

AIR WAR COLLEGE

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## EUROPE'S EXPOSED RIGHT FLANK

Countering the Bonds Between Russia and Europe's Radical Right

by

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## **Biography**

Lieutenant Colonel Cosden entered the Air Force in 1997. He received his commissioning through the Reserve Officer Training Corps at the University of Notre Dame, graduating with a Bachelor of Science Degree in Aerospace Engineering. Following his commissioning, Lt Col Cosden served as an F-16 Maintenance Officer and Flight Commander at Shaw Air Force Base, South Carolina, before earning his pilot wings at Columbus AFB, Mississippi. After completing A-10 initial qualification training, Lt Col Cosden served as an A-10 flight lead and Assistant Weapons Officer at Eielson AFB, Alaska. He then moved to the 75<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron at Pope AFB, North Carolina, where he was an A-10 Instructor and Evaluator Pilot, Training Officer, and Flight Commander.

In 2005, Lt Col Cosden was selected as an Olmsted Scholar to Sofia, Bulgaria. Following a year of Bulgarian language training in Washington, DC, he attended Sofia University, graduating in 2008 with a Master's Degree in International Political Relations and Security. After completing his graduate studies, Lt Col Cosden requalified as an A-10 Instructor Pilot and Evaluator at Spangdahlem Air Base, Germany, where he also served as the Chief of Wing Inspections and the 81<sup>st</sup> Fighter Squadron's Acting Operations Officer. Following this assignment, Lt Col Cosden was the Senior Defense Official and Defense and Air Attaché at the US Embassy in Dublin, Ireland. He is currently a student at Air War College.

## **Abstract**

In recent years, radical right-wing parties have seen a surge in support across much of Western Europe and, in several countries, have threatened to break into influential government positions. These parties, though different in many ways, tend to share an anti-immigration and anti-European Union platform that looks to upturn much of the existing transatlantic order. However, perhaps just as dangerously, Russia also recognizes the influence of these parties, and there is growing evidence of direct links between Moscow and the radical right. Because of the increased influence of these parties and the pressure exerted on them from Moscow, the ability of the United States and European partners to cohesively counter Russian aggression is undermined. On a positive note, differences exist between these parties and in their links to Russia. While some have ideological affinity with Vladimir Putin's world view, others are more pragmatic and opportunistic in their relations with Moscow. Moreover, significant differences exist in the platforms of these parties. Taken together, this means that opportunities exist to counter these parties and their Russian influence. This can be accomplished by exposing the links to Moscow, by exploiting the differences between the parties, and by lessening their popular appeal. In doing so, the Transatlantic Community can more effectively present a cohesive and unified front in enacting policies to counter Russia.

## Introduction

Democracy and post-World War II liberal institutions in Europe may be facing their biggest challenge since the end of the Cold War. In Poland, the ruling Law and Justice party has forced a constitutional crisis by attempting to undermine the authority and independence of the country's highest court.<sup>1</sup> In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has called for a roll back of democracy in favor of an "illiberal state" on the model of Turkey and Russia.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, in a shock to many on both sides of the Atlantic, June 2016 saw 17.4 million British vote for the United Kingdom (UK) to leave the European Union (EU), 51.9% of the total ballots cast.<sup>3</sup> Fears of immigration stemming from Europe's migrant crisis, combined with slow recovery from the 2000's financial crash, have helped drive this backlash against the trend of liberal integration, particularly as many voters have come to view EU institutions as constraints on the ability of individual nations to control their own destiny.

Few countries in Europe are immune from this reaction, especially over the last three years as populist parties have harnessed anti-immigration and anti-EU discontent. From Austria's Freedom Party and Alternative for Germany, to the Flemish Interest (Belgium) and the Northern League (Italy), radical right-wing parties threaten to break into government throughout Western Europe. However, in a trend that is perhaps just as dangerous to liberal, western institutions, the Russian government also recognizes these parties' growing strength. Connections and support between the Kremlin and the radical right has increased; Russia sees them as a way to undermine the cohesiveness of the EU and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) while the parties become apologists for Russian actions.

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<sup>1</sup> Kelemen, "Poland's Constitutional Crisis."

<sup>2</sup> Simon, "Orban Says Seeks End."

<sup>3</sup> BBC News, "EU Referendum Results."

The growing strength of these parties, combined with their Russian links, means that the ability of the Transatlantic community to cohesively counter Russian activities is undermined. However, differences exist in the level and type of support that these parties and Russia provide each other; moreover, radical right-wing parties, while sharing many similarities, still vary significantly in their particular platforms. This presents opportunities for the United States and Europe to counter this threat.

In order to demonstrate this, two particular parties are examined, namely the Netherlands's Party for Freedom (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*, PVV) and France's National Front (*Front National*, FN). These parties were selected for several reasons. First, both come from states that are founding members of both the EU and NATO. Second, significant differences exist between these parties, both in platform and in history. Third, the PVV and FN are co-Chairs of the Europe of Nations and Freedom group (ENF), a coalition in the European Parliament of radical right-wing parties. Finally, and most importantly, both countries have major elections in early 2017, which are seen as bellwethers of future right-wing success. It is clear through an examination of these parties, and their specific connections to Russia, that the United States and its European partners can counter the threat, namely by exposing the Russian links, exploiting the differences between the parties, and lessening the popular appeal of right wing parties. Although this remains a daunting task, even limited success in this arena will increase transatlantic cohesion in responding to Russian aggression.

