

POLICY PAPER

**European Populism Feels
at Home in Moscow: the
Italian Case**


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Policy Paper


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Italian Case**

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Introduction

With the recent rise of tensions in the Azov Sea, Russia-EU relations seem to have reached a new low after the Salisbury attack. However, some European political parties, and notably the so-called populist movements, have often called for a sanction lift or a review and for an increased dialogue with Moscow. While the escalation of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine seems to have resulted in a temporary consolidation of the European front, it is reasonable to think that we will not have to wait long before new pro-Russian stances will surface again.

On December 13, 2018, the summit of the European Council did not consider further sanctions against Russia¹. The expected rollover of existing sanctions without any increase and the debates around this decision reveal a lack of consensus on the matter within the European Union. While no member country has expressed the will to veto an extension of sanctions yet, some begin to wonder if it may not be only a matter of time.

More importantly, it is becoming increasingly necessary to understand what the motivations of the populist parties of Europe in aligning with Russia are, and which consequences it may produce on the future of the European Union. Russia's lobby campaign in Western Europe has been defined as an extension of his hybrid warfare. However, it must be noted that Moscow did not have to break down the door or even knock it to get into Europe; rather, it found the door already open and was invited in with loud and clear calls.

Russia and the rise of populist movements in Europe

Populist movements and parties in Europe do not necessarily subscribe to a single political line. They are positioned on different fringes of the political spectrum, although mostly at the extremes, and can present widely varied characteristics. Surprisingly, however, they seem to converge on their stance towards Moscow, often adopting a more sympathetic position compared to the European official line. While most leaders of populist parties recognise the relevance of the sanctions introduced in 2014 to penalize Russia for the illegal annexation of Crimea, they are also inclined to adopt a double approach, favouring open dialogue over antagonization.

This is the case, for instance, of Austrian Chancellor Kurz. During his fourth meeting in a year with Putin, Kurz stated that “especially with neighbours with whom there are tensions, there is a need for a good dialogue²”. And again, the same language can be often found in Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban's declarations, as last year he lamented “a strong anti-Russian atmosphere” in the West and stated that it would be “hard to foresee global economic prosperity without Russia³”.

Russia is not responsible for the emergence of populism in the European Union. Rather, the rise of popular movements is often attributed to economic distress, public opposition to mass immigration and cultural liberalization, and perceived surrender of national sovereignty. It is in this context that Moscow was able to present itself as the defender of more conservative and patriotic values. In turn, these European “allies” became instrumental in order to validate and legitimize its own policies and spread further its disinformation campaign, both at home and abroad. As relations with the West have deteriorated, Russia must be taking into considerations all the elements at its disposal to shift Europe's domestic debates from within.

¹ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/no-new-sanctions-on-russia-at-eu-summit-over-azov-sea/>

² <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/austrian-chancellor-kurz-visits-russia/>

³ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/eus-orban-and-ally-putin-cement-closer-ties/>

The origins for the rise of populist movements also explain the fascination with presenting Russian President Vladimir Putin as a strongman and as the defender of traditional and patriotic values, which also seems to be a common feature of these movements. Often feeding off people's fears of chaos and uncertainty, it is no wonder that such parties express admiration for the kind of strong leadership that their voters ask for. In light of this, it is hardly surprising to hear declarations such as those expressed by National Front leader Marine Le Pen, who was reported saying: "I have a certain admiration for the man. He proposes a patriotic economic model, radically different than what the Americans are imposing on us."⁴

Finally, it is interesting to observe that when the ties between European populist movements and the Russian Federation first came to the attention of the public, popular parties mostly represented fringe positions in the political arena. Nowadays, this kind of ties link Russia directly with the leaderships of some EU member states. Even opposition parties such as U.K. Independence Party and France's National Front can now count on much greater numbers at the polls. This evolution should be carefully taken into consideration, especially with a view to the 2019 European Elections.

The anti-sanctions bloc

The main complaint from representatives of different member states revolve around the economic impact of sanctions against Russia and the Russian countersanctions at the national level. Italian Minister of Interior Matteo Salvini has called them a "social, cultural, and economic madness"⁵, while a number of countries lamented billions of losses, either from sanctions against Russia or the countermeasures against the European Union.

