

The Russian party in France

Françoise Thom

"We must conquer Europe ... We only want a protectorate in Europe. We do not need to go to war for it. Soft power will suffice. We will propose to the Europeans to save them from the gays, Pussy Riot, FEMEN Europe will benefit from it. The Europeans realize that they are degenerate ... Europe hates itself and is tired of nihilism. ... Europe will enter our Eurasian Union ... We have the experience of expansion in Europe, through the use of Comintern and the infiltration of European parliaments ... finding a fifth column, propelling to power people we control, buying PR specialists with Gazprom money ... The Russian tsar or the Russian president should be a European tsar or the president of Europe." Alexander Dugin¹

Across Europe, the Kremlin has implanted influence groups which disseminate its propaganda in the media, in political circles and social networks. France is probably the country where this penetration effort has met its greatest success. The French specificity can be explained by several factors:

- A long tradition of Russophilia, sometimes spontaneous, often venal. After having offered Voltaire a luxurious fur coat, Catherine II persuaded the grateful philosopher to advertise the partition of Poland as a progressive measure since the Russian takeover of Poland amounted to the eradication of obscurantist Catholicism in this country, and the introduction of freedom of conscience.
- A numerous and ancient Russian emigration
- A long tradition of anti-Americanism.
- A strong anti-liberal tropism, in which the right and the left are converging
- A structural proximity with Russia, which is important. Economically and politically, France is a dirigist country with centralizing Jacobin inclinations, a huge public sector, and big corporations closely linked to the state. This centralized structure is easily understood by the Kremlin. This simplifies the task of identifying centres of power and decision, and therefore makes penetration and influence operations easier.
- An old collaborationist tradition, rooted in the feeling, chronic among the French, of being badly governed.

The linchpins of the Russian networks

In September 2012, Russia launched an internet television channel conceived by former National Front cadre Gilles Arnaud: ProRussia.tv. But this experiment was short lived, due to the reorganisation of Russia Today: ProRussia.tv lost its financial support in 2014 and ceased to exist. Since 2015 Kremlin propaganda is broadcast by Sputnik France, which prides itself on being "an alternative information provider." Its main role appears to be 1) to encourage the cult of everything Russian (for instance the victory in the Great Patriotic War); 2) to disseminate the Kremlin's interpretation of current events; and 3) to turn the French public against Russia's current foes: lately, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Chancellor Merkel.

The Russian government has clearly realized that society networks are important in France. Through them the Kremlin seeks to influence French public opinion and especially decision makers. Three pro-Kremlin organizations spread an expanding web across French society: the Coordinating Council of Compatriots, the Institute of Democracy and Cooperation, and especially the Franco-Russian Dialogue.

1 *Newsland*, 12 /04/14. Interview of A. Dugin on tv.russia.ru.

The French **Coordination Council of Compatriots** is a subsidiary of the International Council of Russian Compatriots established in October 2003, the Putin equivalent of the Ausland Organization (AO) created by the Nazi Party in 1931 in order to mobilize the German diasporas to serve the Reich. This network now relies on the "Russian world" (*Russkiy mir*), an organization founded in 2007, which signed a collaboration agreement with the Orthodox Church in November 2009.² The first Forum of Russian Compatriots was held in France in September 2011 at the Russian Embassy. At the 3rd Forum organized in October 2013, French citizens of Russian origin were explicitly invited by the attending representatives of the Russian authorities to become vectors of the Kremlin's policy in France.³ In France the role of the Moscow Patriarchate in the seduction of the conservative right should not be underestimated.

Since 2000 the Moscow Patriarchate has been taking over Russian Orthodox parishes formerly in the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, reportedly with the occasional help of the Russian special services. Thus after a decision of a French court in 2011, the Moscow patriarchate took control of the Cathédrale Saint-Nicolas de Nice, in spite of the desperate resistance of the local parishioners, members of the Association culturelle orthodoxe russe de Nice (Acor) created in 1923. The Russian authorities managed to gain the support of the Nice municipality which dispatched a commission to expel from the cathedral its legitimate owners, allegedly because of "security concerns" for parishioners in this antiquated building! This raid-like operation "à la russe" took place on French territory, involving French courts and French local authorities.

