

Russia and the European Far Right after Brexit: Shifting Gears in the European Parliament

Issue 2016/16 • September 2016

by Antonios Nestoras

Brexit and the future of EU-Russia relations

It is hard to imagine the EU without Britain. It is even harder to make accurate predictions for what comes after an unprecedented event. Brexit, if and when it happens, will deliver a blow of historical proportions to European ambitions for deeper integration; its implications for the EU will be far-reaching and overwhelmingly difficult to foresee. Therefore, any attempt for long-term calculations, economic or otherwise, should be taken with a pinch of salt. Nevertheless, there are a few institutional features of a Britain-less EU that could already be considered. For instance, it is safe to assume that the 2019 elections for the European Parliament (EP) will not take place in the UK and hence the next EU legislature will not contain any British Members of Parliament (MEPs).

Expect the absence of 73 MEPs from the UK and across the political spectrum to upset the dynamics in the European Parliament¹. The groups of the European People's Party (EPP) and the Socialists & Democrats (S&D), along with the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats (ALDE), will be required to reach a new compromise between them that will outline the mainstream, pro-European bloc in the EP. Nevertheless, the likely breakdown of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) – led by British Conservatives and UKIP respectively – will affect even more profoundly the equilibrium in the far-right end of the EP.

The far-right shifting gears in the European Parliament is of special importance for EU-Russia relations because of the well-documented link between right-wing populist parties and Putin's Russia. At this time, Marine Le Pen and Geert Wilders' Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF) look likely to gain momentum because of the Brexit vote. Rejoicing in the wake of the results in

A consensus is emerging in the transatlantic community that the Kremlin's manipulation of information constitutes a real threat to EU security. Across Europe, far-right, populist and Euro-skeptic political parties are embracing Russia's information campaigns. In the European Parliament, Marine Le Pen's Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF) is the main proponent of pro-Kremlin narratives. The foreign policy platform of the Front National in France contains explicit references to a strategic alliance with the Kremlin and a pan-European Union that includes Russia. Following Brexit, Marine Le Pen is describing the UK vote as a peoples' rebellion that has signaled the beginning of the end for the EU, much like the fall of the Berlin Wall signaled the collapse of the Soviet Union. Conceivably, in the aftermath of Brexit the absence of British Eurosceptic MEPs from the European Parliament may lead to the consolidation of the radical far-right under the banner of the Front National. In turn, this means that the EU may have a rather difficult time gathering the necessary support to confront Russian assertiveness in the Eastern Neighbourhood.

the UK, both of them have called for EU referenda in France and in the Netherlands². This Policy Brief will attempt to assess to what extent the changing landscape of the European far-right after Brexit may prompt the consolidation of pro-Russia forces in the European Parliament and what this could mean for Russian information warfare as well as the general course of EU-Russia relations.

Russian information warfare and the European far-right

A series of relevant publications and parliamentary hearings³ indicates an emerging consensus in foreign policy circles across the Atlantic that the Kremlin's manipulation of information constitutes a threat to security, one that exploits the openness of western liberal democracies and puts the national security of EU and NATO members at risk.

The information warfare of Putin's Russia is designed to manipulate or confuse public opinion with intentionally false material, which is spread through the use of social media (including trolling) and a network of state-sponsored media outlets⁴. However, Russian information warfare is far more sophisticated than a mere ensemble of trolling farms, viral hoaxes and paranoid conspiracy theories. It is driven by a set of refined and complex historical narratives: some even claim that Putin is revolutionising information warfare by using skewed interpretations of the past and deploying history as a political weapon⁵. What is more, the Russian information strategy is highly segmented and region-specific⁶, which makes it difficult – if not impossible – to come up with a uniform response to Putin's tactics.

Across Europe, Putin's segmented message is mostly carried by the far-right. This is not a big surprise. For some time, far-right populists have been aligning themselves with Moscow⁷. In Central Europe, the Hungarian far-right Jobbik relays Russian geopolitical visions of 'Eurasianism'⁸. Northward in Slovakia, a multifarious far-right resonates with skewed reinventions of both 'Eurasianism' and 'Pan-Slavism'⁹. Further to the South, in Greece, where Russia topped the EU in nationwide approval ratings¹⁰, the Kremlin is of course exploiting domestic disappointment over European economic governance, but it also plays with twisted notions of patriotism, religious zeal and apocalyptic prophecies¹¹. However, the notable increase of the Kremlin's influence in Europe is not confined to the East and the South, where Russia is perceived as a natural ally because of cultural and religious heritage. Marine Le Pen's Front National (FN) and the Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF) – the political group that she leads in the European Parliament – is an exceptional case of Russian influence that is consolidating its presence in western Europe.

