

## “There are Always Two Sides to the Truth” French Susceptibility to Russian Propaganda

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There are a number of reasons why France has become a key target of Moscow's soft power over the course of the last years. These include the French elite's traditionally pro-Russian stance, the country's diplomatic weight (its military bases, deployments abroad, strong foreign policy tradition, and permanent seat on the UN Security Council), and its influence on European politics. Another reason lies in a peculiarity of French political culture. For decades, anti-Americanism has been more marked in France than in many other EU countries, and this has been accompanied since the end of the Cold War by a deep distrust of globalization. Such attitudes also have implications for the way the French perceive the EU; they expect it to protect its citizens from globalization. Disappointment on this front is fuelling criticism of Brussels, which in turn has led to the huge success of the radical right Front National in the May 2014 European elections. The country's populist parties (on both the left and the right) have attracted the loudest critics of the US, of globalization, and indeed of the European project in general. But similar sentiments are being echoed in more mainstream political parties as well.

Underlying the growing tensions between Russia and the West is an imbalance of power. Moscow's sense that it is being humiliated by the Americans and Europeans, rather than being taken seriously, has led it to adopt an aggressive, defensive attitude. In order to protect itself against what it perceives as pressure from the West and to respond with its own means, the Kremlin resolved to undertake an active soft power campaign. It has waged this with renewed intensity since the beginning the Ukraine crisis and continues to expand its reach. The establishment of the international news agency Rossiya Segodnya (Russia Today) at the end of 2013 was a milestone on the path to this reconfiguration. The communication strategy developed by Moscow not only serves to convince the

Russian population of Western “aggressiveness” and to persuade citizens to support Vladimir Putin and his policies. It is also intended to have an impact abroad – to “influence public opinion in other countries with targeted disinformation,” in the words of my DGAP colleagues Stefan Meister and Jana Puglierin.<sup>1</sup> France, in particular, is affected by this “information war” and is perceived by Russia as playing a strategic role in it.

## Old Propaganda, New Media

Part of Russian information warfare is an active and targeted media policy; profiting as it does from the power of new media, this policy has been called “more mendacious and more subtle” than it was during the Cold War.<sup>2</sup> Online media are of key importance to Moscow’s communication strategy for making possible the instant circulation of Russian narratives among the general public.<sup>3</sup> In France there are two main information portals that are supported by Russia and aim to provide a supposedly alternative view on international politics and call into question the news coverage of Western mainstream media. The first is *Sputnik* (formerly RIA Novosti), which was established in January 2015 with the claim that it “says what others are silent about.” The second, simply known by the initials RT (formerly *Russia Today*), alleges to provide “an alternative perspective on major global events, and acquaints an international audience with the Russian viewpoint.”<sup>4</sup> The French online television broadcaster ProRussia.tv, active between 2012 and 2014 under the direction of Front National politician Gilles Arnaud, had a similar slogan “*La vérité n’est jamais tout entière du même côté*” (there are always two sides to the truth). ProRussia.tv was a private broadcaster that received important financial support from Moscow.

This communication strategy is also supported by think tanks that foster a degree of closeness with Russian policies, albeit without any verifiable ties to the Kremlin.<sup>5</sup> Their objective is similar, except that rather than target the general public directly, they target opinion makers such as journalists and academics, who then contribute to public debate.

The most prominent example in France is the Institut de la démocratie et de la coopération (Institute of Democracy and Cooperation, or IDC), founded in 2008 during the Georgia crisis. That crisis had been perceived by many in Russia as the “defeat of Russian hard power at the hands of the influential soft power of the West.”<sup>6</sup> The Paris-based think tank is financed by anonymous private sponsors and regularly invites representatives of the Catholic and radical right to its conferences. It may not be directly concerned with Russian policies, but it deals with international topics that are of particular interest to Russia, such as Syria, Macedonia, and Ukraine, and it does so from a pro-Kremlin perspective, advocating for instance an international system “that respects the sovereignty of states and nations” and “a political order grounded on the Judeo-Christian ethics of both parts of Europe.”<sup>7</sup> The IDC cultivates an image of itself as critical of NATO and the EU and supportive of a traditional set of values in line with the political elite of Russia. The influence at

the institute of Russian media and pro-Russian opinion makers is hard to gauge, partly because the debate covers such a wide range of topics (questions of foreign policy, domestic policy, and social issues), and partly because the positions held are by no means unique to Russia but also have a hold in other ideological circles.