The Institute of Democracy and Cooperation was designed in 2008 as a Russian counterpart of the US Freedom House. It is headed by Mrs. Natalia Narochnikskaya, a historian by training and a loyal Putin supporter. Mrs Narochnikskaya probably attracted the Russian president's attention through her fierce attacks on the "falsifiers of history"⁴. As early as 1995, she insisted that the Russian people were a divided people who had a right to reunification. Putin trusts her so much that during the presidential campaign in 2012 he dispatched her to debate in his place with his "opponents". Mrs. Narochnikskaya insists that the IDC is financed by Russian business and not by the Kremlin. But given the well-reported ties between Russia's political and business elites, and the IDC's consistent support for, and advocacy of, the Kremlin's policies and narrative, it is legitimate to view her organisation as a *de facto* public-diplomacy arm of the Russian government. Mrs Narochnikskaya is assisted by IDC's vice president, John Laughland, a British Eurosceptic Conservative and in France a regular commentator of current events, always advocating the Kremlin's line. The IDC pursues multiple objectives. First it attempts to popularize in France the major themes of Putin's propaganda (see below), to impose Putin historiography in French intellectual circles, and to identify and exploit themes which would help to sway French (and European) opinion in Moscow's favour, expanding pro-Kremlin sentiment from fringe parties to the political mainstream, especially the conservative right. The IDC regularly organizes meetings and seminars when the Kremlin wants to impose its views on a particular issue or when it chooses to exploit fractures of French society, as at the time of the adoption of the law on "gay marriage". This legalisation of same-sex marriages provoked considerable opposition from grassroots conservative movements in the so-called *Manif pour tous* ("Demo for everyone"). The Institute of Democracy

2 See Cécile Vaissié, *Les réseaux du Kremlin en France*, Ed. Les petits matins, 2016, p. 82

3 See Cécile Vaissié, *Les réseaux du Kremlin en France*, Ed. Les petits matins, 2016, p. 89-91

⁴ Those who cast doubt on the "liberation" of Eastern European states by the Red Army qualify as "falsifiers of history". See

<https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%9D%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%BE%D1%87%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%86%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%8F,%D0%9D%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%8F%D0%90%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%BA%D1%81%D0%B5%D0%B5%D0%B2%D0%BD%D0%B0>

<http://www.people.su/79047>

and Cooperation capitalized on this by promptly organizing in Paris a symposium on the defence of family values, attended by Christine Boutin (4 July 2013), the leader of the French Christian Democrat party.

In theory, **the Franco-Russian Dialogue's** mission is to promote Russian-French relations, especially in the field of economics. Since 2011, this organization has been co-directed by the "orthodox Chekist" oligarch Vladimir Yakunin⁵, the former president of the Russian Railways, and by MP Thierry Mariani, who is married to a Russian. The Honorary President is Thierry Demarest, President of the Total oil company. In reality the Franco-Russian Dialogue spends much of its time organizing a pro-Russian political lobby of French businessmen attracted by "the vast Russian market" and implementing demonstratively pro-Russian actions challenging European solidarity, such as the invitation to Paris in September 2014 of Sergei Naryshkin, the speaker of the Duma, accompanied by the EU-sanctioned MP Alexei Pushkov, and Leonid Slutsky, president of the Duma Commission for Relations with Compatriots, of the Committee for Eurasian integration and of the Russian peace Foundation; as well as sending to Russia a group of French parliamentarians in September 2014, and later, in July 2015, to Crimea. The Franco-Russian Dialogue relies on the Friendship Group France-Russie in the National Assembly. The Mariani pro-Kremlin group has just demonstrated its clout by inducing the French Parliament to adopt a resolution calling for the country's government to reject sanctions against Russia, and worse still, "to begin talks aimed at quickly lifting political sanctions against Russia altogether," including those against Russian deputies.⁶

