

## Russian and American Far Right Connections

### CONFLUENCE, NOT INFLUENCE

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 516

March 2018

Marlene Laruelle<sup>1</sup>

*George Washington University*

The current U.S. debate on Russia is shaped by conspiratorial narratives that see Russia meddling in almost every issue of U.S. political life. This frenzy is reinforced by the fact that Republicans and Democrats now share a relatively similar anti-Russia agenda that is inspired by Cold War “Red Scare” rhetoric. One conspiratorial narrative revolves around connections between Russia and part of the American far right. This topic became highly relevant with the election of Donald Trump, who designated Steve Bannon, then editor of the far right news portal Breitbart, as White House Chief Strategist (he was fired in August 2017). Trump’s election also polarized U.S. public opinion regarding its racist past, epitomized by the Charlottesville riots and multiple polemics about taking down statues of Confederate heroes.

That Russia finds itself enmeshed in issues deeply linked to America’s own past encapsulates the current panic in the United States about Moscow’s alleged ability to influence U.S. domestic public opinion. This memo demystifies the Russian-U.S. far right links that U.S. politicians and media generally overestimate, showing that they are much more limited than portrayed. Further, based on Joseph Nye’s notion of “soft power” and the idea of “strategic narratives” elaborated by Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, it is important to distinguish between two critical forms of exercising soft power: (1) shaping another country’s public opinion by shifting its perceptions and values; and (2) moving with the current *Zeitgeist* to promote one’s own agenda. Here, I contend that Russia’s soft power in the United States and its links with the U.S. far right demonstrate a *confluence* of interests rather than an *influence* on U.S. public opinion.

---

<sup>1</sup> [Marlene Laruelle](#) is Research Professor, Associate Director of IERES, Director of the Central Asia Program, and Co-Director of PONARS Eurasia at George Washington University.

## Deconstructing Dominant Narratives

There are several layers to be deconstructed in the conventional punditry on Russian-American far right connections.

*Two conservative presidents being in power does not mean the far right is in power*

In both Russia and the United States, liberal pundits tend to frame the rise of the “conservative values” agenda as a victory for the far right. Even if there are links between the far right and conservatives, the two realms are clearly distinct in terms of their influence over policy decisions. The notion of “far right” does not constitute a closed realm with easily identifiable boundaries; it contains “niches” that are part of a broader continuum and can retract or expand depending on evolving political contexts and framing. In the Russian context, the far right benefited from the “conservative turn” of Vladimir Putin’s third presidential term, but has not gained any new access to decision-making circles and remains dissociated from the government. The Kremlin’s negative reaction to street violence organized by Russian Orthodox radicals in [their fight](#) against the film *Matilda* confirms how much the two realms can oppose each other. In the United States, marginal neo-Nazi groups and the historic Ku Klux Klan are connected to a broader political trend that gathers around the right side of the Republican Party, but they cannot be conflated with it, and did not gain any policy-making positions after Donald Trump’s election—except for the rapid rise and fall of Bannon.

*Mutual admiration but limited mutual influence*

One of the most vocal components of the American far right is the Alt-Right (alternative right) movement. This term refers to a loose realm of white supremacist movements that promote their ideology as an alternative to the Republicans’ more classical conservatism. The Alt-Right movement is embodied by websites such as Breitbart News and AlternativeRight.com, which have become the intellectual centers revamping white supremacy theories using more politically correct terms. Richard Spencer, one of the main figures of the Alt-Right, is at the forefront of this “identitarian” movement. The term comes from the French movement Les Identitaires that posits that identity is the crux of any political, religious, or political movement. Spencer leads the National Policy Institute (NPI), an organization launched in 2005 and [described](#) by the Southern Poverty Law Center as a “suit-and-tie version of the white supremacists of old.” Trump’s victory in the 2016 elections put wind in the sails of the Alt-Right, but Bannon’s resignation signaled a turn by the White House toward a more classical Republican framing of domestic and foreign policy issues.