## The Growth of Europe's Radical Right

It is important to begin by defining what is meant by the term “radical right-wing” parties. According to Cas Mudde, such parties share three core features in their ideology: nativism, which crosses nationalism with xenophobia, or at least preservation of a homogeneous nation; authoritarianism, in relation to the maintenance of law and order; and populism.<sup>4</sup> Populism, in turn, can be characterized as a movement which claims to represent the voiceless majority, is anti-establishment, speaks in terms familiar to the average person, and tends to produce charismatic leaders.<sup>5</sup> Because of these parties’ right-wing tendencies, many people view them as being offshoots of fascism, which terrorized much of Europe in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. However, Sheri Berman points out that today’s radical right-wing parties are in fact not fascist. While fascism has a “virulent opposition to democracy and liberalism,” these populist right parties, while having antiliberal tendencies, are not antidemocratic and do not look to overturn European democracy.<sup>6</sup>

The nationalist and xenophobic nature of radical right-wing parties manifests itself in strong anti-immigration stances and Islamophobia. They tend to view Islam not only as the source of many of the world’s problems, but also as a cause of “domestic anxiety.”<sup>7</sup> However, the platform of radical right parties goes beyond simply Islamophobia and anti-immigration; it also addresses the problems supposedly caused by immigration. These parties see immigration as instigating “societal insecurity” where national identity and well-being are threatened.<sup>8</sup> Christopher Flood points out that the supporters of these parties want an ordered society that

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<sup>4</sup> Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties*, 22-23.

<sup>5</sup> Eatwell, “Introduction: Extreme Right Challenge,” 12.

<sup>6</sup> Berman, “Populism Is Not Fascism,” 41, 43.

<sup>7</sup> Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties*, 85.

<sup>8</sup> Flood, “Organizing Fear and Indignation,” 19.

cares for its members, but that they “resent the taxes and endless demands of those who claim to be deprived.”<sup>9</sup> Radical right parties capitalize on this resentment by seeking to bolster national unity and restore societal stability, while simultaneously supporting a liberal capitalist economy.<sup>10</sup> However, these parties do not always support traditional right-wing economic values. Their nationalism attempts to seek a balance between protectionism while maintaining global access.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, while some, but not all, radical right parties advocate socially conservative positions on things such as abortion and gay rights, their conservatism is defined more by their views on national identity.<sup>12</sup>

In France, the National Front (FN) has been capitalizing on these sentiments for decades. The party was founded in 1972 by uniting several different groups from the extreme right. From the outset, the party and its charismatic leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen, placed anti-immigration at the center of their platform.<sup>13</sup> However, Le Pen’s extreme right-wing rhetoric failed to gain significant ground until 1984 when the FN won 11.1% of the vote in the European elections, in part due to public discontent and a backlash against the policies of the ruling left-wing parties.<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Marcus points out that by the time of this election the FN, while still campaigning on immigration and the protection of French culture, had “developed into a sophisticated political party with policy proposals on a wide range of issues.”<sup>15</sup> Over the next decade the FN slowly gained support, culminating in 1995 with Le Pen receiving over 15% of the vote for president, sending him into the second round of voting. Recognizing the need to gain additional support, the late 1990s saw the party move slightly towards the mainstream right

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties*, 126.

<sup>12</sup> Art, “Why 2013 Is Not 1933,” 89.

<sup>13</sup> Flood, “Organizing Fear and Indignation,” 21.

<sup>14</sup> Fieschi, *Fascism*, 159.

<sup>15</sup> Marcus, *National Front*, 104.



on many issues, led in part by its Director General, Bruno Mégret.<sup>16</sup> The popularity of the FN declined somewhat through the late 2000s, but increased again following the replacement of Jean-Marie Le Pen by his daughter, Marine Le Pen.

Marine Le Pen has continued efforts to “de-demonize” the FN<sup>17</sup> and to distance the party from some of its extreme right image. This included expelling her father from the party, in part because of his anti-Semitic reputation.<sup>18</sup> However, the FN remains a party typical of Europe’s radical right. Immigration, lack of assimilation of Muslim immigrants, and their connection to Islamic terrorism remains integral to its platform.<sup>19</sup> The FN views the EU as a significant part of the problem, with France unable to control its own borders.<sup>20</sup> This anti-EU rhetoric goes beyond just immigration; when questioned recently about France’s high unemployment rate, Le Pen blamed it directly on the EU, citing free trade and free movement of labor, the Euro and lack of a national currency, and “the disappearance of a strategic state.”<sup>21</sup> While the FN generally supports free trade, it believes that the French government, and not the EU, should make those decisions for France.<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile, on social issues the FN remains strongly conservative. It stresses the importance of religion and a deep traditional morality, including supporting the patriarchal family, the banning of abortion and a “war against moral depravity.”<sup>23</sup>

On defense and international affairs, the FN maintains its nationalistic streak. In a recent interview Le Pen stated, “I am for independence. I am for a France that remains

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<sup>16</sup> Fieschi, *Fascism*, 143-144.

<sup>17</sup> McAuley, “Can Trump’s Win Boost Le Pen?”

<sup>18</sup> Chazan, “France’s Front National.”

<sup>19</sup> Le Pen, interview, 7-8.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>22</sup> Marcus, *National Front*, 109.