Just days before Putin's visit to Austria, for instance, vice-chancellor and FPÖ leader Heinz-Christian Strache, called for a definitive end to "these exasperating sanctions" in order to "normalize political and economic relations with Russia"⁶. While Austria's coalition government reassured that it would not break the European ranks towards sanctions, Chancellor Sebastian Kurz also called for increased dialogue, noting after talks with Putin that "to go forward together one with the other is better than one against the other."⁷

Establishing the true impact of sanctions has proved to be difficult, thus allowing the debate to continue without a definitive answer. Most studies on the matter seem to agree on the fact that, while European exports towards Russia have declined in recent years, the main factor for the economic loss was not the imposition of sanctions, but rather the "contraction in demand in Russia and substantial depreciation of the Ruble"⁸. In light also of the partial re-direction of both countries' export fluxes, the debate around sanctions appear to increasingly revolve around purely political agendas.

This seems to be proven by the fact that the top 5 countries most affected by the decrease in export to Russia from 2014 to 2017 – in the order Lithuania, Estonia, Finland, Slovakia and Latvia – have expressed no intention to lift the sanctions⁹. On the contrary, the Baltic countries have firmly asked

⁴ <https://www.thelocal.fr/20140905/le-pen-says-she-admires-vladimir-putin>

⁵ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/salvini-at-home-in-moscow-denounces-eu-sanctions-on-russia/>

⁶ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-austria-russia/austrian-far-right-leader-wants-eus-russian-sanctions-ended-idUSKCN1IZ09B>

⁷ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/in-austria-putin-calls-for-lifting-sanctions-kurz-sticks-by-eu-position/>

⁸ <https://helda.helsinki.fi/bof/bitstream/handle/123456789/15510/bpb0418.pdf?sequence=1>

⁹ <http://neweurope.org.ua/en/analytics/hto-pershyj-yaki-krayiny-navazhatsya-porushyty-yednist-yevropejskogo-soyuzu-shhodo-sanktsij-proty-rosiyi/>

for further economic measures against Russia after the escalation of tensions in the Azov Sea¹⁰. This seems to imply that these measures are being debated more on political and strategic grounds than on economic ones.

Europe's pain is Russia's gain

While on their own these EU member states do not represent crucial partners in the Russian foreign policy strategy, the general climate across the continent is certainly appreciated in Moscow. The agendas seem to align on more than one common cause, in a way that the Russian Federation is more than capable of exploiting, using key vulnerabilities in European politics in its favour.

An important component of populist parties, in fact, is their identification as anti-establishment movements challenging the mainstream European and global order, often adopting anti-NATO and anti-US stances. Some of them, like the National Front in France, openly oppose the European project, while others are critical or at least suspicious of it (for instance, Alternative for Germany or Podemos in Spain). Finally, some populist movements take a more anti-capitalist and anti-NATO approach, such as the Czech Communist Party. Even when not openly supporting Russia's policies, this overlap of interests is thus still furthering the Russian agenda indirectly.

For Russia, this auspicious alignment is a matter of legitimacy, both at home and abroad. Internally, Russia can demonstrate to maintain strong ties with Europe despite the sanctions, and to have the support of European leaders on its policies. This was the case, for instance, of former Italian Premier Silvio Berlusconi's visit to Crimea in 2015¹¹, instrumentalized by Moscow (together with a visit by several French parliamentarians during the same year) in an attempt to win international recognition for the illegal annexation.

Legitimacy is now becoming even more relevant for Putin, as polls show that Russian are increasingly concerned about Western sanctions (13% more of concerned respondents in comparison with April 2018) and international isolation (concerned respondents have grown from 29 to 43 percent in the last six months)¹². The majority of respondents does not profess concerned about Russia's situation, but the growing numbers are a reality to take into consideration.

Externally, Russia is able to influence, or even shift, the European political discourse in its favour. Several European leaders have, in the past, being hosted on Russia Today or Sputnik, propagating anti-establishment and anti-globalization narratives that, in Russia, quickly become anti-Western as well.

Country focus: Italy-Russia relations

The last Eurobarometer survey¹³, measuring public attitudes to the EU across all member states, shows a record high of 68 percent of people stating that their country has benefitted from European membership, and 62% of respondents consider their country's membership a positive thing.

