Russia's Global Anti-Libertarian Crusade

How Vladimir Putin's desire for domination and acceptance is scrambling American politics.

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One of the surreal twists of the past year in American politics has been the rapid realignment in attitudes toward Russia. Democrats, many of whom believe that Russian interference was key to Donald Trump's unexpected victory last November, are now the ones sounding the alarm about the Russian threat. Meanwhile, quite a few Republicans—previously the keepers of the anti-Kremlin Cold War flame—have taken to praising President Vladimir Putin as a strong leader and Moscow as an ally against radical Islam. A CNN/ORC poll in late April found that 56 percent of Republicans see Russia as either "friendly" or "an ally," up from 14 percent in 2014. Over the same period, Putin's favorable rating from Republicans in the *Economist*/YouGov poll went from 10 percent to a startling 37 percent.

The dominant narrative in the U.S. foreign policy establishment and mainstream media casts Putin as the implacable enemy of the Western liberal order—an autocratic leader at home who wants to weaken democracy abroad, using information warfare and covert activities to subvert liberal values and to promote Russia-friendly politicians and movements around the world.

In this narrative, President Donald Trump is like the French nationalist Marine Le Pen, whose failed presidential campaign this year relied heavily on loans from Russian banks with Kremlin ties: a witting or unwitting instrument of subversion, useful to Putin either as an ideological ally or as an incompetent who will strengthen Russia's hand by destabilizing American democracy.

At its extremes, the Russian subversion narrative relies on a great deal of conspiratorial thinking. It also far too easily absolves the Western political establishment of responsibility for its failures, from the defeat of European Union supporters in England's Brexit vote to Hillary Clinton's loss in last November's election. Putin makes a convenient boogeyman.

Nonetheless, there is a real Russian effort to counter American—plus NATO and E.U.—influence by supporting authoritarian nationalist movements and groups, such as Le Pen's National Front, Hungary's quasi-fascist Jobbik Party, and Greece's neo-Nazi Golden Dawn. Today's Russia is no longer just a moderately authoritarian corrupt regime trying to maintain its regional influence. Cloaked in the mantle of religious and nationalist values, the Kremlin

positions itself as a defender of tradition and sovereignty against the godless progressivism and the migrant hordes overtaking the West. It has a global propaganda machine and a network of political operatives dedicated to cultivating far-right and sometimes far-left groups in Europe and elsewhere.

Tom Palmer, vice president for international programs at the Atlas Network, has been actively involved in projects promoting liberty in ex-Communist countries since the late 1980s; he has taken to warning against a new "global anti-libertarianism." Writing for the *Cato Policy Report* last December, Palmer noted that "Putin, the pioneer in the trend toward authoritarianism, has poured hundreds of millions of dollars into promoting anti-libertarian populism across Europe and through a sophisticated global media empire, including RT and *Sputnik News*, as well as a network of internet troll factories and numerous made-to-order websites."

Slawomir Sierakowski of Warsaw's Institute for Advanced Study and Emma Ashford of the Cato Institute have also warned about the rise of an "Illiberal International" in which Russia plays a key role.

Of course, for many libertarians, the post–Cold War international order that Putin seeks to undo is itself of dubious value. For one thing, that order is based on America's role as GloboCop, which isn't very compatible with small government. For another, it enforces its own "progressive" brand of soft authoritarianism, from over-regulation of markets to restrictions on "hate speech" and other undesirable expression. Yet for all the valid criticisms of the Western liberal establishment and its foreign and domestic policies, there is little doubt that the ascendancy of hardcore far-right or far-left authoritarianism would lead to a less freedom-friendly world. And there is little doubt that right now, Russia is a driving force in this ascendancy.

The President's Rasputins

One common view is that we've re-entered a Cold War–style ideological confrontation—but that this time, in a head-turning reversal from the Communist era, Russia sees itself as leading a global traditionalist resistance. The argument is superficially persuasive but tends to confuse rhetoric with motive.

Former National Security Agency analyst John R. Schindler, that rare pundit who is vehemently critical of Clinton but also strongly believes Russian interference was instrumental to Trump's win, goes so far as to call Putin a champion of "Orthodox Jihadism."

In a post-election *New York Observer* column titled "Why Vladimir Putin Hates Us," Schindler asserts that the Russian leader's holy-war ideology sees the West as "an implacable foe" of Russia and her Orthodox faith, and Russia as a country with a special spiritual mission to fight evil. Schindler anticipates the objection that Putin, a career KGB officer under the atheist Soviet state, is an unlikely Christian zealot. But in his view, it doesn't matter what Putin or other nominally Orthodox Russians may believe in their hearts. The important thing is that Putin acts like a champion of religious nationalism on a "spiritual-cum-ideological" crusade against the decadent West. As evidence, Schindler cites a 2013 speech in which Putin deplored the rejection of "Christian values" by "many Euro-Atlantic countries," defended Russia's right to protect

traditional morality, and criticized attempts to export "extreme Western-style liberalism" worldwide. (The main example of Western decadence and liberal extremism was, of course, same-sex marriage.)