<sup>23</sup> Flood, “Organizing Fear and Indignation,” 31.

equidistant between the two great powers, Russia and the United States, being neither submissive nor hostile. I want us to once again become a leader for the nonaligned countries, as was said during the de Gaulle era.”<sup>24</sup> This Gaullist rhetoric permeates much of the FN’s platform. It believes in the importance of a strong military, but questions the modern relevance of NATO.<sup>25</sup> Anti-Americanism tends to pervade the French radical right, which looks to counter a hegemonic United States.<sup>26</sup> As Jonathan Marcus points out, “As far as the National Front is concerned, France has rallied to the ‘New World Order’, which is simply a vehicle to ensure American dominance.”<sup>27</sup>

Support for the FN continues to grow. A breakthrough for the party came in 2014’s EU Parliament elections. The FN received 24.9% of the vote, the highest of any French party, and took 23 seats in the Parliament, including a seat for Marine Le Pen herself.<sup>28</sup> Although the party won control of no regions in 2015’s regional elections, 6.4m Frenchmen voted for the FN, an all-time high.<sup>29</sup> Proceeding the April 2017 French presidential elections, some polls indicate that Le Pen will garner the most votes in the first round of voting.<sup>30</sup> Even as early as the late 1990s, Christopher Flood argued that support for the party had become too strong to assume that a vote for the FN was just a protest vote.<sup>31</sup> The National Front is a political force to be reckoned with and, at the very least, it has forced the public debate to move in a more nationalistic direction.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Le Pen, interview, 6.

<sup>25</sup> Marcus, *National Front*, 121-122.

<sup>26</sup> Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties*, 171.

<sup>27</sup> Marcus, *National Front*, 118.

<sup>28</sup> European Parliament, “Results 2014 Elections.”

<sup>29</sup> Nardelli and Chrisafis, “What French election results mean.”

<sup>30</sup> Deen, “Le Pen Moves Into Lead.”

<sup>31</sup> Flood, “Organizing Fear and Indignation,” 24.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

The populist radical right in the Netherlands has a much different history than the FN in France. Dutch populism burst onto the scene in 2002 when, just months before parliamentary elections, Lijst Pim Fortuyn (LPF) was created. Despite the assassination of its leader, Pim Fortuyn, less than two weeks before the election, the LPF took 26 seats in the parliament, the second highest of any party in the Netherlands.<sup>33</sup> The party garnered 17% of the vote and entered into the government as part of a coalition.<sup>34</sup> Similar to the FN and other right-wing parties, LPF saw Islam as a threat and at war with the west.<sup>35</sup> However, LPF did not completely fit the mold of a radical right-wing party, and therefore should not be labelled as such; though xenophobia was a key part of LPF's rhetoric, Islam was seen through the lens of being incompatible with liberal, left-leaning social values.<sup>36</sup> Pim Fortuyn himself took libertarian views on homosexuality and other social norms, and did not take a hard line on immigration as a whole, only Muslim immigration.<sup>37</sup>

Due to a mix of incompetence and factionalism, LPF quickly disintegrated.<sup>38</sup> However, there was now a market in the electorate for a populist and anti-Islamic immigration party. Into this vacuum stepped Geert Wilders, who had broken from the liberal People's Party for Freedom and Democracy over disagreements about Turkey's future membership in the EU, forming the Party for Freedom (PVV) in 2005.<sup>39</sup> Though not as initially successful as LPF, by 2010 the PVV had become the third largest party in the Dutch parliament.<sup>40</sup> Over the next few years the PVV took a dramatic shift in position. While anti-immigration remained a key

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<sup>33</sup> "Wind of Change in Netherlands."

<sup>34</sup> Art, "Why 2013 Is Not 1933," 90.

<sup>35</sup> Buruma, *Murder in Amsterdam*, 7.

<sup>36</sup> Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties*, 47-48.

<sup>37</sup> Bornschier, *Cleavage Politics*, 45.

<sup>38</sup> Art, "Why 2013 Is Not 1933," 90.

<sup>39</sup> Otjes and Louwerse, "Populists in Parliament," 67.

<sup>40</sup> Goodwin, "Right Response," 3.

platform, exiting from the European Union became the centerpiece of Wilders' rhetoric.<sup>41</sup> The 2014 European Parliament elections saw the PVV take 13.3% of the vote and 4 of 26 Dutch seats.<sup>42</sup>

The PVV's platform and methodology have shifted somewhat over the last decade, in part to harness more populist rhetoric.<sup>43</sup> Wilders' initial economic platform called for traditional neo-liberal right-wing measures, such as reduced welfare spending. However, since then the PVV has moved to the left on some of these issues, campaigning for increased public spending and opposing labor market reforms.<sup>44</sup> The EU is portrayed as being a significant cause of the economic woes of the common Dutchman. In February 2014, Wilders denigrated the "self-defeating austerity policies imposed by Brussels" and called for leaving the EU as the only solution to the economic crisis.<sup>45</sup> Simultaneously, Islamophobia has remained a key part of Wilders' message. Among other things, he has called for the taxing of women wearing hijabs and for the banning of the Koran.<sup>46</sup> However, the PVV's anti-immigration rhetoric is slightly different from that of the FN. While the FN holds a strong socially conservative platform rooted in Christianity (with which Islam is seen as incompatible), Wilders, like Pim Fortuyn before him, is supportive of the traditional Dutch culture of tolerance, especially on such issues as gay rights; in the PVV's case, Islam is seen as being a threat to this Dutch tolerance.<sup>47</sup>

Some of his comments have landed Wilders in hot water. In December 2016, he was found guilty in a Dutch court of "insulting an ethnic group and inciting discrimination" for

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<sup>41</sup> Political Capital Institute, "Changing Enemies," 5.

<sup>42</sup> European Parliament, "Results 2014 Elections."

