



DISINFORMATION, EUROSKEPTICISM AND PRO-RUSSIAN PARTIES IN EASTERN EUROPE

Maria Snegovaya

DISINFORMATION, EUROSKEPTICISM AND PRO-RUSSIAN PARTIES IN EASTERN EUROPE



FREE RUSSIA FOUNDATION

2021

Free Russia Foundation

Author

Maria Snegovaya

Editor-in-Chief

Anton Shekhovtsov

Proofreading

Courtney Dobson, Bluebearediting

Layout

Free Russia Designs

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	6
ANTI-EU SENTIMENT AS RUSSIA'S GEOPOLITICAL TOOL	7
CLASSIFYING PRO-RUSSIAN PARTIES	8
VULNERABLE GROUPS AND HYPOTHESIS	11
RESEARCH DESIGN	13
FINDINGS	15
CONCLUSION	19
REFERENCES	20



ABOUT AUTHOR

Maria Snegovaya

Postdoctoral Fellow at Virginia Tech (Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University), Visiting Fellow at George Washington University

ABSTRACT

What social groups support pro-Russian parties in Eastern Europe? This paper demonstrates that pro-Russian parties in Eastern Europe tend to have electorates with significantly more Euroskeptic attitudes than voter bases of mainstream parties. Importantly, support for pro-Russian parties is not related to an individual's ideological (right or left) leanings. Because of their Euroskeptic attitudes, social groups supporting pro-Russian parties are far more susceptible to disinformation and, in particular, the anti-EU narratives spread by the Kremlin. These findings explain the endorsement of pro-Russian narratives and social attitudes which are indirectly favorable to the Kremlin by political leaders whose electorates harbor anti-Western sympathies. It also sheds light on the nature of Russia's information operations that seem to be opportunistic rather than ideological in nature, but also limited in scope by the structural conditions in targeted societies.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, accumulating evidence has exposed the Kremlin's active measures campaign in Europe, which consists of a set of efforts to weaken European democracies. Active measures seek to influence the targeted society in a number of ways: espionage operations to acquire information; information operations to disseminate disinformation as well as spread and amplify information that advances a particular narrative; operations to help pro-Russian political parties that promote Russia's viewpoint and influence decision-making (Bergmann and Kenney 2017).

While the supply side of Russia's active measures (the Kremlin's goals and strategies) is well explored in scholarly literature, the demand side—the characteristics of targeted societies and vulnerable social groups that make them more susceptible to Russia's active measures—is understudied.

In Eastern Europe, reactionary impulses among certain social groups provide the opportunity for local political movements to embrace the themes intensely promoted by Russian information operations. These themes exploit grievances of social groups who have found themselves on the losing side of the post-Communist transition. For many such groups, "Europeanization" has come to be associated with the erosion of national sovereignty and the destruction of traditional social structures (Popescu and Zamfir 2018, 13). Russia has tried to collaborate with these reactionary movements and foster a Euroskeptic sentiment among their supporters (Popescu and Zamfir 2018, 13). This raises the question: what characteristics of pro-Russian party supporters make them more susceptible to such themes?

Almost all of the existing studies on the topic assume that despite differences in their ideologies and political styles, pro-Russian political parties attract supporters who share certain characteristics. However, surprisingly few studies have focused on analyzing these particular characteristics. The lack of scholarly attention to this question limits our ability to fully understand the effectiveness of Russia's information operations.

This article makes several contributions to existing scholarship. First, using existing studies on the topic and expert evaluations, I compile a list of parties that endorse pro-Russian narratives in Eastern Europe. Second, I analyze the electorates of ten such parties from seven Eastern European countries and find that voters of such parties have significantly more Euroskeptic attitudes than supporters of mainstream parties that is unrelated to their ideological (right or left) leanings.

These findings explain the endorsement of pro-Russian narratives and social attitudes which are indirectly favorable to the Kremlin by political leaders whose electorates harbor anti-Western sympathies. It also sheds light on the nature of Russia's information operations that seem to be opportunistic rather than ideological in nature, but also limited in scope by structural conditions in targeted societies.

ANTI-EU SENTIMENT AS RUSSIA'S GEOPOLITICAL TOOL

Russia deploys information operations as a soft power tool based on disinformation campaigns, propaganda, and subversion (Galeotti 2016; Snegovaya 2015). Information operations are means of conveying specific information that will predispose targets to voluntarily make a decision desired by the initiator of the action (Snegovaya 2015, 10). In the Communist period, the Soviet governments often used disinformation strategies to reinforce people's existing beliefs and fears and/or to sow divisions among targeted social groups.