Schindler, like the Yale historian Timothy Snyder, believes that Putin takes his inspiration from the Russian philosopher Ivan Ilyin, an émigré who died in Switzerland in 1954. Putin has quoted Ilyin on several occasions, including in an address to the Duma, and he assigned one of Ilyin's books to regional governors as winter holiday reading in 2014. Onetime Kremlin propaganda chief Vladislav Surkov is also a fan.

Ilyin was an authoritarian nationalist, though late in life this was tempered by a belief in the rule of law and limits on state power. (In the 1930s, by contrast, he was openly pro-fascist.) His vision for a post-Communist Russia featured a strong government rooted in patriotic values, Orthodoxy, and national unity, run by the "single will" of a near-dictatorial ruler periodically reconfirmed by an electoral assembly. In his later years, he also saw the West as innately hostile to Russia and likely to seek its destruction. While the Ilyin passages Putin has publicly quoted have been blandly patriotic or even liberal-sounding, the elevation of this particular figure as the Kremlin's favorite political philosopher is telling.

A much weirder contender for that role is the maverick ex-academic Alexander Dugin—sometimes dubbed "Putin's Rasputin," possibly because he has the shaggy beard and crazy eyes for the part. Dugin, now 55, spent the 1990s calling for a "red-and-brown" fascism and being active in a group called the National Bolshevik Party, which is every bit as bad as it sounds. In the Putin years he has rebranded himself as a "traditionalist," started an "International Eurasian Movement," and found patrons in high political and military circles; in the late 2000s, he served as an advisor to Duma chairman Sergei Naryshkin and had top officials of the ruling party, United Russia, on his movement's advisory board.

At the core of Dugin's theory—much of it cribbed from 20th century reactionaries and proto-fascists, with an added dose of mystical apocalyptics—is the conviction that "Eurasian" Russia must lead the resistance to "Atlanticism," viewed as literally demonic in its promotion of sin and secularism. Dugin argues that human rights-based liberalism is totalitarian, since it wants to impose itself everywhere and allows no alternatives, while his traditionalism is genuinely pluralistic, since it respects all cultures, political systems, and beliefs—as long as they make no claim to universalism.

Dugin's foreign policy views do dovetail with actual Kremlin policies of the last decade, from his intense hostility to Ukrainian independence to his call for an international anti-liberal alliance. Dugin envisions a common struggle of diverse forces—nationalist, conservative Christian, Islamist, leftist—against Western norms, globalism, and liberal capitalism. That's not so far off from Russia's support for European far-right and far-left parties (in addition to the likes of Le Pen, Russia has backed Germany's Die Linke and the socialist-communist-Green Syriza coalition in Greece), diehard communist dictatorships in Cuba and North Korea (the latter of which has been hailed by "Christian traditionalist" Dugin as a brave island of independence from Western hegemony), Venezuela's socialist government, Iran's Islamic Republic, the Assad regime in Syria, and the militantly jihadist Hezbollah.

Nonetheless, Dugin's actual political influence is debatable. In 2014, he was fired from his job running the international section of the sociology department at Moscow State University, apparently because of backlash against a Facebook post in which he urged the murder of Russians sympathetic to Ukraine's cause. The Kremlin also seemed to sideline him as it scaled back its active support for the pro-Russian insurgency in Eastern Ukraine, with which Dugin was in at least occasional contact.

Dugin may be making a comeback, though. He has carried out some unofficial diplomacy between Russia and Turkey, where his Eurasian movement has a following. He is also the editor in chief and co-founder of the Russian Orthodox cable channel Tsargrad-TV, a project of God-loving tycoon Konstantin Malofeev—a Kremlin insider and an active supporter of the Illiberal International.

Does Putin believe in Dugin's bizarre metaphysical geopolitics? That's doubtful. But Dugin's ideology "is a very useful virus to let loose," says Palmer. "It's useful to the idea of a Russian state led, as they say in Russia, with a strong hand—that hand being Mr. Putin's."

The same calculus almost certainly explains the Putin circle's interest in Ilyin, whose bowdlerized ideas provide a convenient, authentically Russian foundation for the Putin regime's style of government. Likewise, Russia's current blend of nationalism and Orthodox Christianity has been a useful quasi-official ideology to fill the post-Communist void.

