

# THE DAILY BEAST

## The Libertarian Civil War Over Ukraine

**Ron Paul's noninterventionist supporters are getting into a war of their own—against libertarians who support Ukraine.**

James Kirchick

February 12, 2015

The latest episode in the brewing Cold War between libertarians over foreign policy is set to take shape this weekend at an international student conference—with former congressman and presidential candidate Ron Paul standing at the epicenter.

Paul is scheduled to deliver a keynote address in Washington Friday evening at the [International Students for Liberty \(SFL\) Conference](#), a confab bringing together some 1,500 students from over 100 countries devoted to the principles of classical liberalism, free markets, and individual rights. But Paul's presence on the dais has provoked frustration among some members with roots in the former Soviet Union who view the Republican's statements regarding Russia with disdain.

“Unfortunately, Ron Paul is someone very respected in the West, but if you look very broadly when it comes to Ukraine and Eastern Europe, his rhetoric is pretty insulting to me as an Eastern European,” says Eglė Markevičiūtė, an international board member of SFL and former Chairwoman of the Lithuanian Liberal Youth. In response to SFL's decision to host Paul this weekend, she started an initiative with two other young libertarians—Alexandra Ivanov, a student at Stockholm University whose father is Russian, and Irena Schneider, a Russian-American—entitled, [“I am a classical liberal and I don't support Ron Paul.”](#)

Citing their experience “marching for liberty” in demonstrations against the reign of President Vladimir Putin in Moscow and St. Petersburg, the young women fault Paul—whom they call “an advocate of Russian aggression”—and his [eponymous think tank](#) for “regurgitating [Russian] propaganda” alleging that Ukraine's Maidan revolution was a “fascist coup,” that the [annexation of Crimea was legal](#), and that there are no Russian forces operating in Ukraine.

The conflict between Paul and SFL dates back to March, shortly after the Russians annexed Crimea. Paul began giving a spate of interviews on RT, the Kremlin-funded disinformation network, justifying the blatantly illegal land-grab. In response, [SFL President and co-founder Alexander McCobin](#) published a piece criticizing Paul. Establishing his non-interventionist bona fides, McCobin began by criticizing “the War on Terror and seemingly endless interventions by the US military in the Middle East and Africa over the past 12 years,” before launching into Paul for failing to recognize that “there are other aggressors in the world,” namely Russia.

“Former Congressman Ron Paul, whose views are interpreted by many as wholly representative of the libertarian movement, gets it wrong when he speaks of [Crimea’s right to secede](#),” McCobin wrote. “Make no mistake about it, Crimea was annexed by Russian military force at gunpoint and [its supposedly democratic ‘referendum’ was a farce](#). Besides a suspiciously high voter turnout without legitimate international observers, the referendum gave Crimeans only two choices—join Russia now or later.”

In response to McCobin’s article, [Paul released a fundraising letter](#) condemning the head of SFL as taking part in a “coordinated attack” against him, one in which yours truly was also alleged to be an instrumental player and that “arch-neocon” Bill Kristol had supposedly orchestrated. According to the good doctor Paul, the reason we were all attacking him was because “the American people are hearing our message, and by an increasing majority they oppose US intervention in Ukraine—and everywhere else the neocons want to bomb.”

Of course, none of us had ever advocated American military “intervention” in Ukraine, much less “bombing” it, but accusing his critics of being bloodthirsty “warmongers” is well-worn tactic of Paul and his supporters.

Indeed, in response to the demonstrably true accusation that he is pro-Putin, Paul’s defenders have trotted out the same hoary slanders against his Eastern European critics. “Never have I been called a ‘neoconservative’ as many times as this last month,” says Ivanov. “To say that to stand up for the basic principle of liberty you’re a neoconservative is not to take the debate in front of you.”

A writer for the website of Paul’s former congressional chief of staff Lew Rockwell—the man widely suspected of writing his [racist newsletters](#) and with whom Paul is still close—[labeled the young women](#) “lady skunks.”

Markevičiūtė isn’t intimidated.

“I come from Eastern Europe,” she tells me. “I can take more.”

It says something about the enduring popularity of Paul, and the sway he continues to hold over young libertarians, however, that he would be invited to speak at the International Students for Liberty Conference notwithstanding his slavish defense of Moscow and the attacks he and his think tank launched on the hosting organization’s president. According to Frederik Cyrus Roeder—a young, German libertarian activist involved with SFL (but who, for the purposes of this article, did not speak on behalf of the organization)—foreign policy in general and the Ukraine crisis in particular, is “not a priority for most people.” He notes that the millennial generation came of age in an era when foreign intervention became discredited, thanks to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and many young libertarians, by virtue of the ideology they have imbibed, “see our own governments as the worst.”

While Roeder considers himself a non-interventionist, he has a Ukrainian wife, and recognizes that “Russia’s government is worse. Some so-called libertarians struggle to differentiate between how bad a government is.” Roeder acknowledges that Paul is a huge draw for the libertarian movement, though he says that, at least as far as the question of Russia is concerned, it is “time to emancipate our ideas from what Ron Paul says.”

This latest controversy is the latest manifestation of a long-running battle between the movement's isolationist and internationalist wings. Last year, similar fissures came to light when the [CATO Institute](#) fired former Czech President Vaclav Klaus, an outspoken Russophile, as a fellow, largely over his embarrassingly pro-Putin political stances. Even for the non-interventionists at CATO, Klaus's defenses of the Russian government were too much to stomach.

As long as the Russian regime continues to pose a threat to its own people and neighbors, libertarians in Central and Eastern Europe will ask their ideological brethren in the United States to stand with them in solidarity. And if they truly believe in the universality of individual rights—a crucial component of which is that the rights of the individual precede those of the state—then American libertarians must answer the call, rather than bow before such statist notions as “privileged spheres of interest.” It is a sorry commentary on the state of the American libertarian movement that one of its most popular heroes doubles as a leading apologist for Vladimir Putin, and that the task of challenging him on this matter has been left to three young women—none of whom were born in the United States.