Anti-American and pro-Kremlin narratives in the FN's 'Politique Étrangère'

In terms of pro-Russian narratives and the spread of disinformation, Marine Le Pen's FN is operating within the same discourse followed by far-right parties across Europe. One of the major themes is that US economic and security interests are dominating Europe. For the French far-right, the entire transatlantic security architecture represents an organised attempt to subdue the nations of Europe and strip them of their national sovereignty. This kind of anti-Americanism is an explicit component of the FN's foreign policy platform. According to the FN's 'Politique Étrangère', French leaders in the past have been 'prisoners' of an 'internationalist ideology', which is 'universally enforced' by the 'western American model'; French governments have 'aligned France with the United States' and by so doing they have sacrificed national sovereignty only to 'dissolve into a European Empire, deprived of identity'¹².

On the opposite side of this argument lies the image of Russia as a strategic ally for Europe. The foreign policy positions of the FN are unequivocal to this end. Instead of unprovoked hostility, the ideal Europe for the FN should be offering Russia a 'strategic alliance' in military terms and in specific policies such as energy. The ultimate goal of this alliance would then be the formation of a 'pan-European union of sovereign nations' that will include Russia (and Switzerland)¹³. This stark contrast between the US plotting against national sovereignty and Russia as potentially enabling European emancipation is the canvas upon which the rest of the pro-Russia narratives are sketched; and it looks like the Brexit vote is breathing new life into those narratives.

When the result of the UK referendum was in, Alexey Pushkov, Head of the Duma's Foreign Affairs Committee, rejoiced on Twitter by describing Brexit as a 'revolt against the ruling system and traditional politicians'¹⁴. On June 27, Yulia Latynina, commentator for the Russian Novaya Gazeta, portrayed Brexit as 'an uprising against Brussels' and likened the EU to 'an enormous socialist state' just like the Soviet Union¹⁵. The next day, in an op-ed published in the New York Times (in both English and French), Marine Le Pen summoned once again the image of the EU as a 'prison' and a 'cage', citing this time Brexit as an act of revolt and the beginning of the 'inevitable peoples' spring'. More and more, Le Pen wrote, 'the destiny of the Euro-

pean Union resembles the destiny of the Soviet Union, which died from its own contradictions¹⁶. Elsewhere, in an interview with Time Magazine, Le Pen compared the result of the UK referendum with the fall of the Berlin Wall, invoking again the image of the collapsing Soviet Union¹⁷. This comparison between the EU and the Soviet Union is an opportune and novel tactic. Its function is to update the threadbare argument that western democracy is morally corrupt, and that integration with Europe since the Cold War has failed, in order to instill on the public a sense of the EU's imminent collapse¹⁸.

Couple this alarmist, Eurosceptic, rhetoric with the well-proven fact that the FN received funding from Kremlin-backed financial institutions¹⁹ and Le Pen's vocal pro-Russian stance might seem as a foregone conclusion. Le Pen herself confirmed the loan and did not shy away from admitting she was going to ask for more Russian money with which to fund her upcoming presidential campaign²⁰. Yet the pro-Russian approach of the FN hardly stops there: allegedly, key members of the French party develop and maintain pro-Kremlin networks of influence and a complete media world ripe with Russian propaganda and disinformation material²¹.

Will the ENF lead a far-right bloc in the European Parliament after Brexit?

The same pro-Russian themes and pieces of disinformation have been echoing in the chambers of the European Parliament, where the FN is currently leading Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF), a coalition of far-right parties that includes four of the most influential far-right parties in Europe: the Dutch PVV (led by Geert Wilders), the Lega Nord from Italy, the Austrian FPÖ and the Flemish Vlaams Belang. Even before the establishment of the ENF last November, MEPs belonging to the FN and its allies were fierce opponents of US interference in European matters and outspoken advocates for Europe's strategic alliance with Russia. A recurring group of MEPs active in the Committee on Foreign Affairs (including the French Aymeric Chauprade who has been considered in the past as a conspiracy theorist and a 9/11 denier²²) has been disseminating pieces of Russian disinformation relating to the destruction of the MH17 flight, the EU's alleged support of Nazis in Ukraine and the citing of NATO aggression as the trigger of Russian retaliation in Crimea²³.

Evidently, compared to the ECR and the EFDD, led by British Conservatives and UKIP respectively, Marine Le Pen's ENF represents a far more radical Euroscepticism. In the past, the unwillingness of UKIP to cooperate with FN has made it very difficult for Le Pen to reach the threshold of 25 MEPs from 7 Member-States and form a political group in the European Parliament²⁴. The absence of British MEPs in the next EU legislature will probably mean that the ENF will have an easier time reaching this threshold. And, for now, it is doubtful whether either the Polish Conservatives or Beppe Grillo's Cinque Stelle (junior partners in ECR and EFDD respectively) will be able to stand on their own or to find common ground and challenge Le Pen's momentum. It seems more likely that Le Pen will assume the leadership of a broader far-right bloc in the European Parliament after Brexit.

