Friends of Putin on the Western Front

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During the Cold War, supporters and many allies of the Soviet Union belonged to the radical left in Europe. Today, Russia’s supporters hail from the opposite wing, the trendy and fast rising Euro sceptics. Parties such as Golden Dawn in Greece, anti-Semitic and xenophobic Jobbik in Hungary, FPÖ in Austria, Lega Nord in Italy, the Front National in France, and Vlaams Belang in Belgium are united by their Eurosceptic views as well as their support for Putin’s Russia. Marine Le Pen and Geert Wilders pledged to “wreck” the EU from within, a statement that seems to embody Putin’s goals.

UKIP’s leader Nigel Farage named Vladimir Putin as the world leader he admires the most. Jobbik’s leader Gábor Vona said in Moscow that Russia was the true guardian of European heritage as opposed to the “treacherous” European Union. And Golden Dawn leader, Nikolaos Michaloliakos, said that “Greece and Russia are natural allies.”

Marine Le Pen and FPÖ members were among the official international observers to the “fairness” of the Crimea referendum in March (whereas OSCE and UN monitors were repeatedly turned back). “Viva the referendum in Crimea! Viva the free choice of the people! They resisted the international dictates and didn’t let Merkel or Obama or Barroso choose for them” said Matteo Salvini, the federal secretary of Italy’s Northern League. After meeting with Marine Le Pen on April 15, Salvini is due to meet Russian president Vladimir Putin later this year.

Peter Kreko from Political Capital argues that Russia seeks to build “party families” in Europe. He noted political consultations with Russian representatives prior to the creation of the European Alliance for Freedom in 2010.

The leader of the British National Party (BNP), Nick Griffin, visited Moscow in November 2013 along with the leader of Italy’s New Force and members of the Golden Dawn. A month later, Viktor Zubarev from Putin’s party, United Russia, visited the election congress of Italy’s Northern League. PVV’s Geert Wilders, FPÖ’s Heinz Strache, members of France’s Front National, Swedish Democrats, Belgium’s Vlaams Belang, were also present.

Kreko has classified the relations between far right Eurosceptic parties and Russia as
Based on the latest polls in March 2014, a pro-Russian faction in the new European Parliament would gain 38 seats from nine countries, far more than the required minimum of 25 seats from seven countries for the establishment of an official political group.

Putin's Worldview

Putin sees the world in simple binary opposites, as shown by his November ultimatum to Ukraine in which he asked Yanukovich to choose between EU’s Association Agreement and the Russian-led Eurasian Union. Merkel told Obama in March that Putin was “in another world.”

Putin’s main propaganda tool is the construct of an epic war between Russia and the West. This fares well with the post-imperial nostalgia of many Russians. Putin’s latest actions in Ukraine threaten to enact this concept.

Putin’s ideology is built on authoritarianism, strong law and order policies, as well as the following values, which are shared by many Eurosceptics:

- **Racism** when it comes to “reactionary” minorities (or majorities that “threaten” the Russian minority). While UKIP’s leader, Nigel Farage, states that he does not want to “be in bed” with what he calls the “far-right” Front National or PVV, UKIP’s agenda has racist points such as “prioritize social housing for people whose parents and grandparents were born locally.” For United Russia, PVV, Vlaams Belang, FPÖ and Front National, the “reactionary” minority is the Muslim minority. For Jobbik and United Russia, it is the Roma (Gypsy) minority. For the Bulgarian Ataka – the Turkish minority. The Jewish minority is still a problem for Jobbik, Ataka, and in the past, Front National and FPÖ.

- **Old-fashioned Gender Divisions.** United Russia and all other European far right parties (Front National, UKIP, Lega Nord, Jobbik, etc.) perpetuate hatred and suspicion towards those living “alternative lifestyles,” meaning Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT). Geert Wilder’s PVV is the only exception to that.

- **Economic Protectionism.** Putin’s Ph.D. thesis in the ’90s talked about “National Champions” – national corporations that are majority owned by the state. Gazprom is a perfect example of that.

- **Genuine Sovereignty.** Putin promises the post-Soviet states “genuine sovereignty” that is national, however, only within his Eurasian Union, but without EU’s “unnecessary” restrictions.

The power base of Eurosceptics is mainly comprised of victims of the financial crisis. Parties such as Front National, Jobbik, and FPÖ throw the blame for the crisis on the IMF, the Euro currency and multinational corporations. They offer in exchange solutions similar to Putin’s economic platform: protectionism, state corporations, and a strong regulatory role of the state.

“Freedom” is the main ideology of right wing Eurosceptics, who call for “national freedom and democracy in opposition to centralized, supranational control” from “the monster of Brussels.” Jobbik wants an alliance of “Free Nations” from Lisbon to Moscow and into Eurasia, where Turkey and the US would not participate. Marine Le Pen even calls for a Paris–Berlin–Moscow axis.

What is Putin’s beef with the EU? EU’s diversification of energy resources to American shell and liquefied gas, as well as EU’s massive investments in renewables threaten to lessen EU’s dependency on Russian gas. To this, Putin offers his solution from Russia with love: *Divide et impera.*

EuroPoint: The financial crisis left the EU with real problems. Putin and his far right EU allies are standing ready to harvest the discontent and “wreck” the EU from within.