

# THE KREMLIN'S TROJAN HORSES



Name: [REDACTED]  
Surname: [REDACTED]  
Party: [REDACTED]  
Unsurprisingly, the [REDACTED] accepted a strong and visible pro-Russian orientation. [REDACTED] also formed closer connections to other European parties of the far-right.



Name: [REDACTED]  
Surname: [REDACTED]  
Party: [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED], at the European Parliament and at [REDACTED], tends to put the blame on NATO and the EU, and calls for an unconditional lifting of sanctions on Russia.



Name: [REDACTED]  
Surname: [REDACTED]  
Party: [REDACTED]  
The [REDACTED] government's opposition to the EU's Russia policy did not go unnoticed [REDACTED] by Russia. [REDACTED] sent an immediate positive message.

Alina Polyakova, Markos Kounalakis, Antonis Klapsis,  
Luigi Sergio Germani, Jacopo Iacoboni,  
Francisco de Borja Lasheras, and Nicolás de Pedro



# **THE KREMLIN'S TROJAN HORSES**

## **Russian Influence in Greece, Italy, and Spain**

**Alina Polyakova, Markos Kounalakis, Antonis Klapsis,  
Luigi Sergio Germani, Jacopo Iacoboni,  
Francisco de Borja Lasheras, and Nicolás de Pedro**

Second edition

ISBN: 978-1-61977-387-5

*Cover photo credits, from left to right: GUE/NGL, Niccolò Caranti, and matthew\_tsimitak.*

*This report is written and published in accordance with the Atlantic Council Policy on Intellectual Independence. The authors are solely responsible for its analysis and recommendations. The Atlantic Council and its donors do not determine, nor do they necessarily endorse or advocate for, any of this report's conclusions.*

November 2017

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 1** Introduction: The Kremlin's Trojan Horses 2.0
- 5** Greece: Still the EU's Weak Link?
- 11** Italy: Is the Turn to Russia Reversible?
- 20** Spain: The Next Target for Russian Influence?
- 26** Policy Recommendations
- 29** About the Authors

# INTRODUCTION: THE KREMLIN'S TROJAN HORSES 2.0

Alina Polyakova

Russia's interference in the US presidential election in 2016 sent a signal to the West: democratic societies are deeply vulnerable to foreign influence. For decades, the Kremlin had been testing and refining its influence operations in the new democracies of Eastern Europe. Russian cyber attacks, disinformation campaigns, and Kremlin supported political allies are nothing new to Ukraine or Georgia, which have been testing labs for Moscow since the early 2000s. If US and European policy makers had been paying attention to Russia's activities in these countries, then perhaps the West would have been better prepared to respond when Russia targeted it. Instead, the American public and policy makers were taken by surprise in the fall of 2016.

In January 2017, the US intelligence community published an assessment of Russian influence operations in the US elections, which concluded that "Moscow [would] apply lessons learned from its Putin-ordered campaign aimed at the US presidential election to future influence efforts worldwide, including against US allies and their election processes."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, since then, major elections took place across Western Europe, and to varying degrees, the hand of the Kremlin was visible in all of them: in France, the National Front's presidential candidate, Marine Le Pen, was propped up by Russian sponsored social media accounts and media; in Germany, the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) campaigned aggressively in districts with a high concentration of Russian speakers while Russian state media provided favorable coverage; and in the Netherlands, fears of vote manipulation pushed the Dutch parliament to return to a fully manual paper ballot. Increased attention to the integrity of democratic elections is a positive, if unintended, consequence of the US experience. But Russian influence operations go far beyond disparate elections.

In November 2016, shortly after the US presidential elections and before the full extent of Russian interference was coming into public focus, the Atlantic Council published the first volume of *The Kremlin's Trojan Horses* that detailed the extent of Russian-linked political networks in France, Germany, and the United Kingdom.<sup>2</sup> That report has since become a guide to policy makers, journalists, and experts seeking to understand how the Kremlin cultivates political allies in Western European countries to achieve its goals of undermining European consensus, sowing divisions in societies, and engendering mistrust in democratic institutions. US congressional members<sup>3</sup> and European Union (EU) parliamentarians<sup>4</sup> have highlighted the report's conclusions as a call to action, and the links the report pointed to between Russian interests and the Brexit campaign have led to a new investigation by the UK's Electoral Commission into the funding behind the referendum.<sup>5</sup> Among its recommendations, the report's authors urged EU member states to establish "counter-influence taskforces" to track, monitor, and report on Russia's influence activities. And indeed, most EU member states, including the EU and NATO, have established or reinvested in StratCom taskforces, hybrid threat centers, or cyber threat centers whose function is to do just that.

Following on the success of the first *The Kremlin's Trojan Horses*, volume two takes up the task of tracing the extent of Russian political penetration in Europe's southern flank: Greece, Italy, and Spain. These countries bore the brunt of Europe's major crises in the last decade: the 2008 economic crisis and the 2015 refugee crisis. In the aftermath of the economic crisis, Greece, Italy, and Spain experienced double digit unemployment and income drops coupled with reductions to social safety nets. The EU's response for Europe's large southern economies was to impose

- 1 "Background to "Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections": The Analytic Process and Cyber Incident Attribution," *Office of the Director of National Intelligence*, January 6, 2017, [https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICA\\_2017\\_01.pdf](https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICA_2017_01.pdf).
- 2 Alina Polyakova et al., "The Kremlin's Trojan Horses: Russian Influence in France, Germany, and the United Kingdom," *Atlantic Council*, November 15, 2016, [http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/The\\_Kremlins\\_Trojan\\_Horses\\_web\\_0228\\_third\\_edition.pdf](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/The_Kremlins_Trojan_Horses_web_0228_third_edition.pdf).
- 3 Sheldon Whitehouse, "Transparency, Corruption, and Russian Meddling," *Sheldon Whitehouse United States Senator for Rhode Island*, June 14, 2016, <https://www.whitehouse.senate.gov/news/speeches/transparency-corruption-and-russian-meddling->
- 4 Kavitha Surana, "The EU Moves to Counter Russian Disinformation Campaign," *Foreign Policy*, November 23, 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/11/23/the-eu-moves-to-counter-russian-disinformation-campaign-populism/>.
- 5 Maïa de La Baume, "Arron Banks investigated over Brexit campaign funding," *Politico*, November 1, 2017, <https://www.politico.eu/article/arron-banks-investigated-over-brexit-campaign-funding/>.



The Kremlin, seat of the Russian government in Moscow. *Photo credit: Svetlana Tikhonova.*

austerity measures. And while in the long run, these policies helped shore up the economies (signs of recovery emerged in 2016), in the short term, they bred resentment among citizens against the EU, mainstream parties, and the Western model of liberal democracy. Then, Syrian refugees began arriving by the thousands on the Italian and Greek shores. These already struggling economies became the first entry point for the millions that would arrive in 2015 and 2016, further polarizing these societies and Europe as well.

As Markos Kounalakis and Antonis Klapsis write, it is this “volatile socio-economic climate” that “has proven to be fertile ground for Russian overtures” while providing an opening for political parties oriented toward the East rather than the West. The Kremlin has actively stepped into this opening by providing political and media support to pro-Russian forces, leveraging historical, religious, and cultural ties, and cultivating (either directly or through proxies) a network of pro-Moscow civil society organizations to promote Russia’s goal of weakening the EU and NATO.

In all three countries examined in this report, the economic crisis is the watershed moment that facilitates

doubt in the Western system and centrist parties and thus primes citizens to look beyond mainstream politics toward more radical political parties on the far right or far left. At first blush, parties like the leftist Spanish Podemos, the nationalist Northern League and populist 5 Star Movement (M5S) in Italy, and the governing Syriza party in Greece appear to have little in common in terms of policy. Podemos and Syriza are politically left while Northern League and M5S are on the right. Northern League and Syriza are traditional parties while M5S and Podemos style themselves as movements. Despite significant differences in their political visions, however, these parties share one thing: they have all sought to align themselves with Putin’s Russia. Some have made this intention more explicit than others. Northern League, for example, formalized its desire for closer relations with Russia by signing a cooperation agreement with Putin’s United Russia party in March 2017. As Luigi Sergio Germani and Jacopo Iacoboni write, formal agreement or not, these parties’ political leaders, their media entities, and their foreign policy platforms “embrace and spread Russian strategic narratives, support Moscow’s foreign policy actions, and propose policies that favor Russia’s geopolitical interests and that tend to

undermine the cohesion of the EU and NATO.” From the Russian perspective, the ideological stances of useful political allies are irrelevant: Communist or right-wing nationalist, what matters is that these parties advocate Russian interests, vote against common EU foreign policies, and undermine establishment parties to engender chaos and instability from within Europe.

For these reasons, the Kremlin has worked strategically and actively to cultivate closer relations with Europe’s emerging insurgent parties on the left and the right.

The case studies reveal that the extent of Russian political influence and investment in forging political relationships varies between countries. Italy is most

Map 1. Pro-Russian Political Parties in Western Europe



# Western democracies can build resilience to Russian interference, but they are only as strong as their weakest link.

vulnerable to Russian influence. In the fall of 2017, M5S was consistently polling as the most popular party in Italy. The party's documented pro-Kremlin stance combined with its grassroots mobilization capacity make it a particularly important ally for the Kremlin, and thus a dangerous force against the EU, NATO, and the transatlantic partnership. With Italy poised for elections in early 2018, an M5S win could dramatically shift Italian foreign policy away from EU cooperation, support for common defense, and continuation of economic sanctions against Russia. As the authors warn, an "M5S-led government could lead to serious domestic political and economic instability because of the party's lack of experience and capacity to govern, undermining Italy's credibility as a partner for Washington and the Euro-Atlantic community."

Greece's long-standing historical and religious connections to Russia through the Orthodox Church serve as the conduit for the Kremlin's desire to deepen its foothold in Greek politics. But Russia's activities in Greece are not contained to diplomatic overtures. Russian oligarchs with close ties to the Kremlin have bought stakes in Greek media. Russia's state-owned gas giant, Gazprom, purchased large stakes in Greek energy firms. And most notably, Putin has maintained a close relationship with the Greek leadership. Despite these ties, Moscow is only willing to go so far in supporting its allies. In 2015, Greece was still reeling from the fallout of the economic crisis, which almost led the country to default on its debt. Alexis Tsipras, newly elected as prime minister after Syriza's win in the elections, was locked in difficult negotiations with the EU over additional bailout funds, which Greece would need to avoid bankruptcy. Tsipras has become a vocal critic of the EU's sanctions policy against Russia. That spring, Tsipras traveled to Moscow to meet with Putin. While both countries denied that the purpose of Tsipras's visit was to request financial support, the timing raised eyebrows in the EU. Tsipras walked away empty-handed, nonetheless.

Tsipras's experience with Putin in 2015 highlights an important facet of the Kremlin's strategy toward its political influence operations: despite the political connections, Russia has not invested economically in the European countries it seeks to influence. There are two reasons for this: first, Russia remains a struggling natural resource driven economy that has few economic resources at its disposal. Russia cannot match China, for example, in investing in infrastructure projects or buying up national debt. Russia is not a major foreign investor in Western European countries. Second, as a result of its economic limitations, the Kremlin is constantly engaged in a cost-benefit game to assess how to achieve its foreign policy goals with minimum investment. For this reason, asymmetric measures—disinformation, cyber attacks, cultivation of political allies, and corruption—that are far less expensive than economic investment or conventional military activities but have great destabilizing potential, are the preferred tools of choice for the Kremlin. Chaos is cheap.

Spain, unlike Italy and Greece, has not been a target of Russian influence. "Still, Spain, as one of the largest EU countries and hub of the Spanish-speaking world, is relevant to Russian geopolitical interests," write Francisco de Borja Lasheras and Nicolás De Pedro. A lack of engagement with Russia coupled with Russia's growing Spanish language media outlet—RT Spanish—and Madrid's desire to balance a pro-EU foreign policy with multilateralism, along with an emerging pro-Russian foreign policy in Podemos, could make Spain the likely next target for the Kremlin. In this sense, Spain is at an inflection point: if Spanish policy makers take lessons from the experiences of other European countries and the United States, they might be able to get ahead of the Kremlin's agenda. If not, then Spain will likely face increasing Russian meddling in its politics.

Western democracies can build resilience to Russian interference, but they are only as strong as their weakest link. Building societal resilience will require policy makers, civil society, and the private sector coming together to find short- and long-term solutions. The first step in this process is identifying where our societies are vulnerable. This report, and the 2016 volume on France, Germany and the United Kingdom, is meant to alert policy makers across the Atlantic to the depth and breadth of the Kremlin's influence operations and to the threats these activities pose to transatlantic stability and security.

# GREECE

## STILL THE EU'S WEAK LINK?

Markos Kounalakis and Antonis Klapsis

Russia has always had a strong—and sometimes reciprocated—interest in Greece. From the birth of modern Greece during its 1821 revolution against Ottoman Turkey to its contemporary relations with Greece's ruling leftist Syriza party and through their mutual support of Orthodox Christian institutions, Russia has found Greece open to a strategic relationship rooted in historic, cultural, and religious connections.

As president of Russia, Vladimir Putin has used these historic foundations to pursue closer economic, military, political, and cultural bonds between Athens and Moscow. Putin works to further his project of diminishing Euro-Atlantic institutions, of which Greece is a member, by strengthening Greco-Russian relations and attempting to tilt Greece's political stance into closer alignment with Russian interests. With Greek support, the Kremlin could leverage Greece's European Union (EU) and NATO memberships to drive wedges between members from within. In the short run, this means weakening the EU's common sanctions policy, which must be approved by all member states. In the long run, this means ultimately creating an alliance between Athens and Moscow and undermining Greece's affiliation with Western liberal democratic values and institutions.

### POLITICAL CONTEXT

Greece in 2017 is economically and politically vulnerable. The country is suffering its eighth year of a modern great depression,<sup>6</sup> and its populace feels exploited and underserved by both NATO and the EU. Greece's economic condition—the result of predatory lending practices and irresponsible Eurozone

borrowing in combination with a severe EU economic austerity program—have left many Greeks embittered, cynical, and seeking radical solutions while openly challenging the status quo.<sup>7</sup> As of September 2017, a quarter of Greeks were still unemployed, including 50 percent of youths, and the debt to gross domestic product (GDP) ratio was at an alarming high of 180 percent.<sup>8</sup> In addition, Greece has received over one million migrants and refugees from the Middle East and North Africa since 2015,<sup>9</sup> adding political and economic burdens on local communities and exacerbating anti-immigrant sentiments.