The strengthening of the radical, far-right, bloc may be Brexit's unfortunate repercussion in the European Parliament. Not only in terms of the increased access in EU funds that Le Pen will enjoy, but also in terms of the increased legitimacy that the far-right, pro-Kremlin, narratives will seek to attain inside the EU's legislative chamber. A rather common hypothesis in the Brexit debate is that the loss of the UK's soft and hard power will result in diminished international influence for the EU. The far-right's shifting gears in the European Parliament might just prove this hypothesis – in which case, it is not impossible to imagine that the EU will have an even more difficult time justifying a policy of confrontation with Russia in the Eastern Neighbourhood.

Footnotes:

¹ For an early assessment of Brexit on EU politics and the European Parliament in particular see: Chrysosogelos, A. (2016) "How Brexit will affect the balance of power in the European Parliament", EUROPP Blog, London School of Economics. See: <http://bit.ly/29dclH2>.

² "Le Pens rejoice at Brexit, call for EU-wide votes on EU membership", Politico, 24 June 2016; "Marine Le Pen: After Brexit, the People's Spring Is Inevitable", The New York Times, 28 June 2016; "Geert Wilders Calls for E.U. Referendum in the Netherlands", The New York Times, 24 June 2016.

³ See for example: Ed Royce, "Countering Putin's Information Weapons of War", The Wall Street Journal, 14 April 2016; US House Foreign Affairs Committee, Hearing: Confronting Russia's Weaponization of Information, April 15 2016, for full transcripts of the hearing see <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/hearing/hearing-confronting-russias-weaponization-of-information/>; European Parliament SEDE Committee, Public Hearing, "Cyber warfare: a real menace to EU security", 21 April 2016, information relating to the hearing, for a programme and the contributions of speakers see: www.europarl.europa.eu/committees/en/sede/events.html?id=20160421CHE00031.

⁴ For a further conceptual discussion on Information Warfare with case studies, see: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (2016) *The Manipulative Techniques Of Russia's Information Campaign: Euro-Atlantic Values And Russia's Strategic Communication In The Euro-Atlantic Space*; Nimmo, B. (2016) *Identifying Disinformation: An ABC approach*, Institute for European Studies, Vrije Universiteit Brussel; Lange-Ionatamishvili, E. and Svetoka, S. (2015) "Strategic Communications and Social Media in the Russia Ukraine Conflict", in Geers, K. (ed.) *Cyber War in Perspective: Russian Aggression against Ukraine*, Tallinn: NATO CCD COE Publications; NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (2016) *Internet Trolling as a Tool of Hybrid Warfare: the Case of Latvia*; Dougherty, J. (2015) "How the Media Became One of Putin's Most Powerful Weapons", The Atlantic.

⁵ Pomerantsev, P. (2014) "Russia and the Menace of Unreality", The Atlantic, 9 September; Gzirian, R. (2015) "Putin has Weaponized Soviet History", The Newsweek, 7 August; Prus, J. (2015) "Russia's Use of History as a Political Weapon", The Polish Institute of International Affairs, No. 12 (114), May.

⁶ Nimmo, B. and Lucas, E. (2015) "Information Warfare: What is it and How to Win it", Centre for European Policy Analysis, Infowar Paper No.1, p. 3.

⁷ See for example: Chrysosogelos, A. (2011) *Old Ghosts in New Sheets: European Populist Parties and Foreign Policy*, Brussels: Centre for European Studies; "Reports multiply of Kremlin links to anti-EU parties", EU Observer, 26 November 2014; "Is the Kremlin financing Europe's right-wing populists?", Deutsche Welle, 29 November 2014; Klapsis, A. (2015) *An Unholy Alliance: The European Far Right and Putin's Russia*, Brussels: Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies; Krekó, P. et al. (2015) *Europe's New Pro-Putin Coalition: the Parties of 'No'*, Institute for Modern Russia and Political Capital Institute.

⁸ Juhasz, A. and Gyori, L. (2015) "I am Eurasian": The Kremlin Connections of the Hungarian Far-Right, Budapest: Political Capital Institute & Social Development Institute.

⁹ Gyori, L. Kreko, P. et al. (2015) *Marching Towards Eurasia: The Kremlin Connections of the Slovak Far-Right*, Budapest: Political Capital Institute & Social Development Institute.