In the post-Communist period, a decline in traditional forms of ideological contestation made the promotion of disinformation a more useful tool than traditional propaganda campaigns (Nye 1990; Sakwa 2012, 581). Russian disinformation manipulates internal domestic vulnerabilities and seeks to amplify existing societal fractures to achieve several related goals. First, the Kremlin seeks to prevent governments and societies from becoming increasingly integrated with the West—a block that it views as actively pursuing regime change in Russia. The aim is to draw these countries back into Moscow's sphere of influence and bring them to identify more closely with the Kremlin (Popescu and Zamfir 2018, 6). Second, the Kremlin promotes the positions and policies that are more aligned with its foreign policy interests (such as lifting the EU sanctions on Russia) in targeted countries.

The Eastern European context provides fertile ground for achieving these goals. In recent decades, these countries underwent a colossal transformation in an effort to (re-)integrate themselves into the European economic and political structures. In the run-up to negotiations for EU membership, societies and major political parties converged around pro-EU positions. In the aftermath of accession, the lifting of accession-related constraints allowed parties to adopt more nationalist and culturally conservative positions (Vachudova 2008, 862), while societal disillusionment with the experiences of "Europeanization" grew (Krastev and Holmes 2018). This dynamic was exacerbated by the 2008 global financial crisis and its fallout.

Subsequently, many social groups in counties of the region came to associate "Europeanization" with the erosion of national sovereignty, mounting pressure from Brussels for increased multiculturalism and immigration, and the destruction of traditional social structures through cultural libertarianism and economic globalization. These political trends created a "market" for narratives questioning Westernization, rejecting globalization, glorifying a mythic past golden age, and longing for the return of exclusive ethnic mythologies. In response, a growing number of political actors exploited these sentiments and challenged the fundamentals of the social contract and the liberal social order. It is not accidental that Russia has attempted to collaborate with these traditionalist conservative political movements, while simultaneously portraying itself as a protector of Christian values and civilization (Popescu and Zamfir 2018). The agendas of these groups are rarely set by the Kremlin; instead, they simply align with

Russian interests in a way that creates large inroads for destabilization efforts and only requires a “gentle” nudge to do maximum damage (Popescu and Zamfir 2018, 15). The mix of economic populism and alarmist social conservatism that supporters of such movements embrace offered multiple opportunities for the Kremlin’s information operations. Supporters of such parties are more susceptible to disinformation narratives spread by the Kremlin. Conspiracists and people more susceptible to disinformation tend to be on the “losing side” (politically, economically, and socially) of society; for them, a belief in conspiracies is often therapeutic and helps explain why certain misfortunes have occurred to them. Conspiratorial themes take away the uncomfortably random nature of life and provide a clear pattern of determination (David 2009; Sakwa 2012).

Additional social drivers of pro-Russian opinions and discussions in this region are the general feeling of “insecurity” created by the region’s historical experience of being the battleground between the East and the West and the perceived dependence of these countries on great powers and an associated feeling of inferiority. Russian disinformation builds on these sentiments by questioning the advantages of being a member of the EU and/or NATO and promoting anti-Western views not only directly, but also indirectly, via relativization, geopolitical “in-betweenness,” and “neutrality” (Pakier and Wawrzyniak 2015; Györi and Krekó 2019, 5).

Russia actively spreads narratives on related themes such as the decline of Europe, the crisis of global capitalism, and the redefinition of liberal interventionism and misguided democratization (Wilson 2015). In particular, the anti-EU narrative is designed to portray the EU as “suffering an existential crisis and being on the verge of collapse,” and as a place of moral and economic decay (Klapsis 2015; Popescu and Zamfir 2018; Rebegea 2019).¹ Europhobic or Euroskeptical themes are further encouraged through narratives about the importance of national independence, which play on public sentiment about national identity and pride, and on the negative perceptions regarding these countries’ status in the European Union. Conversely, Russia is contrasted to the EU as a force for good that opposes Western hegemony, the leader of traditional values and the only country that can stop the moral apocalypse resulting from the alleged moral decay of Western Europe (Klapsis 2015; Popescu and Zamfir 2018).