One thing, however, is certain: recent years have seen no clear improvement in Russia’s overall image in French society. Although Moscow invests many resources in cultivating its image abroad, France is among the countries with the most negative image of Russia worldwide. According to a poll carried out by the Pew Research Center in 39 countries in summer 2015, “anti-Russian sentiment” is widespread in the French population: 70 percent of respondents claim to have a “negative attitude” toward Russia – one percentage point more than in the German population and ten percentage points fewer than in the Polish population, where criticism of Russia is particularly vehement.<sup>8</sup>

Even more negative are the attitudes of the French respondents toward Vladimir Putin: 85 percent do not trust him. This figure is higher than in Germany (76 percent) and resembles the extent of dislike for him in Poland (86 percent) and Ukraine (84 percent). According to another poll published in January 2014, the French regard Putin as “cold” (85 percent), “dictatorial” (80 percent), “arrogant” (79 percent), “dangerous” (77 percent), and “unsympathetic and megalomaniac” (74 percent), but also – to name the only positively invested characteristic of the entire survey – “energetic” (72 percent).<sup>9</sup> In the last years, moreover, his image seems to have worsened. The number of French people who have “no trust whatsoever” in Putin has risen sharply – from 38 percent in summer 2011 to 56 percent in spring 2015. Here it should be noted that the political preferences of the respondents do influence their assessment of Russian policies. To be sure, critics of Russia are in the majority in all the big parties, but supporters of the conservative party Les Républicains have a less negative attitude (67 percent) than respondents who are close to the Socialist party.<sup>10</sup>

## Russia’s Friends in French Politics

The mood in the French political elite is quite different. It is traditionally marked by “a degree of Russophilia, or at least positive pragmatism” that is at odds with the negative image of Russia in the population.<sup>11</sup> For decades, the numerous “channels of influence between politicians of the two countries” have ensured close relations and contributed to mutual understanding.<sup>12</sup> As demonstrated by a debate in the Assemblée nationale two years

ago, sympathy for Moscow extends across all parties. Answering a question on the human rights situation in Russia, Danielle Auroi, a Green member of the *Assemblée nationale*, said: “Whatever the situation in Russia, it’s no worse than in China.” Her conservative colleague Thierry Mariani added: “The press in Russia is free. You can write whatever you like, although there can be consequences.”<sup>13</sup> Germany was also mentioned repeatedly in the course of this discussion – not as a partner but as a clever rival that knows how to take advantage of its good relations with Russia.

The underlying appeal for more pragmatism in France’s dealings with Russia was unmistakable. The two countries have enjoyed close relations marked by “admiration and friendship”<sup>14</sup> since the 18th century, but these alone cannot explain the French elite’s Russophilia. Commercial and, even more crucially, geopolitical considerations also factor. Very much in the tradition of De Gaulle, the close alliance with Moscow is intended to help set limits to Anglo-American power and reinforce a multipolar world order. The assumption is that France should take the opportunity to regain influence on the international stage.