Last but not least, the **Chamber of Commerce and Industry of France and Russia**, chaired by Emmanuel Quidet, sponsored by the oligarchs Vladimir Yakunin and Gennady Timchenko, which publishes in Russia the *Courrier de Russie*.⁷

To this must be added the role of the public relations agency G + Europe, enlisted by the Kremlin to extend its influence in Europe. The representative of this agency in France is Bernard Volker, "a key man in the propaganda of Russia in France".⁸

The pro-Putin parties in France

A number of political parties in France toe the Kremlin line. While they disagree with each other on practically every other point of politics, they are united in their support for Putin - a sign of the ideological nihilism which is now the Kremlin's hallmark in its choice of allies.

* Sovereignist Eurosceptics:

- **The National Front.** The first trip of Jean-Marie Le Pen to Moscow dates back to 1991⁹. The leader of the National Front returned to Moscow in 2003 at the invitation of Sergey Baburin, a leader of the "Communo-patriot" movement. Jean-Marie Le Pen then met Father Tikhon, Putin's confessor, and Vladimir Kryuchkov, the former head of the KGB. He returned to Moscow in June

⁵ The current of "orthodox chekists" crystallised in the Center for National Glory created in 2001, under the leadership of Vladimir Yakunin. See <http://www.iris-france.org/43337-les-raisons-du-leadership-de-vladimir-poutine/>

⁶ <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/french-national-assembly-backs-lifting-anti-russia-sanctions/567475.html>

⁷ Cécile Vaissié, *Les réseaux du Kremlin en France*, Ed. Les petits matins, 2016, p. 129

⁸ Cécile Vaissié, *Les réseaux du Kremlin en France*, Ed. Les petits matins, 2016, p. 143

⁹ See Vincent Jauvert, « Poutine et le FN : révélations sur les réseaux russes des Le Pen » *Nouvel Observateur*, 27/11/2014

2005 at the invitation of the nationalist Rodina movement. In June 2013, Marine Le Pen was received by the Moscow Duma Speaker Sergei Naryshkin. The National Front obtained a credit of EUR 9 million from a bank controlled by Russia. Aymeric Chauprade, the diplomatic advisor of Marine Le Pen at that time, encouraged contacts of the National Front with the Putin regime. Speaking in Sevastopol, Aymeric Chauprade declared on 16 March 2014, that the referendum in Crimea was a "success", as it allowed the "reunification of a historical province with the motherland"¹⁰. The National Front has announced that in case it comes to power it will withdraw France from NATO and the EU, and replace the Atlantic alliance by a Paris-Berlin-Moscow axis.

- **Debout la France**, the party of Nicolas Dupont-Aignan, a right-wing Gaullist sovereignist. Dupont Aignan addressed in the Russian parliament on 16 March 2015 : "I am here to tell you about the-great silent majority of the French people, who believes in the beautiful French-Russian relationship and refuses manipulations to sow discord between our two great nations... The European Union, which is so misnamed, bears logically, alas, an overwhelming responsibility for the mess that now stretches before us. Through lies and manipulations, the EU managed the feat of failing to reconcile the West and the East, dividing the continent into a sterile quarrel between neighbours and cousins... In spite of Brussels, France should quickly lift the sanctions and honour its word, delivering the Mistrals, these symbols of good cooperation between our two countries."¹¹

- The **Republican and Civic Movement** of Jean Pierre Chevènement, a left wing pro-Russian splinter of the Socialist Party, and a longtime sovereignist. Chevènement proposed establishing a dialogue with Nicolas Dupont-Aignan but was not followed by his party. Chevènement claims to be "a left wing Gaullist". In September 2014, he declared in an interview in *Courrier de Russie* : "There is no independence of France without a strong Russia. And Russia also needs a great friendly partner in Western Europe. Basically, there is no fundamental antagonism between Russia and France, the two countries have never been opposed." According to Chevènement, Europe and the US are the main culprits of the Ukraine crisis. The annexation of Crimea was forced on Putin by a local initiative: "The annexation of Crimea is a violation of the principle of state sovereignty. I believe that the initiatives taken by the inhabitants of Sevastopol placed Russia in front of a *fait accompli*. And Russia chose to satisfy their request of reunification, without measuring the problems that would arise, or the exploitation of this step by the partisans of a new Cold War in Europe."¹²

