

## Five Faces of Russia's Soft Power

### FAR LEFT, FAR RIGHT, ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN, RUSSOPHONE, AND ETHNORELIGIOUS NETWORKS

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Does Russia exercise true “soft power” –the power of attraction–in any significant measure? [Scholars](#) like Joseph Nye, who [first conceptualized](#) the notion of soft power, [argue](#) that the kind of international influence Russia exerts is not really soft power. On the contrary, I suggest Russia's soft power may be at least as great as its hard power in international politics. Since Russian soft power is generally overlooked or dismissed in Western countries either as an outgrowth of Russian military power or as a result of rent-seeking by some political entrepreneurs, its structural causes and long-term staying power is vastly underestimated.

There are at least five different categories of foreign audiences that espouse a pro-Russian geopolitical identity, all united by an opposition to liberalism. In addition to pro-Russian far right parties and networks, which have attracted most of the attention of scholars and [journalists](#), there are also [far left](#), Orthodox Christian, Russophone, and various ethnoreligious and separatist groups that favor a pro-Russian geopolitical identity. During international crises that involve Russia, such as Russia's annexation of Crimea or its intervention to support the Assad regime in Syria, these pro-Russian groups with seemingly irreconcilable views on domestic politics, may mobilize to pressure their governments to adopt a more pro-Russian foreign policy position than would be expected otherwise. Although the presence of popular pro-Russian political parties is not necessary for a country to adopt a more Russia-friendly foreign policy, the presence of an electorally popular pro-Russian political party in the parliament may be sufficient to prevent a

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democratic polity from adopting a more confrontational attitude vis-a-vis Moscow in international crises.

### **Far Left Parties: Anti-Imperialism of a Pro-Russian Variety?**

Being the successor to the Soviet Union, the first and arguably most consequential socialist polity in history, endows Russia with a significant discursive resource in targeting far leftist audiences around the world, especially since, as Peter Rutland and Andrei Kazantsev [write](#), “Russia did not make a completely clean break with the Soviet past.”

Previous research [identifies](#) numerous far left parties in Europe with a [pro-Russian](#) geopolitical orientation. At least one pro-Russian far left party even came to power in a NATO member state, namely, Syriza in Greece between 2015 and 2019. Jean-Luc Mélenchon in France, who received an impressive 19.6 percent of the vote in the first round of French presidential elections in 2017, is an example of a far leftist populist in the French Jacobin tradition, who [espouses](#) pro-Russian geopolitical arguments. Jeremy Corbyn, the leader of the opposition in the United Kingdom, the Labour Party, is another example of a prominent, high profile leftist [sympathetic](#) to Russia in geopolitical terms, primarily as a counterweight against a U.S.-led, pro-market, capitalist, world order. Other far left parties, such as [Podemos](#) in Spain, also see Russia a counter-hegemonic alternative to the Western world order.

There is an ideological “path dependence” among some of the far left parties, such that their present-day pro-Russian geopolitical identity can be thought of as a legacy of their pro-Soviet Cold War era predecessors. This is nonetheless surprising at first, since post-Soviet Russia under Putin is a capitalist society with very dramatic socioeconomic inequalities, and one where the Communist Party is in the opposition. Rather than focusing on Russian domestic politics, however, European far left parties’ sympathies for Russia are often couched in more strictly geopolitical terms, namely, seeing Russia as a counterweight against U.S. hegemony. Hence, I find it more accurate to describe them as having a “pro-Russian geopolitical identity.”

### **Far-Right Parties: Russia as the Savior of White, Christian, European Civilization?**

European far right parties with pro-Russian geopolitical preferences are probably the most studied of the five categories of pro-Russian groups discussed in this memo due to their electoral success and political significance. The National Rally (RN) in France and the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) have been the most electorally significant [pro-Russian far right parties](#) in Western Europe. RN’s leader Marine Le Pen received 34 percent of the vote in the second round of the French presidential elections in May 2017, and RN became the leading party in France with 23.3 percent of the vote in the European Parliament elections of May 2019. FPÖ is the only pro-Russian far right party that has been the major partner of a coalition government in Western Europe so far. [Northern League](#) (LN) under

the leadership of Matteo Salvini in Italy has been almost as consequential, since it was the junior partner of a coalition ruling Italy, and might win the Italian elections in the near future. Other notable pro-Russian far right parties include [Vlaams Belang](#) in Belgium, AfD in Germany, Vox in Spain, Jobbik in Hungary, and UKIP in Britain.