<sup>43</sup> Otjes and Louwerse, "Populists in Parliament," 67.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> As quoted in Political Capital Institute, "Changing Enemies," 5.

<sup>46</sup> "Dutch leader will face trial."

<sup>47</sup> Goodwin, "Right Response," 28.

public comments he had made about Moroccans.<sup>48</sup> However, his conviction in many ways simply served to consolidate his support. As of December 2016, polls indicated that the PVV had the potential to become the largest party in the Dutch parliament following elections in March 2017.<sup>49</sup>

As the FN and the PVV have increased support and influence at the national level, they have also gained momentum in uniting the radical right throughout Western Europe. Historically, unlike the left, radical right-wing parties have had difficulty uniting. There are several reasons for this, including links being based on individual connections (as opposed to being institutionalized at the party-level) and parties wanting to distance themselves from the unsavory reputations of others.<sup>50</sup> However, following their successes in the 2014 elections, a block led by the FN and the PVV coalesced in the European Parliament. In 2015 the Europe of Nations and Freedom group was created, with Marine Le Pen (FN) and Marcel de Graaff (PVV) as co-Chairs. The group has 38 members, 5% of the European Parliament, with parties from eight different countries.<sup>51</sup> By forming an official group, these parties gained certain privileges in the Parliament, including the ability to raise funds and increased speaking time; though limited, it gives the ENF a greater ability to affect policy.<sup>52</sup> While the member-parties have several differences, they are united in their Euroscepticism.<sup>53</sup> However, this anti-EU platform has led the group to unite on another issue, which has transatlantic security implications; in voting against the EU, the ENF has taken a strong pro-Russia stance.

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<sup>48</sup> Adams, “Wilders found guilty.”

<sup>49</sup> Cluskey, “Wilders extends lead.”

<sup>50</sup> Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties*, 172, 175.

<sup>51</sup> Krekó, et al., “Europe’s New Pro-Putin Coalition.”

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Laruelle, et al., “From Paris to Vladivostok,” 29.

## Russian Influence and the Radical Right

Russia under Vladimir Putin has taken significant steps to upend many of the rules and norms promulgated by the western-led international order. Whether through military actions in Georgia and Ukraine or economic blackmail in Central and Eastern Europe, the Kremlin has sought to exert its influence and to challenge liberal democratic institutions. At home, Putin has been able to consolidate power by “reformulating ideology based on authoritarianism, law-and-order policies, nationalism and statism.”<sup>54</sup> This increased domestic control has allowed Putin to set forth on a path of “foreign policy activism.”<sup>55</sup>

The think tank Political Capital Institute has termed Putin’s international aspirations as the “Eurasian Doctrine.” In particular, three objectives stand out: the restoration of Russia as a world power; continuation of an expansionist strategy in Russia’s historic sphere of influence; and destabilization of the EU.<sup>56</sup> However, the ways and means envisioned to accomplish these objectives go well beyond simply using the Russian military or economic coercion. Central to the Russian strategy are influence operations to spread propaganda and to use the West’s own freedom of the press to push the Kremlin’s narrative.<sup>57</sup> Russia also seeks to locate or build pro-Russian civil society organizations throughout Western Europe that help to advance its information operations. However, perhaps more subtly, it looks to build alliances with individuals and political parties throughout Europe who are “ideologically friendly.”<sup>58</sup> While in some countries such parties fall on the left side of the political spectrum, in Western Europe the parties with whom Russia seeks connections are the radical right.

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<sup>54</sup> Political Capital Institute, “Changing Enemies,” 3.

<sup>55</sup> Political Capital Institute, “Russian Connection,” 2.

<sup>56</sup> Kreko, “Putin’s far right friends,” 14.

<sup>57</sup> Alina Polyakova, “Introduction: The Kremlin’s Toolkit of Influence in Europe,” in “Kremlin’s Trojan Horses,” Polyakova, et al., 3.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 4.

There are several goals that Russia hopes to achieve by supporting radical right-wing parties. A study from the Political Capital Institute outlines three specific objectives: destabilization, legitimization, and disinformation. Because of their generally anti-EU stances, radical right-wing parties often support positions that undermine EU cohesion, which serves Russia's ultimate goal of destabilizing the EU as a whole. Similarly, radical right-wing parties often provide rhetorical support for Russian actions or oppose EU measures aimed at Russia, thus helping to legitimize Russian activities both at home and abroad. Finally, right-wing parties can become mouthpieces for Russian influence operations, propagating the Russian point-of-view to the European audience.<sup>59</sup> However, support for these parties is not necessarily tied to any ideological affinity on the part of Russia; rather, for Moscow it is pragmatic, and Russian officials will both praise and condemn the radical right to suit their own agendas. As Cas Mudde sums it up, these parties "are seen as a useful irritant within the EU...potentially obstructing (perceived) anti-Russian actions, and providing the Russian elite with propagandistic ammunition for the home audience. In their propaganda, Russian elites alternate between references to the European far right as positive examples of 'the protection of genuine and social interests of the population' and negative examples of widespread xenophobia in the European Union."<sup>60</sup>

The links between Russia and the radical right are not a one-way street; there are many motives that explain why radical right-wing parties support Russia in return. One of the more significant reasons is ideology. The domestic state-organizational model that Putin advocates is often very similar to that envisioned by these parties, with its strong, authoritarian leader and

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<sup>59</sup> Laruelle, et al., "From Paris to Vladivostok," 10.