1 In Putin’s own words: “the Euro-Atlantic countries are actually rejecting their roots, including the Christian values that constitute the basis of Western civilization. They are denying moral principles and all traditional identities: national, cultural, religious and even sexual” (2013: Красные линии Владимира Путина. Президент России выступил на Валдайском форуме. Российская газета - Неделя № 216(6192). [Red lines of Vladimir Putin. The Russian President spoke at the Valdai Forum. Russian newspaper - Week # 216 (6192).] <https://rg.ru/2013/09/26/valdai.html>).

CLASSIFYING PRO-RUSSIAN PARTIES

Despite significant attention to the topic of Russia's links to political actors in Europe, most studies have focused on Western Europe, while surprisingly few attempts have been made to classify parties with pro-Russian positions in Eastern Europe.

Existing party datasets offer little help in this regard. Among the large quantitative databases, the coding of party positions on Russia or references to Russia are rare. The widely used Chapel Hill Dataset does not evaluate party positioning on Russia. The Comparative Manifesto Project dataset codes positive and negative references to Russia among parties, but there is not a single coded mention of Russia for countries outside the former Communist bloc and Greece since 1920. For the former Communist bloc and Greece, there are less than 50 positions on Russia coded for all parties since 1990 (Volkens et al. 2018; Onderco 2019).

As to qualitative studies, two attempts to classify pro-Russian parties in Eastern Europe are worth mentioning. First, Political Capital (2014) listed radical right parties with links to Russia based on their public statements and connections with the Kremlin. Second, the European Council on Foreign Relations conducted an expert survey of all 252 parties represented in the 28 national parliaments and the European Parliament to determine their ideological alignment with Russia (Gustav 2019). To compose my own list, I have relied on the data from these studies and consulted with leading experts on the topic. The resulting updated list of pro-Russian studies as of 2019 is provided in Appendix 1.

Overall, I classified 30 parties with pro-Russian rhetoric and stances in nine European countries. A quick look at the list provided in Appendix 1 reveals that these parties do not belong to one particular party family. To be precise, parties on the right side of the political spectrum tend to dominate the sample, as the list includes 18 parties belonging to right, national conservative or radical right party families. However, there are also 8 parties with pro-Russian stances belonging to social democratic or center-left party families, two radical left parties, and two parties that do not classify themselves as left or right. This corresponds with earlier quantitative studies that found little evidence that belonging to one particular European party family drives party attitudes toward Russia (Braghiroli 2015; Onderco 2019). Parties with more pro-Russian positions are found on the far left and far right ends of the political spectrum as well as among more mainstream party families (Schmitt 2017; Stéphane and Schmitt 2015).

If not their ideology, what do pro-Russian parties have in common? Important common ground that exists between the Russian government and such parties are often based on a narrative of Euroskepticism originating within Europe itself (Gressel 2017; Political Capital 2014; Braghiroli 2015; Onderco 2019). Usually, these parties disapprove of the concept of European integration, fight against Transatlanticism, and reject Western liberalism (Braghiroli and Makarychev 2016; Stéphane and Schmitt 2015). These parties commonly embrace the vision of a "Europe of banks" and a "Europe of peoples," and believe that the EU's supranational nature undermines its legitimacy (Braghiroli and Makarychev 2016). Such Euroskep-

tic messages can be combined with different ideologies (Taggart 1998), and can, therefore, be employed by parties belonging to different families. Because of their opposition to European integration, these parties view Russia as an example of a country that can be truly sovereign and independent, and as the power which could help counterbalance US influence over Europe and even achieve the gradual disassociation of their countries from Euro-Atlantic institutions (Klapisis 2015, 25).