By contrast, Italy is the Member state showing the least amount of support for EU membership with only 44 percent stating that they would vote to remain in the EU if a referendum was held. Moreover, 72 percent of respondents believing that their voice is not heard at EU level. Italy is also the Member

¹⁰ <https://www.vocaleurope.eu/no-option-left-in-the-azov-sea-the-eu-is-all-talk-and-no-action/>

¹¹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-russia-crimea/italys-berlusconi-rubs-shoulders-with-putin-in-crimea-idUSKCN0RB1V420150911>

¹² <https://www.levada.ru/en/2018/12/07/sactions/>

¹³ <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/en/be-heard/eurobarometer/parlemeter-2018-taking-up-the-challenge>

state most concerned with issues of immigration, with 33 percent of people believing that this should be the first issue discussed during the electoral campaign for the next European elections (against a EU27 average of 17%).

In light of the trends mentioned above, it should come with no surprise that the Italian coalition government has apparently taken the lead within Europe in promoting dialogue and strategic partnership with Russia. The country seems to present all the features that represent a vulnerability to European unity, from popular opposition to mass migration, to anti-European feeling, to a leadership crisis.

Moreover, Italy is looking for its own space in the international arena. Having long lost its geopolitical relevance, the country feels now relegated to the periphery of a German-centric EU and lost in a Mediterranean Sea of chaos. In such context, the Italian leadership is looking outside of Europe for the adoption of strong leadership models. And far from being a new alliance, this cooperation feels like a meeting between old friends.

Old ties

Despite belonging to opposing sides during the Cold War, Italy and Russia managed to establish and maintain good trade and political relations immediately following the Second World War. Domestically, a strong Communist Party certainly influenced Italy's marginal position during the Cold War, while both center-left and center-right governments were interested in business and energy deals.

Suffice to say that half of the industrial equipment imported in the Soviet Union during the 1960s came from Italy. Further proof of this strong relationship is the Russian city named after Togliatti, leader of the Italian Communist Party, where automobile manufacturer Fiat built a massive car plant.

The relation between the two countries further intensified in recent years, with personal ties adding to the complexity of the picture, especially considering the long-term friendship between former Italian Premier Silvio Berlusconi and Russian President Vladimir Putin. Through the year, the two were often reported socializing, and Berlusconi was one of the few Western leaders to visit Crimea¹⁴.

Energy dependence

Beyond the long-standing political ties, Italy has also been careful in protecting its interests in the energy sphere. The two countries have long been interdependent, and for many the energy sector is the key to understand this partnership. Russia is, in fact, the first gas provider on the Italian market, representing 43 percent of imports in 2017¹⁵. And while Russia maintains a few strategic alternatives, Italy may not find itself in the same situation.

The country's main diversification option was traditionally represented by the North African imports, namely Libya and Algeria¹⁶, where the precarious political situation is a constant cause for concern. It is clear that the region cannot be an alternative in terms of energy security, even when taking into consideration the deepening of the political crisis between Russia and Ukraine and the consequent risk for a cuts in supply.

¹⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-russia-crimea/italys-berlusconi-rubs-shoulders-with-putin-in-crimea-idUSKCN0RB1V420150911>

¹⁵ <https://www.iai.it/it/pubblicazioni/le-relazioni-tra-italia-e-russia>

¹⁶ <http://www.newslettereuropean.eu/gas-market-future-new-italian-government/>

The energy relations between Italy and Russia have been a cause of debate at the European level. The dismissed project of the South Stream, originally conceived to bring gas from Russia across the bottom of the Black Sea from Anapa to the Bulgarian port of Varna, was deemed in violation of the Third Energy Package, adopted in 2009, which provides for the separation of management and production in gas infrastructures. The veto on the project in 2014, in conjunction with the green light to the Nord Stream 2 pipeline connecting Russia to Germany, caused frictions between the Italian government and the European institutions, often blamed to apply double standards towards the Southern country.