This volatile socio-economic climate has proven to be fertile ground for Russian overtures. The ruling coalition, led by Syriza—which is friendly to the Russian government—along with its marginal but important governing partner, Independent Greeks, took advantage of the crisis that discredited much of the old political establishment. Syriza, under the leadership of Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, aimed to mobilize disillusioned voters with a radical platform opposed to the austerity policies imposed by the EU after 2009. Syriza made quick gains, growing from 4.6 percent of the vote and fifth place in Greece's 2009 general elections to 16.8 percent and second place in May 2012. By 2015, Syriza was the ruling party with over 35 percent of the vote.<sup>10</sup>

One of Tsipras's first moves as prime minister was to force a referendum on whether to accept the EU's bailout in exchange for more austerity measures or to leave the Eurozone. The confusing snap referendum was not literally a vote to leave the Eurozone, but did create the conditions for an exit. The so-called "Grexit" referendum failed to deliver by a small margin in the

6 "Explaining Greece's Debt Crisis," *New York Times*, June 17, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/business/international/greece-debt-crisis-euro.html>.

7 Markos Kounalakis, "Greece's High-Stakes Gamble," *Sacramento Bee*, July 10, 2015, <http://www.sacbee.com/opinion/op-ed/markos-kounalakis/article26905798.html>.

8 "Greece Government Debt to GDP | 1980-2017," *Trading Economics*, 2017, [tradingeconomics.com/greece/government-debt-to-gdp](http://tradingeconomics.com/greece/government-debt-to-gdp).

9 John Clayton, "More than one million refugees travel to Greece since 2015," *UNHCR*, March 16, 2016, <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/latest/2016/3/56e9821b6/million-refugees-travel-greece-since-2015.html>.

10 Antonis Klapsis, "In the Shadow of Grexit: A Short Story of Long (and Failed) Negotiations, January-July 2015," *Romanian Journal of European Affairs*, Vol. 15, No. 14, 29-31.





Russian President Vladimir Putin meets with Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras in Moscow, Russia, April 8, 2015. *Photo credit:* Press Service of the President of Russia.

summer of 2015, but it signaled Greece's potential to be a disruptive force in the EU. While Russia's desire to develop a deeper foothold in Greek politics serves the Kremlin's interests of weakening the EU and undermining the Western liberal project, for now, Russian economic investments, cultural connections, and political overtures fan the flames of discontent but do not ignite them.

Russia's successful actions in Greece—such as providing discounted energy, intervention in media ownership, and ethno-cultural seduction of the Orthodox hierarchy—have already weakened EU resolve toward confronting Russia's more egregious acts, neutralized Greece's previous intent for expansion of defense ties within NATO, and rebuilt the foundation of a strong and lasting alignment with Greece's people and interests.<sup>11</sup>

## MAJOR PLAYERS

Russian President Vladimir Putin himself is active in the direct overtures to Greece. He has made it a personal project to engage Orthodox religious institutions, meet with the Greek political leadership, and pursue any availing business opportunities in the country. As Putin made clear in his May 2016 visit to Greece, the new receptivity of a Syriza-led government provides a strategic opening for the two countries to increase their cooperation and collaboration. Tsipras told Putin that improving Greco-Russian relations was “a strategic choice.” Putin asserted that “it is not a coincidence that an opportunity for this has arisen in Greece—a country with which we have deep and historic ties.”<sup>12</sup>

A host of other individuals and institutions support the Kremlin's strategy toward Greece, but it is Putin who provides the leadership, vision, and symbolism for the renewed and rapidly evolving Greco-Russian relationship. The improving Greco-Russian twenty-first

11 Markos Kounalakis, “Greece Is a Good Insurance Policy for the West,” *Sacramento Bee*, September 21, 2014, <http://www.sacbee.com/opinion/op-ed/article2610377.html>.

12 “Putin and Tsipras Seeking to Profit from Historic Ties,” *Kathimerini*, May 27, 2016, <http://www.ekathimerini.com/209084/article/ekathimerini/news/putin-and-tsipras-seeking-to-profit-from-historic-ties>.

century relationship has not relied on leftist Greek governments alone, however. Greece's conservative New Democracy government of Prime Minister Kostas Karamanlis (2004–09) provided a strong and symbolic boost to building economic ties with Russia in the energy sector. In March 2007, the Karamanlis government signed an agreement with Bulgaria and Russia for the construction of the Burghas-Alexandroupolis pipeline—a key strategic partnership—but a project that was never implemented.<sup>13</sup>

Unlike the Karamanlis administration, Tsipras's government made better relations with Russia a top priority and part of its anti-EU platform. In January 2015, Tsipras expressed “discontent” with an EU statement that Russia was responsible for a rocket attack on Mariupol, Ukraine.<sup>14</sup> Countering the prevailing EU sentiment and action for economic sanctions on Moscow following its annexation of Crimea and incursion into Ukraine's Donbas in 2014, Tsipras made his first official foreign policy statement a criticism of those sanctions and an affirmation of solidarity with the Russian people.<sup>15</sup>

The Tsipras government's opposition to the EU's Russia policy did not go unnoticed (or even unmanaged) by Russia. Putin sent an immediate positive message: Putin, via his ambassador to Greece, was the first to personally congratulate Tsipras on his initial January 25, 2015 victory.<sup>16</sup> This marked the beginning of Russia's public charm offensive with the Greek leadership and people.

Putin's first trip to an EU country after the imposition of sanctions against Russia was to Athens to meet Tsipras.<sup>17</sup> Importantly, on this two-day visit in May 2016, Putin made a personal pilgrimage to the Orthodox spiritual center of Mount Athos along with Patriarch Kirill of Moscow. Putin first went to Mt. Athos in 2005, the only Russian leader ever to do so and, on this visit,

he received a warm welcome from monks and priests expressing adulation for his global leadership and moral rectitude. One monk, Father Efraim, exclaimed, “Putin is the only true world leader.”<sup>18</sup> Putin made sure to solidify this perception by taking a seat on what appeared to be the Protaton Throne, the throne of past Byzantine emperors. In fact, this was widely misreported (instead he sat in an ornate bishop's chair in the Protaton church), but the story was propagated and popularly accepted as Putin symbolically taking his rightful place in Byzantium's resurrection, with his role presumably as its emperor. The photos of Putin at Mt. Athos were widespread and impressive, and conveyed to both Russians and Greeks the historic relationship of the two fraternal Orthodox nations.<sup>19</sup>

Putin's personal touch is visible with his regular and close communications with the Greek leadership, in particular Prime Minister Tsipras.<sup>20</sup> Tsipras and Putin have spoken by phone and met in both bilateral and multilateral settings, such as the May 2017 Beijing “Belt and Road Forum.”<sup>21</sup> Defense Minister Panos Kammenos, a member of the governing coalition and leader of the far-right Independent Greeks party, also has moved to deepen professional relations with Russia, including signing a memorandum of understanding with the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISI)—a think tank known to have connections to the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service. Both Kammenos and RISI's leader, Leonid Reshetnikov, are devout defenders and aggressive promoters of Orthodox religious clergy and institutions, with Kammenos depending on the church and its fervent adherents as a reliably solid part of his power base.<sup>22</sup> Reshetnikov is but one of the frontline individuals bridging institutional relations with Greece.

Putin's proxies are also able to develop these warm ties further and maintain personal, business, and media relationships with Greece. First among those playing

13 “Greece, Russia, Bulgaria Sign Pipeline Deal,” *Kathimerini*, March 16, 2007, <http://www.ekathimerini.com/47756/article/ekathimerini/news/greece-russia-bulgaria-sign-pipeline-deal>.

14 Andrew Rettman, “Greece Says No to EU Statement on Russia,” *EUobserver*, January 27, 2015, <https://euobserver.com/foreign/127393>.

15 Nick Squires, “Greece Objects to EU Call for More Russia Sanctions,” *Telegraph*, January 27, 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/greece/11373136/Greece-objects-to-EU-call-for-more-Russia-sanctions.html>.

16 Bernard-Henri Levy, “Admired by Le Pen, Friends with Putin, Tsipras Spells Trouble,” *Daily Beast*, February 4, 2015, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/admired-by-le-pen-friends-with-putin-tsipras-spells-trouble>.

17 Derek Gatopoulos, “Putin Blasts West on First Trip to EU Country This Year,” *US News and World Report*, May 27, 2016, <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2016-05-27/putin-heads-to-greece-for-business-orthodox-christian-site>.

18 Giorgos Christides, “Putin Auf Athos: Hier Bin Ich Mönch, Hier Darf Ichs Sein,” trans. Markos Kounalakis, *Spiegel Online*, May 28, 2016, <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/wladimir-putin-auf-athos-hier-bin-ich-moench-hier-darf-ich-sein-a-1094681.html>.

19 “Putin on Athos: The Protaton Throne,” Athos - Agion Oros, June 1, 2016, <https://athosweblog.com/2016/06/01/1823-putin-and-the-protaton-throne/>.

20 Dalibor Rohac, “Putin's Best EU Friends,” *Politico*, June 16, 2015, <http://www.politico.eu/article/putin-friends-renzi-tsipras/>.

21 “Tsipras, Putin Underlined Need of Strengthening Greek, Russian Relations,” *National Herald*, May 14, 2017, <https://www.thenationalherald.com/161975/tsipras-putin-underlined-need-strengthening-greece-russia-relations/>.

22 John R. Schindler, “Is Putin Playing Puppetmaster in Greece?” *Daily Beast*, July 8, 2015, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/07/08/is-putin-playing-puppetmaster-in-greece>.

## THE KREMLIN'S TROJAN HORSES 2.0

a significant role is Ivan Savvidis, a Georgian-born Russian Greek, one of Russia's richest men, member of Putin's United Russia party, a member of the Russian parliament (Duma), and a resident of Thessaloniki, Greece.<sup>23</sup> Savvidis is actively investing in strategic industries and advocating against the New Democracy opposition party and its pro-Western leader Kyriakos Mitsotakis.<sup>24</sup> Savvidis bought Thessaloniki's PAOK professional soccer team, northern Greece's cigarette manufacturer SEKAP, Thessaloniki's best-known hotel, the Grand Pallas, and, most troubling to the Greek political opposition, a controlling interest in one of the more popular television networks, MEGA.<sup>25</sup> In late July 2017, he also purchased three historic newspapers.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to Putin and Savvidis, there are second-tier players who dabble in real estate and business engagements, seeking opportunities to strengthen Greco-Russian ties where available. For example, three Russian companies, including Gazprom, pursued large stakes in the Greek gas companies DEPA and DEFSA.<sup>27</sup> Wealthy Russian individuals, such as Ekaterina Rybolovleva, also make headlines for their wealth, influence, and interest in Greece. Rybolovleva made a symbolic splash when she purchased the private island once owned by Aristotle Onassis—the island where he married former US first lady Jacqueline Kennedy.<sup>28</sup>

### PRO-RUSSIAN LEANINGS AND GREEK POLITICS

Russian attempts to influence Greek politics have a long history, starting with the early days of Greek independence in the nineteenth century, when Russia funded and fought together with Greek naval revolutionary forces and commissioned the famous female revolutionary leader, Laskarina Bouboulina, as an admiral in the Russian Imperial Navy.<sup>29</sup> But today, Russian efforts to influence Greek politics are part of a broader effort to undermine Western institutions, and

they have never found such fertile ground in Greece as the Syriza government and its Independent Greeks coalition.

For the leftist and anti-liberal Syriza, closer cooperation with Russia seems to be the key to Greece's gradual disengagement from the West. Tsipras and many of his closest associates are former communists who base their political thinking on a loathing of capitalism and many of the Western values that go along with it. From this perspective, Russia appears as Greece's geopolitical alternative to the EU and NATO. Members of the populist right Independent Greeks view Moscow favorably in light of the common religious background between the two countries.

Ardent supporters of the move to establish much closer Greco-Russian relations are found across almost the whole political spectrum in Greece, from the extreme right to the communist left. A striking example of this pro-Russian attitude was the vote of the Greek members of the European Parliament (MEPs) in September 2014, on the ratification of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement. Out of the 21 Greek MEPs, 12 voted against the agreement, 8 voted in favor, and 1 abstained. Not surprisingly, the votes against were cast by MEPs from Syriza (6); the Independent Greeks (1); neo-Nazi Golden Dawn (3); and Communist Party of Greece (2). The votes in favor were cast by MEPs belonging to the three major pro-Western Greek political parties, namely New Democracy (4), PASOK (2), and the River (2).<sup>30</sup> What is even more impressive is the fact that the Greek MEPs were the only national group in the European Parliament that voted in majority against the ratification of the agreement.<sup>31</sup>

As in the case of many other far-right European parties, Golden Dawn openly favors a pro-Russian turn in Greece's foreign policy.<sup>32</sup> Golden Dawn officials have repeatedly referred to the religious bonds that unite

23 Giorgos Christides, "Greece Gets Investment from Russia with Love," *BBC News*, October 26, 2012, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-20031296>.

24 "Greek-Russian Tycoon Intervenes in Politics," *Kathimerini*, May 2, 2017, <http://www.ekathimerini.com/218081/article/ekathimerini/news/greek-russian-tycoon-intervenes-in-politics>.

25 "Russian-Greek Investor Savvidis Buys 20% Stake of Troubled Nationwide TV Channel," *Naftemporiki*, May 22, 2017, <http://www.naftemporiki.gr/story/1238160/russian-greek-investor-savvidis-buys-20-stake-of-troubled-nationwide-tv-channel>.

26 Tasos Kokkinidis, "Greek-Russian Businessman Ivan Savvidis Buys 3 Historic Newspapers," *Greek Reporter*, July 26, 2017, <http://greece.greekreporter.com/2017/07/26/greek-russian-businessman-ivan-savvidis-buys-3-historic-newspapers/>.

27 Georgi Gotev, "Privatisation of Greek Gas Grid Operator DESFA Fails," *Euractiv.com*, December 1, 2016, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/energy/news/privatisation-of-greek-gas-grid-operator-desfa-fails/>.

28 Julie Zeveloff, "24-Year-Old Russian Billionaire Heiress Is the Buyer of Greece's Most Famous Private Island," *Business Insider*, April 19, 2013, <http://www.businessinsider.com/ekaterina-rybolovleva-bought-skorpios-2013-4>.

29 Callum Rae, "Laskarina Bouboulina," *Female Soldier*, September 27, 2015, <http://thefemalesoldier.com/blog/laskarina-bouboulina>.

30 The Greek MEP that abstained belongs to New Democracy as well.

31 "EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, with the Exception of the Treatment of Third Country Nationals Legally Employed as Workers in the Territory of the Other Part," *Votewatch*, last updated September 16, 2014, <http://www.votewatch.eu/en/term8-eu-ukraine-association-agreement-with-the-exception-of-the-treatment-of-third-country-nationals-lega.html>.

