

Russian Influence in Europe

Six ways (other than hacking) that Russia is exploiting divisions and the rise of xenophobia in Europe

1. Backing far-right and other disruptive parties

Russia has publicly provided financing to Marine Le Pen's far-right [National Front](#) in France. However, through oligarchs, foundations, and other channels, it has also established connections with the French [center-right party](#) of Francois Fillon, [Alternative for Germany \(AfD\)](#), the [Lega Nord](#) in Italy, and [the party](#) (and office of) [the president](#) of the Czech Republic. All four of these countries will hold elections this year. It also has supported Greece's neo-Nazi party [Golden Dawn](#) and is thought to fund the far-right [Ataka](#) in [Bulgaria](#), Jobbik—the powerful far-right party in Hungary, and Prime Minister [Viktor Orban](#) of Hungary's ruling party Fidesz, the [Freedom Party](#) (FPO) in Austria, the [Kotleba Party](#) of Slovakia, and several parties in [Serbia](#). Russia does not confine itself to supporting the far-right. It has ties to socialist parties that recently won elections in [Bulgaria](#) and [Moldova](#) and has supported [Syriza](#) in Greece, [Podemos](#) in Spain, and [Green parties](#) throughout Europe. The Russian government is working to establish a global movement, convening far-right political parties to discuss methods of sowing division in the West. One such gathering was held in [March 2015](#) in Saint Petersburg. Another—this one bringing together separatist movements from Europe, such as Catalonians and Northern Irish movements, and from California and Texas—was held in [July 2016](#) at a Kremlin-funded conference in Moscow.

2. Buying media and spreading disinformation to undermine public confidence in truth

As the Department of National Intelligence report of January 7 indicated, Russia's media meddling is cause for concern. Russia is increasingly using media in the West to disseminate propaganda. Russia is buying up media in places like [Latvia](#) and the [Czech Republic](#), and in 2015, German stations [reported requests](#) by Russian media outlet Sputnik to purchase one to two hours of airtime per day. RT, Sputnik, and other Russian-owned media are competitive in the English, Spanish, Arabic, German, and now [French-speaking](#) worlds, but their stories often [misrepresent facts](#), and even create [false stories](#), with the aim of calling into question whether media can ever be reliable. It uses [trolls and digital bots](#) to spread pro-Russia ideas, such as cutting E.U. support to Ukraine, and to try to destabilize the European Union and NATO, alleging that migrants are terrorists and that the European Union and the United States are unstable. Examples of bogus stories include [factory explosions](#) in the United States, [Ukrainian arms sales](#) in Sweden, or [rapes](#) perpetrated by migrants in [Germany](#), with the goal of inciting hatred toward minority groups and toward the West, which allegedly doesn't provide adequate "[protection](#)" from these groups. The outlets also use false "[experts](#)" who provide unscientific information, for example about the [danger posed by LGBT](#) people. With its propaganda, Russia seeks to undermine the idea that truth and measurable standards exist and to

compel citizens in the West to question their own values. Russian disinformation and the confusion it sows contributed to the failure of a Dutch referendum in support of European financial assistance for Ukraine and to the success of the Brexit campaign.

3. Establishing anti-democracy think tanks and foundations that try to legitimize false facts and xenophobia

Boris Yakunin, an oligarch friend of Putin and former head of Russian Railways, recently established a think tank called the Dialogue of Civilizations Research Forum in Berlin, to accompany his existing World Public Forum Dialogue of Civilizations in Vienna, St. Andrew the First Called Foundation in Geneva, and the Dialogue Franco-Russe in Paris, which aims to counter “massive propaganda... directed against Russia” and U.S. militarism and U.S. hegemony. Many other Putin-friendly oligarchs, and even Putin’s leading philosopher-advisor, Alexander Dugin, have established their own foundations, faux think tanks, and NGOs in London, Berlin, Geneva, Paris, and other cities, which, while not openly linked to the Kremlin financially, are Kremlin-friendly and promote its ideology. In addition, Kremlin-funded aid organizations are creating “diaspora associations” of Russians abroad or Slavic unity organizations to support political change, and even the Russian Orthodox Church is now creating organizations that can be used to support Russia-friendly policy. These foundations and think tanks can serve as a neutral-seeming pass-through for funding to far-right and traditional values organizations, journalists, and parties, and some have been investigated for espionage. They can provide an overlay of legitimacy for false ideas, for example that migrants are terrorists, that the European Union discriminates against Orthodox Christians, and that the West cannot protect citizens from migrant-caused terrorism. Some NGOs are, in fact, media outlets seeking to avoid regulation, for example, RT.