Still, it's quite a leap from that to the conclusion that Putin—a man with a KGB past, a crony-capitalist present, and friends like the notoriously corrupt Italian ex–Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi—is a holy warrior at heart. Even his 2013 speech lamenting Western moral decline was delivered at the Valdai Club, Russia's Davos-style annual hangout for domestic and foreign intellectual and political elites. That's an odd venue for an "Orthodox Jihadist" diatribe. And even those remarks also praised secular patriotism and religious diversity, and called for openness to "the best ideas and practices of the East and the West."

The Orange Threat

For all the anti-Western and anti-globalist animus, for all the rhetoric about Russia's unique virtues, Moscow's elites crave the West's acceptance and respect. Putin was always an authoritarian, but he started his rule in 2000 as a pro-American authoritarian. His shift to anti-Western rhetoric didn't become evident until early 2007, with his Munich speech inveighing against the U.S.-dominated global order.

Some Russia watchers, including Evan Osnos, David Remnick, and Joshua Yaffa in a March 2017 article for *The New Yorker*, trace this change in attitude to the war in Iraq. But while Putin opposed the U.S.-led invasion, his criticism was restrained and sometimes balanced by statements favorable to the U.S. position (such as his claim in early 2004 that Russian intelligence had received and shared information about Saddam Hussein's regime plotting terror attacks against Americans). Putin's turn against the West is far more likely to have been precipitated by perceived infringements on Russia's sphere of influence—especially Ukraine's Orange Revolution, which began in November 2004.

After massive demonstrations challenged the fraud-riddled election victory of President Leonid Kuchma and forced a recount, the pro-NATO Victor Yushchenko was declared the winner in January 2005. Putin, who had visited Kiev twice to show support for Kuchma, blamed these events on Western meddling. The "Orange threat"—foreign subversion disguised as grassroots demands for change—became a staple of Russian official rhetoric.

In a recent column for the independent Russian website *Grani*, the Ukrainian journalist and Radio Liberty commentator Vitaly Portnikov argued that Putin was pushed toward even more hardline anti-Western views by the Arab Spring, which he also attributed to Western subversion. (Putin, writes Portnikov, is "very typical of lower-rung chekists"—KGB agents—in his conviction that "all mass protests are always engineered and financed by someone.")

The Russian president certainly seems to have been rattled by the brutal death of the deposed Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi in October 2011, which Putin publicly blamed on NATO. (Gaddafi was killed by insurgents, but their victory followed NATO's intervention in the country's civil war.) And in late March of this year, when protests broke out across Russia in response to a video accusing Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev of corruption, Putin warned in his remarks at an international forum in Arkhangelsk that the "instrument" of anti-corruption protests "was used at the beginning of the so-called 'Arab Spring' [with] bloody consequences."

In Putin's perfect world, Russia would have an authoritarian regime that secures his own hold on power and ill-gotten wealth and treats smaller nearby countries as vassal states—while also being recognized as a major player on the world stage *and* a member of the club of free nations. These somewhat incompatible goals are reflected in Russia's schizophrenic official rhetoric, where broadsides against Western perfidy mix with declarations of partnership with the West. For all the talk of Russia's unique spiritual virtues, the Kremlin's fallback defense of questionable practices, such as arresting protesters, is that Western countries do it too. In Palmer's words, "They don't claim that what Putin has created is the best. What they claim is that nothing is better than anything else."

The goal of protecting Putin's power at home while securing a respected position on the international scene would also explain much of Russia's activity targeting the West: The aim is to win friends by moving other countries in a more pro-Russian direction. A case in point is Kremlin support for Le Pen, a Putin admirer who not only endorses the annexation of Crimea but envisions Russia as an essential part of the alliance of sovereign European nations that she would like to see take the place of NATO and the E.U.

Russian interference in the West has become the subject of fevered speculation that borders on a post-Soviet version of reds-under-the-bed panic. But there are real reasons to worry about Putin's global outreach. Kremlin-sponsored activity abroad includes not just information warfare intended to undermine the very notion of facts—weaponized postmodernism, as it were—but more literal subversion.

Earlier this year, prosecutors in Montenegro charged that a thwarted violent coup in the fall of 2016 had been engineered by two Russian military intelligence officers with the help of paramilitary Russian and Serbian nationalists. The plot, they said, included a plan to assassinate the prime minister and was intended to keep the country from joining NATO. While the charges

remain unproven so far, there is little doubt that Russia is extensively involved in the Balkans with the goal of undermining pro-Western forces.