Many Alt-Right figures are [big fans](#) of Putin, whom they see as a beacon of the white world. They are attracted to his rejection of so-called decadent U.S. liberalism and

multiculturalism, his hard line against Islamic radicalism, his upholding of Christian values, his criticism of Western political correctness, and his support for the idea that global elites conspire against ordinary people. On the Russian side, many nationalists favored Trump over Hillary Clinton. Duma members [expressed](#) their hope for a change with the Trump agenda while denouncing Clinton's outlook as being too ideologized against Russia. The provocative Russian political figure Vladimir Zhirinovskiy [invited](#) U.S. citizens to vote for Trump or face the risk of nuclear war. And, as expected, the neofascist and Eurasianist geopolitician Alexander Dugin was among the most vocal in expressing support for the new U.S. president, going so far as to call on him to take the lead in a "[Nuremberg Trial for Liberalism](#)."

Yet, the honeymoon between the two far rights is far from total. Bannon had referred to Dugin and Putin positively, but he considers Putin's regime to be kleptocratic and Dugin to be too open to the Islamic world. He has [distanced](#) himself from them more than have some other Alt-Right figures. Indeed, only a few individuals in the Russian and U.S. far right are interested in developing a genuine bilateral partnership. Only a small section of the U.S. far right, inspired by the American political philosopher Francis Parker Yockey (1917–1960) and his magnum opus, *Imperium: The Philosophy of History and Politics* (1948), fervently believes in a pan-white unity encompassing the United States, Europe, and Russia-Eurasia.

For the more traditional U.S. far right, the geopolitical enmity with Russia constitutes an impassable boundary and the connections with Moscow make sense only through the European New Right; it is mostly by reading their European counterparts that the U.S. far right became interested in what has been happening in Russia. More importantly, for the part of the population in both countries that displays sympathy for far right ideas, the relationship between Russia and the United States remains a distant topic that is unable to compete with their foci on domestic political issues. A shared agenda of advancing so-called Christian conservative values and defending "whites" against the "migrant invasion" does not offer enough ground for bolstering actual transnational cooperation. Russia's far right interactions with some of its European counterparts are much deeper and regular.

#### *More loose than structured connections*

Mutual admiration and shared worldviews are not enough to demonstrate any kind of concrete interactions, and still less any kind of Russian influence over U.S. far right public opinion. Indeed, when one looks in detail at the documented connections between the Alt-Right movement and Russia, they are not simply thin, but largely confined to anecdotal evidence.

Several far right websites—such as Open Revolt, Green Star, New Resistance, and Spencer's AlternativeRight.com—regularly publish Dugin's main texts in English for

American audiences. This is the biggest outreach into the United States that a Russian far right thinker can hope for. Spencer's Russian wife, Nina Kouprianova (the two are separated), who publishes under the nom de plume Nina Byzantina, has translated Dugin's two books on German philosopher Martin Heidegger into English and published a blog on "meta and geopolitics" inspired by him. She is an apologist of Putin's regime (and the Novorossiia project) but she has [distanced herself](#) from her husband's racist theories.

The U.S. white supremacist activist Preston Wiginton, who has been developing contacts with Russian skinheads since the 2000s with the help of former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke, [invited](#) Dugin to give a Skype lecture at Texas A&M University in 2015, but very few people showed up. Another example is Matthew Heimbach, the leader of the self-proclaimed Traditionalist Worker Party who originated the social media hashtags such as #HailPutin and #PutinForTsar, is said to have [converted](#) to Orthodoxy, and [broadcast](#) a video from Dugin at a conference in California that exalted their common struggle. Jared Taylor, another big name in the white supremacy movement who oversees the American Renaissance website, attended the 2015 Russian International Conservative Forum in St Petersburg. Dugin was also [interviewed](#) by American conspiracist Alex Jones for his website Infowars in February 2017, just a few months after Dugin [interviewed](#) Jones. The ultraconservative Internet television channel Tsargrad, funded by the Orthodox businessman Konstantin Malofeev, one of the main funders of the Donbas insurrection, [employs](#) former FOX News producer Jack Hanick (who converted to Orthodoxy). And Lee Stranahan, a former journalist at Breitbart, began [working](#) for Sputnik's Washington, D.C., bureau in early 2017. A last example is Charles Bausman, the editor of *Russia Insider* that was launched in 2014 during the Ukraine crisis, who is close to some pro-Church and pro-abortion networks in Russia. He recently [published](#) an anti-Semitic manifesto accusing Jews of funding hostility toward Russia, an ideological move that attracted to him the sympathies of the Alt-Right.

As one may notice, these are relatively minor personal connections and they have not led to larger structured or institutionalized associations.

