



FEBRUARY 2020 | THE RETURN OF GLOBAL RUSSIA

With Friends Like These: The Kremlin's Far-Right and Populist Connections in Italy and Austria

Andrew S. Weiss

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Introduction

Russian foreign policy has been growing more assertive in regions that the Kremlin largely neglected in the years after the Cold War—most notably, the Middle East, Northeast Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Europe is another story: it has always been too important for the Kremlin to ignore. It is the historical benchmark for Moscow's great power ambitions, a vital market for Russia's hydrocarbons, and a place for Russian elites to park their families and wealth. But Europe is also a persistent and growing source of Russian insecurity. The risk of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) moving deeper into the post-Soviet space has long been the Kremlin's geopolitical obsession, and it has triggered Russian actions that have upended international norms and the post-Cold War security order. Moscow also cannot separate Europe from the threat from the United States. In the Kremlin's overly simplistic view, European security policies are always subordinate to a U.S. hegemon or simply an extension of U.S. power. Russia also tends to believe that European security is precarious enough that it sometimes wobbles in Washington's hands. That tempts Moscow to knock it loose.

Russian foreign policy activism in Europe may not be new, but it is evolving. The Kremlin's war in Ukraine shook the West in 2014, triggering sanctions and a sharp rift in Europe's relations with Vladimir Putin's regime. In response, Moscow is meddling more frequently and blatantly in the internal affairs of European states. It promotes allies wherever it finds them and seeks to keep opponents off-balance. At the same time, Europe's bruising debates over migration, populism, and the future of the European Union are pulling at the continent's divides, allowing Moscow to take advantage of these rifts. Europe's far-right, which idolizes Putin's Russia as leading the conservative vanguard against a discredited West, is flourishing in parts of this polarized political landscape. The blend of new threats and opportunities is causing Moscow to take greater risks and embrace more flamboyant policies.

To be sure, Russian foreign policy across Europe is multidimensional and multifaceted. Yet the Kremlin's relationships with Italy and Austria shine a spotlight on how Europe's domestic troubles have opened many doors for the Kremlin. At the same time, Moscow's deep political, economic, and cultural ties to Rome and Vienna are not new phenomena and stretch back to the Cold War era. The Kremlin has long capitalized on well-established and reliable ways of cultivating pro-Russian Italian and Austrian elites, even though Italy and Austria remain firmly planted in the West. The rise of far-right and populist parties in both countries has created additional openings for Moscow to exploit based on their pro-Russian rhetoric, suspicion of Brussels, and signs of corruption. Yet, in brief experiments with power, recent Italian and Austrian governments that included far-right and

populist parties demonstrated the limits of what Moscow can gain in Europe, at least for now. A better understanding of these limits can help Western policymakers and analysts avoid misperceiving or overexaggerating the extent of Russian inroads and frame more effective policy responses.

Russia and Europe: Pulling on the Seams

The Kremlin's strategic intent in Europe is widely understood. It wants to keep the continent (and the broader West) too divided and weak to threaten its security or challenge its interests, particularly its desired hegemony over post-Soviet countries.¹ If NATO and EU member states are busy fighting among themselves, as the Kremlin's thinking goes, they cannot promote regime change inside Russia, confront Moscow over its misdeeds, or absorb the post-Soviet countries on Europe's edge. Russia's national security establishment has long fixated on NATO's expansion and the risk of encirclement, but over the past decade the Kremlin has become increasingly hostile toward the EU.² EU policies to curb reliance on Russian energy, to expand outreach to the post-Soviet space, and to champion democratic norms had soured Putin on the EU long before it imposed Ukraine-related sanctions.

The Kremlin also dislikes the EU's multilateralism. It resents that Poland and the Baltics can influence Russia's relations with states like Germany and France. Moscow prefers dealing with each state on its own terms, whether in terms of commercial ties with friendly states or coercion against less friendly ones. Russia's deputy national security adviser has explained this preference for such bilateralism, arguing that European countries should work with Russia on the "basis of their own national priorities" and not as "proxies for alien interests."³ Preventing Brussels from usurping control over European states' foreign policies toward Russia is a corollary of Moscow's intent to keep Europe divided.

Natural rifts already separate European countries on the Russia issue. Centuries of history color how each European capital views Russia, and modern geography sharpens differences between existing points of view. Countries closer to Russia's borders, who spent much of the twentieth century under the Soviet yoke, often view Russia as a dissatisfied power with lingering imperial ambitions that must be confronted and contained. Moving west, European states grow more relaxed on the Russia question, with political leaders open to mollifying Russian insecurity with a tighter political and economic embrace and wary about the post-2014 direction of U.S. policy.