But even if Russia’s “friends” span the entire spectrum of the French political landscape, they are far more numerous in conservative and right-wing camps (although the radical left *Front de Gauche*, with its anti-globalist and anti-American tendencies, also shows sympathy for Russia). Figures at the far right of the conservative party, *Les Républicains*, rate Russia highly. This is thanks in part to Thierry Mariani, the *Assemblée nationale* member whose group *Dialogue franco-russe* aims – quite successfully – to step up cooperation between the two countries and calls for a greater understanding of Russian policies.<sup>15</sup>

Within Mariani’s party, criticism about the “humiliation” of Russia at the hands of the West is getting louder and is often given as the main reason for Putin’s aggressive behavior. Among prominent *Républicains*, only Alain Juppé and Bruno Le Maire take an openly critical stance on Putin’s policies. Even party leader Nicolas Sarkozy has, surprisingly, drawn on the rhetoric of the Kremlin, describing the annexation of Crimea as the “decision” of the local population and holding the US responsible for the crisis because it “wants to separate Europe and Russia.”<sup>16</sup>

Given this, it is no coincidence that the *Républicains* made up the vast majority of *Assemblée nationale* members who travelled at Mariani’s instigation to Moscow in April 2015 and to Crimea in July of the same year. According to their statements, they wanted to see the situation for themselves, but they not only ignored *Assemblée nationale* president Claude Bartolone’s warning of “potential

exploitation”<sup>17</sup>; they also provoked the French foreign ministry.

Such visits are balm for the Russian soul, for they convey an image of a country that has been unfairly treated by the West but is not yet isolated. The same is true of instances in which French politicians speak out against EU sanctions. But the Kremlin does not rely exclusively on French politicians making trips to Russia. Talks in Paris are also an important part of its political communication strategy. Russian diplomats in France are responsible for maintaining contacts. One source speaks of “unprecedented activism”<sup>18</sup> on the part of the Russian embassy, which a speaker from the French foreign ministry deems “highly influential.”<sup>19</sup> Most of the embassy’s partners are leading figures from the *Républicains*, but the *Front National* is also very well represented among them.

### The Front National: A Strategic Partner

No other party is as keen on Moscow at present as the *Front National* (FN). In the family of party leader Marine Le Pen, there is a long tradition of cultivating amicable relations with Russia. Her father, party founder Jean-Marie Le Pen, was famous for his *matinées* with oligarchs and figures from Russia’s far-right scene<sup>20</sup> and continues to this day to call for an alliance with Russia, in order to “save boreal Europe [that is, the nations between the Atlantic and the Urals] and the white world.”<sup>21</sup> Not only does this amount to proclaiming a cultural war in which Islam plays the part of the bogeyman; it also takes a harsh swipe at the EU, which Le Pen would like to see abolished and replaced with a large, loose alliance of sovereign states (including Russia) with a “common civilization.”

On this point – as on so many others – his daughter is not only following in her father’s footsteps but also rapidly overtaking him. Since becoming party leader in 2011, she has made efforts to reinforce, systematize, and thus professionalize her contacts with influential figures in Putin’s circle. A few months after assuming office, she announced her “admiration” of Vladimir Putin.<sup>22</sup> To be sure, she has yet to secure an official meeting with him, but like her father and her niece (*Assemblée nationale* member Marion Maréchal-Le Pen) she is now among the regular guests at the Russian embassy in Paris.

Since Marine Le Pen became party leader, Moscow trips by FN leaders have become standard procedure. The party leadership has never been part of the parliamentary delegations to Russia (among other things because the FN has only two seats in the *Assemblée nationale*), but Marine Le Pen has already made three trips to Moscow and has always been warmly received. On her first, care-

fully prepared visit in June 2013, she met Sergey Naryshkin, the chairman of the Duma and a confidant of Vladimir Putin, and talked with Deputy Prime Minister Dmitri Olegovich Rogozin about the situation in Syria, EU enlargement, and their common opposition to same-sex marriage. She ended her visit with a lecture at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), in which she severely attacked the EU.<sup>23</sup> Her second trip to Moscow was made in April 2014, shortly before the European elections, in the middle of the Ukraine crisis. She was sharply critical of EU sanctions against Russia and supported the Russian proposal to federalize Ukraine. Little is known of her May 2015 trip, however. The schedule is unknown, and the visit was not even included on the official party agenda. Since then, she has kept a low profile on Russian issues.