<sup>60</sup> Mudde, "Is far right Russia's trojan horse?"

emphasis on law and order.<sup>61</sup> Many, though not all, radical right-wing parties see the suppression of some human rights in the name of national security as important and necessary measures.<sup>62</sup> From an economic standpoint, right-wing parties look to Russia as a model for how to mix traditional capitalism with government interventions to influence free market mechanisms in the name of the national interest.<sup>63</sup> In terms of foreign policy, radical right-wing parties respect the nationalism and “great-power rhetoric” that Putin projects;<sup>64</sup> however, perhaps more importantly, they share Russia’s viewpoint on the negatives and weaknesses of the European Union and, for some, the transatlantic community as a whole. As Political Capital puts it, “Russia’s EU-skepticism along with the downright anti-EU attitude of the far-right forces of Europe...[make these parties] all but natural allies of Putin’s Russia.”<sup>65</sup>

However, it is not simply ideology that attracts these parties to support Russia; there are opportunistic and pragmatic reasons that motivate their cooperation. The most important benefit to these parties derives from Moscow’s anti-EU platform. Information and rhetoric from the Kremlin that highlights the failures of the EU serve to bolster these parties’ own domestic message. Meanwhile, when Russia is perceived to succeed internationally by putting its national interest first, the radical right can use this as an example of the benefits of nationalism over the subjugation of sovereignty to the European Union.

Direct benefits from Moscow can also be a motivating factor. Although not widespread, there is some limited evidence of financial support provided by Russia.<sup>66</sup> However, a more tangible benefit is the direct personal connections between the Russian government or Russian

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<sup>61</sup> Political Capital Institute, “Russian Connection,” 4.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Kreko, “Putin’s far right friends,” 17.

<sup>65</sup> Political Capital Institute, “Russian Connection,” 3.

<sup>66</sup> Marlene Laruelle, “France: Mainstreaming Russian Influence,” in “Kremlin’s Trojan Horses,” Polyakova, et al., 7.



citizens and these parties. Through these personal contacts, right-wing parties receive support in networking. Meetings between radical right politicians and Russians, especially when done in the open, can also provide significant public relations value. Because the parties are often marginalized at home, “having a powerful friend that eases the diplomatic isolation and makes it more difficult to sideline [them]” can be a considerable advantage.<sup>67</sup>

The National Front is one of Russia’s strongest allies in Europe. As Marlene Laruelle states, “On the far right, the FN is Moscow’s most vocal supporter, where almost no dissenting anti-Russian voices can be heard.”<sup>68</sup> For Marine Le Pen and the FN, the ideological parallels with Moscow are strong. All of the ideological reasons described above fit with the FN’s views: Putin’s authoritarianism, nationalism in both foreign policy and economics, and anti-EU rhetoric. The FN is one of the most fiercely anti-American radical right-wing parties in Europe, and their aversion includes international institutions dominated by the United States, including NATO;<sup>69</sup> these beliefs correspond well with those of Moscow. The FN’s strong social conservatism also coincides with much of Putin’s domestic agenda, including Russia’s weakening of gay rights and its supposed defense of Christian values.<sup>70</sup> The FN’s ideological affinity for Russia is summed up well by a 2014 statement from Marine Le Pen: “Mr. Putin is a patriot. He is attached to the sovereignty of his people. He is aware that we defend common values. These are the values of European civilization.”<sup>71</sup>

However, the mutual support between the Kremlin and the FN is not just through a shared ideology. The FN is one of the only radical right-wing parties in Europe to receive

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<sup>67</sup> Kreko, “Putin’s far right friends,” 17.

<sup>68</sup> Laruelle, “Mainstreaming Russian Influence,” in “Kremlin’s Trojan Horses,” Polyakova, et al., 7.

<sup>69</sup> Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties*, 77-78.

<sup>70</sup> Laruelle, et al., “From Paris to Vladivostok,” 21.

<sup>71</sup> As quoted in *ibid.*, 22.

financial support from Moscow. In 2014, the FN received a loan for €9 million from the First Czech Russian Bank, which has connections to the Kremlin. Although Marine Le Pen confirmed the existence of this loan, she has denied that an additional €31 million was also sought. Further reporting shows that Jean-Marine Le Pen had separately received a loan for €2 million through a firm with Russian connections. However, there is no direct evidence that any of these loans were given with an explicit expectation of FN support for Russia.<sup>72</sup>

The personal connections between high ranking members of the FN and Moscow are many. Marine Le Pen herself visited Moscow in both 2013 and 2014, meeting with speaker of the Duma, Sergei Naryshkin,<sup>73</sup> and Le Pen appears to have met often with the Russian ambassador in Paris.<sup>74</sup> Le Pen's niece and FN parliamentarian, Marion Maréchal-Le Pen, has also visited Moscow.<sup>75</sup> Perhaps one of the most vocal supporters of Russia is Aymeric Chauprade, the former advisor on international affairs to the FN. Although he left the party in 2015, due in part to an anti-Muslim video he posted,<sup>76</sup> Chauprade made numerous statements in support of Russia while serving as an official representative of FN, including support for the Russian position on the downing of flight MH-17 in Ukraine.<sup>77</sup> He has also described Russia as "the hope of the world against new totalitarianism."<sup>78</sup>

Besides Chauprade's comments, the FN has taken other actions and made statements that further help to legitimize Moscow's positions. Following Russia's takeover of Crimea, the FN sent observers for the referendum on the region's status, and subsequently recognized the

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<sup>72</sup> Mudde, "Is far right Russia's trojan horse?" and Laruelle, et al., "From Paris to Vladivostok," 32.