32 For a detailed account of the forging of bonds between Moscow and far-right parties across the EU see Antonis Klapsis, *An Unholy*

the Greeks and the Russians. Being anti-European and anti-American, Golden Dawn sees Russia as Greece's "natural ally." According to the party's leader, Nikos Michaloliakos, Athens and Moscow share broad common interests in the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean; therefore, Greece should disassociate itself from the West (i.e., from the EU, NATO, and the United States) and offer Russia an exit "to the warm seas" in return for a Russian guarantee of Greek national security. Golden Dawn's official program clearly states that a turn to Russia in the fields of investment and energy is absolutely essential, since a trade and defense agreement with the Russians would disentangle Greece "from the fatal embrace of the US and its allies."<sup>33</sup> Not surprisingly, Golden Dawn warmly welcomed the creation of the Russian-fostered Eurasian Economic Union in May 2014, expressing the hope that it would become a successful rival to both the EU and the United States.<sup>34</sup>

The prospect of closer cooperation between Athens and Moscow, especially in the economic sector, has been warmly welcomed by the Tsipras-led coalition government, especially just after the government came to power in January 2015. In early 2015, Tsipras's government supported the expansion of the Turkish Stream gas pipeline to Greece and negotiations between Athens and Moscow on the project went on for several months.<sup>35</sup> However, the scheme was never implemented. Had it been constructed, the new pipeline would have increased Greece's dependence on Russian gas. In one of his recent interviews, Panagiotis Lafazanis, minister of productive reconstruction, environment, and energy in the first Tsipras cabinet and supporter of Greece's exit from the Eurozone, revealed that when he was in government, he made an agreement with Moscow that Russia would provide a "down payment" for a gas pipeline and that this money would be used to supplement the Greek budget, if Greece left the Eurozone. "The pipeline we agreed on would have changed the economic and foreign policy conditions for Greece if the deal had been implemented," he claimed.<sup>36</sup>

## The prospect of closer cooperation between Athens and Moscow, especially in the economic sector, has been warmly welcomed by the Tsipras-led coalition government. . .

Tsipras himself publicly referred to his plan of deepening Greco-Russian bonds in June 2015, at a time when the Greek government's negotiations with the country's creditors were going from bad to worse. In 2015, Greece was on the verge of bankruptcy. Grexit, or a Greek exit from the Eurozone, was a real possibility ahead of a July 2015 referendum pushed through by Tsipras. During this tumultuous time, Tsipras took part in the St. Petersburg Economic Forum. Tsipras described Russia as one of "Greece's most important partners." He lambasted the EU for imposing sanctions on Russia over the annexation of Crimea, attacked the "delusions" of Europe, and openly hinted that Athens would form a strong alliance with Moscow if Greece had to leave the Eurozone. "We are at the centre of a storm, of a whirlpool," Tsipras added. "But you know we live near the sea—we are not afraid of storms, we are not scared of open seas, of going into new seas. We are ready to go into new seas to reach new safe ports."<sup>37</sup> After the so-called Grexit referendum failed, Tsipras had to make a quick U-turn and abandon these plans. However, the desire for closer relations with Russia remains among policy makers in Greece, some of whom are members of the current government. For example, in May 2016, Defense Minister Kammenos publicly announced his intention to sign an agreement with Moscow for the manufacture of Kalashnikov assault rifles in Greece as soon as the European Union ended its trade embargo with Russia.<sup>38</sup> Kammenos was also the only Western politician to attend the Fourth

*Alliance. The European Far Right and Putin's Russia* (Brussels: Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, 2015).

33 Klapsis, *An Unholy Alliance*, 19.

34 Klapsis, *An Unholy Alliance*, 28.

35 "Greece Says Financing Agreed to Extend Russian Gas Pipeline," *Euractiv.com*, June 2, 2015, <http://www.euractiv.com/section/energy/news/greece-says-financing-agreed-to-extend-russian-gas-pipeline/>.

36 "Lafazanis Claims Russian Cash Could Have Helped with Grexit," *Kathimerini*, July 22, 2017, <http://www.ekathimerini.com/220304/article/ekathimerini/news/lafazanis-claims-russian-cash-could-have-helped-with-grexit>.

37 Ben Chu, "Greece's Crisis: Alexis Tsipras Woos Vladimir Putin as Greeks Rush for their Savings," *Independent*, June 19, 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/greece-crisis-alexis-tsipras-woos-vladimir-putin-as-greeks-rush-for-their-savings-10333104.html>.

38 "Greek Defense Minister Eyes Kalashnikov Project," *Kathimerini*, May 31, 2016, <http://www.ekathimerini.com/209185/article/ekathimerini/news/greek-defense-minister-eyes-kalashnikov-project>.

International Security Conference held in Moscow in April 2016.<sup>39</sup>

### CONSEQUENCES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS

What is clearly felt in the post-Grexit debate environment is a palpable shift and a political and popular Greek reorientation away from the US and European institutions and affiliations built, enhanced, and solidified following World War II and toward a reexamining and renewal of relations with Russia.

The harsh economic consequences of austerity,<sup>40</sup> Eurozone exigencies, NATO expectations and costs, the failure of previous Greek governments oriented toward the West, historic grievances over active US support for the twentieth century Greek Junta—in addition to the Kosovo war and Belgrade bombing, relations with Turkey, and the ongoing dispute in Cyprus—are all contributing factors to contemporary Greece's susceptibility to Putin and its increasing preference for a culturally aligned and fraternally seductive Russia.

Despite this current trend, Greece's foreign policy turn toward Russia might shift as domestic political disenchantment with Syriza grows over its economic and taxation policies. With this political shift, European leaders look toward the rising centrist New Democracy (ND) party and its US-educated and business-oriented leader Kyriakos Mitsotakis with some hope. Despite the relentless domestic press attacks on Mitsotakis by the Savvidis news organizations and historic disillusionment with ND among the public, current polls favor Mitsotakis's party. The mainstream EU leadership seems to believe an ND victory in the next general elections could reverse Greece's growing disposition toward Moscow. Polling in early 2017 showed a strong likelihood that Syriza would be turned out and New Democracy would become the number one vote-getter

with a significant lead.<sup>41</sup> The next general elections will take place no later than September 2019, but an exact date is uncertain. Greek elections regularly take place earlier than expected.

The Greek government's attitude toward Russia also has ramifications for European and US security policies. In particular, Souda Bay is a key US naval support base on the Greek island of Crete and used by NATO for operations. Upgrading its role and facilities relies on reaching a longer-term agreement between Greece and the United States—an arrangement opposed behind the scenes by Russia. The current Greek government continues to negotiate this deal, but there is a clear lack of enthusiasm on Syriza's part, despite the economic and security benefits of such an agreement.<sup>42</sup>

The European Union conducts its foreign policy on the basis of full consensus by its member states. As long as this is the case, the EU will be a weak foreign policy actor. It can only be as strong as its weakest link, and Greece, along with countries such as Hungary, is already practicing the pocket veto prerogative on EU policy making vis-à-vis Russia. Growing frustration with the evolving Greek reorientation has even led analysts to consider the possibility of cutting Greece loose in a "grand bargain" approach.<sup>43</sup> Such loose European talk and limited options create the potential for a conceivable concurrence of an opportunistic Russia offering a financial lifeline amidst a Eurozone renegotiation.<sup>44</sup>

In essence, transatlantic relations are on the verge of being further undermined by the Greek Syriza coalition government that is neither oriented toward improving relations with the United States—exacerbated of late by the Trump presidency—nor positively inclined toward a Europe it perceives as strangling Greece economically and forcing it into impoverished subservience.

39 Con Coughlin, "NATO's United Front Under Threat after Greece Signs Arms Deal with Russia," *Telegraph*, July 8, 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/0/natos-united-front-under-threat-after-greece-signs-arms-deal-wit/>.

40 Markos Kounalakis, "European Confederacy Slowly Dies," *Sacramento Bee*, June 27, 2015, <http://www.sacbee.com/opinion/op-ed/article25534822.html>.

41 Philip Chrysopoulos, "New Poll Shows New Democracy 17.5% Ahead of Syriza," *Greek Reporter*, April 11, 2017, <http://greece.greekreporter.com/2017/04/11/new-poll-shows-new-democracy-17-5-ahead-of-syriza/>.

42 Alexis Papahelas, "Agreement Needed on Souda Bay," *Kathimerini*, May 10, 2017, <http://www.ekathimerini.com/218283/opinion/ekathimerini/comment/agreement-needed-on-souda-bay>.

43 Stefan Wagstyl, "Germany's Wolfgang Schäuble puts Grexit back on the agenda," *Financial Times*, July 16, 2015, <https://www.ft.com/content/4bb34e4e-2bcf-11e5-8613-e7aedbb7bdb7?mhq5j=e7>.

44 "Signal: Acelaland, the United States of Europe and the New Hanseatic League," Eurasia Group, June 29, 2017, <http://mailchi.mp/eurasiagroup/signal-acelaland-the-united-states-of-europe-and-the-new-hanseatic-league-lshlqkhtd0?e=e0c1842e88>. In an interview with Eurasia Group, Karthik Sankaran made a flippant, if telling statement: "I was joking that the Russians should just pay Greece \$100 billion, at least in perpetuity, for the Sergey Gorshkov Memorial Base for the Russian Mediterranean fleet. You'd accomplish a few different things. You'd make Greece sustainable. You would make Greece, which historically at least, has been a country that has had an element to the left and seen a great deal in common with their kind of coreligionists in Russia. The great enemy of Greece is their neighboring NATO member 'ally,' Turkey."

# ITALY

## IS THE TURN TO RUSSIA REVERSIBLE?

Luigi Sergio Germani and Jacopo Iacoboni

**T**he rise of pro-Russian political parties in Italy is intimately linked to the populist and anti-establishment surge that, in the past four years, has fundamentally transformed the Italian political system. A key factor in this surge was the economic crisis, which hit the country hard beginning in 2011, provoking a sharp decline in living standards and economic security for vast sectors of society, especially the middle class. Growing frustration and anger with the Italian establishment was fueled not only by socio-economic stress, but also by fear of uncontrolled immigration, widespread corruption in the country's political elite, and ties between politics and organized crime, as well as the political system's failure to respond effectively to the economic crisis or to carry out long-awaited structural reforms.

In 2011-2012, Mario Monti's technocratic government, under pressure from the European Union (EU), implemented harsh austerity measures that saved the country from financial collapse but provoked widespread social discontent and exacerbated the populist surge. In Italy's 2013 general elections, the anti-establishment 5 Star Movement (M5S) won more than 25 percent of the vote and over one hundred parliamentary seats.<sup>45</sup> The M5S styled itself as an anti-austerity, anti-EU, and anti-bank force that was fighting to regain Italy's economic and political sovereignty, which it claimed had been usurped by the EU and by other international centers of power and "globalist elites."

A remarkable phenomenon that accompanied the recent phase of the populist surge, especially in the past three years, is the increasing popularity among the Italian public of Vladimir Putin,<sup>46</sup> who is widely perceived as a strong and effective leader, the only leader capable of saving Europe from the threats of Islamist terrorism and mass illegal immigration. In Italy, Putin has also become a cult figure on social media: there are dozens of Facebook (FB) pages of Putin fan clubs as well as numerous "alternative news" FB pages that disseminate a highly favorable image of Putin to a vast audience in the country.<sup>47</sup>

Within Italy's anti-establishment movements, Putin became a powerful symbol of "sovereignism" in its battle with globalism. This perception may also have been influenced by Kremlin propaganda efforts, which for several years had been emphasizing Putin's role as a great leader who restored Russia's sovereignty against foreign efforts to weaken and destabilize it.<sup>48</sup> The Russian president was also seen by many in the rising Italian populist forces as an adversary of the EU and of the West's "globalist elites" and therefore a potential ally in Italy's efforts to regain its sovereignty. The widespread perception among Italy's anti-establishment parties of Putin as a model and ally (and perhaps even a vote-getter, given his popularity) was one of the key factors that explains why these forces embraced a pro-Russian stance.

45 "Elezioni Politiche 2013 - Liste e risultati per circoscrizione," *Repubblica.it*, accessed October 17, 2017, [http://www.repubblica.it/static/speciale/2013/elezioni/camera/riepilogo\\_nazionale.html](http://www.repubblica.it/static/speciale/2013/elezioni/camera/riepilogo_nazionale.html).

46 According to an SWG opinion poll conducted in August 2017, thirty-three percent of Italians expressed appreciation for Putin, who is liked by a higher proportion of Italians than are other world leaders such as Trump, Merkel, Macron, May, and Xi Jinping. In a SWG November 2015 poll, forty-nine percent viewed Putin's policies against ISIS as effective, while thirty-two percent viewed Obama's anti-ISIS policies as effective. "Sondaggi politici SWG: chi sono i leader mondiali più amati dagli italiani?" *Termometro Politico*, accessed October 17, 2017, [http://www.termometropolitico.it/1264328\\_sondaggi-politici-leader-mondiali.html](http://www.termometropolitico.it/1264328_sondaggi-politici-leader-mondiali.html).

47 One example of a Facebook page that frequently disseminates an idealized image of the Russian president is "Silenzi e falsità della stampa italiana," a widely followed Facebook page within the pro-M5S FB network.

48 Russia has invested considerable resources in Italy to shape geopolitical perceptions favorable to Russia among the political elite and public opinion. See: Gustav Gressel, "Fellow travellers: Russia, anti-Westernism, and Europe's political parties," *European Foreign Policy Council Policy Brief*, July 14, 2017; Massimiliano Di Pasquale, "Perché la propaganda russa trova terreno fertile in Italia," *Strade*, May-June, 2017.

### IDENTIFYING MAJOR PLAYERS: KEY PRO-RUSSIAN PARTIES AND FIGURES

Italian political parties can be subdivided into three categories according to their Russia policy:

1. The mainstream camp includes the present Gentiloni coalition government parties: the center-left Democratic Party (PD), the center-right Popular Alternative (AP), and other minor parties. This camp follows Italy's traditional foreign policy approach: Atlanticism and Europeanism are the pillars of Italy's foreign and security policy, but Rome should, nonetheless, always strive to engage with Russia and position itself as Russia's best friend in the Euro-Atlantic community in order to safeguard Italian energy and economic interests.
2. The "ambiguous" camp comprises Berlusconi's Forza Italia (FI), a center-right party that is currently in the opposition. FI's foreign policy looks both toward the West and toward Russia. It cannot be considered a pro-Russian party, although some of its members of parliament (MPs) express a Kremlin-friendly line. It maintains good contacts in the Kremlin thanks to Berlusconi's personal relationship with Putin and the Moscow connections of some FI politicians (Valentino Valentini, for example).
3. The pro-Russian camp is made up of the anti-establishment parties that are riding the populist wave: the far-right Northern League (*Lega Nord* or LN—now renamed *Lega dei Popoli*); the 5 Star Movement (M5S), which does not easily fit into "left-right" categories; the far-right *Fratelli d'Italia* (FDI); the extreme neo-fascist right, which includes *Casapound* and *Forza Nuova*; and some parties of the extreme left (such as the Communist Party headed by Marco Rizzo).

The parties in the third group are labelled pro-Russian because they conduct the following activities: a) they embrace and spread Russian strategic narratives, including anti-Western and anti-American ones; b) they consistently support Moscow's foreign policy

actions; and c) they propose policies that favor Russia's geopolitical interests and that tend to undermine the cohesion of the EU and NATO.

