

RUSSIA'S FAR RIGHT AND FAR LEFT FRIENDS IN EUROPE

On Friday, July 11th, the Wilson Center's Global Europe program hosted a presentation by the director of the Political Capital Institute Peter Kreko on Russia's Far Right and Far Left Friends in Europe with Dieter Dettke, former Wilson Center fellow and adjunct professor at Georgetown's Center for Security Studies, moderating. Kreko's and his institute's recent research focuses on Russia's growing interest in margin parties in the European Union.



Global Europe Program

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Dieter Dettke opened the event by speaking about the growing intolerance towards minorities, including anti-Semitic and anti-Roma sentiments that constitute a continuing problem today in Europe. He argued that far left and far right parties and movements are putting a "strangle-hold on European integration", turning it into "a battle". He stated that Peter Kreko is an important speaker to hear from as he studies discrimination and prejudice in Europe and can provide the data and facts needed to address these issues.

In his introduction Peter Kreko stressed the importance of studying the far left's and far right's links to Russia. He stated that some of these parties such as: the Front National in France, Vlaams Belang in Belgium, Jobbik in Hungary, and Golden Dawn in Greece, or Die Linke in Germany, Front de gauche in France have an "open commitment" to Russia, as many far right politicians have praised Russia's actions in Ukraine and Crimea. Meetings have taken place between far right leaders and Russian "political celebrities" and advocates for the Eurasian Union. Kreko argued that these polarized leaders have shown their Pro-Russian stance in very obvious ways. They have participated as observers in the Crimean referendum, voted against the European Parliament resolution on "Priorities for EU relations with the Eastern partnership countries," and related resolutions such as the one on "Russian pressure on Eastern Partnership countries and in particular destabilization of eastern Ukraine". Putin, in return, has shown support for far right and far left parties, saying that "there are promising leaders in the EU" in reference to those who are openly against the EU, NATO, and United States.

Kreko explained that after the EU Parliamentary elections there are fourteen far right parties with seats. They have an ethnocentric ideology and aim to destabilize the EU. They range from the neo-fascist organization Golden Dawn in Greece to the very dissimilar Freedom Party in the Netherlands. Kreko argued that eight of these parties are obviously committed to Russia (such as the Front National, that received 25% of the votes and sent 23 candidates to the European Parliament at the end of May alone), meaning they have voted Pro-Russia on various issues. Only two of these fourteen parties are openly hostile to Russia, an example being the far right True Finns Party in Finland whose history with Russia explains its stance. The remaining four parties are "open" to Russia – such as Geert Wilders's Freedom party that also voted against the resolutions criticizing Russia in the EP and it has spectacularly more positive coverage in the pro-Kremlin media than before. While some of these parties see Russia only as a "neutral ally" or a political and economic partner, others are open towards creating a new Eurasian Union

with Russia. As for the far left parties, there are 21 relevant forces Europe-wide and 18 of them won seats in the European Parliament. About one-fourth of these parties are “committed”—and the rest is practically open. Overall Kreko noted a lower level of commitment from the left than the right as “they are praising Russia without having anything in return”, but the importance of these parties can grow further in the eye of the Kremlin as well.

These far right and far left parties wish to dissolve the EU because they see it as a threat to national sovereignty. It seems contradictory then that they want to side with Russia to create a Eurasian Union (Jobbik) or a “Pan-European Union” (Front National). Kreko explained that the Eurasian ideology relates closely to the “authoritarian, nationalistic, statist and orthodox values of the Russian regime”. Kreko traced the roots of this “neo-Eurasian” nationalism back to pre-1917 Tsarist Russia, and argued that this type of “old-new” nationalism embodies principles borrowed from various ideologies including fascism, Bolshevism, and Soviet expansionism. Kreko argued that this ideology appeals especially to far right parties as it runs contrary to the EU which they view as “the decadent West of filthy liberal values and practices”.

Kreko’s research found that Putin is becoming the front man of an anti-human right’s movement and he is investing in parties that are trying to “sabotage democracy in Europe”. Kreko explained that Russia’s tools towards destabilizing the EU and advancing Moscow’s ideology include supporting parties on the margins and friendly media outlets, as well as creating pseudo-civil NGOs and Think Tanks that particularly touch youth. Whether there is monetary support for fringe parties in the EU is uncertain and Kreko called for further investigation.

Kreko explained the mutual benefits of this political partnership. Far right parties in particular gain ideological support, networking, having a powerful friend like Russia. In return, the Kremlin gains diplomatic support, legitimacy from the European level for its actions, information, and friends, who spread the Eurasian ideology and destabilize the EU. According to Kreko, the United States should care about far right and far left involvement with Russia because most far right groups are Anti-American and can undermine U.S. policy interests. They could destabilize NATO by halting its expansion and setting off a “chain of mass quitting”. These parties are also against importing American Shale gas and the Transatlantic trade and Investment Partnership. Kreko also cited the rise of professionally run social media campaigns which are picking up support for the Russian narrative from youth around the globe and also aimed to recruiting volunteers for the “fight of independence” at the Crimean and Donetsk conflicts.

In his conclusion, Kreko argued for the EU to investigate the links between Russia and radical parties, and for stronger EU social media campaigns to counterbalance the Pro-Russian narrative.