<sup>73</sup> Mudde, "Is far right Russia's trojan horse?" and Laruelle, "Mainstreaming Russian Influence," in "Kremlin's Trojan Horses," Polyakova, et al., 10.

<sup>74</sup> Laruelle, "Mainstreaming Russian Influence," in "Kremlin's Trojan Horses," Polyakova, et al., 11.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Vinocur, "Le Pen victory."

<sup>77</sup> Laruelle, et al., "From Paris to Vladivostok," 26. This source actually says "MH-14," though MH-17 is the correct designation.

<sup>78</sup> Mudde, "Is far right Russia's trojan horse?"

referendum's legitimacy.<sup>79</sup> As recently as January 2017 Le Pen publicly confirmed her support for Russia's position on Crimea: "I absolutely disagree that it was an illegal annexation: a referendum was held and residents of Crimea chose to rejoin Russia."<sup>80</sup> Similar statements exist regarding Russia's military activities in Syria, with Le Pen claiming that backing Bashar al-Assad is the best way to defeat the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and that France should align with Russia when dealing with Middle Eastern terrorism.<sup>81</sup>

While links between the FN and Russia run particularly strong, mutual support between the PVV and Russia appears more tenuous. The two definitely share common ideologies when it comes to the failings of the EU, as well as the importance of law and order and defense of national culture. However, the ideological similarities seem to end there. Domestically, on social issues the PVV is a strong supporter of gay rights,<sup>82</sup> a traditional Dutch value, in comparison with Moscow's more repressive stance. However, a more significant difference exists on views towards NATO and the United States; the PVV supports continued Dutch participation in NATO and does not have a negative impression of collaboration with the United States.<sup>83</sup>

Therefore, any links between the PVV and Russia are mostly pragmatic; party pro-Russian rhetoric "is driven more by political calculations than by ideology."<sup>84</sup> PVV statements regarding Russia can to be mixed, and Geert Wilders seems adept at networking with Russia when abroad while simultaneously condemning Russian actions when at home.<sup>85</sup> For example, Wilders has denounced Russian military intervention in Ukraine; yet, simultaneously, he has

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<sup>79</sup> Raynova and Kearns, "Foreign and Security Policies," 4.

<sup>80</sup> Batchelor, "Russian annexation of Crimea."

<sup>81</sup> Rothman, "France Should Align with Russia."

<sup>82</sup> "Turning right."

<sup>83</sup> Raynova and Kearns, "Foreign and Security Policies," 4.

<sup>84</sup> Matlack, "Far Right Cozy with Russia."

<sup>85</sup> Political Capital Institute, "Russian Connection," 6.

echoed Russian propaganda about Ukrainian agitators being ultimately to blame for the uprising.<sup>86</sup> He has opposed EU sanctions against Russia, and also criticized the EU's overall response to the crisis in Ukraine.<sup>87</sup> More recently, the PVV's senior representative in the EU Parliament demonstrated the pragmatic nature of the party's pro-Russian rhetoric. Over the course of a few weeks in 2015 Marcel de Graaff sent several tweets about the supposed success of Russian intervention in Syria, including: "Where others failed, Russia and Syria are effectively defeating IS [Islamic State]."<sup>88</sup> However, the website EU Today points out that these pro-Russia tweets from de Graaff were in English, while he generally tweets in Dutch;<sup>89</sup> therefore, the target audience was likely not his own constituency.

The links between the PVV and Russia can also be seen when one looks at the interactions between right-wing parties across Europe. The evidence indicates that Russia uses diplomatic efforts to unite radical right-wing parties into a cohesive party family. Russia supports and encourages these parties to meet and form alliances.<sup>90</sup> As an example, in December 2013, Italy's right-wing Northern League party's annual meeting was attended by Geert Wilders, as well as representatives from Russia and several other right-wing parties, including the FN.<sup>91</sup>

However, the best example of a united right-wing, pro-Russian front in Western Europe is the previously mentioned Europe of Nations and Freedom group in the EU Parliament. Between July 2014 and June 2015 six major votes took place in the Parliament on issues that were directed at Russia. Examining the individual voting records of the 35-plus members of the

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<sup>86</sup> Mudde, "Is right really Russia's trojan horse?"

<sup>87</sup> Dandolov, "Paradoxes of Populism."

<sup>88</sup> EU Today, "Influence Over MEPs?"

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Political Capital Institute, "Russian Connection," 5.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 6.

ENF over these six measure, ENF members took the pro-Russia side 93% of the time.<sup>92</sup> The radical right is able to coalesce at times, whether united by pragmatism or ideology.

Populist right-wing parties share many characteristics when it comes to foreign affairs, the EU, and relations with Russia. However, there are also significant differences, which could indicate a crack in their unity. *The Economist* summed up these similarities and differences quite well: “That [populist right-wing parties] are disparate there can be no doubt; they vary hugely according to local tastes, traditions, and taboos. Take the FN and the PVV. Late [in 2013] their leaders, Ms. Le Pen and Geert Wilders, began a political courtship with an eye to creating a new parliamentary group after the European elections. But the PVV is ardent in its support for Israel, while the FN has an anti-Semitic past. The PVV is in favor of gay marriage; the FN marches against it. The PVV sees Islam as a totalitarian danger around the world; the FN frets not over the religion’s basic tenets but only about the ‘Islamification’ of France...What they have in common is that they are populist and nationalist, that they have strong views on the EU, immigration and national sovereignty, and that as a result they are doing well in the polls.”<sup>93</sup> Although there are certain aspects that unite the radical right, there are also differences and cleavages, which can be leveraged to undermine their links with Russia and their influence on domestic politics, thus decreasing their threat to transatlantic security.