In 2012-2013, the Kremlin began to actively engage the emerging anti-establishment forces in Italy, encouraging them to embrace a pro-Russian stance, and using them to exert influence on Italian political debates.<sup>49</sup> This strategy became more aggressive after the Ukraine crisis, as Moscow sought to support populist and sovereigntist forces across Europe to weaken the unity of the EU and NATO, foment tensions among Euro-Atlantic states, encourage domestic political instability, and undermine public confidence in liberal democracy.<sup>50</sup>

Italy's pro-Russian parties—especially LN and M5S, but also to some extent the extreme neo-fascist right<sup>51</sup>—receive political support from Moscow, as evidenced by meetings between representatives of these parties and senior Russian government and United Russia officials (LN and United Russia even signed a cooperation agreement in March 2017). These parties and their leaders also receive media support, primarily in the form of visibility in Kremlin-controlled international media as well as Russian media campaigns hostile to the Italian government; however, there is no publicly available evidence that Moscow has provided overt or covert financial support to these parties.

There is considerable evidence of the pro-Russian activities of LN and M5S, the two major anti-establishment parties, as will be detailed below. First it is useful to provide some background information on these two parties.

The Northern League (LN). Matteo Salvini, when he was elected leader of LN in December 2013, inherited a party in deep crisis. LN's image was seriously compromised by corruption scandals, and in the February 2013 national elections, its vote had plummeted to 4 percent.<sup>52</sup> Salvini and his team then embarked upon a major rebranding of the party, transforming LN from a northern-Italy focused

49 Anton Shekhovtsov, "Ul'trapravyy front aktivnykh meropriyatiy: Rossiya i yevropeyskiye krayne pravyye," *Anton Shekhovtsov's Blog*, July 6, 2017, <http://anton-shekhovtsov.blogspot.it/2017/07/blog-post.html>.

50 Mark Galeotti, "Controlling Chaos: How Russia manages its political war in Europe," *European Council of Foreign Relations Policy Brief*, September 1, 2017.

51 The relations between neo-fascists—such as Forza Nuova—and the Kremlin are handled by the Russian nationalist party "Rodina." Forza Nuova's leader Roberto Fiore was invited by Rodina to participate in the March 2015 International Russian Conservative Forum, held in St. Petersburg, that hosted representatives of right-wing extremist (including neo-Nazi) movements from many countries. Andrea Ferrario, "Il cuore dei neofascisti batte per la Russia," *Comedonchisciotte.org*, March 26, 2015, <https://comedonchisciotte.org/forum/index.php?p=/discussion/79923/il-cuore-dei-neofascisti-batte-per-la-russia>.

52 Giulia Parravicini, "Italy's Far-Right Jolts Back from Dead," *Politico*, March 2, 2016, <http://www.politico.eu/article/italys-other-matteo-salvini-northern-league-politicians-media-effettosalvini/>.



Beppe Grillo, a former comedian, is the founder of the 5 Star Movement (M5S), which espouses a pro-Russian foreign policy. *Photo credit:* Niccolò Caranti.

separatist party into a right-wing nationalist, populist, sovereigntist force, similar to Marine Le Pen's National Front.<sup>53</sup>

Under Salvini, the LN adopted a strong and visible pro-Russian orientation. The party also formed closer connections to other European parties of the far-right.<sup>54</sup> The party aimed at appealing to anti-system voters, who were increasingly frustrated and enraged with Italy's political establishment, both in northern and in central-southern Italy.

5 Star Movement (M5S). M5S was founded in 2009 by former comedian Beppe Grillo and the late Gianroberto Casaleggio, a visionary Internet entrepreneur; both founders realized that the Internet could be used to launch a new political movement. Casaleggio Associati, a consulting company specializing in web strategies set

up by Gianroberto Casaleggio, has played a strategic role in M5S since its beginning; it is now run by Davide Casaleggio (Gianroberto's son).<sup>55</sup> The latter's shadowy role as the party's "de-facto leader" and the conflict of interest between his company and M5S have aroused considerable concern.<sup>56</sup>

The party managed to capture a growing share of the protest vote using aggressive anti-establishment rhetoric and building up a powerful Internet-based propaganda machine,<sup>57</sup> which includes:

- The party's own official blogs and social media accounts, especially the founder's blog, directly run by Casaleggio Associati, which has millions of followers.

53 Matteo Luca Andriola, "Populismo e Liberismo: la 'rivoluzione' di Salvini in camicia nero-verde," *Paginauno* (February-March 2015).

54 Andriola, "Populismo e Liberismo."

55 Margherita Movarelli, "From Dreams to Reality: The Challenges of Italy's Five Star Movement," *European View* (2016).

56 James Politi and Hannah Roberts, "Five Star Movement: The Unanswered Questions about Italy's Populist Movement," *Financial Times*, September 17, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/546be098-989f-11e7-a652-cde3f882dd7b>.

57 Alessandro Dal Lago, *Populismo Digitale* (Milan: Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2017).



## THE KREMLIN'S TROJAN HORSES 2.0

- Many supposedly independent news outlets that are in fact close to the pro-M5S universe (although unofficially).<sup>58</sup>
- More loosely affiliated sites, such as those of the fan clubs of M5S members of parliament (MPs).
- Anonymous sites sympathetic to the party.<sup>59</sup>

M5S's ideology is a mix of technological utopianism (especially the idea that the Internet enables web-based direct democracy); hostility toward the Italian establishment, depicted by the party as totally corrupt; populism; environmentalism; anti-capitalism; anti-globalism; and sovereigntism.

## Many Italian radical right and neo-fascist intellectuals have been in contact with Russian ultranationalists since the early 1990s. . .

### BUILDING NETWORKS OF INFLUENCE: EVIDENCE OF THE PRO-RUSSIAN ACTIVITIES OF KEY ACTORS

#### The Northern League (LN)

Under Salvini, LN initiated dialogue with extreme right-wing intellectuals and think tanks aimed at developing a new sovereigntist identity for the party, drawing from Russian Eurasianist and National Bolshevik critiques of the perceived moral and spiritual degradation of modern Western societies produced by liberalism's erosion of tradition, the family, religion, and patriotism. Many Italian radical right and neo-fascist intellectuals have been in contact with Russian ultranationalists since the early 1990s, in particular with Aleksandr

Dugin, who became an influential figure in the Italian extreme right milieu,<sup>60</sup> but was little-known in Italy outside these fringe groups.

LN established a connection to Dugin, who in the past was himself a fringe figure in Russia but in recent years, has entered the mainstream of the Russian political scene.<sup>61</sup> The party—together with some extreme right-wing think tanks—sought to make Dugin's ideas known to a wider audience, frequently inviting him to LN-sponsored conferences.<sup>62</sup> In 2013-14, LN also began to forge ties with senior Russian figures close to the orthodox ultranationalist oligarch Konstantin Malofeev, particularly with Aleksey Komov, World Congress of Families Regional Representative for Russia and the CIS and head of international projects at Malofeev's St. Basil the Great Foundation,<sup>63</sup> and with Andrey Klimov, who at the time was responsible for United Russia's foreign relations.<sup>64</sup>

In February 2014, LN set up the Lombardy-Russia Cultural Association (ACRL) in order to support the development of its political contacts in Russia, relay Russian strategic narratives to the Italian public, and facilitate business relationships between the Lombardy business community and Russian entrepreneurs. Gianluca Savoini, a journalist and longtime Russia expert for LN, became the president of ACRL, while the above-mentioned Aleksey Komov was chosen as honorary president. As Savoini explained in an interview, ACRL was established in order to make the Italian public aware that "it is absurd and counterproductive for the EU to view Russia as an enemy and not as a fundamental geopolitical, military, as well as economic ally."<sup>65</sup>

Three influential LN figures were active in developing and managing the party's relations with Moscow: Gianluca Savoini (mentioned above); Claudio D'Amico, a former LN MP, and Lorenzo Fontana, member of the European Parliament (MEP) for LN and responsible for LN's relations with other European far-right parties. In

58 Nicola Biondo and Marco Canestrari, *Supernova* (Nicola Biondo and Marco Canestrari, 2017), p. 24-25, [www.supernova5stelle.it](http://www.supernova5stelle.it).

59 Jacopo Iacoboni, "L'abbraccio dei Cinquestelle con I due emissari di Putin," *La Stampa*, November 5 2016, <http://www.lastampa.it/2016/11/05/italia/politica/labbraccio-dei-cinquestelle-con-i-due-emissari-di-putin-17GOE54oaCbp9gUqrjTn/pagina.html>.

60 Giovanni Savino, "From Evola to Dugin: The Neo-Eurasian Connection in Italy," in *Eurasianism and the European Far Right: The Future Europe-Russia Relationship*, ed. Marlene Laruelle (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015).

61 Anton Shekhovtsov, "Russia and the Western Far-Right," Institute for Human Sciences, January 25, 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UM\\_LkVLdwCw#action=share](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UM_LkVLdwCw#action=share).

62 Matteo Andriola, "Dugin: il filosofo antiliberalista che ha stregato la Lega," *Lettera 43*, December 6, 2015.

63 Komov participated in the 2013 LN congress in Turin that elected Salvini as party leader, along with United Russia deputy Viktor Zubarev.

64 Anton Shekhovtsov, "The Italian Far-Right Lega Nord Builds Closer Ties with Moscow," *Anton Shekhovtsov's Blog*, March 6, 2017, <http://anton-shekhovtsov.blogspot.it/2017/03/the-italian-far-right-lega-nord-builds.html>.

65 Alessandro Catto, "Associazione Lombardia - Russia, uno sguardo geopolitico per una nuova amicizia con Mosca," *Blog.ilgiornale.it*, December 2, 2015, <http://blog.ilgiornale.it/catto/2015/12/02/associazione-lombardia-russia-uno-sguardo-geopolitico-per-una-nuova-amicizia-con-mosca/>.

March 2014, D'Amico and Fontana traveled to Crimea as “observers” of the referendum organized by Moscow to legitimate its annexation of the Ukrainian province by force.

Beginning in the fall of 2014, LN significantly increased its pro-Russian activities, as Salvini and other LN compatriots began to meet frequently with Russian officials.

- October 13, 2014: Salvini leads an LN delegation to Russian-annexed Crimea and Moscow. They meet with Crimea’s “Prime Minister” Sergey Aksyonov, Sergey Naryshkin (chairman of the State Duma), Vladimir Vasiliev (deputy chairman of the State Duma), and Aleksey Pushkov (chairman of the Duma Foreign Affairs Committee).<sup>66</sup>
- October 17, 2014: Salvini meets with Putin on the sidelines of the Asia-Europe Summit to discuss “the absurd sanctions against Russia” imposed by the EU.<sup>67</sup>
- October 18, 2014: LN organizes a mass anti-illegal immigration demonstration in Milan called “stop invasion.” Many demonstrators held posters hailing Putin and his tough anti-immigration policies. Salvini, in his speech to the crowd, praised Putin as a great and far-sighted statesman, stressed that Russia should be a fundamental ally against Islamist terrorism, and attacked the EU’s sanctions policy.<sup>68</sup>
- December 8, 2014: Salvini travels to Moscow to meet Pushkov and other Russian officials. The LN leader stressed LN’s uncompromising opposition to sanctions in various media appearances,<sup>69</sup> and claimed that the Italian economy had suffered a loss of five billion euros because of lost exports to Russia.
- February 14, 2015: Salvini returns to Moscow to meet Russian officials.
- December 18, 2015: An LN delegation led by Salvini meets Klimov and Pushkov to discuss an LN-United Russia cooperation agreement. The Russians were apparently not yet ready to agree to it, because LN’s popularity was not yet sufficient (at the time it had 10-12 percent support in nationwide polls, with some polls pegging support as high as 15 percent).<sup>70</sup>
- May 18, 2016: The LN-dominated Venice regional parliament passes a resolution calling for lifting anti-Russian sanctions and recognizing the 2014 Crimea referendum. LN pushed for other regional parliaments in the country to pass the same resolution.
- October 14, 2016: LN begins to adopt more aggressive anti-NATO rhetoric and denounces the Italian government’s decision to send 140 Italian troops to Latvia to participate in a NATO Enhanced Forward Presence battle group in support of reassurance measures in Central and Eastern Europe as an “act of war” against Russia.<sup>71</sup> At the time, Kremlin-controlled media were warning that Italy’s participation in the battle group was “putting Italy on a collision course with Russia.”<sup>72</sup>
- October 18, 2016: Salvini, in a television interview states, “NATO is playing a very dangerous game by moving 4000 troops, with tanks and aircraft, toward Russia’s borders.” He described NATO’s Latvia mission, and Italy’s participation in it, as “crazy,” and stated that Italy should reconsider its membership in NATO.<sup>73</sup>
- November 18, 2016 (about two weeks before the critical referendum on then Prime Minister Matteo Renzi’s constitutional reforms): Salvini and other LN officials are again in Moscow to meet Sergey Zheleznyak (deputy chairman of the Duma and deputy secretary of the General Council of United

66 Shekhovtsov, “The Italian far right Lega Nord builds closer ties with Moscow.”

67 Eliseo Bertolasi, “Sanzioni alla Russia fanno interessi solo delle lobby» – Intervista a Matteo Salvini e Gianluca Savoini,” *Lombardiarussia.org*, November 3, 2014, <http://www.lombardiarussia.org/index.php/component/content/article/57-categoria-home-/392-lsanzioni-alla-russia-fanno-interessi-solo-delle-lobby-intervista-a-matteo-salvini-e-gianluca-savoini>.

68 Matteo Salvini, “Stop Invasione - Intervento di Matteo Salvini,” YouTube.com, October 18, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v2pfZajgeaA>.

69 Tatiana Santi, “Salvini torna a Mosca per dire “no” alle sanzioni,” *Sputnik News*, December 9, 2014, [https://it.sputniknews.com/italian.ruvr.ru/2014\\_12\\_09/Salvini-torna-a-Mosca-per-dire-no-alle-sanzioni-Parte-1-7922/](https://it.sputniknews.com/italian.ruvr.ru/2014_12_09/Salvini-torna-a-Mosca-per-dire-no-alle-sanzioni-Parte-1-7922/).

70 Shekhovtsov, “The Italian far right Lega Nord builds closer ties with Moscow.”

71 Ugo Giano, “Nato, Divina (Ln): Soldati Alleanza Atlantica a confine russo è atto di Guerra,” *Agenparl.com*, October 14, 2016, <http://www.agenparl.com/nato-divina-ln-soldati-alleanza-atlantica-confine-russo-atto-guerra/>.

72 “NATO’s Bidding Puts Italy on a Collision Course with Russia,” *Sputnik News*, October 19, 2016, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201610191046484173-italy-russia-troops/>.

73 Matteo Salvini, “Matteo Salvini intervistato da Myrta Merlino,” YouTube.com, October 18, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2nJZb6OREm4>.



Supporters of the Northern League (LN), a far-right political party with close ties to Russian leadership, rally against immigration in Turin, Italy, October 12, 2013. *Photo credit:* Fabio Visconti.

Russia), Viktor Zubarev (United Russia), and Crimea’s “Deputy Prime Minister” Georgy Muradov.