- The **Rally for the Independence of France** created by Paul-Marie Coûteaux, which boasts among its members Yvan Blot , co-founder of the Club de l'Horloge, a guest of Club Valdaï.

*The mainstream conservatives

More worrying is the tilting of the traditional right, with very few exceptions, in the Putin camp; for instance, the **Popular Right** of Thierry Mariani. The evolution of Nicolas Sarkozy is typical. During his election campaign in 2006-7 he was very critical of Putin. But once Gazprom announced, in July 2007, that Total would get 25% of the shares of the Shtokman deposit operating consortium, Sarkozy took a pro-Russian orientation, boosting the Franco-Russian cooperation in the field of armaments, including unwise technology transfers such as the contract for Mistral helicopter carriers signed on 17 June 2011. The head of Sarkozy's government, François Fillon, is a

10 <http://globe.blogs.nouvelobs.com/archive/2014/06/13/le-grand-frere-des-fachos-d-europe-534477.html#more>

11 <http://www.debout-la-france.fr/actualite/article/discours-de-nicolas-dupont-aignan-devant-le-parlement-russe>

12 <https://www.les-crises.fr/chevenement-il-ny-a-pas-dindependance-de-la-france-sans-une-russie-forte/>

longstanding Russophile. His first trip to the USSR was in 1986, as president of the Defence Committee of the National Assembly. He returned two years later with Chevènement, Minister of Defence.¹³

Fillon is surrounded by Russophiles: his adviser in Matignon, Jean de Boishue, has a degree in Russian; his speechwriter, Igor Mitrofanoff, is an Orthodox from a family of white Russians.¹⁴ When he was Minister of Research, Fillon inaugurated in 1994 the first company to launch Franco-Russian satellites. In September 2013, after leaving office, Fillon visited the Valdai Forum, where he advised France to act "independently" in the Syrian crisis that is, to adopt the Russian position. As for Sarkozy, he has said that the US is solely responsible for the Ukrainian conflict, repeating the Kremlin line: "The split between Europe and Russia is a tragedy. The Americans may want it, it is their right and that's their problem (...) but we do not want the resurgence of a Cold War between Europe and Russia."¹⁵

* The Left Front

Jean Luc Mélenchon, co-founder of the **Left Party**, has identical positions to those of the National Front on Russia. He also echoes the great themes of Russian propaganda.

The other targets

Infiltrating think tanks is also a priority of Moscow's policy. The Kremlin seeks less to impose on them an explicitly pro-Russian orientation than to neutralise and silence those who understand the Kremlin's objectives and oppose them. The Russians influence think tanks with the help of industrial and financial pro-Russian lobbyists, or using their society networks. Thus, the hope of being invited to Valdai, to be the guest of a Russian oligarch on a luxury cruise, can easily induce self-censorship.

The infiltration of military circles goes back to the mid-1980s. It began with the development of networks of influence in think tanks specialized in security. The Institute of Democracy and Cooperation cultivates retired officers. The Russians find numerous mouthpieces of their propaganda among those circles. For instance, General Jean Bernard Pinatel published in 2011 a book entitled *Russia, a vital alliance*. He justified the annexation of Crimea by taking the Kremlin line, "Putin only responds with a coup to another coup which took place in Ukraine with the help of the Europeans and the support of the United States ... Putin could only react to this provocation which was not the first."¹⁶ The CIDAM (Civisme Défense Armée Nation) created by former Intelligence chief Admiral Lacoste invited Alexander Dugin, the ideologist of the Eurasian Union, to a conference held on 2-5 December 2013. French officers present at this conference indulged in outspoken criticism of NATO and the United States.¹⁷