For example, in Poland, groups with more pro-Russian attitudes are found on the far right and far left of the political spectrum. They are attracted to disinformation themes spread by the Kremlin, such as anti-German and anti-European narratives, portrayals of the West as a place of moral decay, and the promotion of traditional values. While these groups do not necessarily seek a direct partnership with Russia, the commonality of these interests makes them susceptible to the Kremlin's disinformation narratives and endorsement of pro-Russian policies (Volha and Yeliseyeu 2018). In Slovakia, pro-Russian narratives are primarily promoted by Euroskeptic nationalist parties, such as the nationalist Slovak National Party (SNS) or Kotleba-People's Party Our Slovakia (ĽSNS). Marian Kotleba, the leader of ĽSNS openly embraces pro-Russian positions and uses strong anti-EU and anti-NATO rhetoric. In 2014, during Ukraine's Euromaidan revolution, he sent a supportive letter to the then President Viktor Yanukovich and hosted members of the pro-Kremlin Night Wolves motorcycle club during his term as chairman of the Banská Bystrica region (Kandřík and Jevčák 2018, 285). In Hungary, disinformation-prone electorates are found primarily among supporters of nationalist and radical right Fidesz and Jobbik parties that share Euroskeptic attitudes (Volha and Yeliseyeu 2018). One recent study found that supporters of the ruling Fidesz party and the radical right parties Jobbik and Mi Hazánk (which split from Jobbik in 2018) are more likely to agree with anti-Western conspiracy theories and disinformation narratives such as "the United States uses the EU to control other countries (like Hungary) by imposing its will on them"; "the European liberal left seeks to destroy Christianity and nation-states in Europe" or "European NATO forces prepare for a war against Russia" (Political Capital 2018). In the Czech Republic, openly pro-Kremlin voices are present within the Euroskeptic radical left Communist Party (KSČM), as well as the Euroskeptic radical right party "Freedom and Direct Democracy" whose leader Tomio Okamura attends regular pro-Kremlin international gatherings (Győri et al. 2017; Volha and Yeliseyeu 2018).

VULNERABLE GROUPS AND HYPOTHESIS

What characteristics of pro-Russian parties' electorates make them most susceptible to disinformation narratives?

As mentioned above, pro-Russian parties tend to embrace more Euroskeptic, anti-Western rhetoric and positions. Accordingly, supporters of Euroskeptic parties (both left- and right-wing) tend to be rather Euroskeptic as well (Lubbers and Scheepers 2007; Werts, Scheepers, and Lubbers 2013; Visser et al. 2014; Ramiro 2016). Since pro-Russian parties are more likely to express Euroskeptic attitudes, one can hypothesize that their supporters are also likely to embrace these themes (Snegovaya 2021).

I, therefore, expect that:

Hypothesis I: The electoral bases of pro-Russian parties consist of individuals who are more likely to be Euroskeptic than those who vote for mainstream parties-Euroskeptic.

Second, a pro-Russian position and dissatisfaction with the pro-European status quo may be related to antiestablishment attitudes. Research has shown that those voting for antiestablishment parties and candidates tend to be distrustful of political systems in general (Swyngedouw 2001; Bélanger and Aarts 2006) and of political elites within those systems (Bergh 2004). It is likely that the politically discontented vote for antiestablishment parties because the negative attitude toward the politics of establishment parties is congruent with their own ideas (Shekhovtsov and Polyakova 2016; Rooduijn 2018). Particularly in the context of specific Eastern European experiences and disenchantment with "Europeanization," support for Euroskeptic pro-Russian parties might be explained by protest voting (Krastev and Holmes 2018; Popescu and Zamfir 2018). Some studies have shown that political distrust exerts a positive effect on voting for radical right or radical left parties (Doyle 2011; Hooghe, Marien, and Pauwels 2013), which tend to frequently embrace pro-Russian narratives.

Hence, I theorize that:

Hypothesis II: The electoral bases of pro-Russian parties are more likely to have antiestablishment attitudes than those who vote for mainstream parties.

Lower educated groups may be more susceptible to Russian disinformation. Indeed, studies have shown that, in Slovakia, for instance, typical examples of disinformation-prone groups include representatives of the lower middle class or working class with basic education (Kandřík and Jevčák 2018: 3). Less-educated electorates are more likely to embrace disinformation narratives as they are less selective about media consumption. By contrast, greater knowledge about the news media predicts a lower likelihood for conspiracy theory endorsement (Craft, Ashley, and Maksl 2017).

Therefore, I expect that:

Hypothesis III: The electoral bases of pro-Russian parties consist of individuals who are more likely to be less educated than those who vote for mainstream parties.

Ultimately, age may be another factor contributing to the susceptibility to pro-Russian narratives. Studies of the effects of disinformation have shown that older people in Eastern Europe may be more nostalgic for the Communist era, and therefore are more likely to support parties espousing pro-Russian rhetoric (Volha and Yelisyeu 2018). Older people dissatisfied with their current situations are likely to feel a sense of nostalgia for the previous regime and tend to embrace Russian disinformation narratives.