avoids regulation under FARA in the U.S. because it is an NGO.

4. Undermining multilateral organizations and questioning the universality of human rights principles

With its disinformation, Russia promotes the idea that respect for human rights is a Western concept, presenting itself as the champion of the opposing view. Some countries, counters Russia, believe that traditional values trump LGBT rights and women’s rights. As part of its campaign against human rights, Russia has passed four resolutions in the United Nations that threaten the human rights of LGBT people. It leads a voting bloc on the Economic and Social Council that has blocked NGOs such as the Committee to Protect Journalists from obtaining the status of an official observer at the United Nations. Its actions forced High Commissioner on the Rights of National Minorities Astrid Thors from her job in the OSCE following her reporting on national minorities in Crimea, and has also forced the OSCE Special Representative on Freedom of the Media, Dunja Mijatovic, to leave prematurely by refusing to extend her mandate.

5. Use of economic coercion, incentives, ties to bribe individuals with foreign influence

The use of economic incentives—which in some cases might also be called bribes—to influence key individuals driving economic policy is also a common Russian strategy. Russia has used energy influence in countries such as Bulgaria—which relies on Russia for large amounts of gas, nuclear energy, and oil—and Hungary, by funding an expansion of Hungary’s PAKS nuclear power station. Demonstrating that it can compete with the European Union as a patron of smaller countries, Russia has persuaded Prime Minister Orban to support its anti-E.U. stance. Russia also awarded German politician Gerhard Schroeder a position on the Board of Gazprom project Nord Stream,

after which Schroeder backed Russia's invasion of Ukraine, stating that Russia just wanted to stay "big and strong" to remain on equal footing with the United States. Russia develops business and financial ties to high-ranking officials and uses these ties to influence policy. Lukoil, a Russian-State-owned oil company, paid the debt of Martin Nejedly, an economic advisor to President Zeman in the Czech Republic, who himself was the head of a party that admitted accepting Russian funds, and then Zeman called for a Czechxit. Oligarch Vladimir Yakunin has created a joint think tank with French politician Thierry Mariani that pays for French politicians to travel to Moscow and Crimea so that they can see these places from a so-called Russian perspective. The Russian government also famously funds lobbyists in Europe and the United States who exert direct influence over policymakers through financial and personal incentives. Several of these lobbyists have been arrested in Europe—Bela Kovacs in Hungary and Edgar Savisaar in Estonia—for pushing policies benefiting Russia to the detriment of their own country. Savisaar, for example, advocated for purchase of Russian gas and rejection of Norwegian gas deals.

6. Use of espionage through hiding intelligence officers in Russian embassies

Russia has expanded some of its European embassies beyond any normal expectation. The Czech Republic's intelligence agency has expressed concern at the extremely large Russian Embassy in Prague. In 2015 Czech intelligence reported there were 140 people in the Russian embassy, compared to 70 U.S. diplomats. Czech intelligence reports that Russia is concealing the affiliation of many of its intelligence service officers in the embassy. Swedish intelligence also reported in 2015 that about one-third of the roughly 35 Russian diplomats accredited in Stockholm were intelligence officers. The Russian Embassy in Vienna, and apparently the Russian intelligence presence, is also quite large. In 2015 it employed 116 diplomats, almost double the number employed by the U.S. embassy. According to German counterintelligence, this is because one-third of the diplomats are spies. The head of Belgium's State Security Service also notes that Russian espionage in Brussels, the seat of the European Union, is an increasing problem. ■