The debate on sanctions between Rome and Brussels

Considering the importance of the bilateral exchange between Italy and Russia, it comes with no surprise that sanctions against the former represent a heavily debated issue around the economic implications of sanctions and countersanctions. Agricultural organization Coldiretti recently issued a statement in which it lamented a loss of more than a billion in exports of Italian agri-food products. Coldiretti also notes that, in addition to direct loss in exports, the countersanction regime has caused a damage of the “Made in Italy” image, with the appearance of “Italian-sounding” imitation products on the Russian market¹⁷.

However, just like at the European level, the actual impact of the sanctions and countersanctions is hard to measure. For Italy, the loss in agro-food exports in comparison with 2013 is almost 28% (equal to around EUR 301 million)¹⁸. However, this decline cannot be attributed solely on the countersanction regime. Other factors should be taken into consideration, such as the impact of the economic crisis, of the 2015 fall of oil prices, and of the devaluation of the Ruble on the spending capacity of the Russian market¹⁹. Moreover, 2017 has seen a growth in both Italian export and investments in Russia²⁰.

Despite the heated debates, both on economic and political grounds, it is highly unlikely that Italy’s opposition to sanctions against Russia will translate in a veto at the European level. Salvini has talked about this option as a “trump card”, with a single chance to play it²¹. And in this respect, he noted that Italy is involved with Brussels on other battles, from EU budget, to Italy’s own budget, to immigration reform. Whatever will be assessed as the highest interest in the Italian agenda will be prioritized; a sanctions lift is unlikely to prevail.

In search of an (external) strong leadership

Combing back to the present, Italian Premier Giuseppe Conte called for an opening towards Russia during his maiden speech to the Parliament in June 2018, praising the consolidation of the country’s international roles in recent years and promising the promotion of “a review of the sanctions system”²². Earlier this year, 5 Stars Movement founder Beppe Grillo stated in an interview that Putin

¹⁷ http://www.ansa.it/canale_terraegusto/notizie/mondo_agricolo/2018/11/28/coldiretti-le-sanzioni-alla-russia-sono-costate-1-miliardo-allitalia_6a704164-0c8c-44bc-8445-10acb07a74f8.html

¹⁸ <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/mondo/2018-05-24/sanzioni-e-crisi-russa-costano-all-export-alimentare-italiano-28percento-193508.shtml?uuid=AEUJytE>

¹⁹ <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/nuove-sanzioni-alla-russia-export-italiano-altalena-20429>

²⁰ <https://www.iai.it/it/pubblicazioni/le-relazioni-tra-italia-e-russia>

²¹ http://www.ansa.it/english/news/politics/2018/10/17/russia-sanctions-madness-says-salvini_a6f2bd66-3402-4c00-aab9-5fa00b7a3757.html

²² <https://www.euractiv.com/section/elections/news/new-italian-prime-minister-takes-aim-at-migrants-austerity-in-maiden-speech>

is a man with “clear ideas”, adding that “Russia wants to make commerce, not war. Anti-Putinism costs us billions in sanctions”²³.

His debut speech matched well with the proclaimed intentions towards Russia of both parties in the government coalition. Matteo Salvini, head of the League party and now Minister of Interior, had visited Moscow in 2017 in order to sign a cooperation agreement (which also included information sharing with United Russia) and, during his most recent visit, has remarked how he felt at home there, more so than in other European countries²⁴. These visits mark the specific intention of both countries to maintain both formal and informal ties for the future.

As previously mentioned, a bloc of European leaders is frequently advocating for dialogue over antagonism with respect to EU-Russia relations. In this regard, the Italian administration seems to have taken the lead, even in the few months since the formation of the current government. Italian Premier Giuseppe Conte does not shy away from openly calling Russia “a strategic partner”, using a terminology that many experts in Europe would once have considered definitely outdated. Moreover, Conte acknowledged the “special attention” he dedicates to this country and justified his recent visit by expressing Italy’s “constant willingness to engage in dialogue.”²⁵

Recommendations: What should Europe do?

Recognizing the problem is the first step to solve it

Dealing with domestic populism is a challenge for all European leaders, as it makes the Union more influenceable and vulnerable to both external and internal threats to its stability. While Russia cannot be considered responsible for the rise of this type of parties and movements, it has been able to utilize such internal vulnerabilities to its advantage, and this is not expected to change in the near future.