When the Kremlin cultivates ties to friendly European elites or pursues commercial and energy deals that benefit individual states, it widens the gap. The controversy over the Nord Stream 2 pipeline is a high-profile example.⁴ Moscow appealed to Germany's national interest by offering cheap, reliable gas and recruited European energy companies to finance the Gazprom-owned project, creating a lobby

in other states. But eastern and central European countries opposed the pipeline as a geopolitical ploy to deprive Ukraine of transit fees and to allow Moscow to cut off gas supplies to eastern Europe without damaging supplies to the west. With the pipeline's construction, the value of close, pragmatic relations with Russia becomes entrenched in some countries, while the anxiety over Moscow's influence sharpens in others.

Courting Elites: Russian Statecraft in Italy and Austria

For decades, Italy and Austria have stood out as being among the European states most open to Moscow's appeals for deeper cooperation in multiple spheres, and their elites have a long history of turning to Russia for commercial or political gain. During the Cold War, Italy was home to the largest communist party in Western Europe.⁵ The strength of domestic support for left-wing policies created political pressure on the policies of a string of Italian governments and stoked perennial concerns in the West at the height of the Cold War that the Communists would come to power and threaten NATO solidarity.

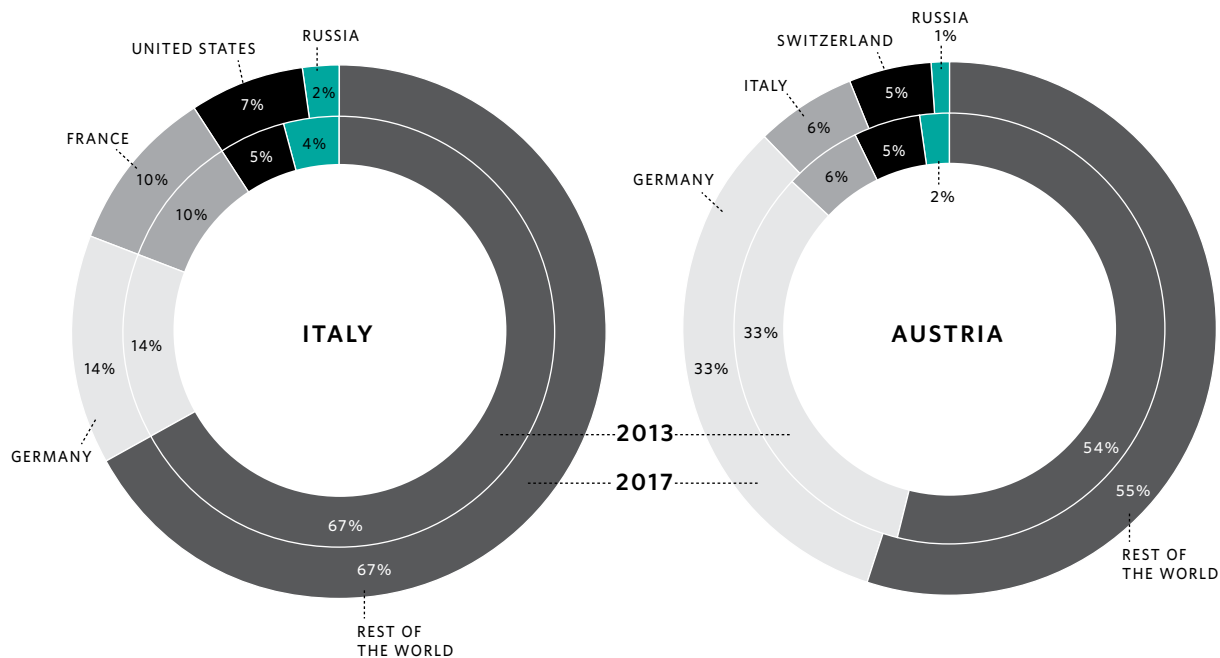
Yet it was the centrist Christian Democrats that brokered trailblazing deals with the Soviets in the 1960s. At the start of the decade, the Italian state-owned oil company ENI signed a massive oil deal with the Soviet Union, which triggered alarm in Washington.⁶ Italy became by far the largest importer of Soviet oil outside of the Communist bloc, and it delivered pipes for the Soviet Union to build new export capacity. A gas deal followed in 1969, solidifying the energy ties that remain in place today. In 1965, the Italian car company Fiat agreed to build a factory in the Soviet Union that remains Russia's largest auto production facility.⁷ Italy was a major supplier of industrial equipment to the Soviet Union and remained one of its top trading partners in Western Europe into the 1980s.⁸

Austria developed close relations with the Soviet Union as well. After a decade-long occupation, Moscow agreed to restore Austria's sovereignty as a neutral state in 1955. Neutrality became the bedrock of Vienna's foreign policy and fostered a heavily transactional approach to foreign policy.⁹ Austrian officials also occasionally flirted with unrealistic notions of their country serving in the role of mediator that were based on exaggerated perceptions of the country's geopolitical significance. Even as Austria's Cold War governments aspired to bridge East and West through dialogue, they established important economic links with the Soviet Union. Austria, like Italy, was a trailblazer when it came to Soviet energy supplies. In 1968, Austria's state-owned energy company OMV became the first Western European firm to reach an agreement on importing Soviet gas.¹⁰ Other countries soon followed suit (including Italy a year later), and Austria became a major hub for Soviet and then Russian gas exports across the continent.