#### *More influential than the Alt-Right: the Christian Right*

If there are better-connected ideological relationships between the United States and Russia, they are to be found in the realm of the U.S Christian right and the Russian Orthodox Church. For the past decade, U.S. radical Christian wings have been promoting reconciliation with Russia in the name of common Christian values. Indeed, the combination of Putin's framing of Russia as a bastion of "traditional values" and the growing recognition of LGBT rights in the United States spurred the U.S. Christian right to see Moscow as a new ally in the fight against what they interpret as decadent values. Several senior officials from the Russian Orthodox Church have met with

representatives of different U.S. evangelical and Presbyterian churches, while pro-life associations have [loudly praised](#) Putin for his stance on “family values” and called on the United States to follow his example.

However, these elements are obviously not enough to reconcile hardline Republicans with Russia, especially considering the crises in Ukraine and Syria, and, significantly, the allegations of Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The Kremlin, however, is betting on the religious-connection angle to keep pro-Russian voices in American politics over the long term. These Christian connections are structured at a higher and more institutionalized level than the Alt-Right ones and they predate Trump’s election. Hence, while significant, they cannot be added to the conspiracy framework around Trump’s personality, his links to the far right, and his team’s Russia connections.

*No “grand design” from the Kremlin*

Any far right U.S.-Russian connections tend to be analyzed as part of an alleged Machiavellian “grand strategy” elaborated by the Kremlin to destabilize the United States. There are several reasons why these connections are not as substantive as may be claimed.

First, the Kremlin supports the European and U.S. far right for lack of better friends. It would prefer to build alliances with mainstream conservative parties and be supported by large firms that could effectively lobby for Russia’s interests. Second, on the Russian side, there is no centralizing force that coordinates all outreach efforts to far right groups in the West. The topic is highly divisive and many high-level figures in the Russian establishment have criticized such attempts. The peak of the pro-far right “policy” in Russia was probably reached with Marine Le Pen’s defeat in the French elections of May 2017 and as reflected by United Russia’s August 2017 [statement](#) that it should “avoid ties with right-wing marginals” in the West. Obviously, the rise into government levels of some far right parties such as the FPÖ in Austria allows the Kremlin to maintain links with them (a form of bilateral relations). Ties with Americans are more limited: Russian presidential advisor Sergey Glazyev’s early friendship with Lyndon LaRouche had no impact on any U.S. circles except the LaRouchians; Dugin’s connections do not go beyond fringe Alt-Right groups; and the Moscow Patriarchate’s relationship with the Christian right has been unable to transform the Christian values agenda into a genuine American pro-Russia policy.

If there are authentic strategies to reshape U.S. decision-making in Russia’s favor, they appear as shadow business ties and pro-Russian lobbying by big firms with assets in Russia rather than through the distorted lens of marginal far right groups.

## Conclusion

It is important not to conflate influence with confluence. The whole issue of assessing Russia's soft power in the West mixes two interpretations of what soft power means. The spectrum of persuasion by other means than military coercion is wide: a thin definition is to convince actors to behave in a particular way, a thicker one is to follow the trend of what is "commonsensical." Russia's positioning as the savior of Christian values belongs more to the thick than to the thin definition of soft power: Moscow does not have such an impact that it would shift public opinion in the United States or Europe and change citizens' priorities and values.

If the awakening of the American alt-right is undisputable, the reasons are deeply domestic and embedded in the U.S. social fabric. Russia is not responsible for U.S. race relations and social ills. Russia plays a third-tier role, taking advantage of this new voice, consorting with it, often trying to amplify it, but it never originated the homegrown dynamics and has no realistic influence over it. The Kremlin is a beneficiary of a confluence of narratives and visions and it would not be able to do anything if they began to disappear. Russia acts not as a societal transformer but as an echo chamber of European and American societies' own doubts and transformations.

PONARS ● NEW APPROACHES  
E U R A S I A ● TO RESEARCH AND  
● SECURITY IN EURASIA

Elliott School of  
International Affairs

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

© PONARS Eurasia 2018. The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the author. PONARS Eurasia is an international network of scholars advancing new approaches to research on security, politics, economics, and society in Russia and Eurasia. PONARS Eurasia is based at the [Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies \(IERES\)](#) at the George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs. This publication was made possible in part by a grant from Carnegie Corporation of New York. [www.ponarseurasia.org](http://www.ponarseurasia.org)