In Macedonia, that involvement is on the side of the conservative populist supporters of former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, who have refused to accept a liberal and multi-ethnic parliamentary coalition following the results of last December's elections. Russian media outlets, such as *Sputnik News*, have been stoking the Slav majority's fears of empowering the country's Albanian minority by flogging conspiracy theories about NATO plans for "Greater Albania" and for Macedonia's dismemberment. The conflict turned bloody after the election of an Albanian speaker in late April, when about 200 right-wing protesters stormed the parliament; about 100 people, including nine lawmakers, were injured in the melee.

Less dramatic but baneful effects of Russian influence can be seen in Hungary, where the Kremlin has cultivated both the far-right Jobbik and the more moderately right-wing ruling party, Fidesz. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who has an amicable relationship with Putin and is openly skeptical of the post-Crimea sanctions, says he favors an "illiberal democracy" in which the collective good takes precedence over individual rights.

In practice, this has meant reforms that weaken the separation of powers and strengthen state controls over the media. In April, Hungary passed a law requiring non-E.U. universities that issue diplomas in Hungary to have an active campus in their home country, a measure likely to force the closure of the country's top private school, Central European University, which is headquartered in New York but has no campus in the United States. Since it's funded by George Soros, the financier and controversial philanthropist at the center of many post-communist regimes' conspiracy theories, the government's critics charge that it is being targeted on purpose—perhaps taking a page from Russia, where the Soros-backed European University in St. Petersburg closed after having its license revoked in March.

Aside from the separatist fighting in Ukraine, neither ethnic nor political conflicts in Europe are created primarily by Russia. But the Putin regime has been adept at exploiting and stoking conflicts and tensions that already exist. Those conflicts range from ethnic and political divisions to anxieties about social disruption and violence by migrants—an area where Russian media can vie with *Breitbart* in fearmongering. Between April 2016 and May of this year, *Sputnik News*ran 127 articles tagged "Refugee and Migrant Crisis in Europe."

What Is To Be Done?

What should American policy be toward Putin's Russia? The answer to that question depends, above all, on your view of America's role in the world and of how broadly America's national interest should be defined. In the wake of the Iraq War, few would defend the vision of nearly untrammeled American hegemony that some neoconservatives espoused in the early 2000s. On the other hand, you need not embrace wide-ranging American adventurism abroad to believe that we're better off in a world with more freedom-friendly countries in it.

While "democracy promotion" in countries with no homegrown liberal tradition is a project likely to remain discredited for the foreseeable future, support for genuine grassroots pro-freedom aspirations in countries that look to America for leadership is a far more complicated

matter. Ukraine, Georgia, and even the Baltic states may not be paragons of liberal capitalism today. Yet if they were bullied into a return to Russian vassalage, it would be a net loss for liberty and, arguably, for America as well.

Nonetheless, pro-Russian (or at least anti-anti-Russian) arguments have become fairly common not just among conservatives but among a contingent of libertarians, such as former Rep. Ron Paul and Antiwar.com Editorial Director Justin Raimondo. The new Republican affection for Russia is largely a matter of political polarization: Since Putin is the Democrats' boogeyman *du jour*, he can't be all bad. But quite a few conservatives also genuinely see Putin's Russia as a Christian ally against Islam, a perspective recently endorsed by Ann Coulter in a March column trollishly titled "Let's Make Russia Our Sister Country."

That view manages to ignore not only Russia's coziness with Iran but the fact that one of Putin's staunchest domestic allies, Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, runs a de facto sharia state within the Russian Federation. This spring, Kadyrov was in the news for throwing gay men in prison camps and threatening a fatwa on Russian journalists who exposed the persecution.

Meanwhile, Ron Paul–style libertarians are inclined to see Russia as a check on U.S. foreign adventurism and Russia hawks as hardcore proponents of the American imperial leviathan. "Unfortunately, there is a small contingent who fall victim to the fallacy that 'the enemy of the enemy is my friend,' and if the Kremlin is the enemy of my enemy, then it must be my friend," Palmer says.

Still, most Republicans in Washington don't share the party base's newfound affection for the Russian president: A spending bill unveiled by the Republican-controlled Congress includes at least $100 million for a Countering Russian Influence Fund, intended to support "civil society organizations and other entities" in Europe and Central Asia.

Aside from a verbal commitment to liberal democracy and the rule of law, what can Western countries do to curb Russia's anti-liberal influence without risking military conflict? Economic sanctions—particularly when they target the Russian political elite and its properties abroad, as opposed to targeting ordinary Russian consumers—can be more effective than they are often believed to be. The desire to avoid further and harsher sanctions, for example, may have helped persuade the Putin regime to abandon its territorial ambitions in eastern Ukraine and to scale down its war in that region to a simmering conflict.