Putin propaganda and Soviet propaganda: Continuities and Innovations

13 http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/politique/francois-fillon-et-son-ami-poutine_1318016.ht

14 http://www.lesechos.fr/24/11/2010/LesEchos/20811-192-ECH_igor-mitrofanoff.htm#YJDB4w8UZmQxpj4O.99

15 http://www.lemonde.fr/europe/article/2015/02/09/crise-ukrainienne-nicolas-sarkozy-reprend-la-rhetorique-du-kremlin_4572863_3214.html

16 <http://www.geopolitique-geostrategie.fr/crimee-poutine-joue-moment-brejnev-loccident-moment-sudetes>

17 Cécile Vaissié, *Les réseaux du Kremlin en France*, Ed. Les petits matins, 2016, p. 74

Putin's propaganda is as centralized as that of the Comintern in the Soviet era. In Russia the annual meetings of the Valdai International Discussion Club, where Western targets meet mouthpieces of Russian propaganda, set the themes and interpretations which the Kremlin wishes to spread around the world.

Russian leaders use ideas as instruments or weapons, just as in Communist times. Campaign themes are put forward to improve the balance of power, either in domestic policy or in foreign policy. Kremlin propaganda uses slogans which attract large audiences, such as the campaign against gay marriage, the anti-migrant campaign, the war on terror, exactly as Comintern brandished "anti-fascism" in the 1930s, or in the 1950s the "struggle for peace".

Soviet propaganda tried to sell a positive image of the USSR. This is what hampered the Kremlin narrative because it was easy to catch it in a lie. Putin's propaganda makes little attempt to improve the image of Russia. His priority is to denigrate all that exists in the West: the political class ("all corrupt, all nonentities"), morals ("all decadent sodomites"), democracy ("Anglo-Saxon hypocrisy"), law ("idolatry of the man who forgets God", according to Patriarch Kirill), international law ("a fiction that Americans use to camouflage their hegemony"), Europe ("decadent"), the US ("doomed"). All negative events on which the media feed - Islamic terrorism, war in Ukraine, economic crisis - have a culprit: the United States and its European vassals. America is always responsible, whether it acts (the intervention in Iraq), or does not act (the evacuation of Iraq, the expansion of ISIS). As the European peoples have become spineless, worn down by eudaemonism, warrior Russia will take over European civilization. Under Moscow's leadership Europe will be able to pull out of the spiral of decadence and self-destruction in which it is engaged. This propaganda is effective because it stirs and systematizes hatred, hatred of the United States, hatred of Europe, ordinary xenophobia, and ultimately self-hatred.

One of the Kremlin's priorities is to extend to Western Europe the indifference to truth that characterizes Russian media. Under the guise of rebelling against "political correctness", against the alleged "single thought" (*pensée unique*), the Kremlin's propaganda promotes the emergence of a conformist anticonformism, of a mirror "single thought" where it is compulsory to stigmatize globalization, American hegemony, the Brussels bureaucracy, the decadent morality, islamization etc ... Russian propaganda seeks to disseminate the lawlessness that permeates post-Communist Russia: we can say and do anything. "Gopnik culture", as Cécile Vaissié calls it,¹⁸ that is, the thug culture common in Russia, seduces the West and especially the French, weary of civilization and its constraints. The character of Eduard Limonov, writer and revolutionary, refined pornographer and romantic à la d'Annunzio, fashionably leftwing while flirting with fascism, crystallises all these fantasies. The paradox of Russian propaganda is that under its slogans calling for "traditional values" its subliminal message revives the ultra-leftist utopias of the nineteen-sixties and the extreme nihilism that was fashionable at that time. Limonov is a perfect example of this ambivalence.

The effectiveness of this propaganda and of Kremlin means to censor the French media are obvious. Journalists who have understood Russia (such as Marie Jégo and Laure Mandeville) can no longer write on Russian themes and are sent by their editors to other countries. As soon as an anti-Putin article appears in a publication, it attracts a flood of complaints and insults. Entire magazines, such as *Valeurs Actuelles*, broadcast the world view favoured by Moscow.