Marine Le Pen's sudden efforts to be discreet about her dealings with Russia can perhaps be explained by the scandal surrounding a loan to the FN from Moscow. In November 2014, investigative journalists from the Internet newspaper *Mediapart* revealed that the FN had received a loan of nine million euros from the First Czech Russian Bank, which has its headquarters in Moscow.<sup>24</sup> It was, apparently, only the first installment of a loan of over forty million euros. Although the bank in question has no direct ties to the Kremlin, it would hardly have been possible for it to grant funds of this magnitude without a green light from the Russian government.<sup>25</sup> The FN did not deny receiving the loan but went on the offensive, explaining that it had had no choice but to appeal to a foreign country after being turned down by all the French banks it had contacted.

From a purely legal standpoint, there is nothing wrong with a loan of this nature; French political parties may borrow money both at home and abroad. What is contentious is the issue raised by *Mediapart* of "the interference of a foreign state in the political life of France."<sup>26</sup> It is a particularly controversial subject for a party like the FN, which declares state sovereignty to be sacred and strongly condemns the interference of foreign states or organizations. Marine Le Pen continues to deny any form of quid pro quo and calls attention to her party's long-standing pro-Russian attitude.<sup>27</sup> It is difficult to verify whether or not the FN is allowing itself to be bought by Moscow, but the fact remains that around the time the credit was granted, Marine Le Pen supported Putin's policies in the Ukraine crisis in a strikingly uncompromising way – thus influencing debate in the French public sphere.

When Crimea was annexed in March 2014, the FN's "pro-Russian lobby work" reached new heights.<sup>28</sup> Former FN foreign policy advisor and MEP Aymeric Chauprade

denounced, for example, the interference of foreign "pyro-maniacs" in Ukrainian politics and justified Moscow's intervention by pointing to the necessity of securing "the strategic interests of a historical zone of influence like any other."<sup>29</sup> Two weeks later, the pro-Russian NGO, Eurasian Observatory for Democracy and Elections, sent Chauprade to Crimea as an election observer, together with other representatives of populist parties. He declared the referendum "legitimate"; shortly afterward, Marine Le Pen described the results as "uncontroversial."<sup>30</sup> Jean-Marie Le Pen, too, welcomed Putin's "faultless achievement," remarking that "Crimea has always been a part of the Russian empire."<sup>31</sup>

Unlike other nationalist parties in Europe, the FN has not made regionalism and rejection of state centralism part of its discourse, campaigning instead for the indivisibility of France and rejecting on principle the demands of autonomous movements. More in evidence is the FN's criticism of Western "interventionism" (especially that of the US) and its admiration of Russia as a country that in the eyes of party strategists is capable of defending its own national interests. Both these aspects also figure in the FN's condemnation of the EU sanctions against Russia, and in the controversy over the French government's cancellation of a delivery to Russia of Mistral helicopter carriers in summer 2015. In her response to this decision, Marine Le Pen not only attacked France's "submission to the US" but also expressed her concern over the country's "financial, political, economic (and thus also social) interests"<sup>32</sup> – a point of criticism that was also raised far beyond the FN's parameters.<sup>33</sup>

## A Shared Desire for the Old Order

The FN's ideological proximity to the Kremlin clears the way for Moscow's charm offensive toward the party.<sup>34</sup> The Le Pens make no secret of the fascination that Putin's world view holds for them. While Marine Le Pen extolls the Russian "model of civilization," Jean-Marie Le Pen expresses his delight that "the set of values that Putin is defending is the same as ours."<sup>35</sup> An important contributing factor to this ideological proximity is the Le Pens' admiration for Putin's leadership style – a style that seems to fit the ideal of a charismatic and self-confident leadership that they themselves aspire to.