After the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Italy and Austria maintained close links to the Russian Federation. Pragmatism toward Moscow is now an unchallenged foreign policy axiom for the majority of both countries' political and commercial establishments. Russia's influence is built on close ties to elites maintained through routine state visits and high-level engagement with Italian and Austrian leaders. In some cases, Putin's relationships veer toward personal friendship. His closeness to former Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi stands out, in particular, and caused Washington to suspect mutual corruption.¹¹ Putin famously danced with Austria's then foreign minister Karin Kneissl at her 2018 wedding, and once gave two puppies to former Austrian president Thomas Klestil.¹²

These are the most prominent examples, but they reflect the success of broader Russian statecraft to nurture an elite consensus in favor of closer ties to Russia. Putin once boasted that an Italian politician had told him he was the only person who could get along with both Berlusconi and his one-time political antithesis, Romano Prodi.¹³ Likewise, leaders from both Austria's dominant and rival centrist parties—the Social Democratic Party (Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs; SPÖ) and the

FIGURE 1
Italy and Austria's Trade Turnover



SOURCE: Data drawn from the World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS) database, <https://wits.worldbank.org/countrystats.aspx?lang=en>, accessed January 8, 2020.

People's Party (Österreichische Volkspartei; ÖVP)—garner plenty of attention from Moscow based on their avowed support for strong relations with Russia.¹⁴ Vienna was the first foreign capital Putin visited after his reelection in 2018, and over the years a succession of Austrian chancellors, no matter their political affiliation, have held multiple meetings with him.¹⁵ For a small country like Austria, securing high-level access in Washington is a much more difficult challenge, which increases the appeal of head of state contacts with Moscow.

The Kremlin relies on commercial links to underpin its political influence. Russia is a small-time trading partner for Italy and Austria compared to other European powers, the United States, or China (see figure 1). But such economic data show only part of the story. The Italian and Austrian economic players dealing with Russia are more important than the aggregate trade numbers might suggest.¹⁶ In both countries, the key business sectors linked to Russia have ties to the state, strong corporate lobbies, or both.

Energy is one example. Italy's ENI and Austria's OMV have partnerships with Russia's energy parastatals—Gazprom and Rosneft—and Italy and Austria are among Gazprom's biggest customers.¹⁷ In 2018, the chief executive officer of OMV estimated that 10 percent of the company's capital was invested in Russian projects; OMV is financing Gazprom's controversial Nord Stream 2 pipeline and has stakes in Russian oil and gas fields.¹⁸ Banking is another key sector. Austria's second-largest bank, Raiffeisen, for example, has remained committed to the Russian market even as most Western banks have pulled back due to the impact of sanctions and assertiveness of Russian state-owned competitors. Italian and Austrian business leaders from the energy, finance, and agriculture sectors are reliable advocates for Russian ties and are critical of sanctions. The head of Russia operations for Italy's largest bank, Intesa, for example, said in 2017 that sanctions were “illegal” and “imposed due to ideological reasons.”¹⁹

Moscow also has strengthened its ties to elites by recruiting them to work for major Russian companies. Former German chancellor Gerhard Schroeder's work for Gazprom and Nord Stream after leaving office has been heavily scrutinized. Yet far less attention has been paid to the fact that Russian companies routinely have snapped up former Austrian politicians across the political spectrum.²⁰ Former chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel, for example, previously served on the board of the Russian telecom



Gazprom Chief Executive Officer Alexei Miller and OMV Chief Executive Officer Rayner Zele at a signing ceremony on June 5, 2018, in Vienna. (Photo by MLADEN ANTONOV/AFP via Getty Images)

company MTS and now sits on the board of Lukoil. Former finance minister Hans Jörg Schelling is an adviser to Gazprom. Former chancellor Christian Kern joined the board of Russian Railways in 2019.²¹ Even though Western governments have focused on the dark arts of Russian foreign policy, including espionage, disinformation, influence operations, and cyber campaigns, in Italy and Austria, Russia's prosaic diplomatic and economic appeals to elites and national interests often gain the most traction.

Moscow's Far-Right Fellow Travelers

Western anxiety about Russian influence in Italy and Austria has grown with the rise of the far-right in both countries. Moscow's cultivation of far-right political actors mirrors its outreach to more traditional elites but deserves special scrutiny. Leaders of Italy's Lega party and Austria's Freedom Party (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs; FPÖ) have publicly fawned over Putin, portraying Russia as a bastion of sovereignty, identity, and cultural conservatism against the forces of liberalism destroying Europe.