¹⁰ See Gallup poll 'More Greeks Approve of Russia's Leadership Than EU's'. See: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/181460/greeks-approve-russia-leadership.aspx>

¹¹ Gyori, L. Kreko, P. et al. (2015) "Natural Allies": the Kremlin Connections of the Greek Far-Right, Budapest: Political Capital Institute.

¹² All quotes from FN's foreign policy positions that can be accessed on 'Notre politique étrangère', Front National. See: <http://www.frontnational.com/le-projet-de-marine-le-pen/politique-etrangere/notre-politique-etrangere/>.

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ Translated and reviewed by EU East StratCom Task Force, Disinformation Digest, 1 July 2016. See: <http://us11.campaign-archive1.com/?u=cd23226ada1699a7700eb60b&id=9baebd1caa&e=4bcffe6560>; Alexey Pushkov's Tweet available at https://twitter.com/Alexey_Pushkov/status/746442241145774080.

¹⁵ Translated and reviewed by EU East StratCom Task Force, Disinformation Digest, 1 July 2016. See: <http://us11.campaign-archive1.com/?u=cd23226ada1699a7700eb60b&id=9baebd1caa&e=4bcffe6560>; Original article in Russian available at <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/columns/73597.html>.

¹⁶ "Marine Le Pen: After Brexit, the People's Spring Is Inevitable", The New York Times, 28 June 2016. See: http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/28/opinion/marine-le-pen-after-brexit-the-peoples-spring-is-inevitable.html?_r=0.

¹⁷ "France's Marine Le Pen on Brexit: "This Is the Beginning of the End of the European Union"", Time Magazine, 28 June 2016. See: <http://time.com/4386695/brexit-france-q-and-a-marine-le-pen-national-front/>.

¹⁸ See also Le Pen's interview on RT before the UK referendum: "EU is in process of collapsing on itself" – Marine Le Pen to RT", RT, 20 May 2016. See: <https://www.rt.com/news/343715-eu-collapsing-france-lepen/>.

¹⁹ "Le Front national décroche les millions russes", Mediapart, 22 November 2014; "Le Pen borrowed €9mn from Kremlin-linked bank", EU Observer, 24 November 2014; "National Front's Kremlin loan is worth €40m", EU Observer, 27 November 2014.

²⁰ "Le Pen Party Taps Russian Banks to Fund 2017 Election Campaign", Bloomberg, 19 February 2016.

²¹ For a brief exposé of the FN's multilateral network of pro-Russian influence see: Laruelle, M. Gyori, L. et al (2015) "From Paris to Vladivostok": The Kremlin Connection of the French Far-Right, Budapest: Political Capital Institute.

²² See for example: Aymeric Chauprade, "l'avènement d'une géopolitique conspirationniste?", Conspiracy Watch, 5 February 2009. See: http://www.conspiracy-watch.info/Aymeric-Chauprade-l-avenement-d-une-geopolitique-conspirationniste_a279.html; "Le double discours d'Aymeric Chauprade sur le 11-Septembre", Conspiracy Watch, 18 December 2013. See: http://www.conspiracywatch.info/le-double-discours-d-aymeric-chauprade-sur-le-11-septembre_a1153.html.

²³ For a more detailed analysis of pro-Russian discourse in the AFET, see: Nestoras, A. (2016) "Is Information Warfare Breaching the European Parliament?", IES Policy Brief, 12/2016. See: <http://www.ies.be/policy-brief/information-warfare-breaching-european-parliament>.

²⁴ "Nigel Farage rejects offer of UKIP tie to French far-right Front National", The Guardian, 18 April 2014. See: <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/apr/18/nigel-farage-rejects-ukip-tie-french-front-national>; "Le Pen and Farage battle for partners to form group", Euractiv, 29 May 2014. See: <http://www.euractiv.com/section/eu-elections-2014/news/le-pen-and-farage-battle-for-partners-to-form-group/>; "How Le Pen did it", Politico, 22 June 2015. See: <http://www.politico.eu/article/how-le-pen-did-it-fn-enf/>.

About the author



Antonios Nestoras is a doctoral researcher in European Foreign and Security Policy at the Institute for European Studies of Vrije Universiteit Brussel. He is also an Adjunct Professor of international affairs at Vesalius College. Previously, he served as policy advisor in the ALDE Group and as parliamentary assistant to Members of the European Parliament. Antonios has also held positions with the EPP Group and the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies. He holds a BA in International and European, Economic and Political Studies (University of Macedonia, Thessaloniki) and an MA in International Relations and Diplomacy (Leiden Universiteit, Netherlands). He is a laureate of the Huygens Scholarship for International Talent.