- March 6, 2017: Salvini travels to Moscow to sign the United Russia-LN cooperation agreement.<sup>74</sup>

### The 5 Star Movement (M5S)

M5S shifted toward a pro-Russian foreign policy in the spring of 2015. It appears that a key role in the decision to make this shift was played by Davide Casaleggio. Previously, the party was not pro-Russian but was, in fact, often critical of Putin’s authoritarian regime and of systematic violations of fundamental rights in Russia.

In contrast to LN, which openly declares its pro-Russian stance and publicizes its contacts with the Kremlin, M5S denies that it has such an attitude toward Russia and generally strives to keep its contacts and meetings with Russian officials confidential and out of the public view.

Three leading M5S MPs appear to have been assigned a key role in managing the party’s cooperation with Moscow: Alessandro Di Battista (deputy chairman of the Foreign Affairs Commission of the Chamber of Deputies), Manlio Di Stefano (M5S group leader at the Foreign Affairs Commission of the Chamber of Deputies, often described as a possible foreign minister in a future M5S government), and Vito Petrocelli (M5S group leader at the Senate). Davide Casaleggio is believed to have closely followed the development of the M5S-Russia relationship.

One of the first indicators of Moscow’s support of M5S was the party’s growing visibility in Kremlin-controlled international media such as RT, Sputnik, and other outlets. This trend began in April 2015, when RT broadcast an interview with Beppe Grillo in which the latter described Italy as a country “in dire straits” and on the verge of breakdown and an authoritarian coup d’etat, while RT—during Grillo’s interview—showed images of unrest and violent anti-government protests

<sup>74</sup> Matteo Carnieletto and Elena Barlozzari, “Ecco l’accordo tra Lega Nord e Russia Unita,” *Ilgiornale.it*, July 13, 2017, <http://www.ilgiornale.it/news/politica/ecco-laccordo-lega-nord-e-russia-unita-1419611.html>.

in Italian cities.<sup>75</sup> The depiction of Italy as a country in constant revolt against the government and on the verge of chaos became a recurring theme of Kremlin propaganda that was echoed by M5S's extensive network of websites and social media accounts.<sup>76</sup>

In June and July 2015, the party launched a campaign against anti-Russian sanctions,<sup>77</sup> and top M5S politicians began to express pro-Moscow views and to embrace Kremlin strategic narratives. On June 8, 2015, for example, Manlio Di Stefano, in a statement posted on Grillo's blog, accused the West of having staged a coup d'état in Ukraine and installed a pro-US government in Kiev. He argued that the West is now preparing to turn Ukraine into a NATO base in order to launch "a final assault on Russia."<sup>78</sup>

On July 29, 2015, Di Stefano argued, in a post on Grillo's website, that the EU is subservient to US interests and that "Europe is being dragged by Washington into a dangerous crusade against Russia."<sup>79</sup>

It became increasingly evident in 2016 that Russian strategic narratives (sometimes including disinformation and conspiracy theories) were systematically spread in Italy by the vast network of pro-M5S websites and social media accounts.<sup>80</sup> Items on these websites were frequently sourced to Kremlin-controlled media.

For example, Sputnik became one of the preferred sources of stories published by *Tze Tze* (controlled by Casaleggio Associati), one of the major news websites of the pro-M5S network with 1.2 million followers. *L'Antidiplomatico*, a website that publicizes M5S's foreign policy positions but is not officially affiliated with the party, constantly published articles that relayed Kremlin propaganda themes. The site's director,

Alessandro Bianchi, is one of Alessandro Di Battista's closest aides.<sup>81</sup>

In 2016, top M5S politicians began to visit Moscow to meet senior Russian politicians while the party intensified its pro-Russian activities.

- March 25, 2016: The United Russia website announces that on March 26, 2016, an M5S delegation, guided by Di Battista, is to meet Sergey Zheleznyak, deputy secretary of United Russia's General Council, and Robert Shlegel, chairman of the Foreign Affairs Commission of the Presidium of United Russia's General Council.<sup>82</sup>
- June 26, 2016: Di Stefano is the only Italian politician to speak at the United Russia congress in Moscow. In his speech, Di Stefano calls Ukraine's Maidan revolution a "Western-backed coup" aimed at bringing NATO to Russia's borders. He calls for sanctions to be lifted immediately, and for closer Italian-Russian intelligence cooperation on counterterrorism. He also stresses Italy's national interests require that Moscow be a key player in the solution of security crises in the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>83</sup>
- August 3, 2016: As terrorist attacks in Europe increased, Di Battista, in a foreign policy speech to the Italian Parliament, emphasizes Italian-Russian intelligence cooperation as the key to countering the growing threat of Islamist terrorism.<sup>84</sup>
- August 4, 2016: M5S presents a legislative proposal to the Italian parliament that would require Italy's participation in NATO to be ratified by parliament every two years and would also subject NATO's

75 "Beppe Grillo alla televisione russa RT: "Sono a favore dell'Europa ma contro l'euro" #fuoridalleuro," Beppegrillo.it, April 10, 2015, [http://www.beppegrillo.it/2015/04/beppe\\_grillo\\_alla\\_televisione\\_russa\\_rt\\_sono\\_a\\_favore\\_delleuropa\\_ma\\_contro\\_leuro\\_fuoridalleuro.html](http://www.beppegrillo.it/2015/04/beppe_grillo_alla_televisione_russa_rt_sono_a_favore_delleuropa_ma_contro_leuro_fuoridalleuro.html).

76 Jacopo Iacoboni, "L'abbraccio dei Cinquestelle con i due emissari di Putin," *La Stampa*, May 11, 2016, <http://www.lastampa.it/2016/11/05/italia/politica/labbraccio-dei-cinquestelle-con-i-due-emissari-di-putin-17G0E54oaCbpgn9gUqrjtN/pagina.html>.

77 "Revocare sanzioni a Russia, Italia ha perso più di 1mld in un anno," Movimento5stelle.it, June 11, 2016, <http://www.movimento5stelle.it/parlamento/esteri/2015/06/revocare-sanzioni-a-russia-italia-ha-perso-piu-di-1mld-in-un-anno.html>.

78 "Putin circondato," Beppegrillo.it, June 8, 2015, [http://www.beppegrillo.it/2015/06/putin\\_circondato.html](http://www.beppegrillo.it/2015/06/putin_circondato.html).

79 Manlio Di Stefano, "Una delegazione di pace M5S in Russia e Crimea," Beppegrillo.it, July 29, 2015. [http://www.beppegrillo.it/2015/07/una\\_delegazione\\_di\\_pace\\_m5s\\_in\\_russia\\_e\\_crimea.html](http://www.beppegrillo.it/2015/07/una_delegazione_di_pace_m5s_in_russia_e_crimea.html).

80 Alberto Nardelli and Craig Silverman, "Italy's Most Popular Political Party is Leading Europe in Fake News and Kremlin Propaganda," *Buzzfeed*, November 29, 2016, [https://www.buzzfeed.com/albertonardelli/italys-most-popular-political-party-is-leading-europe-in-fak?utm\\_term=.bj1qk2Pay#.sxBw2J8jQ](https://www.buzzfeed.com/albertonardelli/italys-most-popular-political-party-is-leading-europe-in-fak?utm_term=.bj1qk2Pay#.sxBw2J8jQ).

81 Jacopo Iacoboni, "L'Antidiplomatico, così un sito divulga la linea filo-russa del M5S," *La Stampa*, November 8, 2016, <http://www.lastampa.it/2016/11/08/italia/politica/lantidiplomatico-cos-un-sito-divulga-la-linea-filorussa-del-ms-wcy1106N9alcHSE8nUGwsL/pagina.html>.

82 "V Moskve sostoyatsya rossiysko-ital'yanskiye mezhpartiynnye konsul'tatsii «Yedinaya Rossiya» - «Dvizheniye pyat' zvezd»," United Russia website, March 25, 2016, <http://er.ru/news/140645/>.

83 Manlio Di Stefano, "Manlio Di Stefano in Russia: Una politica estera differente è possibile," *Ilblogdellestelle.it*, June 28, 2016, [http://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/manlio\\_di\\_stefano\\_in\\_russia\\_una\\_politica\\_estera\\_differente\\_e\\_possibile.html](http://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/manlio_di_stefano_in_russia_una_politica_estera_differente_e_possibile.html).

84 Manlio Di Stefano, "Non Era Mai Successo...Prima del M5S," Facebook, August 4, 2016, [https://www.facebook.com/ManlioDiStefano/videos/1198714733519984/?video\\_source=pages\\_finch\\_main\\_video](https://www.facebook.com/ManlioDiStefano/videos/1198714733519984/?video_source=pages_finch_main_video).

## THE KREMLIN'S TROJAN HORSES 2.0

use of military bases in Italy to parliamentary approval.<sup>85</sup>

- October 14, 2016: After the announcement that 140 Italian troops would participate in a NATO Enhanced Forward Presence battle group in Latvia, M5S intensifies both its hostile rhetoric against NATO and its warnings that a nuclear war could break out because of the West's "aggressive and provocative" moves against Russia. These warnings echoed a recurrent theme of Kremlin propaganda campaigns aimed at reinforcing fear and anxiety in Western public opinion that tensions with Russia could escalate into nuclear war. Di Stefano called on the government to immediately re-discuss Italy's membership in NATO, "an 'alliance' that is trapping us in a scenario of war and its ultimately apocalyptic consequence: a thermonuclear war with Russia."<sup>86</sup>
- In October 2016, some of Russia's international media outlets initiated a campaign to undermine the pro-Yes (pro-Renzi) vote for the December 2016 referendum on constitutional reform.
- October 30, 2016: RT in English and its websites falsely present images of a pro-Yes public demonstration of thousands of people in Rome as an anti-government protest supporting a no vote at the referendum, and the fake news is spread quickly by a number of pro-M5S websites and social media accounts. Rome lodged a protest with Moscow over the incident through diplomatic channels.<sup>87</sup>
- November 14, 2016: An M5S delegation headed by MP Vito Petrocelli travels to Moscow to wrap up M5S's campaign for a no vote at the referendum, and holds a press conference at the Kremlin-controlled *Rossiya Segodnya's* media center.
- March 23, 2017: M5S issues the *Five Stars Citizen Handbook for Europe*, a foreign policy document that calls for the immediate removal of sanctions against Russia, and the cancellation of funding for EU strategic communications programs that spread "anti-Russian propaganda" and "pro-Euro

propaganda," and for those that seek to counter "fake news."<sup>88</sup>

- April 5, 2017: Registered members of M5S's "Rousseau" online voting platform vote on the party's foreign policy program, which calls for a strategic partnership with Russia, while repeating the Russian strategic narrative that US and Western "interventionism" and democracy-promotion programs are entirely to blame for generating chaos, terrorism, and destabilization in the Middle East and in other regions of the world, as well as uncontrolled immigration from such crisis-stricken areas. "Western unilateralism," the program states, "has destroyed countries such as Iraq, Somalia, the Former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Libya, Ukraine and Syria."<sup>89</sup>

### Consequences and Implications for Transatlantic Relations

Italy is set to hold national elections in the first half of 2018. If M5S or LN enter into national government or significantly increase their influence on policy making, then the transatlantic partnership—a key pillar of Italy's foreign and security policy—could be weakened.

1. M5S and LN, if they accede to power, may push to change Italy's traditional Atlanticist and Europeanist foreign policy and attempt to forge some kind of strategic alliance with Moscow. This would weaken mutual trust between Europe and the United States, with negative consequences for transatlantic dialogue and cooperation.
2. These parties have proclaimed policies that weaken Italy's commitment to NATO and create obstacles for the country's participation in NATO missions and for NATO's use of military bases in the country, thus undermining the Alliance's cohesion.
3. M5S and LN will probably continue to spread the Kremlin's anti-Western and anti-US strategic narratives among the Italian public, which has traditionally been pro-American. These propaganda efforts, if left unchallenged, may generate a significant increase in anti-American sentiments in

85 Manlio Di Stefano, "Non Era Mai Successo...Prima del M5S."

86 Manlio Di Stefano, "Manlio Di Stefano (M5S): «Quando governeremo, la Nato non potra' trattarci come sudditi. Mai piu'»,» *Lantidiplomatico.it*, October 14, 2016, [http://www.lantidiplomatico.it/dettnews-manlio\\_di\\_stefano\\_m5s\\_quando\\_governeremo\\_la\\_nato\\_non\\_potra\\_trattarci\\_come\\_sudditi\\_mai\\_piu/82\\_17478/](http://www.lantidiplomatico.it/dettnews-manlio_di_stefano_m5s_quando_governeremo_la_nato_non_potra_trattarci_come_sudditi_mai_piu/82_17478/).

87 Jacopo Iacoboni, "La propaganda russa all'offensiva antirenze e il web grillino rilancia," *La Stampa*, November 2, 2016, <http://www.lastampa.it/2016/11/02/italia/politica/la-propaganda-russa-alloffensiva-antirenze-e-il-web-grillino-rilancia-4Nr21Ymkcw9cIKLm6HtuFK/pagina.html>.

88 "Libro a 5 Stelle Dei Cittadini Per L'Europa," *Movimento5stelle.it*, <http://www.movimento5stelle.it/parlamentoeuropeo/libro-5-stelle-dei-cittadini-per-europa.pdf>.

89 "Programma Esteri Movimento 5 Stelle," *Programma parziale*, April 13, 2017.

Italy, undermining public support for the country's transatlantic partnership.

4. An M5S-led government could lead to serious domestic political and economic instability because of the party's lack of experience and capacity to govern, undermining Italy's credibility as a partner for Washington and the Euro-Atlantic community.

Italy's political system has been transformed by the pro-Russian camp in Italian politics, which has emerged and grown as a result of the populist surge that began in 2013. In the absence of a strategic response by Italy's establishment that addresses the deeper causes of the populist surge, Russian influence in Italy is bound to increase, progressively undermining the country's Western-oriented foreign policy as well as the strength and stability of its democratic system.

# SPAIN

## THE NEXT TARGET FOR RUSSIAN INFLUENCE?

Francisco de Borja Lasheras and Nicolás de Pedro

Until recently, Russia has not been a traditional foreign policy priority or a “hot” topic that can easily mobilize domestic constituencies in Spain. Nonetheless, Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014 produced heated public debates. As in other Western countries, the Russia question, especially when paired with broader European security issues, international order, and Western democracy, could be a polarizing topic, especially against a backdrop of discontent, economic insecurity, and populism.

Spain has not been a priority target for hybrid activities from Moscow, unlike Germany, Italy, or some Central European countries. Still, Spain, as one of the largest European Union (EU) countries and hub of the Spanish-speaking world, is relevant to Russian geopolitical interests. And because political and strategic thinking on Russia remains hollow and often driven by stereotypes, public opinion outlets and some policy makers are malleable, which makes Spain potentially vulnerable to Russian influence operations.