Far right parties mostly see Russia as the defender or savior of a white, Christian-heritage, European civilization, both against an alleged Islamic invasion through immigration and refugee flows, but also against socially liberal policies such as legislation allowing for same sex marriages. Without an exception, all pro-Russian far right parties mentioned above see immigration as a major threat and propose to limit it through various measures, some of them rather punitive and arguably inhumane. Relatedly, and also without an exception, they perceive an Islamic threat to European societies. Thus, anti-immigrant and particularly Islamophobic rhetoric is a common feature of pro-Russian far right parties in Western Europe.

### **Orthodox (and) Christian Networks: Putin's Russia as the Defender of Traditional Family and the Reviver of Byzantine Empire?**

In addition to far right and Islamophobic groups, which may be and often are rather secular and even secularist, there are also essentially religious conservative networks around the world that perceive Russia under Putin as the principal defender of Orthodox Christianity or even more broadly the Christian way of life in the world against secularist and non-Christian threats. The "Russian world... retained those Christian values that were seen as lost elsewhere," [according](#) to Putin, whose government's [instrumentalization](#) of the [Russian Orthodox Church](#) for its [domestic](#) and [international](#) political goals is well documented.

A few examples may suffice to illustrate Russia's use of the Orthodox Church for political influence in the post-soviet republics, in Europe, and even in the Americas. In May 2016, Putin made a highly publicized visit to Mount Athos, an Orthodox monastic complex in Greece, and the Russian media reported, somewhat inaccurately, that Putin sat at the throne historically reserved only for the [Byzantine emperors](#). Common Orthodox religious identity is a critical element of Russian influence in Greece as well as some other Orthodox majority polities such as Bulgaria and Serbia.

Within Orthodox Christianity, however, there is a split between more pro-Western and pro-Russian elements with momentous ecclesiastical and organizational repercussions. Russian Orthodox Church [vehemently objected](#) to and struggled against the [granting](#) of autocephalous status to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church by the Ecumenical Orthodox Patriarchate in Istanbul, a geopolitical drama that unfolded at multiple levels and even involved Russian [hacking](#) of the Ecumenical Patriarchate's e-mails. Just as the Istanbul Patriarchate granted autocephalous status to the Orthodox Church in Ukraine, the Russian Orthodox Church decided to [establish](#) a Patriarchal Exarchate of Western Europe

[in France](#), which is the country with the largest Russian Orthodox minority in Western Europe.

Intra-Christian and intra-Orthodox disputes do not prevent the Putin government and the Russian Orthodox Church from claiming leadership in defense of Christianity and the traditional family. For example, Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill, during his visits to various traditionally Catholic Latin American states such as Brazil and Paraguay, [called](#) for a common Christian front against secularization, and some religious conservatives, including in the United States, applaud Putin's defense of the traditional family against pro-LGBT+ legislation. In short, from Paraguay to Ukraine, from Greece to France, Orthodox networks are often utilized by the Putin government to cast Russia as the leader and defender of Christianity.

### **Ethnic Russian and Russophone Groups: On "Russia World" Duty?**

Tens of millions of ethnic Russians around the world and over a hundred million Russian speakers beyond the Russian Federation constitute another significant and very much acknowledged (re)source of Russia's soft power. *Russotrudnichestvo* is the relatively new governmental [agency](#) responsible for [reaching out](#) to ethnic Russian minorities and Russian-speakers abroad. Such pro-Russian influence is particularly [observable](#) in the Baltic republics, where ethnic Russian minorities constitute up to a third of the population in Estonia and Latvia. As Agnia Grigas [wrote](#), a pro-Russian party came in first place in the 2011 Latvian parliamentary elections; pro-Russian politicians were elected as mayors of Riga (Nil Ushakov) and Tallinn (Edgar Savisaar), the capital cities of Latvia and Estonia, respectively; and the president of Lithuania, Rolandas Paksas, was impeached for his links with Russian business.

The officially endorsed concept of the "Russian World" (*Russkii mir*) targets such ethnic Russian and Russophone audiences, and has been employed by Russia with rather limited success vis-a-vis [Ukraine](#). Somewhat surprisingly, even sizeable Russophone groups of emigrants who are neither Orthodox Christian nor of Slavic ethnicity also demonstrate pro-Russian geopolitical preferences. Ethnic Germans and Jews who migrated from the former Soviet Union and the Russian Federation to Germany and Israel, respectively, could be classified under this category. Russian Germans' support for the pro-Russian far right party, AfD, has been [extensively discussed](#), and Russian Germans *do* vote for AfD at higher rates than the average German citizen. Somewhat similarly, Israeli Prime Minister [Benjamin Netanyahu](#) actively sought to get the Russian Jewish vote by highlighting his strong friendship with Putin rather ostentatiously ahead of the last Israeli national elections in September 2019. Russian Jews mostly vote for the far right party, Yisrael Beiteinu, led by [Avigdor Lieberman](#). Russophone communities, even those who were previously persecuted in the Soviet Union for their identity such as Russian Jews and Germans, are still susceptible to pro-Kremlin propaganda [through Russian-language media](#). Finally, one could even add foreign migrant workers in Russia whose remittances

[amount](#) to a quarter or more of GDP in Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, and Tajikistan, as a potential resource for Russia's soft power projection in their home countries.