Putin himself favors instruments, not ideologies; what partners can deliver is more important than what they believe. His appeal to the far-right stems in part from his own (rather insincere) pivot to conservatism in 2012–13, when his regime targeted Western-backed nongovernmental organizations, attacked the LGBTQ community, strengthened its links to the Russian Orthodox Church, and started decrying decadent liberalism. Political expedience in the face of a street protest movement inside Russia—not ideological zeal—drove this turn to the right. As Europe's migration crisis intensified, Putin pinned the blame on Western foreign policy mistakes in the Middle East and overly generous social welfare benefits at home. That message helped turn Putin into a poster child for part of the European far-right. His stated opposition to a permissive, corrupted liberalism became part and parcel of Russia's message to various European audiences.

Statements from Lega and FPÖ on Europe, NATO, and the West often align with Putin's aspirations—demonization of Brussels and an end to sanctions.²² On several of these issues, more centrist political actors share similar sentiments, but the far-right takes a more strident stance. They do not merely criticize sanctions as ineffective, for instance, but claim that Russia's annexation of Crimea was legitimate.²³ For decades, Italian and Austrian leaders on the left and right have defended engagement as the best policy to keep Moscow from being a problematic neighbor; the modern far-right argues that Russia is no problem at all.

The long-standing ties between European far-right and populist figures and Russian right-wing elites have only intensified in the past decade.²⁴ Aleksandr Dugin, an esoteric patriarch of the modern Russian right, forged connections to Italian and other European far-right intellectuals in the late 1980s and early 1990s. More recently, a younger guard of Russian conservatives, including the pro-Orthodox business leader Konstantin Malofeev, have joined Dugin in courting Europe's far-right. One of Malofeev's associates, Aleksey Komov, focuses on cultural and social issues and relationships with European and American conservatives opposed to abortion and LGBTQ rights. Komov attended the Lega congress when Matteo Salvini became the leader of the party in 2013. He also co-leads the Lombardy-Russia Cultural Association, which lauds Putin's Russia as the defender of identity, tradition, and sovereignty, alongside Salvini's pro-Russian adviser, Gianluca Savoini. In Austria, Malofeev and Dugin hosted a closed-door meeting in Vienna in May 2014 that included key representatives of Europe's far-right, including the FPÖ's Heinz-Christian Strache and the French National Front's Marion Maréchal-Le Pen. The event was intended to mobilize supporters of lessening Russia's international isolation in the wake of Crimea annexation.²⁵

The political machinations of figures like Dugin, Malofeev, and Komov in various parts of Europe raise questions about where official Russian influence begins and ends. None of them holds an official position or has a close personal relationship to Putin, but Dugin and Malofeev are close to people in various parts of Russian officialdom. Both men helped organize and finance fighters in Ukraine in 2014.²⁶ Much of their conservative activism in Europe looks independent of any Kremlin directive or control, even though it is framed by the Kremlin's wants and aligns with Russian leaders' conservative ideology. The logic here is similar to Nathaniel Reynolds's analysis of the role played by Yevgeniy Prigozhin with regard to the Internet Research Agency and the Wagner Group.²⁷ Malofeev understands that the more he can deliver for the Kremlin, the more support he will gain for his initiatives inside Russia and his own financial well-being. It is a mutually beneficial arrangement: the regime can tap him and his network in Europe for off-the-books activities if needed.

Moscow began to strongly court Europe's far-right in official channels in 2014. Expedience explains the shift, and luck helped sustain it. Russia's seizure of Crimea and covert war in eastern Ukraine—including its responsibility for shooting down a civilian airliner, Malaysia Airlines Flight 17—triggered unexpected transatlantic unity to punish Russia. A joint U.S.-EU push for sectoral sanctions went far beyond what Putin likely expected was possible at the dawn of the war. Even European leaders known for being pragmatists on Russia, especially German Chancellor Angela Merkel, grew colder to Moscow. Meanwhile, NATO pivoted to focus more on the Russia threat, and the EU cemented a free-trade agreement with Ukraine. Putin was staring at a Europe that was decidedly more unified and far less friendly to Moscow.

The Italian and Austrian far-right, however, provided an oasis of pro-Russian sentiment. These political figures energetically condemned sanctions, supported Moscow's annexation of Crimea, and denounced the EU, NATO, and other Western institutions. Lega and the FPÖ had little power in 2014, but Moscow elevated their voices as evidence of European support. By the end of the year, Russian officials had hosted Lega members in Crimea, Putin had met with Salvini in Moscow, and Russian state-owned media were lavishing attention on sympathetic Italian and Austrian far-right figures who lamented the West's anti-Russian policies.²⁸ Formal cooperation agreements between Russia's ruling United Russia party and both Lega and the FPÖ soon followed.²⁹ If Russia could not break Europe's official position, it could at least chip away at the EU's carefully constructed image of solidarity against Moscow.