Overall, the Spanish government’s position on Russia reflects established patterns in Spanish diplomacy, such as a preference for multilateralism, a penchant for caution, and a self-perception of Spain as predictable and as a neutral broker. It also reflects an uneasy equilibrium between competing strategic drivers. This is why Madrid’s position may be framed as a balancing act among three positions: 1. a pro-European and

pro-Western position, which sees a pro-EU Spain adhering to sanctions and supporting NATO positions in the Baltics and in Europe’s East, while generally refraining from open overtures to Moscow; 2. a pro-engagement with Russia position, that furthers bilateral relations, is cautious with measures that Madrid perceives as escalating tensions with Russia, and underscores the need to engage with Russia; and 3. a geo-economic position, which dominates the current minority government of the Popular Party (conservative), is focused on economic growth, and sees diplomacy as a tool for business promotion abroad.<sup>90</sup>

Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy’s government is generally keen to avoid tensions with Russia. Madrid’s initial stance on Ukraine was ambiguous,<sup>91</sup> but the government gradually escalated its critical rhetoric, closely following Berlin and Paris. After Russia’s annexation of Crimea, Rajoy’s government slowed its pursuit of better bilateral relations, but, following this brief hiatus, interests in seeking closer economic links with Russia and a return to so-called normalization seem to be the driving force right now. Spanish officials have resumed visits to Moscow,<sup>92</sup> coupled with some calls to eventually revisit sanctions, though within the EU-specified constraints that link sanctions relief to the fulfillment of the Minsk agreements. And while Madrid insists on engagement, it has set in motion, and endorsed at the highest political levels,<sup>93</sup> a substantial

90 According to official statistics provided by ICEX, current bilateral figures of investment are modest (109 million euros in 2016). Total bilateral trade turnover is more significant (it reached five billion euros in 2016), though limited compared to Spain’s total international trade (583 billion euros in 2015). Russia is a key partner in tourism and real estate, with promising opportunities in infrastructure development and civil engineering. See: Antonio Sánchez Andrés and Nicolás De Pedro, “Spain and the European Union-Russia Conflict: the Impact of the Sanctions,” *Notes Internacionales*, CIDOB 108 (2015), accessed October 18, 2017, [https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication\\_series/notes\\_internacionales/n1\\_108/spain\\_and\\_the\\_european\\_union\\_russia\\_conflict\\_the\\_impact\\_of\\_the\\_sanctions](https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication_series/notes_internacionales/n1_108/spain_and_the_european_union_russia_conflict_the_impact_of_the_sanctions).

91 Previous Spanish Foreign Minister Manuel García-Margallo raised eyebrows with his friendly meeting with Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, in Madrid, on March 5, 2014, at the peak of the Crimean crisis. Margallo did ask Russia to respect international law, though expressing a wish that there would not be a need to slash sanctions. This is consistent with his policy throughout his term as finance minister.

92 Foreign Minister Alfonso Dastis, and also Spain’s Minister for Industry, Energy and Digital Agenda, Álvaro Nadal, visited Moscow in spring 2017, with a strong economic component. See: Xavier Colás, “España, al rescate de las infraestructuras rusas,” *El Mundo*, May 29, 2017, <http://www.elmundo.es/economia/2017/05/29/592c7af7e2704ecd058b45b1.html>.

93 Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy made a strong endorsement of the mission during his visit to the Spanish troops in Adazi (Latvia) in July 2017 and even supported the possibility of Spain leading the multinational battlegroup. See: Ángel Collado, “Rajoy anuncia en

increase in its contributions to NATO deployments in the Baltics,<sup>94</sup>—an area not seen as vital interest.

## THE SPANISH RUSSLANDVERSTEHERS

Spain and Russia have generally had limited political, social, and economic relations and have weak historical and structural links.<sup>95</sup> As a result, Spanish-Russian relations remain hollow in strategic terms, and public discourse is often rife with stereotypes and misconceptions. Since the war in Ukraine, this may be changing. Though specific polls on the topic are infrequent,<sup>96</sup> most Spaniards seem to find Putin and Russia, which they view as a blend of authoritarianism with homophobic, militaristic, and macho posturing, as abhorrent. This suggests a gap between some sectors of the establishment, political groups and scholars, and a plurality of citizens when it comes to Putin's Russia, though it is still not a topic that mobilizes the public.<sup>97</sup> In general, mainstream media editorials endorse a harsher position on Russia than that advocated by the Spanish government.

There is, nonetheless, an entrenched “Russophilia” that seems to result from a deeply rooted blend of ideology as well as idealistic characterization and clichés of Russia or the Soviet Union. This Russophilia often goes hand in hand with equally strong, though negative perceptions of the West, the role of the United States and NATO in European security (or even Spanish history—e.g., US support for Francisco Franco) or ideology—especially, but not only, on the left of the political spectrum where anti-Americanism is still rampant. Such Spanish Russophilia is inchoate, not grounded in any substantial understanding of modern Russia and is devoid of strategic depth. Nevertheless, it does play a role in shaping policy preferences and

public positioning, as it permeates politically active and ideological segments of society with or without public responsibilities.

Thus, while Spain may not yet have high-profile *Trojan Horses*, it has many *Russlandversteher*s: individuals and entities who sympathize with, subscribe to, or promote core elements of the Kremlin's worldview and narrative.<sup>98</sup> These individuals are active in political settings, including government bodies, policy circles, and across social media, from different positions of influence. They are a heterogeneous group that includes scholars, civil servants, politicians of almost all stripes, and pundits who mainly emphasize the need to “understand” Russia's actions in Syria, Ukraine, or elsewhere as inevitable or justifiable, over other considerations such as human rights, pluralistic democracies, or liberal values. Pragmatists amongst them understand that Russia behaves as a hostile power and thus that some form of containment is necessary; however, they frequently stress that open-ended confrontation over Ukraine is pointless in the wider scheme of international affairs. A smaller subgroup of “true believers” sees Russia's actions as justified, one way or the other, or that despite them, Russia is a European country and remains a potential partner and ally facing common threats, such as terrorism.

Most Spanish *Russlandversteher*s refrain from stances openly supportive of Putin himself, but they do prioritize notions of partnership and a common European space. At times, some such voices promote the need for a nonaligned, Russia-friendly Southern Caucasus.<sup>99</sup> They reject the “pro-Russian” label and seem to perceive themselves as objective and balanced, as opposed to mainstream Spanish public figures in media or policy

Letonia una mayor implicación de España con la OTAN,” *El Confidencial*, July 18, 2017, [https://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/2017-07-18/rajoy-letonia-implicacion-espna-otan-baltico\\_1417133/](https://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/2017-07-18/rajoy-letonia-implicacion-espna-otan-baltico_1417133/).

94 Spain has deployed 300 troops in Latvia as part of NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence multinational battlegroups in the Baltic countries and Poland. It has contributed for years to the NATO Policing mission in the Baltics with several Eurofighter jets. Spain is deploying a mechanized infantry Company in armored fighting vehicles, including Leopard tanks, together with cyber security experts in Estonia. See: “NATO's Enhanced Forward Practices,” NATO, May 2017, [http://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf\\_2017\\_05/1705-factsheet-efp.pdf](http://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2017_05/1705-factsheet-efp.pdf).

95 For instance, in terms of energy, Russia was the fifth largest supplier of oil to Spain in 2016 (7.9 percent of the total). The supply sources of crude oil are highly diversified. At the same time, Russian gas is not consumed in the Iberian Peninsula. Official figures are provided by the Corporación de Reservas de Productos Petrolíferos (CORES).

96 For instance, according to a Pew Research poll published in August 2017, Spaniards are among the least confident in President Putin worldwide. In the EU, Spain is ranked only behind Poland with eighty-eight per cent exhibiting lack of confidence in Putin's global leadership (above the global median of sixty percent). This is consistent with similar results in previous years. See: Margaret Vice, “Publics Worldwide Unfavorable Toward Putin, Russia,” Pew Research Center, August 16, 2017, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2017/08/16/publics-worldwide-unfavorable-toward-putin-russia/>.

97 There are exceptions. For instance, on April 21, 2017, hundreds gathered in front of the Russian embassy in Madrid to protest against the alleged concentration camps for homosexuals in Chechnya. See: “Cientos de personas protestan por la persecución de homosexuales en Chechenia,” *Eldiario.es*, April 21, 2017, [http://www.eldiario.es/sociedad/Cientos-protestan-persecucion-homosexuales-Chechenia\\_O\\_635537548.html](http://www.eldiario.es/sociedad/Cientos-protestan-persecucion-homosexuales-Chechenia_O_635537548.html).

98 Francisco de Borja Lasheras, “Spain's balancing act with Russia”, European Council on Foreign Relations, July 26, 2016, [http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_spains\\_balancing\\_act\\_with\\_russia](http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_spains_balancing_act_with_russia).

99 Discussions with authors, Madrid, 2014-2017.





Thousands of people participate in the “March of Change,” organized by Podemos, a leftist political party supportive of lifting sanctions on Russia, in Madrid, Spain, January 31, 2015. *Photo credit: Barcex.*

circles, whom they criticize as “anti-Russian” (or “pro-Ukrainian” or “pro-Syrian opposition”).

The Spanish *Russlandverstehers*, like their peers in other Western countries, whether left or right, subscribe to a rather conservative view of international affairs that uncritically accepts power-based international affairs and geopolitics. These Iberian Henry Kissingers are skeptical about democracy promotion and revolutionary uprisings like Ukraine’s Maidan or the Arab Spring—especially when the West and United States are perceived to be involved. They are mostly concerned with stability and readily accept the notion of spheres of influence.

Hence, such support in Spain for Russian views of the international order is generally less an open admiration of the model and more an acceptance and legitimization of Russia’s geo-strategic agenda, regardless of the Kremlin’s actual behavior. In fact, in their view, Russia’s aggressive foreign policy bolsters

claims that it is better to engage with Russia and Putin in order to avoid greater conflict.

Nonetheless, Russia’s allure to Europhobic far right groups and its actions in recent years, from Ukraine to Syria to interference and meddling in Western democracies could contribute to a certain reassessment of positions at both government and broader political levels. This shift is far from coherent yet, and the jury is still out on whether it will produce a strategic repositioning of the country as a whole. But the Kremlin’s undeniably destabilizing actions have certainly hampered notions of partnership with Russia. Madrid does not officially see Putin’s Russia as a threat, but there is an awareness of the challenges it presents to European security and stability—and that these could eventually affect Spain.<sup>100</sup> Such factors mitigate and restrain the *Russlandverstehers*, but they have further entrenched opinions regarding Russia, both within the political class and in policy and media

<sup>100</sup> Take the concerns of Madrid’s authorities regarding the presence of Russian mafia elements in the Spanish coast and their potential links to the Kremlin. See: Jesus Duva, “Un fiscal español vincula a la mafia rusa con el Kremlin,” *El País*, December 1, 2010, [https://elpais.com/internacional/2010/12/01/actualidad/1291158037\\_850215.html](https://elpais.com/internacional/2010/12/01/actualidad/1291158037_850215.html).

circles, even if the topic is not mainstream yet.<sup>101</sup> Still, as a pacifist country, Spanish political discourse shies away from positions labelled as too hawkish on Russia.

## IDENTIFYING THE MAJOR PLAYERS: KEY PRO-RUSSIAN POLITICAL PARTIES AND FIGURES

Overall, the main Spanish parties tend to adhere to common EU and NATO positions, and some, such as the social democrats (PSOE) are, at times, quite vocal on human rights and democracy questions with respect to Russia and the post-Soviet space.

Spain does not yet have the equivalent of Italy's Northern League and its leader Matteo Salvini or Germany's Gerhard Schroeder, each vying for Kremlin attention apparently out of financial interest, ideological conviction, or a mix of both. Political figures that are openly pro-Russian are mostly fringe characters of the right and far right, along with some groups and figures from the far left. They all defend and/or support Russia, though for different reasons and agendas, and out of disparate preconceptions of what Russia or Putin fundamentally are. Their motivations and inspirations resemble those of their bedfellows in the West and Russia: to the left (including far left), Russia is seen through the prism of Soviet ideological nostalgia and as a bulwark against Western imperialism and the US-backed NATO alliance; meanwhile, rightists admire Russia and even Putin out of an imperialistic nostalgia, and they appreciate Putin's brand of social conservatism. As a result, when it comes to policy toward Russia, far-right and far-left forces often find themselves on the same side of the fence.

On the right, the pro-Russian grouping is composed of fringe parties and far right movements, such as Movimiento Social Republicano (MSR) and the xenophobic Plataforma per Catalunya (PxC), in addition to individual figures in or close to mainstream conservatism. Russia-promoted narratives are attracting growing attention from some outlets and emerging rightist parties, such as Vox, which does not have parliamentary representation yet. These actors see Putin as tough on terrorism or as a supporter of territorial integrity, and they view Russia as a stalwart defender of Christianity against Islam.

On the left, Podemos, which is further to the left politically than PSOE,<sup>102</sup> deserves a separate, nuanced analysis. Russia (and foreign policy) is not a core policy platform of this force. Instead, Podemos mostly looks at the Russian model as an embodiment of a counter-Western narrative that puts on the table, in their view, the hypocrisy and abuses of the liberal order. The party does take pains in public not to be associated with Putin himself, a leader seen as at odds with the party's pro-empowerment, anti-oligarchic, and pro-social rights stance. Though the party rejects the label of "pro-Russian," it is the only main Spanish party calling for an immediate, unconditional lifting of sanctions on Russia.<sup>103</sup> Some Podemos leaders make arguments tantamount to spheres of influence,<sup>104</sup> akin to a Monroe doctrine for Eastern Europe—even if the rejection of the eponymous US doctrine in Latin America is, ironically, one of their ideological bases.<sup>105</sup>

There are some differences of opinion, and specific Podemos leaders have occasionally condemned Moscow.<sup>106</sup> Still, and overall, the party thus far stands

101 Francisco de Borja Lasheras, "Four Spanish factions on Russia and Ukraine," European Council on Foreign Relations, June 24, 2014, [http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_spain\\_on\\_russia\\_and\\_ukraine\\_the\\_understanders\\_the\\_equidistan274](http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_spain_on_russia_and_ukraine_the_understanders_the_equidistan274).

102 Unlike their German colleagues, today's PSOE lacks any figures perceived as Russia friendly or with interests in that country, and the party has actually shifted towards a more demanding position, though it is not a core party policy.

103 In a survey by the Elcano Royal Institute ahead of Spain's general election in December 2015, Podemos supported a quick lifting of sanctions on Russia and the launch of a dialogue process to (re)incorporate Russia to an inclusive wider Europe security architecture. See: "La intervención de Rusia en Ucrania," Real Instituto Elcano, 2016, <http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/especiales/elecciones2016/pregunta/16.php>.

104 Podemos' foreign policy chief, Pablo Bustinduy, often argues that NATO's expansion is to blame for the war in Ukraine, seen as "meddling into what Russia sees as a geo-strategic area vital for its interests," while stating that the sanctions' policy has been an "utter failure." An especially prominent role in this discourse is also played by Javier Couso, MEP from IU, part of the Podemos coalition. Mr Couso, at the European Parliament and at media appearances (including regularly on RT), tends to put the blame on NATO and the EU, and calls for an unconditional lifting of sanctions on Russia, endorsing the narrative of the "Kyiv junta." Mr. Couso invited Alexey Pushkov to address the European Parliament in February 2015. See: Podemos Congreso, "Pablo Bustinduy en la Comisión de Asuntos Exteriores el 19 de Abril," YouTube video, April 19, 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=odebFkYw\\_cl](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=odebFkYw_cl); IzquierdaUnida, "Couso celebra que 'por fin' Rusia pueda hablar sobre el conflicto en Ucrania en la Eurocámara," YouTube video, February 10, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EUiBXW7LyDo>.