The FN owes its electoral success to stressing the topics of criminality and increased violence in French society. Since the 1980s, it has been stoking public fears and establishing an allegedly causal link to immigration and the failure of integration policy. The FN never tires of condemning the powerlessness of successive govern-

ments to address the problems of immigrant crime and failed integration, and it presents itself as a guarantor of “zero-tolerance” policies that include tougher penalties for repeat offenders and the reintroduction of the death penalty. It is thus no coincidence that the FN is able to identify closely with Moscow’s “law-and-order” approach, even if this means ignoring the violation of basic rights and the loss of liberties in Russia. Security, after all, is “the first of all liberties.”<sup>36</sup> It has been a long time in France, however, since the call to a return to political authority was the exclusive domain of the FN.

Particularly in the right wing of the *Républicains*, which includes politicians such as the decidedly pro-Moscow *Assemblée nationale* member Mariani, there is a desire for a strong state that is more committed to security and order. Sarkozy, too, made this the focus of his electoral campaigns in 2007 and 2012. Since the terrorist attacks in Paris on November 13, such demands for a strong role of the state, more police, and harsher laws are increasing.

On some points there is no clear dividing line between the demands of the FN and those of the right wing of the *Républicains*. Instead, striking similarities become evident in the two parties’ dealings with Moscow – first and foremost the classic principles of an authoritarian system that invests in a strong state in order to ensure the domestic respect of law and order. Even the Socialist government has committed itself to such measures as prolonging the “state of war” and stripping dual nationals condemned for terrorist crimes of their French citizenship.

Moreover, the state is not only to maintain order within its borders but also to defend its national interests vis-à-vis the outside world. Putin’s invocation of patriotism is particularly well-received within the FN because it is a party tradition to accuse the political elite of systematically betraying the country’s interests under pressure from the EU and the US. The FN, in contrast, demands a return to a proud and sovereign France that identifies its interests with confidence and safeguards them by means of strategic partnerships, with Russia in particular. This approach applies to the party’s geopolitical discourse, which focuses both on rejecting international alliances (thus justifying, for example, France’s exit from NATO) and on maintaining and cultivating the major powers’ zones of influence (including those of Russia and France). This approach also applies to the economic sphere: “Colbertism” – which demands that the state intervene in the country’s economic affairs to ensure control of strategic activities (e.g. energy, foodstuffs) – has a firm hold on the branch of the FN represented by deputy leader Florian Philippot. In this point too, representatives of sovereignist movements from

other parties that have long been part of the French political landscape are in agreement with the FN.

Furthermore, Moscow’s discourse on Europe’s moral decadence strikes a chord within the FN. Like Putin, FN politicians abhor the “multiculturalism” of European society. For years they have been exploiting the French fear of loss of identity by painting a picture of a country that, thanks to globalization, European integration, and immigration, is losing its specific cultural characteristics to communitarianism.<sup>37</sup> Unlike the discourse in Russia, however, theirs does not focus on Christian values. Although Catholic traditionalists make up a portion of FN voters, Marine Le Pen is committed to *laïcité* – a specific form of secularism and a pillar of French political culture – and insists on the prohibition of religious symbols in the public sphere. Her demand, however, has nothing to do with tolerance; more than anything else, it is indicative of Islamophobia. For in the eyes of the FN, Islam bears the brunt of the responsibility for France’s loss of identity. The French population is increasingly being replaced by people from Muslim countries, which will ultimately lead to the “extinction” of its European elements – thus the *grand remplacement* (“great replacement”) theory that is particularly popular in radical right circles.<sup>38</sup> In this tense situation, the narrative of an “eternal Russia,” a country that remains true to its historical and cultural identity by protecting itself from external influence, falls on fertile ground. Russia is perceived as a model and an ally in the struggle against “the foreign” (epitomized by immigration and the liberalization of mores).