Then deputy prime minister and minister of interior Matteo Salvini at the annual meeting of Confindustria Russia on October 17, 2018, in Moscow. (Photo by Mikhail Svetlov/Getty Images)

Moscow's embrace of Lega and the FPÖ was fortuitous. Until that point, both parties had been politically marginal: Lega secured less than 5 percent of the national vote in Italy's 2013 general election, and even the somewhat more successful FPÖ had not been in a governing coalition since the early 2000s during the era of Jorg Haider, who was widely viewed as a Nazi sympathizer. However, by 2017, both parties began to have more success at the polls.³⁰ Yet it was their antiestablishment and anti-immigration messages, rather than their public support for Russia, that boosted their popularity, amid growing frustration with elites and Europe's immigration crisis.

Both parties came to power in a six-month period in 2017–18, joining forces with other political leaders with pro-Russian views. First, the young, charismatic leader of Austria's center-right ÖVP, Sebastian Kurz, became prime minister and made the controversial decision to make the FPÖ a junior partner in his coalition after it finished a close third in the polls.³¹ Pushed to the right by the FPÖ's rise, Kurz took a harder line on immigration and advocated closer ties with Russia.³² (As noted above, Kurz's view on the latter topic was hardly a nonmainstream position). A few months later, Lega won nearly a fifth of the Italian vote.³³ It joined with the antiestablishment Five Star Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle), which also has pro-Russian voices, in a ruling coalition.

In power, both the Italian and Austrian far-right showed an openness to corruption that Russia could exploit. The Kremlin's financial ties to far-right and populist parties and politicians elsewhere in Europe, including in France and Germany, are well documented.³⁴ In Austria, the Kurz-led coalition government collapsed after a leaked tape showed the leader of the FPÖ discussing shady deals—and

taking over media for friendly coverage—with a woman he believed was the relative of a Russian business magnate. Investigative reporting and a leaked tape also showed that representatives from Lega had spoken with Russian officials to obtain illicit financing for the party, skimmed from a corrupt oil deal.³⁵ No quid pro quo is explicitly laid out in the discussions, but in the transcript Salvini’s adviser Savoini makes clear that Lega and the Kremlin have a common agenda.

Neither coalition lasted long; both had collapsed by fall 2019. Yet this time in power, however short, deserves a closer look. To what extent did Austria and Italy radically deviate from well-established policies toward Moscow after overtly pro-Russian, far-right forces came to power? What did Moscow gain from these coalitions, and what does this period tell us about the limits of Russian influence?

Russia and the Far-Right in Power

Was the Kremlin pleased by the return on the modest investment it made with far-right and populist political actors in Italy and Austria? The answer depends on precisely what senior officials in Moscow expected that either coalition government might realistically deliver.

To be sure, the rise of figures like Salvini contributed a great deal to the policymaking paralysis and distracting domestic political challenges that have sapped the effectiveness of the EU over the past decade. Both Lega and its Five Star coalition partners were happy to spar with France’s Emmanuel Macron, for instance, as they played to their base on migration and other issues. Salvini called Macron a “terrible president,” and then deputy prime minister Luigi Di Maio thumbed his nose at him by visiting the antigovernment yellow vest (*gilets jaunes*) protesters in Paris.³⁶ (Di Maio, a member of Five Star, is now Italy’s foreign minister.) The coalition under Kurz in Austria was less hostile, but the mere presence of the FPÖ stoked wariness from Western partners leery of its ties to Russia and far-right extremists. After an FPÖ figure serving as Austria’s minister of interior launched a raid on the country’s internal intelligence service for suspicion of misuse of office, several states stopped sharing intelligence with Austria.³⁷

Yet the European project’s current doldrums are hardly a made-in-Russia phenomenon. And it would be misleading to view the rise of these populist forces largely through a Russia-centric lens. Rather, this period of tremendous political volatility, fragmentation, and disintegration has much broader roots in the 2008 global financial crisis and the 2015–16 refugee crisis. On a deeper level, the rise of rightist populism is mainly a response to the disruptive effects of globalization. As Heather Grabbe and Stefan Lehne have warned, the rise of euroskeptic and so-called sovereigntist voices is part of a fundamental reordering of Europe’s post–World War II political order: “The grand coalition of

center-right and center-left parties that has dominated the EU for decades is losing power. Its strategy of keeping the radicals at the edge of the system is unsustainable.”³⁸ It is also worth noting that this unprecedented pressure on traditional parties does not always translate into political advantages for populists and nationalists, as illustrated by the rise of Emmanuel Macron and the centrist *En Marche!* party in France and the surge in support for Germany’s Green Party.