105 Jorge Galindo, "Pablo Bustinduy: «El amor a tu patria es un afecto político poderosísimo y noble en esencia»," *Jotdown*, <http://www.jotdown.es/2016/06/pablo-bustinduy/>.

106 In an interview, Pablo Iglesias, Podemos' main leader, labeled Putin as a "resentful KGB agent" and "a nationalist", adding that "in Russia Podemos would be imprisoned." Additionally, in the 2015 European Parliament resolution condemning the killing of Boris Nemtsov, Podemos split with Mr. Iglesias voting in favor and other MEPs of Podemos voting against. See: John Carlin, "Pablo Iglesias: 'Catalans, stay with us and let's all kick out Rajoy together,'" *El País*, September 24, 2015, [https://elpais.com/elpais/2015/09/24/inenglish/1443088078\\_061646.html](https://elpais.com/elpais/2015/09/24/inenglish/1443088078_061646.html); "Murder of the Russian opposition leader Boris Nemtsov and the state of democracy in Russia," Vote Watch Europe, <http://www.votewatch.eu/en/term8-murder-of-the-russian-opposition-leader-boris-nemtsov-and-the-state-of-democracy-in-russia-joint-mot.html>.

out as the clearest advocate of positions resonating with the Kremlin narrative in Spain—even if, in fairness, these positions resemble those held by individual members of other parties, too.

### **These groups further the Kremlin's goal of fostering alternative political realities and undermining democracy, as their alternative "truths" and echo chambers appeal to individuals disenchanted with established institutions and mainstream parties.**

#### **BUILDING NETWORKS OF INFLUENCE**

As elsewhere, Russia has launched information operations aimed at undermining European unity and polarizing opinion in Spain as well. The Russian government-funded news outlet, RT, launched its Spanish service in 2009. While exact viewership numbers are unknown, RT Spanish targets a huge potential global audience of more than 550 million Spanish speakers, including roughly 40 million in the United States.<sup>107</sup> The channel is well established and easily accessible in Latin America. The editorial line shifts and occasionally represents a balanced perspective, but RT Spanish often seems to nurture mostly anti-US and anti-Western constituencies. Given its current presence and availability, its real impact and leverage in Spain seems limited, especially within a pluralistic media space. RT Spanish has, however, been part of disinformation operations, especially when it comes to shaping the narrative regarding Ukraine or European and Western democracies.<sup>108</sup> The ongoing

crisis in Catalonia has heightened concerns with Russian disinformation. In addition to the pro-independence campaign of Julian Assange,<sup>109</sup> Edward Snowden, and similar public figures, Russia-affiliated bots and outlets, chiefly Sputnik, have ramped up stories on a post-Francoism at work, in tones at times reminiscent of the inflammatory narrative of the "Kyiv junta."<sup>110</sup> At this stage, this propaganda effort is far from consistent and a nuanced assessment is necessary. The Russian government at this point seems keen on sticking to its position of not alienating Madrid, officially reiterating its official adherence to Spain's territorial integrity and categorizing Catalonia as an internal Spanish affair. Putin weighed in on the situation in Catalonia as well, criticizing the EU's "double standard" in recognizing some separatist regions, like Kosovo, but not others, all of which lead to instability.<sup>111</sup>

Moreover, there is a pro-Russian underworld that encompasses the blogosphere, activist platforms, and quasi-civil society groups. They serve as a mobilizing influence among fringe groups on the far left and right, and occasionally have a disruptive impact on Spanish politics. It is unclear whether their funding comes directly from the Kremlin or from sectors associated with it, but indications of Kremlin-directed efforts to establish some sort of friendly experts' platforms are increasing. These groups further the Kremlin's goal of fostering alternative political realities and undermining democracy, as their alternative "truths" and echo chambers appeal to individuals disenchanted with established institutions and mainstream parties. As such, these shady groups and platforms, together with more established politicians and actors, are of interest to Russia, and can be useful levers for public opinion and to influence Spanish politics.

As an example, since the outbreak of the war in Eastern Ukraine, there was activism in favor of "Novorossiia" and the "anti-fascist fight" (antifa) in the Donbas coming from minority extreme-left circles (e.g. squat movement protests and students' associations),

<sup>107</sup> According to the Instituto Cervantes, 472 million people have Spanish as their mother tongue. If those with a limited competence and those learning it are included then the number increases to 567 million, including forty-two million native speakers in the US and fifteen million with some limited competence. See: "El español: una lengua viva: Informe 2016," Instituto Cervantes, [https://cvc.cervantes.es/lengua/espanol\\_lengua\\_viva/pdf/espanol\\_lengua\\_viva\\_2016.pdf](https://cvc.cervantes.es/lengua/espanol_lengua_viva/pdf/espanol_lengua_viva_2016.pdf).

<sup>108</sup> Carl Schreck, "That Awkward Moment": Putin Cited Debunked MH17 Claims In Oliver Stone Interview," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, September 1, 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/putin-debunked-spanish-air-traffic-controller-claims-oliver-stone-interview/28709936.html>.

<sup>109</sup> The sudden support from Julian Assange of Wikileaks to the Catalan pro-independence movement added to the intense coverage by Russian media outlets. See: Marcos Lamelas, "Puigdemont, dos congresistas y un 'lobby': el triángulo que explica los tuits de Assange," *El Confidencial*, September 14, 2017, [https://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/cataluna/2017-09-14/rusia-cataluna-cuna-merkel-romper-europa\\_1443052/](https://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/cataluna/2017-09-14/rusia-cataluna-cuna-merkel-romper-europa_1443052/).

<sup>110</sup> Pilar Bonet, "Russia uses Catalan referendum in fight against Brussels," *El País*, October 1, 2017, [https://elpais.com/elpais/2017/10/01/inenglish/1506863180\\_074507.html](https://elpais.com/elpais/2017/10/01/inenglish/1506863180_074507.html); Mark Scott and Diego Torres, "Catalan referendum stokes fears of Russian influence," *Politico*, September 29, 2017, <http://www.politico.eu/article/russia-catalonia-referendum-fake-news-misinformation/>.

<sup>111</sup> Xavier Colas, "Putin a la UE sobre Cataluña: «Haber pensado mejor el respaldo a Kosovo»," *El Mundo*, <http://www.elmundo.es/espana/2017/10/19/59e8c3c046163f1c2e8b463a.html>.

particularly across social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook. Small committees in support of the “rebels” and the “antifa fight” in Donbas appeared across Spanish cities, sometimes with connections to Spanish “volunteers” fighting in the “republics” supported by Moscow. This garnered occasional media attention, especially from Russian mainstream and Spanish far-left media and websites, even though the number of such volunteers is small.

Within the broad spectrum of Spanish rightists, other platforms have popped up recently that adhere to a social conservative agenda that is cynically spearheaded by the Kremlin. For instance, there have been some reports of links between, “Hazte Oír”—a Spanish ultra-conservative lobby, which is currently very active on issues related to education, abortion, and LGBT rights—and certain Russian figures with Kremlin connections.<sup>112</sup> The abovementioned far-right fringe parties like MSR or xenophobic platforms like PxC align with Moscow and contribute to spreading the work of the Russian nationalist Aleksandr Dugin.<sup>113</sup>

### CONSEQUENCES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS

In general, Spain plays both good cop and bad cop, trying, so to speak, to get along with everyone; yet, it is tempted by great power politics. For the time being, and provided the political landscape in Madrid does

not change fundamentally, it will remain a country that mixes friendly messages toward Russia with increases to its military contributions in Eastern Europe and legal crackdowns on local mafia networks with ties to the Kremlin. Madrid should beware, nonetheless, of two things: the periodic compliments it gets from Moscow on its “balanced” position, which hardly signifies a badge of honor these days; and the fact that Russia will always see Spain as a NATO country that engages in hostile actions against it, in spite of overtures and friendly reassurances.

Much will depend on a combination of a range of factors: the future constellation of political forces in Spain and the polarization of their viewpoints (especially in view of the ongoing Catalan crisis’ potential upending of Spanish democracy);<sup>114</sup> the future of the European order (as well as the position of core countries such as Germany and France); the United States—with the conflicting messages coming from the Trump administration and the US influence on Spain’s security policy choices; and also perhaps on Russia itself and its domestic and foreign policy choices. A developing Spanish policy incorporating different vectors seems likely for the time being, though a hypothetical Podemos-backed government might be pressured toward a nonaligned policy and more demonstrative overtures to Russia.

112 Jordi Pérez Colomé, “La conexión rusa de Hazte Oír”, *El País*, September 5, 2017, [https://politica.elpais.com/politica/2017/08/03/actualidad/1501774274\\_152047.html](https://politica.elpais.com/politica/2017/08/03/actualidad/1501774274_152047.html). [https://politica.elpais.com/politica/2017/08/03/actualidad/1501774274\\_152047.html](https://politica.elpais.com/politica/2017/08/03/actualidad/1501774274_152047.html)

113 In October 2016, one of Dugin’s books was presented in Barcelona at Casa Rusia, an institution devoted to public diplomacy that functions under the umbrella of the *Russkyi Mir* foundation. Some of these individuals are regular contributors to Katehon website and occasionally to RT.

114 Javi Lopez et al., “Spanish democracy faces its biggest challenge in decades”, European Council on Foreign Relations, September 29, 2017, [http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_spanish\\_democracy\\_faces\\_its\\_biggest\\_challenge\\_in\\_decades\\_7233](http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_spanish_democracy_faces_its_biggest_challenge_in_decades_7233).

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

## WHAT THE UNITED STATES SHOULD DO TO COUNTER RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN SOUTHERN EUROPE

- The US Department of State should reach out to Greek Orthodox communities abroad. US embassies could engage diaspora Greek and Cypriot communities, especially in Canada, Australia, Britain, Germany, and other EU countries, to encourage dialogue, investment, and exchange with Greece. Silicon Valley in particular captures the imagination of Greek youth and their aspirations. Leveraging, marketing, and publicizing Greek and Greek-American technology leaders and successes both in Greece and via cultural exchange and internship programs to California would add to the appeal of—and preference for—Western commercial and educational institutions and their global primacy.
- The United States should take a leading role in starting immediate and assertive multilateral negotiations (following unsuccessful efforts)<sup>115</sup> focused on a non-Russian solution to the Cyprus crisis. The United States must not cede negotiation leadership in this dispute to a regionally re-assertive Russia and should be the main party helping to push for the reopening of negotiations.
- To counter Russian disinformation efforts, US public diplomacy should support independent nongovernmental organizations and media in Greece, including helping to finance media professionalization and training programs. For their part, civil society groups and media organizations should build relationships with Greek organizations to exchange best practices and establish open dialogue. The more Western news organizations bring their professional and ethical traditions to the Greek media environment, the more they will reinforce the values of open, free, and independent media. The relationship between the *New York Times* and *Kathimerini*<sup>116</sup> is a good example of how free and independent media collaboration can counter Russian media involvement.
- Italy is an important partner to the United States in managing the spread of terrorist groups, such as ISIS, in Libya and elsewhere in northern Africa. The US administration should reaffirm and strengthen the American commitment to the US-Italian bilateral partnership through increased diplomatic efforts while working to increase military cooperation via the EU and NATO.
- The United States should rebuild its public diplomacy and strategic communications capacity in Europe while devoting particular attention to conducting pro-Western and pro-American soft power activities in European nations, such as Italy, that are particularly vulnerable to Russian influence. The US Congress should continue to allocate and appropriate additional funds for such activities as part of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) and other legislative mechanisms.
- The US Department of State should prioritize and develop its capabilities for tracking, monitoring, and disseminating information about Russian influence operations. To that end, the Global Engagement Center (GEC) should receive congressionally allocated funding via the Department of Defense to carry out such activities.
- The US Congress could consider new legislation to establish an independent advisory council to serve as a bridge between policy makers and social media firms. The advisory council would provide guidance to establishing a voluntary code of conduct for social media firms in the United States.
- The United States should seek more engagement with Spain and the EU, including closer intelligence cooperation, information sharing on cybersecurity best practices, and regular exchanges of information on Russian activities.
- The United States should seek to strengthen the bilateral relationship with Spain through increased official diplomatic visits by high-level officials, including congressional members and Spanish parliamentarians. A dialogue on Russian hybrid

115 Tom Miles, "Cyprus reunification talks collapse, U.N. chief 'very sorry,'" *Reuters*, July 6, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cyprus-conflict/cyprus-reunification-talks-collapse-u-n-chief-very-sorry-idUSKBN19S021>.

116 "Company Profile," *Kathimerini*, accessed October 31, 2017, <http://www.ekathimerini.com/aboutus>.

warfare against the West should be a strong component of bilateral communication.

### WHAT EUROPE SHOULD DO TO COUNTER RUSSIAN INFLUENCE

- To address Greece's economic woes, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the EU must work together to better support Greece's recovery from the economic crisis. Greece has embarked on a massive privatization to raise funds from international donors—an effort that is bearing fruit. But the third EU-IMF bailout package is set to expire in the summer of 2018. To ensure that Greece stays the course of market-based economic measures, the EU and IMF should also consider instituting broader-based professional training programs aimed at Greece's well-educated populace and youth, who remain most vulnerable to economic decline.
- To better understand the nature and impact of Russian information warfare in Greece, the European External Action Service (EEAS) should expand the scope, capabilities, and capacities of the East StratCom Task Force by allocating additional resources to it. The European Parliament should establish and appropriate a funding stream marked for the EEAS's StratCom activities rather than asking the EEAS to reallocate budgeted funds from other activities.
- To better prepare for hybrid threats in Europe's southern flank, NATO could consider establishing a cyber-defense center of excellence in Athens, akin to the NATO Cooperative Defense Center of Excellence in Tallinn, Estonia. The center would be a hub for monitoring, tracking, and alerting NATO members in instances of potential cyber attacks. The Center could also support better collaboration between the EU, NATO, and European Common Security and Defense initiatives on cyber defense.
- Italy's mainstream parties should engage in a serious debate on the divisive economic and cultural issues that are facilitating the growth of populism, including immigration policy, economic liberalization and restructuring, and social welfare programs. The Democratic Party (PD) and Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni's government, should make it a priority to debunk false narratives about refugee and immigration inflows that link refugees and asylum seekers to increased unemployment and high government spending. In the short term, the immigration policy pursued by Interior Minister Marco Minniti that seeks to block migration flows may shore up public opinion, but a more effective long-term policy would aim to regulate, rather than block, migration.
- The Italian parliament should prioritize the fight against elite corruption and against the penetration of organized crime in the political system. It should pass legislation aimed at increasing transparency and accountability in real estate law to compel clarity of land ownership. In addition, a major campaign finance reform effort should require full funding disclosure for both political parties while officials should be obliged to produce full financial disclosures to the public.
- Italy's Ministry of Defense should allocate significant resources to strengthening national cyber defense systems while simultaneously prioritizing training for public sector employees in data protection practices and responsibilities.
- Italy's government should follow the example of the EU's EEAS and other national governments in establishing a counter-disinformation task force that would coordinate intragovernmental efforts to monitor and respond to disinformation attacks while liaising with similar units in NATO, the EU, and other member states.
- The Italian parliament should direct Italy's intelligence services to report on suspicious and covert foreign meddling in Italian politics. The intelligence services should prepare classified and unclassified versions of such a report on a regular basis to raise public awareness of foreign interference and provide evidence to policy makers.
- Spanish political parties should work toward an enhanced domestic accountability of Spain's policy toward Russia. In particular, there is a need for greater attention to and public awareness of parliamentarians' voting records on Russia in the Spanish and EU parliaments.
- There is a need within Spain for a more granular understanding of Russia, Ukraine, and the post-Soviet space that needs to go beyond intergovernmental platforms and bilateral Spain-Russia meetings. This more nuanced approach should include a stronger political and social dialogue with Eastern European countries, which could include expanding university exchange programs between Spanish and Eastern European universities, including in Ukraine and Russia, civil society networks, and independent media dialogue.