How can one explain the Kremlin's success? Money is an obvious answer but it does not

account for such an overwhelming tide. The underlying reason is that the Kremlin uses the malaise of the post-modern man who has the feeling of bobbing around on forces beyond his control, globalization, international finance, mass migration etc... and who thinks that politics have become irrelevant because, he believes, decisions are made elsewhere. The Putin ideologues personalize this cosmic evil, give it a face: the United States (or the Brussels bureaucracy!) - and restore meaning to politics, pointing at an enemy. Conspiracy theories provide the ultimate answer: the complexity of the world disappears, everything has a simple explanation when one knows where to look.¹⁹

This action of demoralization, dumbing down and deep disorientation, conducted with persistence and floods of money, by Russian propaganda for years, reveals the ambition behind this campaign. The integration of Western Europe in the Eurasian Union wanted by Putin is conceivable only if the Europeans cease to present an alternative project to the "vertical of power" of Putin. The Kremlin wants to reformat the European consciousness, persuade the Europeans to abandon their institutions, to give up their freedoms in order to make them "Putino-compatible" by sharing the same hatreds and the same phobias as the Russian population. In France we are already very far gone in this direction. Thus, according to an aide to Fillon, "Khodorkovsky is a bandit, he plundered the coffers of Russia".²⁰ The hatred of Ukraine is surprisingly cloned from Russian media into the French right. Well-known conservative pundit Eric Zemmour indulges in imprecations about this country in tones reminiscent of Céline: "The chimera of a unified Ukraine carried by Europe is dead. Its cadaver still moves but not for long."²¹ However Zemmour can only sympathize with the pro-Russian inhabitants of Donbass: "They have no desire to cosy up to Western Europe as they see it as a decadent land, undermined by multiculturalism, insolent irreligion and militant homosexuality."²² For the former paratrooper officer Xavier Moreau, a great admirer of Putin, Ukraine is a "banana republic".²³ As we see, imported animosities are just as virulent as indigenous hatreds. adhering to the Russian party is like joining a sect: converts are ready to believe and say anything - unconditionally. They lose all critical sense, all sense of proportion, all common sense, and ultimately, all moral sense while they justify Russian behaviour whatever it may be.

An analysis of the information war conducted by the Kremlin, its themes and its main targets, can leave no doubt: it is the ability to act independently of Moscow that the Kremlin wants to destroy in Europe. For that it spreads demoralization, confusion and moral relativism, which can only lead to paralysis, in that it tries to bring under its influence the political elites and the institutions responsible for security in the target countries. **Thus we are dealing with a strategy of pre-conquest.** We should not forget for a single moment the example of Ukraine in the spring of 2014, whose state institutions, including the army and the secret services, had been so infiltrated by Russia that at the time of the Russian attack the Ukrainians realized that they had no army or security services, and it took them several months to overcome their initial paralysis. Now we see the very same structures and the very same men who hollowed the Ukrainian state and turned it into

19 See Françoise Thom, « La guerre cachée de la Russie contre l'Europe », *Politique Internationale*, n°147, printemps 2015

20 http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/politique/francois-fillon-et-son-ami-poutine_1318016.html

21 <http://www.rtl.fr/actu/international/eric-zemmour-l-ukraine-est-morte-mais-il-est-interdit-de-le-dire-7776727303>

22 <http://www.ndf.fr/poing-de-vue/11-12-2013/eric-zemmour-lukraine-lest-na-envie-sacoquiner-europe-minee-multiculturalisme-lirreligion-insolente-lhomosexualite-militante#.Vv6xkuJ97IU>

23 Cécile Vaissié, *Les réseaux du Kremlin en France*, Ed. Les petits matins, 2016, p. 322

a molehill at work in Western Europe – and their masterminds are received in triumph by French parliamentarians.