The threat of stronger sanctions could be used to push for genuine enforcement of the 2014–15 Minsk agreements, which were supposed to restore Ukraine's control over the territories currently ruled by the thuggish "people's republics" of Donetsk and Luhansk. Russia's backsliding toward open contempt for those agreements was signaled in February by a decision to "temporarily" recognize identity documents issued by the two gangster statelets.

Financial support for political forces favorable to liberal democracy—in Eastern Europe, the former Soviet republics, and Russia itself—is important as well, though private organizations have a more important role to play in this than the congressional purse. It's true that foreign funding makes political and civic organizations vulnerable to charges of disloyalty, but it is often

their only feasible source of revenue in a system where most privately owned business is extensively entangled with the state and where backing dissent can bring retaliation.

Private organizations and media must also take the lead in countering Russia's information wars, since government measures against "fake news" raise inevitable and well-founded concerns about censorship.

Above all, it's important not to exaggerate the Putin regime's omnipotence. For one thing, it is running out of cash reserves, thanks not just to sanctions but to lower oil prices and other factors. That will weaken its ability to fund not only political intrigue abroad but the domestic programs that keep the population content at home.

The Kremlin's efforts to maintain its sphere of influence have been expensive: Besides the money pumped into Ukraine, Russia is saddled with massive subsidies to South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the Georgian breakaway republics it has sponsored since 2008. Its record of victories on the larger global stage has been mixed at best, with such defeats as Montenegro's admission to NATO and Le Pen's crushing loss in France. And if Russia did help elect Trump, it seems so far to have been a spectacularly bad investment. While political chaos in America may benefit Putin in some sense, the Kremlin goal of a more accommodating administration in Washington is probably more elusive than before: Very public concerns about Russian influence are likely to make the White House skittish about offering concessions to the Kremlin.

What lies ahead? Victor Davidoff, the Moscow-based founder of the human rights monitoring website IXTC.org, suspects that the Kremlin's financial difficulties will lead to less Russian influence in Eastern Europe over the next several years—including, he predicts, the electoral defeat of pro-Moscow leaders such as Hungary's Orbán.

Davidoff says he also sees new troubles for the Putin regime in the revival of the protest movement, signaled by the anti-corruption rallies in multiple cities starting March 26. Those troubles are compounded by the changing media landscape. The latest protests were sparked by a 50-minute online documentary that accused Russian prime minister and ex-president Dmitry Medvedev of large-scale graft and exposed his alleged "secret empire" of mansions, villas, vineyards, and yachts. The video garnered over 20 million views on YouTube alone in a little over a month.

"A high school student who was at a protest said, 'We don't even watch television,'" says Davidoff. "Do you see what that means? The main lever of thought control is television, but it turns out that it's bypassing the younger generation. So what are they going to do now? They've lost the internet. The trolling, none of that works. There are just too many sources of information." Even websites that have been officially banned in Russia, such as *Grani*, are easily accessible through mirror sites.

Meanwhile, an April survey by the Levada Center, a highly regarded independent polling firm, found that nearly four in 10 Russians approved of the protests. In May, only 48 percent said they would vote for Putin if the next presidential election—due in March 2018—were held now. Two years ago, that figure stood at 62 percent.

Protests and disaffected voters may not seem to pose much of a threat to Putin, given how thoroughly the Kremlin has neutralized independent political life. But disaffected business and political elites may be a force to reckon with if they feel that Putin's continued rule threatens their position. This is particularly true, argues Davidoff, if they manage to harness popular dissatisfaction to create pressure for Putin's removal.

That scenario may seem unlikely, but if recent experience has taught us anything, it is to not dismiss unlikely scenarios. Few expected Trump's victory in November; by the same token, even the more ardent Never Trumpers did not think the new administration would be so thoroughly and so quickly engulfed in Russia-related scandals.

At this point, the further development of U.S.-Russian relations is virtually impossible to predict. Trump seems to be trying to straddle a conventional Republican foreign policy (firm commitments to NATO, hawkishness in the Middle East) and friendly rapprochement with Russia (cooperation on the problems of ISIS and Syria). In actuality, he's lurching awkwardly between those two positions.

The Kremlin, for the moment, seems inclined to treat Trump as a well-intentioned hostage of the anti-Russian Washington foreign policy establishment, but it could easily adopt a more hostile stance. Meanwhile, if the Trump presidency remains a disaster zone, it could have the opposite of a domino effect elsewhere, deterring the populist uprisings Russia favors: The Trump factor probably helped defeat Le Pen in France.

For both Putin and the Illiberal International, the future is far from guaranteed.