## THE KREMLIN'S TROJAN HORSES 2.0

- The Spanish parliament, government, and the security agencies should work closer to scrutinize the activities of platforms and outlets with ties to Russia, and their impact on information in deliberative democracies, as well as investigating Russian organized crime networks. Additionally, a public information campaign should work to provide the Spanish population with greater awareness of Russia's actions within the country. For a start, a parliamentary report could discuss the lessons learned in the information war conducted over the crisis in Catalonia and exchange lessons learned with MPs, governments, and civil society from other EU countries subject to disinformation campaigns, such as Germany.
- Journalists' associations should take the lead in investigating the implementation of European practices regarding journalistic standards, drawing on lessons learned from the coverage of Ukraine and Russia and raising awareness of disinformation campaigns.

# ABOUT THE AUTHORS



## DR. ALINA POLYAKOVA

*David M. Rubenstein Fellow - Foreign Policy, Center on the United States and Europe, Brookings Institution*

Alina Polyakova, PhD, is the David M. Rubenstein Fellow in the Foreign Policy program's Center on the United States and Europe at the Brookings Institution. She is the editor and co-author of *The Kremlin's Trojan Horses: Russian Influence in France, Germany, and the United Kingdom*. Dr. Polyakova specializes in European politics, far-right populism and nationalism, and Russian foreign policy. Polyakova's recent book, *The Dark Side of European Integration* (ibidem-Verlag and Columbia University Press, 2015) examines the rise of far-right political parties in Western and Eastern Europe. She has also written extensively on Russian political warfare, Ukraine, and Transatlantic relations.

Prior to joining Brookings, she served as director of research and senior fellow for Europe and Eurasia at the Atlantic Council. She is a term member of the Council on Foreign Relations and a Swiss National Science Foundation senior research fellow. Polyakova's writings have appeared in the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, the *American Interest*, as well as a number of academic journals and media outlets. She has also been a fellow at the Fulbright Foundation, Eurasia Foundation, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, National Science Foundation, Social Science Research Council, International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), and a Senior Research Fellow and Lecturer at the University of Bern.

Polyakova holds a doctorate and master's in sociology from the University of California, Berkeley, and a bachelor's in economics and sociology with highest honors from Emory University. She speaks Russian and German.



## DR. MARKOS KOUNALAKIS

*Visiting Fellow, Hoover Institution, Stanford University; Senior Fellow, Center for Media, Data, and Society, Central European University*

Markos Kounalakis, PhD, is a visiting fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University and a senior fellow at the Center for Media, Data, and Society at Central European University in Budapest, Hungary. He is president and publisher emeritus of the *Washington Monthly* and writes a syndicated foreign affairs column for *McClatchy* newspapers. Dr. Kounalakis is a veteran print and network broadcast journalist and author who has covered wars and revolutions, both civil and technological. In the 1980s and 1990s, he reported on the overthrow of communism for *Newsweek* in East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria and on the outbreak of ethnic strife and war in Yugoslavia. He was based in Rome and Vienna, and ran the magazine's Prague bureau. After this, he worked in the Soviet Union as the NBC Radio and Mutual News Moscow correspondent covering the fall of the Soviet Union and the war in Afghanistan. Dr. Kounalakis has written for *Wall Street Journal*, *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, *International Herald-Tribune*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Dallas Morning News*, and many other regional and international newspapers and magazines. He has written three books: *Defying Gravity: The Making of Newton* (Beyond Words Publishing, 1993); *Beyond Spin: The Power of Strategic Corporate Journalism* (coauthor, Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1999); and *Hope is a Tattered Flag: Voices of Reason and Change for the Post-Bush Era* (PoliPointPress, 2008). His upcoming book is on the geopolitics of global news networks.





### **DR. ANTONIS KLAPSIS**

*Academic Coordinator, Centre of International and European Political Economy and Governance, University of Peloponnese*

Antonis Klapsis, PhD, is an adjunct lecturer at the Hellenic Open University, the Open University of Cyprus, and Neapolis University Pafos. He is the academic coordinator of the Centre of International and European Political Economy and Governance of the University of Peloponnese. In 2014, he was a visiting fellow at the Wilfried Martens Centre of European Studies. He is the author of five books and the co-author of another. He has published numerous papers in distinguished peer-reviewed international academic journals, contributed volumes, and conferences' proceedings. His latest book, *An Unholy Alliance: The European Far Right and Putin's Russia*, was released in English in May 2015.



### **PROF. LUIGI SERGIO GERMANI**

*Director, Gino Germani Institute of Social Sciences and Strategic Studies*

Luigi Sergio Germani is director of the Gino Germani Institute of Social Sciences and Strategic Studies, a non-profit educational and research think tank in Rome, Italy that was established in 1981. Prof. Germani's areas of specialization include Russian and post-Soviet politics and security issues, European and Italian security policies, the role of intelligence in national security policymaking, transnational organized crime, terrorism, disinformation, and information warfare. He has published many analytical papers and studies on these subjects, and has edited or co-edited several books, including: *L'Intelligence nel XXI Secolo* (2001); *New Frontiers of Intelligence Analysis* (2005); *Pathways out of Terrorism and Insurgency* (2005); *Le nuove minacce provenienti da cyberspazio alla sicurezza nazionale italiana* (2011); *La sfida della cyber-intelligence al sistema-Italia* (2012); *I fondamentalismi religiosi nel mondo contemporaneo* (2014); and *Disinformazione e manipolazione delle percezioni: una nuova minaccia al sistema-paese* (2017). Prof. Germani was previously academic director of the Master's Program on Intelligence and Security Studies at Link Campus University, and currently coordinates conferences and courses on national security issues in Rome. He holds degrees in political science from the University of Bologna and in social sciences from the Gregorian University in Rome, and studied international relations at the Johns Hopkins Bologna Center.



### **MR. JACOPO IACOBONI**

*Political Analyst, La Stampa*

Jacopo Iacoboni has been a journalist at *La Stampa*, one of the oldest newspapers in Italy, since 2000. He currently covers populism and cyber networks in Italian politics. He has reported on every Italian election since 2001, as well as the US presidential election in 2008. Past subjects of his investigative journalism include former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi, Former President Giorgio Napolitano, and current politician Beppe Grillo. In 2005, he won the Ischia International Journalism Award for excellence in journalism and communication. Mr. Iacoboni has published several books on various Italian political developments. His next book, *L'Esperimento: L'Italia del Movimento 5 stelle*, will track the rise of the 5 Star Movement political party in Italy.



### **MR. FRANCISCO DE BORJA LASHERAS**

*Director, Madrid Office, European Council on Foreign Relations*

Francisco de Borja Lasheras is the director of the Madrid Office and policy fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR). Between 2007 and 2009 he worked for the Fundación Alternativas' Observatory of Spanish Foreign Policy (Opex), and taught comparative European politics at the George Washington University in Madrid. After serving at the Spanish Permanent Representation to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Mr. Lasheras spent several years in the Western Balkans: in Bosnia and Herzegovina as seconded national expert to the OSCE, in the field as human rights officer, and in Albania with the head of mission. Mr. Lasheras graduated *summa cum laude* from Deusto University's Faculty of Law and holds an MD from Harvard University, where he studied international relations and politics. He has published works on the Western Balkans, enlargement, security policy, Ukraine, strategy and Spanish politics, and is a regular voice at *El Mundo*, *Letras Libres*, radio, and international media.



### **MR. NICOLÁS DE PEDRO**

*Research Fellow, Barcelona Centre for International Affairs*

Nicolás de Pedro is a research fellow at CIDOB (Barcelona Centre for International Affairs) where he is in charge of the Russia and Eurasia Program. Mr. de Pedro has participated in international Electoral Observation Missions of the Organization for Security and Co-operation (OSCE) in Russia (2011), Kyrgyzstan (2009, 2010), Tajikistan (2010), and Ukraine (2010, 2014). Furthermore, he has carried out fieldwork and traveled extensively throughout the Central Asian region and Xinjiang (China), including a twenty-four-month stay in Kazakhstan (2005-07) funded by a grant from the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID) of the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He has worked as a consultant on Russian and Eurasian issues for the European Parliament, the Institute for Statecraft (UK), the Open Society Initiative for Europe (OSIFE), the Club of Madrid, and the European Union-Central Asia Monitoring (EUCAM) Project. He is an associate professor of international relations at Blanquerna (Universitat Ramon Llull) and at the Institut Barcelona de d'Estudis Internacionals (IBEI). In 2014 he was a visiting professor at the Al-Farabi Kazakh National University (Almaty). He can be followed on Twitter: @nicolasdepedro.

# Atlantic Council Board of Directors

## INTERIM CHAIRMAN

\*James L. Jones, Jr.

## CHAIRMAN EMERITUS, INTERNATIONAL ADVISORY BOARD

Brent Scowcroft

## CHAIRMAN, INTERNATIONAL ADVISORY BOARD

David McCormick

## PRESIDENT AND CEO

\*Frederick Kempe

## EXECUTIVE VICE CHAIRS

\*Adrienne Arsht

\*Stephen J. Hadley

## VICE CHAIRS

\*Robert J. Abernethy

\*Richard W. Edelman

\*C. Boyden Gray

\*George Lund

\*Virginia A. Mulberger

\*W. DeVier Pierson

\*John J. Studzinski

## TREASURER

\*Brian C. McK. Henderson

## SECRETARY

\*Walter B. Slocombe

## DIRECTORS

Stéphane Abrial

Odeh Aburdene

\*Peter Ackerman

Timothy D. Adams

Bertrand-Marc Allen

\*Michael Andersson

David D. Aufhauser

Matthew C. Bernstein

\*Rafic A. Bizri

Dennis C. Blair

\*Thomas L. Blair

Philip M. Breedlove

Reuben E. Brigety II

Myron Brilliant

\*Esther Brimmer

Reza Bundy

R. Nicholas Burns

\*Richard R. Burt

Michael Calvey

James E. Cartwright

John E. Chapoton

Ahmed Charai

Melanie Chen

Michael Chertoff

George Chopivsky

Wesley K. Clark

David W. Craig

\*Ralph D. Crosby, Jr.

Nelson W. Cunningham

Ivo H. Daalder

Ankit N. Desai

\*Paula J. Dobriansky

Christopher J. Dodd

Conrado Dornier

Thomas J. Egan, Jr.

\*Stuart E. Eizenstat

Thomas R. Eldridge

Julie Finley

Lawrence P. Fisher, II

\*Alan H. Fleischmann

\*Ronald M. Freeman

Laurie S. Fulton

Courtney Geduldig

\*Robert S. Gelbard

Gianni Di Giovanni

Thomas H. Glocer

Murathan Gunal

Sherri W. Goodman

Ian Hague

Amir A. Handjani

John D. Harris, II

Frank Haun

Michael V. Hayden

Annette Heuser

Ed Holland

\*Karl V. Hopkins

Robert D. Hormats

Miroslav Hornak

\*Mary L. Howell

Wolfgang F. Ischinger

Deborah Lee James

Reuben Jeffery, III

Joia M. Johnson

Stephen R. Kappes

\*Maria Pica Karp

Andre Kelleners

\*Zalmay M. Khalilzad

Robert M. Kimmitt

Henry A. Kissinger

Franklin D. Kramer

Richard L. Lawson

\*Jan M. Lodal

\*Jane Holl Lute

William J. Lynn

Wendy W. Makins

Zaza Mamulaishvili

Mian M. Mansha

Gerardo Mato

William E. Mayer

T. Allan McArtor

John M. McHugh

Eric D.K. Melby

Franklin C. Miller

James N. Miller

Judith A. Miller

\*Alexander V. Mirtchev

Susan Molinari

Michael J. Morell

Richard Morningstar

Georgette Mosbacher

Edward J. Newberry

Thomas R. Nides

Victoria J. Nuland

Franco Nuschese

Joseph S. Nye

Hilda Ochoa-

Brillembourg

Sean C. O'Keefe

Ahmet M. Oren

Sally A. Painter

\*Ana I. Palacio

Carlos Pascual

Alan Pellegrini

David H. Petraeus

Thomas R. Pickering

Daniel B. Poneman

Arnold L. Punaro

Robert Rangel

Thomas J. Ridge

Charles O. Rossotti

Robert O. Rowland

Harry Sachinis

Rajiv Shah

Stephen Shapiro

Kris Singh

James G. Stavridis

Richard J.A. Steele

Paula Stern

Robert J. Stevens

Robert L. Stout, Jr.

\*Ellen O. Tauscher

Nathan D. Tibbits

Frances M. Townsend

Clyde C. Tuggle

Melanne Verveer

Charles F. Wald

Michael F. Walsh

Maciej Witucki

Neal S. Wolin

Mary C. Yates

Dov S. Zakheim

## HONORARY DIRECTORS

David C. Acheson

Madeleine K. Albright

James A. Baker, III

Harold Brown

Frank C. Carlucci, III

Ashton B. Carter

Robert M. Gates

Michael G. Mullen

Leon E. Panetta

William J. Perry

Colin L. Powell

Condoleezza Rice

Edward L. Rowny

George P. Shultz

Horst Teltschik

John W. Warner

William H. Webster

\*Executive Committee Members

List as of November 3, 2017



The Atlantic Council is a nonpartisan organization that promotes constructive US leadership and engagement in international affairs based on the central role of the Atlantic community in meeting today's global challenges.

© 2017 The Atlantic Council of the United States. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without permission in writing from the Atlantic Council, except in the case of brief quotations in news articles, critical articles, or reviews. Please direct inquiries to:

Atlantic Council

1030 15th Street, NW, 12th Floor,  
Washington, DC 20005

(202) 463-7226, [www.AtlanticCouncil.org](http://www.AtlanticCouncil.org)