At present, the leadership of the EU is consumed by seemingly intractable disputes over migration, financial and budgetary matters, and respect for democratic norms and institutions, among other issues. Italy and Austria have, to varying degrees, an important stake in these intra-European squabbles. Even if these quarrels do not directly bear on major Russia-related policy issues such as the future of the sanctions regime, the resulting level of acrimony and dysfunction helps keep Russia out of the line of fire and undermines the unity and cohesiveness of European institutions. Similarly, such internal instability also strengthens perceptions that the EU is simply not equipped to manage the biggest policy issues of the day, which helps validate much of the criticism leveled at it by populist and nationalist opponents.

Still, there is a broad awareness in both Russia and among major EU member countries that at the end of the day Italy and Austria will not break EU consensus on what are widely viewed as ancillary matters. It is one thing for politicians to pay lip service to the harm that has been caused by the sanctions and to make sympathetic noises when engaging with Russian officials; it is another thing entirely to provoke the ire of Germany and top European Commission economic policymakers. These risks were on display in the running debate between the previous Italian government and the commission over Rome’s flouting of EU deficit rules and staggering public debt levels and the mid-2019 threat of EU disciplinary action in the form of multibillion-dollar fines.

The sanctions issue is perhaps the single most important test case. At the Italian government’s first cabinet meeting in June 2018, Salvini threatened publicly that Italy might veto the next six-month rollover of Russia sanctions. Yet such brave talk was not followed by precipitous action. Salvini’s scathing attacks on the sanctions regime had little effect on the actual policies of the government, which appeared to recognize fully that Italy could take such a dramatic move exactly once—and then face the consequences. More sober minds in Italy’s political establishment, financial services industry, civil service, and diplomatic corps understood all too well that the impact on issues of much greater importance such as the long-running battle with Brussels over the state of the country’s public finances could be severe. In such circumstances, going to the mat for a country like Russia—currently eleventh on the list of Italy’s top trading partners—hardly makes sense.

If anything, it is clear that Salvini’s stance on sanctions was less about challenging Brussels head-on over a major foreign policy issue than a means of energizing Lega’s political base. That base is closely connected to the small and medium enterprise sector in northern Italy, a part of the economy that

has been hit hard by the country's chronic low economic growth, poor competitiveness, and sluggish exports. Small and medium enterprises and their supporting politicians in the north have embraced a self-serving narrative that sanctions are a major driver of the current difficulties, and have placed their faith in Lega to bring about a change in policy. Yet the reality is that much of the post-2015 drop in Italian exports to Russia in 2015 was caused by ruble devaluation, not the sanctions. Total exports to Russia in 2017 declined by 34.1 percent compared with 2013; the ruble was down by 47.8 percent over the same period. The hardest hit sectors were machinery (down 31.8 percent), footwear and headwear (down 26.7 percent), and foodstuffs (down 19.6 percent).³⁹

In the end, neither Italy nor Austria lifted a finger to derail the biannual renewals of EU economic sanctions against Russia. Italian and Austrian diplomats rather conspicuously declined the opportunity to become the champions of an antisandictions constituency inside the EU whose numbers have grown steadily over time and now include member countries such as Cyprus, Greece, Hungary, Malta, Portugal, and Spain. Somewhat paradoxically, EU decisionmaking on sanctions rollovers has become increasingly routine even as intra-EU divisions on Russian policy have hardened over the past two years. Upholding EU unity on sanctions has become an easy way of avoiding a far more difficult conversation about the impact of the current policy, the pathways for overcoming the EU's sharp internal divisions on Russia, or the practical conditions under which it might become possible to launch a midcourse correction. To be sure, the divergence between the EU's advocates of a return to more business as usual with Moscow such as France's Macron and more hardline countries in Central Europe and the Nordic region is becoming harder to paper over.

In any event, neither Italy nor Austria spent major political capital to support Russia or to broker new initiatives with Moscow. With the important exception of the migration debate, Kurz proved to be cautious about challenging German leadership inside the EU or bucking the EU consensus on Russia. Apart from Austria's refusal to expel Russian intelligence operatives in response to the attempted assassination of former Russian military intelligence officer Sergei Skripal in the United Kingdom in 2018, it is difficult to find major examples of Kurz's going it alone. He stuck to familiar formulations: condemning Russian aggression in Ukraine, calling for a full-scale cease-fire in the Donbas, and pledging Austria's support for the EU sanctions regime. Kurz and Putin met four times in 2018, but Kurz was generally careful to balance each of these encounters with outreach to figures such as Ukrainian then president Petro Poroshenko and U.S. President Donald Trump.