On the other hand, young people with grim socioeconomic prospects are dissatisfied with the current situation in general, more disillusioned with mainstream party politics, and are therefore prone to believe Russian propaganda as an alternative based on economic, historical, societal, ethnolinguistic or religious similarities (Jackson and Feldman 2011; Volha and Yelisyeu 2018). For related reasons, younger groups are often found among supporters of radical and populist parties (Bessant 2018).

I hypothesize that:

Hypothesis IVa: The electoral bases of pro-Russian parties consist of individuals who are more likely to include larger numbers of elderly voters than the electoral bases of mainstream parties.

Hypothesis IVb: The electoral bases of pro-Russian parties consist of individuals who are more likely to include larger numbers of young voters than the electoral bases of mainstream parties.

RESEARCH DESIGN

For my cross-country analysis, I devised a study modeled after previous research (Rooduijn 2018). The analysis is set on the individual and country levels and based on data from the European Social Survey (ESS) collected biennially since 2004 until 2018. Unfortunately, the incomplete availability of data in the ESS limited the scope of my analysis. First, some of the parties listed in Appendix 1 are relatively small and the number of their supporters in the ESS is not large enough to run statistical analysis. In addition, the data on Bulgaria and Romania is available only for the years 2006 and 2008, around the time both countries joined the EU.² Since the parties of the region tended to adopt Euroskeptic attitudes after EU accession (Vachudova 2008), I excluded those country-cases from the analysis. Also, I excluded the ethnic Russian party, Latvian Russian Union (LKS), whose pro-Russian orientation is driven by reasons unrelated to my questions of interest.

The resulting list of parties included 11 Eastern European parties:

- Five radical right parties: Czech Dawn of Direct Democracy (Dawn), Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD),³ the Slovak National Party (SNS), Hungary's Movement for a Better Hungary (Jobbik), and the Polish Confederation Freedom and Independence—KORWiN.
- Two radical left parties: the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM) and Lithuania's Labor Party.
- One social democratic party: Harmony
- Three national conservative parties: Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania—Christian Families Alliance (LLRA), Lithuanian Order and Justice, and Fidesz—Hungarian Civic Alliance.

The dependent variable is based on the ESS question “Which party did you vote for in the last election?” I recoded this variable so that a respondent scores “1” if they voted for one of the parties from the above list, and “0” if they voted for one of the mainstream parties. I have chosen mainstream parties represented in the national parliament at the time of the survey as the reference category because the Euroskeptic parties typically attack the political mainstream. If a respondent voted for another party, this variable was labeled as missing.

Several attitudinal characteristics designed to account for the respondents' voting preferences in accordance with my hypotheses were included in the analysis.

In line with Hypothesis 1, Euroskepticism is based on the ESS 11-points question about whether European unification should go further (0) or whether it has already gone too far (10). The positive coefficient to this variable indicates higher levels of Euroskepticism.

² Data for both countries for the third ESS round also lacks design weights, which further complicates the analysis.

³ Since SPD split from the Dawn of Direct Democracy in 2015, and because each of these parties is only present in the ESS dataset in one ESS wave, I combined them into one dependent variable (to increase the number of observations) under an assumption that their electorates share characteristics.

In line with Hypothesis II, to control for the antiestablishment sentiment, I included in the analysis the variable “trust in politicians” ranging from 0 (complete trust) to 10 (no trust at all) to control for levels of political distrust. To control for the respondents’ satisfaction with the overall status quo, I also included a question about the respondent’s satisfaction with the economy (“how satisfied are you with the present state of the economy?”; 0 = “extremely dissatisfied” and 10 = “extremely satisfied”), and a question about satisfaction with the government (“how satisfied are you with the way [the government] is doing its job?”; 0 = “extremely dissatisfied” and 10 = “extremely satisfied”). I also included two other questions designed to account for the respondents’ satisfaction with mainstream parties’ politics, such as the respondent’s attitude toward income redistribution (“the government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels; 1 = “disagree strongly” and 4 = “agree strongly”) and the respondent’s attitude toward immigrants of different race (1 = “many should be allowed to come and live here” and 4 “none should be allowed to come and live here”).

Under Hypothesis III, I controlled for the respondents’ levels of education (1 = “less than lower secondary” and 5 = “tertiary education”); the highest level of education—“tertiary education”—was chosen as base category, as I expect more educated respondents to be less susceptible to disinformation. In addition, I controlled for the respondent’s political interest (1 = “not at all interested” and 4 = “very interested”) under the assumption that more politically knowledgeable respondents are less prone to disinformation narratives.