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<sup>92</sup> Krekó, et al., “Europe’s Pro-Putin Coalition.”

<sup>93</sup> “Turning right.”

## Countering the Threat

The growing support for radical right-wing parties is undoubtedly a threat to the status quo in Europe. The success of the “Brexiters” in convincing a majority of British voters to elect to leave the European Union is a fantastic example. Since the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951, Europe has seen a continuous movement towards greater cooperation and integration. The departure of the United Kingdom from the EU will be a blow to this integration; should right-wing, anti-EU parties continue to gain strength, then other countries could follow the UK’s lead, and the future of the EU would be in doubt.

The relative importance of a strong European Union to the national interests of the United States could be debated. From strictly a security standpoint, some argue that Europe has seen no major wars since European integration began; they can point to the EU’s reception of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2012 for “advancing the causes of peace, reconciliation, democracy and human rights in Europe.”<sup>94</sup> However, others would debate the cause and effect; Marine Le Pen, when questioned about the argument that the EU has preserved the peace in Europe, responded, “...it’s not the European Union that has kept the peace; it’s the peace that has made the European Union possible.”<sup>95</sup> What is difficult to dispute, however, is that significant instability in Europe caused by turmoil within the EU would greatly complicate the security situation for the United States. Therefore, on these grounds alone, US decision-makers should be concerned about the rise of radical right-wing parties in Europe.

In addition, there are other reasons why radical right-wing parties are a threat to US security. As these parties become apologists for Moscow, it grows more difficult for Europe, in

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<sup>94</sup> European Union, “EU receives Nobel Prize.”

<sup>95</sup> Le Pen, interview, 5.

concert with the United States, to cohesively counter Russian actions. Even on matters beyond Russia, much of the radical right is anti-American in its ideology; this includes calls by some to abandon NATO.<sup>96</sup> From an economic standpoint, the increase in economic nationalism supported by these parties could complicate the negotiation of trade deals favorable to US interests.<sup>97</sup>

Even though the rise of radical right-wing parties in Europe and their links to Russia are a threat to the United States, steps can still be taken to mitigate this challenge. In particular, the overall strategy should have three main lines of effort: 1). expose the links; 2). exploit the differences; 3). lessen the appeal. The United States, working with its European partners, can take an active role in the first two methods. The third will rely mainly on the efforts of European governments and indigenous parties, though the United States can still provide diplomatic support.

Many of the links between radical right-wing parties and Russia can be found easily in the open source press. However, not all of the links are known to the wider public; moreover, there are quite possibly additional links that remain undiscovered or at least not publicly acknowledged. Collusion between these parties and Russia should be made transparent to the public; not only will some voters be turned off by these links, but exposing the links also undermines these parties' message that they speak solely for the common man.

US intelligence agencies, working in conjunction with their European counterparts, should actively investigate the links with Russia. Moreover, the key portions of their findings

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<sup>96</sup> Kreko, "Putin's far right friends," 19.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid. This source specifically mentions the antipathy of radical right-wing parties to the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). With the new administration of President Trump, the future of TTIP or a similar agreement is in doubt, and this paper does not argue for or against the merits of TTIP. However, the underlying point made by Kreko remains true; radical right-wing parties will likely remain hostile to any EU-brokered trade deal with the United States.

should be made public. In November 2016, US Congressman Mike Turner (R-OH) reportedly requested that Director of National Intelligence, James Clapper, provide details on the financial connections between the FN and Russia, specifically citing the loans provided to the FN.<sup>98</sup> Such an investigation would be especially timely as France's Presidential election approaches and the FN allegedly searches for additional funding.<sup>99</sup>

Other entities should also be encouraged to help expose these connections. The Atlantic Council highlights that "investigative journalists and independent media should be supported in their efforts to investigate and report on such links."<sup>100</sup> Additionally, the Council urges that financial and banking institutions be encouraged to be transparent about financial links and any irregularities in these parties' finances.<sup>101</sup> Although many of these investigations and subsequent reporting will rely on the Europeans themselves, diplomatic engagement and the sharing of expertise from the United States would be of benefit.

One of the key points when exposing the connections with Russia is to highlight their effect on domestic politics. The Atlantic Council demonstrates that "the electorate is mostly shaped by domestic issues and socioeconomic perceptions...Positioning towards Russia, while discussed among the political class, does not determine voting patterns."<sup>102</sup> However, recent events in the United States show how alleged Russian connections can be framed as domestic interference. Regardless of what actually happened, simply the allegations of Russian hacking and its hypothetical influence on the 2016 US elections have stirred public passions about potential foreign manipulation of domestic issues.

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<sup>98</sup> Vinocur, "Congressman sought inquiry."

<sup>99</sup> Associated Press, "Far right short of fund."

<sup>100</sup> Polyakova, et al., "Kremlin's Trojan Horses," 27.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Laruelle, "Mainstreaming Russian Influence," in "Kremlin's Trojan Horses," Polyakova, et al., 12.



A second line of effort to counter the pro-Russian influence of radical right-wing parties is to exploit the cleavages between these parties. They are not a monolithic voting block but instead have significant differences in their values and platforms; the examination of the PVV and the FN highlighted several of these cleavages. Moreover, it has been demonstrated that the radical right historically has had a difficult time uniting, and the ENF in the EU Parliament is only two years old. If legislation or policy agendas are pushed that exacerbate the fault lines between the parties, the solidarity of the group may be damaged.