Italy under Lega and Five Star also showed Western solidarity. Italy maintained ground troops in Latvia as part of NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence, for example, despite Moscow's opposition to NATO actions along its borders. It surely was not lost on Moscow that when Salvini traveled to Washington in June 2019, he proclaimed on Facebook, "At a time when European Union institutions are fragile and changing significantly, Italy wants to be the first, most solid, valid, credible and coherent partner for the United States."⁴⁰ For its part, the Kremlin was surprisingly outspoken about

the dim prospects for any near-term changes in Italy's transatlantic orientation. As Putin himself explained in June 2019, "We don't expect that because Italy is a disciplined participant and member of the European community, a disciplined NATO member. No changes are expected here that would lead Italy to independently make such decisions that run counter to the contemporary mainstream of the Western community."⁴¹ At the same time, it is worth recalling that the previous Italian government, led by Matteo Renzi, had a track record of playing games on issues such as EU sanctions renewals. Such diplomatic maneuvers were motivated largely by disputes over unrelated issues, such as the fate of Germany's controversial Nord Stream 2 pipeline.

It is telling that the Russian government during this period chose to prioritize pomp and circumstance. Moscow launched no major policy initiatives with Austria or Italy and did not seek to expand economic cooperation. Nor were there any indications that Moscow sought to enlist partners in either government to carry Russia's water within the EU on major issues, except on a rhetorical level, or to serve as mediators for long-standing disputes with the West. The Kremlin's approach was grounded in realism: the Russian leadership understands that any initiatives involving major policy issues will need to be hammered out first and foremost with major powers like Germany, France, and the United Kingdom.

Thus, the Kremlin opted to focus primarily on instrumentalizing its relationships with Italy and Austria to emphasize that Putin was no longer isolated diplomatically and that there are important cleavages in the Western camp. Photo ops such as Putin's inexplicable appearance at then foreign minister Kneissl's wedding were treated as major international milestones for domestic audiences and as a form of trolling of adversaries in the West. Yet for all the trappings of high-level diplomacy such as Putin's July 2019 visit to Rome, which included a meeting with Pope Francis, most of these discussions were conspicuously substance-free.

At the same time, frequent pro-Moscow posturing by Lega and Five Star Movement figures had created expectations of far more expansive changes. The parties' coalition agreement emphasized that Russia

should be perceived not as a threat but as a potentially increasingly important economic and commercial partner . . . which should be rehabilitated as a strategic interlocutor for the resolution of regional crises (Syria, Libya, Yemen). It is also necessary to refocus attention on the Southern front. . . . [I]t is the Mediterranean that involves factors of instability, such as Islamic extremism, uncontrolled migration flows, with consequent tensions between regional powers. Italy should intensify cooperation with countries committed to fight terrorism in this area.⁴²

Russia's impact on the Italian media environment is worthy of continued scrutiny. For the past several years, Russian state-owned media have played up divisive issues in Italy, as they do elsewhere in Europe. At the same time, they clearly are operating within an environment that on the whole maintains a friendly attitude toward Russia to begin with. Both Lega and Five Star have long demonstrated their aptitude for using social media platforms to engage with voters and bypass traditional media sources. The same can be said for FPÖ. These media networks giddily push false stories and portray a Europe in chaos or overrun by migrants that mesh nicely with their core political arguments.

There are also indications that Russian government-controlled media and proxies such as the Internet Research Agency have engaged in the kinds of information operations that trigger so much anxiety and dread elsewhere.⁴³ Materials from Russian state media on hot-button issues such as migration helped shape the public discourse in Italy in part because they were picked up and recirculated aggressively by Five Star- and Lega-controlled media operations in the run-up to a key constitutional referendum in December 2016 and the March 2018 general elections, according to several studies.⁴⁴ Then prime minister Renzi twice raised concerns in 2016 with former U.S. president Barack Obama and Merkel about Russian disinformation activities aimed at bolstering his political opponents.⁴⁵ In October 2016, he also made a direct plea to Putin about willful distortions being pushed by the Russian state propaganda apparatus ahead of the referendum vote.⁴⁶

Yet given that most Italians do not hold negative views toward Russia, the Kremlin has no need to go to great lengths to push pro-Russian narratives or disinformation. According to recent polling, Italians had greater confidence in Putin to do the right thing regarding world affairs than Trump (38 percent versus 32 percent).⁴⁷ Why spend money or take big risks with information operations when Russia can receive much of what it wants from Italy for free?

Policy Implications

Russia's relationships with Italy and Austria can create challenges for Washington, especially in a newly proclaimed era of great power competition. Neither country will see eye to eye with the United States on how to deal with Russia, and Moscow will be happy to emphasize and exploit any differences that emerge. But understanding Moscow's wants, its ability to appeal to Rome and Vienna, and the limits of Russian influence can help Washington deal with differences in a measured, strategic way. Such an approach would be especially timely in light of Kurz's new role as the head of a

governing coalition with the Green Party and the ever-present threat of collapse of Italy's post-Salvini coalition government led by Giuseppe Conte. Three guiding principles should shape how the United States views Italy and Austria's relations with Russia.