To account of the Hypotheses IVa and IVb, I also controlled for the following six age groups of the respondents: “18–24”; “25–34”; “35–44”; “45–54”; “55–65”; “65 or older.” The middle group “35–44” was chosen as the base category under the assumption that this age group is relatively established (past the youth unemployment period and before retirement age), and hence expected to be less susceptible to disinformation narratives.

I also included a control for individual general left-right placement (“where would you place yourself on [a scale] where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?” In addition, respondents’ gender (male), and religiosity (ranging from “not at all religious” [0] to “very religious” [10]) were included in the analysis.

Because of the binary nature of the dependent variable, I ran logit models controlling for fixed-year effects to account for time-level variation. The observations were weighted using the ESS design weights to correct for different sampling probabilities in various countries. Observations with missing values were deleted.

I chose to run separate regressions for each selected party, because in a pooled analysis, the discovered effects may confound important variation at the country level and overestimate the effects of my variable of interest. Therefore, a pooled analysis does not allow convincingly for distinguishing of factors that the electoral bases of pro-Russian parties have in common across cases. The analysis hence focused on the electorates of all of the selected parties separately instead of a pooled regression.

FINDINGS

For the purpose of my analysis, the size of the effects is less important than their sign and significance. Hence, Table 1 below provides an overview of the direction of the regression coefficients and their significance. Statistically, insignificant effects are not shown. Full regressions models are provided in Appendix 2.

Table 1. Logistic regression analyses explaining voting for a pro-Russian party compared to voting for a mainstream party (without Bonferroni adjustments).

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
	SPD/ Dawn	Jobbik	Fidesz	SNS	KORWiN	KSČM	LLRA	Order & Justice	Labor	Harmony
Euroskepticism	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	-
Trust in politicians	+	+						-	-	
Placement on left-right scale		+	+		+	-	-	-	-	-
Satisfied with economy				-		-				-
Satisfied w/ national govt			+	+	+			-	-	
Reduce income differences		+				+	-			
Allow immigrants	+		+							-
Education:										
Less than lower second- ary			+				+	+		
Lower secondary			+			+			+	
Upper secondary		+	+				+	+	+	
Postsecondary nonter- tiary						-		+	+	
How interested in politics			-	-			-	-	-	
Male		+	+	+	+	+	+	+		
Age:										
18–24	+									
25–34		-		-		+		+		
45–54		-		-		+	+			
55–64		-		-		+	+			
≥ 65		-	-	-		+	-		-	-
How religious			+			-	+			+
Observations	2,846	3,080	4,644	1,621	734	5,599	1,604	1,686	1,842	1,113

Note. Only coefficients with $p < .1$ are displayed. Gray shaded areas are significant at $p < .05$. SPD and Dawn of Direct Democracy are combined in one DV.

The displayed effects are in the direction of a significant regression coefficient in the models. The results in Table 1 demonstrate that Euroskepticism exerts a positive and significant effect in 9 out of the 11 cases. Moreover, the Euroskepticism variable is the only variable that has a consistent and significant effect in the absolute majority of cases. Harmony is the only party case where the effect of Euroskepticism goes in the opposite direction. This might have to do with the fact that the pro-Russian orientation of Harmony is driven by the ethnic composition of the party rather than the anti-European sentiment of its electorates. Overall, this finding is in line with Hypothesis I.

Of the other variables that display consistent results, only male gender is associated with the support of a pro-Russian party in over half of all the cases. The remaining variables do not appear to have a consistent effect on the examined list of parties in the majority of the cases. In particular, there is no consistent impact of antiestablishment sentiment on support for pro-Russian parties. Similarly, I do not find a consistent effect of for education levels or age group. Therefore Hypotheses II–IV cannot be accepted..

However, the results of the above multiple hypothesis testing should be treated with caution, as the probability of obtaining a significant result increases as the number of hypotheses increases. As a robustness check, I corrected the p-values of my estimates for simultaneous multiple hypothesis testing by applying Bonferroni's adjustments. The results are provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Logistic regression analyses explaining voting for a pro-Russian party compared to voting for a mainstream party (with Bonferroni adjustments). (SPD and Dawn of Direct Democracy combined in one DV.)