Several issues jump out that could cause a split in the ENF. The first is gay rights. Although the FN and many Eastern European radical right parties are hostile to gay rights, the PVV is not. By advocating gay rights, for example, the EU could force the PVV to take a different stance than its right-wing brethren. Meanwhile, foreign policy measures related to Israel or NATO could similarly drive a wedge between these parties.

Although any EU legislation on the issues mentioned above would not primarily be designed to split the ENF, other means could be taken that do specifically seek to create a rift. For example, the above topics could be pushed by journalists when interviewing party members, thereby compelling them to make public statements contradicting each other. US government officials and diplomats could pursue similar courses of action when engaging with these parties. While such efforts are unlikely to directly undermine the links between Russia and these parties, it will weaken the ability of the radical right in Europe to maintain a unified pro-Russian voice.

A third line of effort, and one that relies heavily on the Europeans themselves to enact, is to weaken the appeal of these parties. Sheri Berman recently stated in *Foreign Affairs*, “The best way to ensure that the Le Pens...of the world go down in history as also-rans rather than as

real threats is to make democratic institutions, parties, and politicians more responsive to the needs of all citizens.”<sup>103</sup> Although analysts give many different suggestions for ways to undermine the appeal of the radical right, the above quote highlights a recurring theme: mainstream parties and governments should engage with the people, and especially different communities, to understand and be able to respond to their true concerns.

Two studies in particular demonstrate the above by examining the many different strategies that mainstream political parties could use to counter the radical right. A Chatham House report, authored by Matthew Goodwin, shows that, while parties can win short term successes by moving to the right and stealing the populist message, they will be hurt in the long run. Instead, Goodwin highlights two other strategies that have potential to lure voters back to mainstream parties without compromising core values. The first, “engagement,” urges mainstream parties to launch a grass root campaign that engages directly with the voters in order to understand their fundamental concerns, thereby stealing a page from the populist playbook. The second strategy, “interaction,” encourages parties to work with different social and ethnic groups to bring them together and, hopefully, lessen the lingering prejudices that fuel right-wing populism.<sup>104</sup> A separate study by Political Capital concurs with the Chatham House strategies and produces two additional unique recommendations that parties can use to counter the appeal of the radical right. The first points out that demonization of right-wing parties should be avoided, as it often only serves to increase their appeal to an already marginalized voter base. Meanwhile, the second recommendation focuses specifically on engaging first-time voters who are especially enthusiastic about grass-roots politics. Mainstream parties can

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<sup>103</sup> Berman, “Populism Is Not Fascism,” 44.

<sup>104</sup> Goodwin, “Right Response,” 23-27.

potentially steal the initiative from the radical right by engaging the youth directly.<sup>105</sup> To summarize, the best way for mainstream parties to lessen the appeal of the radical right is to listen directly to voter concerns and work to fix those problems.

It is obvious from the above discussion of the three major lines of effort that there is no simple solution. Moreover, it is not something that the United States, or any one country, can attack alone. Countering the influence of right-wing parties in Europe, and their ability to work as mouthpieces for Moscow's interests, must involve not only multiple national governments but civil society as well, including political parties, the media, financial institutions and concerned non-governmental organizations. Therefore, only through a concerted US diplomatic effort, a whole-of-government approach, can the United States cohesively counter the threat that European radical right-wing parties pose.

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<sup>105</sup> Political Capital Institute, "How Tackle Far Right?"

## Conclusion

On 15 March 2017, citizens of the Netherlands went to the polls to elect their parliament. In what many consider to be a victory for mainstream parties and a setback for populism, the PVV finished a distant second to Prime Minister Mark Rutte's People's Party for Freedom and Democracy, despite leading in many polls before the elections; the PVV received just 13% of the vote, a far cry from their polling high of 20-25% in December 2016.<sup>106</sup>

Although this may produce a sigh of relief in those who hope to see the halt of populism, the Dutch election hardly means that right-wing radicalism in Europe is on the decline. Geert Wilders' party still received a higher percentage of votes than it did in the last general election (10.1%) and, as Cas Mudde points out, "populism will remain at the center of the Netherlands' politics unless establishment parties address their constituents' concerns in areas beyond the issues of immigration and security."<sup>107</sup>

France's presidential elections, which will begin on 23 April 2017, will also be closely watched as perhaps another harbinger of the future of populism. Marine Le Pen currently is polling nearly even in the first round of voting with Emmanuel Macron of the center-left "En Marche!" party. Perhaps equally fascinating is that in late March 2017, less than a month before the election, Vladimir Putin hosted Le Pen at the Kremlin in a highly-publicized meeting. Although he did not formally endorse Le Pen, Putin called for increased intelligence sharing between France and Russia and provided Le Pen an excellent public relations opportunity, calling her a representative "of a political force that is growing quickly."<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Mudde, "Future of Dutch Democracy," and Cluskey, "Wilders extends lead."

<sup>107</sup> Mudde, "Future of Dutch Democracy."

<sup>108</sup> O'Neal, "Will Putin Endorse Le Pen?"

What is clear from the events surrounding both these elections is that right-wing populism remains a force to be reckoned with in Europe. Moreover, Russia shows no signs of halting its support for these anti-establishment, anti-EU parties. However, the United States and its European partners need not be relegated to the sidelines in this battle. The transatlantic community can work to counter the threat by exposing the links, exploiting the differences between the parties, and lessening their popular appeal. Although such a strategy does not guarantee success, any advances, no matter how small, are important. Taken together they strengthen cohesion in countering Russian actions, which is in the national security interest of both the United States and its European partners.



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