Do No Harm

If Russia's goal is to keep the West divided and unable to act on consensus, Washington should avoid creating and exacerbating splits. Disagreements are an unavoidable part of partnerships, and at times the United States will have to push on partners and allies to get what it wants. But such moments are best handled quietly and within the framework of a long-term, mutually beneficial relationship. The Trump administration's public chastising of allies does more harm than good. Russia often uses coercive and bullying tactics, but Washington's competitive advantage is building steady, institutionalized relationships that can survive disagreements. Some differences among Western states cannot be bridged, and Washington should be careful to manage, not exacerbate, them.

Be Realistic and Focus on What Matters

Italy and Austria will surely maintain relationships with Russia that create consternation in Washington at times. No amount of U.S. pressure is likely to change this fact. Moscow can be counted on to use high-level contacts and friendly voices in these countries to claim that it is not isolated from Europe, but most of this is political theater rather than meaningful diplomacy. The United States will expend political capital fruitlessly if it tries to force Italy and Austria to end decades of foreign policy openness toward Moscow. Ensuring a sufficiently substantive political and diplomatic engagement with Vienna and Rome is the best strategy to ensure that Washington's interests are taken into account.

The United States can accept that Rome and Vienna will take a pragmatic view of Moscow, while being clear with counterparts in both places that Russia sometimes needs to be met with decisive Western unity. Obama, for example, had to lean hard on Renzi to agree to sectoral sanctions after Russia's involvement in shooting down Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 in 2014. At the end of the day, Renzi did not want to be the lone holdout against the Americans, British, French, and Germans. At critical moments, Washington should be prepared to push hard on both Rome and Vienna.

Washington can also be flexible in responding to Russia when full European unity is elusive. Kurz, for example, condemned Moscow but was unwilling to expel Russian diplomats after the Skripal poisoning in 2016. Other EU capitals criticized Vienna's decision, which highlighted the Austrian

government's aloofness from the broader EU consensus. The United States and the United Kingdom still managed to persuade eighteen countries to expel more than 100 Russian diplomats, indicating the overall strength of support for their response.

Keep the Far-Right in Perspective

Russia will continue to build ties with the far-right, and the parties' divisiveness and apparent openness to Moscow's influence and money will be a lingering concern. Clearly, Salvini remains Italy's most popular politician and is far from defeated as a political force. Even though the FPÖ's lackluster showing in the October 2019 elections kept it out of a coalition with Kurz's ÖVP, it continues to attract support from blue-collar workers as well as voters from rural and lower-income parts of Austria.⁴⁸ Unburdened from the difficult task of governing, Salvini has continued to focus his talents on regional elections and what he does best—polarizing rhetoric, criticism of the ruling elites, and disruption.

At the same time, these parties are not Russian proxies or puppets. They have shown that they respond to national interests, domestic political concerns, coalition dynamics, and even the costs associated with breaking European unity. Their public messaging on ending sanctions largely represents cheap, feel-good political rhetoric, even though Russia is not a salient political issue that can help them win elections. It is telling that even when the Lega and FPÖ were part of governing coalitions, neither government was willing to spend major political capital in Brussels on Russia's behalf.

The analogy is imperfect, but the situation with Russia and the far-right in Europe today echoes the Soviet Union's relations with European communist parties in the 1960s and 1970s. The Eurocommunist parties received support from the Soviets as they pursued their goal of gaining power, but they often adopted positions for domestic political purposes that went against the wishes of the Soviet Union. A Central Intelligence Agency analysis from the 1970s concluded that while the Soviets could keep Eurocommunist parties synched on "marginal" issues, it was unable to do so when those parties' "vital interests" were at stake.⁴⁹

Italy and Austria remain rooted in the West, and not even the far-right is willing to challenge that foreign policy orientation. Appealing to Italian and Austrian national interests, no matter who is in power, is the prudent course for Washington. The security, economic, and political benefits that the United States and the broader West can offer are still high, and the alternatives are uncertain. The West, for all its problems and ills, still has more to offer, even for the parties that question it the most.

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Acknowledgments

The author is grateful to Nathaniel Reynolds for his innumerable contributions to this research project. Ambassador Giancarlo Aragona, Jason Horowitz, Stefan Lehne, Paolo Messa, Anton Shekhovstov, Nathalie Tocci, Christian Ultsch, Stefano Vergine, and several other Italy- and Austria-based practitioners and experts were extremely generous in sharing their insights during the preparation of this paper. Aleksandar Vladicic provided outstanding research assistance. The author bears full responsibility for any remaining errors of fact or judgment. This study was supported by a grant from the Open Society Foundations.

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