In this context, the fierce debate on same-sex marriage in 2012–13 acted as a watershed. The bill proposed by the Socialists was criticized with particular vehemence by the opposition, and for months opponents organized counterdemonstrations that turned out to be surprisingly popular. The French legislative process was closely followed in Russia, too, where the mood is predominantly homophobic. The chair of the French-Russian parliamentary group in the *Assemblée nationale*, the socialist Chantal Guittet, describes her Russian interlocutor’s fixation on the subject, which he coupled with a great concern about the adoption of Russian children in France.<sup>39</sup> Interestingly, the FN was not on the front line of resistance; it was the conservatives who led the protests. The right wing of the FN did, it is true, firmly reject the law, but, unlike her niece Marion Maréchal-LePen, Marine Le Pen did not take part in the demonstrations.<sup>40</sup> This can be put down firstly to the fact that the “de-demonization” aspired to by the party calls for a more open-minded attitude toward homosexuality, and secondly to the fact that questions of mores are “of little relevance” to FN voters.<sup>41</sup> According to

polls, when the demonstrations reached a climax in January 2013, there were far more UMP supporters than FN sympathizers protesting gay marriage.<sup>42</sup> (The center-right UMP – Union pour un mouvement populaire – changed its name to Les Républicains in 2015.) The UMP may have been divided over this point, but there was considerable hostility in the party toward the proposed bill. The desire for traditional values reflected in this debate and described by a conservative politician as the “decline of political liberalism” in his party, is one of the main reasons for Moscow’s appeal to a part of the French political class.<sup>43</sup>

## Mutual Exploitation

The common nostalgia for cultural hegemony, the sovereignty of nation states, and great power politics undoubtedly play a central role in the rapprochement of the FN – and of parts of other parties – with the Kremlin. But the two sides are united by far more than mere frustration in the face of ubiquitous complexity. Over and above backward-looking considerations, they also have a common project that they understand as an “alternative” to the model of a liberal, globalized world. This geopolitical project plans to introduce a multipolar order, in which the US would no longer have hegemonic status. Against this backdrop, NATO and the EU are to be dissolved and replaced by loose partnerships serving national interests. Marion Maréchal-Le Pen, for instance – who “still [doesn’t] understand what enemy NATO is supposed to be protecting us from” – suggests a strategic alliance between her own country and Russia in the fields of security and energy policy.<sup>44</sup> In her opinion, France should not only exit NATO but also the EU. Such suggestions are highly convenient to a Russia that aims to split the EU and is investing in bilateral relations with European states rather than cooperating with Brussels.

There is no place for Romanticism in this information warfare. On the contrary: both sides are out to defend

their own best interests. Beside the financial aspect (keyword: credit), the FN hopes that its ostentatious rapprochement with Russia will yield political gain. It plans to make use of it both to convince voters of the respectability of its program (insofar as a similar program has already been implemented in Russia) and to prove that its party leader enjoys international recognition.

Moscow’s goal, meanwhile, is quite simply to destabilize the EU. Its cooperation with Europe’s populist parties is intended to weaken the cohesion of the EU and thus split the Western bloc. The FN fits this strategy particularly well. It may be in the opposition and it may have only two parliamentary seats, but its voice clearly counts in French public debate, as shown by its very good results in the December 2015 regional elections. It is well represented in the European Parliament, too, where it constitutes the strongest political power from France. It is thus no coincidence that Marine Le Pen has been named one of *Time* magazine’s 100 most influential people in 2015. She was the only French politician on the list.

The Kremlin could also pin its hopes on a FN victory in future presidential elections. Regarded as a serious possibility in Moscow, this scenario would involve a split in the Républicains and the subsequent realignment of the conservative camp around the FN.<sup>45</sup> It is currently unlikely that such a scenario will play out. Should it become reality, however, the destabilization sought by the Kremlin would extend far beyond the ideological sphere. It would also have serious repercussions for the equilibrium within NATO and the EU, and thus on the existing structures of world order.

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## Notes

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- 15 Members and partners include prominent figures from politics and culture (e.g. former president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and historian Hélène Carrère d'Encausse) and companies such as Airbus, Alstom, and Bouygues. Thierry Mariani is joint chairman with Russian entrepreneur Vladimir Yakunin.
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