Admitting to this problem and recognizing in a more systematic and comprehensive way these points of internal vulnerability is a first step towards a united Europe, able to quickly adapt to the ever-changing challenges that arise during this time of rapid technological innovation.

The European Commission has already planned and started to implement a number of concrete measures to ensure greater transparency and disinformation²⁶. In addition to that, it would be important to implement programs aimed at increasing media and civic literacy, through a bottom up approach which would also have the benefit to increase the trust in the population.

Fortuitous alignment or conscious collusion?

Within the limits of democracy and the rule of law, anti-establishment parties that have taken power in recent years have every right to take positions that align with those of Russia. However, covert Russian actions in support of those movements and the conscious spread of disinformation represent a collusion and ultimately undermine the democratic basis of the European Union.

²³ <https://www.newsweek.com/giuseppe-beppe-grillo-comedian-who-nows-head-italys-five-star-movement-talks-925307>

²⁴ http://www.ansa.it/english/news/politics/2018/10/17/russia-sanctions-madness-says-salvini_a6f2bd66-3402-4c00-aab9-5fa00b7a3757.html

²⁵ http://www.ansa.it/english/news/politics/2018/10/24/in-russia-for-dialogue-conte_6fc7b141-1fbc-454d-8289-e26aafd855a9.html

²⁶ http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-18-5681_en.htm

As the level and type of Russian support to populist European movements is not transparent, European law enforcement should make a priority to detect and counter Russian cover support. Populist parties have in the past turned to Russian sources for funding, such as in the case of the National Front in France, where the lack of domestic funds led the party to look elsewhere for loans.²⁷ Even just the perception of external meddling in electoral procedures can seriously undermine the voters' confidence and put in question the legitimacy of the process, as it was the case for the Brexit campaign funding²⁸.

The results of the new Eurobarometer survey clearly demonstrate that the public fears foreign influence and cyberattacks with regards to the 2019 Parliamentary Elections. 61 percent of respondents worry that the elections may be manipulated through cyberattacks. This concern was closely followed by the worry about foreign actors and criminal groups influencing the elections (59%)²⁹.

With a view to the upcoming European elections, the right of voters to be fully informed should be guaranteed in order to preserve their trust and protect their democratic rights. Political party financing, especially from foreign sources, requires an increased transparency. It is now more urgent than ever to draw a clear line between support and collusion.

European attractiveness: a matter of communication

It is important to keep in mind that, while Russia is using all these tools to promote its interests in the continent, the emergence or actions of these movements should not be attributed to Moscow. Rather than regarding them as pawns, these parties hold an affinity in terms of ideology and values that seems to align with Putin's Russia. The rise of populist is attributed to economic distress, popular opposition to mass immigration and cultural liberalization, and the perceived surrender of national sovereignty to a distant European Union.

In this context, it has been very easy for these movements to identify a common cause with Putin's leadership, looking at him is search of a role model of unapologetic patriotism and national confidence. Such calls for a strong leadership undermine, in the mind of the European people, the importance of democratic governance, individual liberties and rule of law, favouring an authoritarian order instead.

However, the European discourse should be brought back to facts, rather than on perceived threats and fears. At the same time, the European offer needs to appear attractive again, in order to counter the popular narrative. As recently stated by Katarina Mathernova, Deputy Director General for Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement at the European Commission: "this is a time of hoaxes and disinformation, some of which has nothing to do with Russia"³⁰. Russia's disinformation strategy is nothing new in itself; it only becomes a threat within nowadays' vulnerable European society. This is why building resilience, through civic and media literacy, is so necessary.

This overall "perfect storm environment", paired with a State actor who uses old strategies with new technology, generates a toxic cocktail of information and disinformation. For the European Union, this is a challenge of communication and legitimacy. The result of the 2019 Parliamentary Elections

²⁷ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/europe-s-east/news/national-front-s-russian-loans-cause-uproar-in-european-parliament/>

²⁸ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/uk-europe/news/uk-investigates-brexit-campaign-funding-amid-speculation-of-russian-meddling/>

²⁹ http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-18-6522_en.htm

³⁰ Reported from the conference "Civil Society Under Russia's Threat: Building Resilience in Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova", held by Chatham House and European Endowment for Democracy on 12/12/2018.

will highlight how the different parties in Europe have been able to address the concerns of the citizens.

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