### **Pro-Russian Ethnic and Sectarian Networks: Affinity through Legacy?**

The fifth segment comprises a number of ethnic and sectarian networks, which, through Russia's support historically and/or at present, have developed a pro-Russian geopolitical identity. Russia has provided some support, some of it very symbolic, to [numerous](#) separatist groups around the world ranging from Basque, Baloch, Catalan, and Scottish separatists in Europe and Asia, to Californian, Hawaiian, and Texan separatists in the United States. However, Russia's support for some other ethnic and sectarian groups has been substantial, critical, and decades-long, including direct military aid. For example, some [Western](#) and [Russian](#) sources note that there is a de facto [Russian-Shiite](#) or [Orthodox-Shiite alliance](#) in the Middle East, epitomized by the decisive Russian military intervention in Syria in support of the Assad regime, and the continuing Russian-Iranian partnership that precedes and goes beyond the Syrian war. In short, some other ethnic, linguistic, religious, or sectarian networks, which are neither Orthodox, Russophone, or Slavic, may also display pro-Russian geopolitical preferences due to historical legacies.

### **Commonalities, Consequences, and Contradictions of Pro-Russian Groups**

Although some groups like Turkey's [pro-Russian Eurasianists](#) may straddle more than one of these five categories, the fivefold taxonomy of Russian soft power around the world that is presented in this memo is nonetheless useful in identifying the ways in which different pro-Russian networks' goals may sometimes overlap and sometimes contradict each other. Which ideational and/or material interests enable these distinct groups seemingly pursuing different and even contradictory goals to cooperate in advocating pro-Russian geopolitical preferences?

The ideational common feature of all five categories of pro-Russian groups is their criticism of liberalism, both in domestic politics and in international relations. There are also a number of more specific concerns, such as opposition to [same sex marriage](#) and [Muslim immigration](#), which multiple categories of pro-Russian groups share. The consequences of having such a pro-Russian geopolitical identity often include opposing sanctions or any other punitive measures against Russia for its annexation of Crimea or war crimes in Syria, [voting against](#) the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, and even advocating the dissolution of NATO and its replacement "by a collective security system including Russia [and Germany]," as Sahra Wagenknecht, the leader of the Die Linke (Left), the main opposition party in Germany at the time, [argued](#). In another telling pattern, having interviewed representatives of mostly pro-Russian anti-establishment parties in Europe, Susi Dennison and Dina Pardijs [report](#) that, "[o]n the prospect of collective European intervention in Syria, 32 parties responded that this should not even be on the table."

There are numerous political contradictions that should or at least could otherwise lead to major disagreements between these different pro-Russian parties and groups. For example, Russian officials praise far right political parties such as the National Rally in France and AfD in Germany, which are seemingly the polar opposites of far leftist parties in their respective countries, and yet prominent far leftist leaders and parties such as Jean-Luc Mélenchon in France and the Left Party in Germany also espouse pro-Russian geopolitical arguments on critical issues, such as the Ukrainian and the Syrian conflicts. While pro-Russian far right parties rely heavily on anti-immigrant and anti-minority appeals, pro-Russian far left parties often depend on the electoral support of immigrants and minorities. Similarly, while almost all pro-Russian networks in Europe and the Americas are radically Islamophobic, Putin praises the multiconfessional composition of Russia, which includes the largest Muslim minority in Europe, and [projects](#) the image of an exceptionally Muslim-friendly Russian regime to the representatives of Muslim-majority nations. Despite these glaring contradictions, increasing resentment against U.S. foreign policy, neoliberal market economics, globalization, and/or liberal democracy, as well as opposition to more specific policies identified with Western liberalism such as same-sex marriage legislation, provide opportunities and justifications for otherwise seemingly irreconcilable groups to adopt pro-Russian geopolitical preferences.

This explanation of ideational components of Russian power in international politics constitutes a critical dimension of an increasingly multipolar world order emerging out of U.S.-led liberal hegemony.