	(1) SPD/ Dawn	(2) Jobbik	(3) Fidesz	(4) SNS	(5) KORWiN	(6) KSČM	(7) LLRA	(8) Order & Justice	(9) Labor	(10) Har- mony
Euroskepticism		+	+		+	+	+	+		
Trust in politicians	+	+								
Placement on left-right scale		+	+			-	-		-	-
Satisfied with economy										
Satisfied w/ national govt			+	+					-	
Reduce income differences		+				+				
Allow immigrants	+		+							
Education:										
Less than lower secondary			+				+			
Lower secondary										
Upper secondary									+	
Postsecondary nontertiary									+	
How interested in politics										
Male			+	+	+					
Age:										
18–24										
25–34	+	-				+				
45–54		-				+				
55–64		-				+				
≥ 65			-				-			
How religious			+				+			
Observations	2,846	3,080	4,644	1,621	734	5,599	1,604	1,686	1,842	1,113

Note: Only coefficients with $p < .1$ are displayed. Gray shaded areas are significant at $p < .05$.

After implementing Bonferroni adjustments, Hypothesis I is confirmed in six out of ten cases. While the results are not as strong and consistent as in Table 1, Euroskepticism is still the only variable that preserves the significance and consistent direction of its coefficient in the majority of the analyzed cases.

The findings based on Bonferroni adjustments should be treated with caution, as this correction tends to be extremely conservative and might underestimate the number of statistically significant effects leading to a high rate of false negatives. As a result, this adjustment is often viewed as unnecessary in the literature (Perneger 1998).

Regardless of the use of the Bonferroni adjustment, the results provided in Tables 1 and 2 suggest the same substantive conclusion: the electorates of pro-Russian parties tend to display significantly more Euroskeptic attitudes than the electorates of mainstream parties. Of the tested hypotheses, this is the only one that gives relatively consistent results in different specifications.

Overall, the results confirm Hypothesis I. The electorates of pro-Russian parties display stronger Euroskeptic attitudes than voters of mainstream parties in the respective countries. These political actors exploit these sentiments and challenge the fundamentals of the social contract and the liberal social order. In an effort to undermine European unity, Russia attempts collaboration with these traditionalist, conservative parties, while simultaneously spreading Euroskeptic messages among their electorates and presenting itself as a defender of traditional values.

I do not find other similarities across the electorates of pro-Russian parties, such as levels of education, age group or antiestablishment sentiments.

CONCLUSION

In this article I analyzed the electorates of pro-Russian parties in Eastern Europe and their susceptibility to disinformation narratives. Using existing studies and expert evaluations, I have compiled a list of Eastern European parties that openly adopt pro-Russian positions. Based on the results of the regression analysis of 10 pro-Russian parties in seven Eastern European countries, I demonstrate that the majority of such parties have electorates with significantly more Euroskeptic attitudes than the electoral bases of mainstream parties in these countries that is unrelated to their ideological (right or left) leanings. Accordingly, these electorates are far more susceptible to the anti-EU narratives spread by the Kremlin.

This paper makes several empirical contributions. First, in contrast to most studies, I focused on the demand side of the story—the characteristics of targeted societies and vulnerable social groups that make them more susceptible to Russia's information operations.

Second, I demonstrated that pro-Kremlin parties do not belong to one particular party family, but rather tend to take a variety of ideological positions on the left and right sides of the political spectrum. This finding reveals the nonideological, opportunistic nature of the Kremlin's active measures and that the Kremlin tends to collaborate with political actors regardless of their ideological leanings.

Finally, these findings explain the endorsement of pro-Russian narratives and social attitudes indirectly favorable to the Kremlin by political leaders whose electorates harbor anti-European attitudes. However, the agendas of these groups are rarely set by the Kremlin, instead, they temporarily align with Russian interests in a way that creates opportunities for the Kremlin's destabilization efforts. These parties are likely to dissociate themselves from pro-Russian narratives and stances when circumstances change (demonstrated by their support of the EU sanctions imposed on Russia when they come to power).

The last finding exposes the limitations inherent to the Kremlin's disinformation strategies. Rather than increasing the number of groups with Euroskeptic sentiments, the Kremlin information operations reinforce and radicalize social groups that are already inclined to believe such narratives (Lewis and Marwick 2018). Hence, the Kremlin's ability to use disinformation operations is limited in scope and largely conditioned by the structural conditions existing in targeted societies. In the past, Euroskeptic attitudes have been quite unstable and fluctuated substantially (Vasilopoulou 2013). This suggests that attitudes on Europe are fairly malleable and could be responsive to political events. When the current wave of Euroskepticism (inflated by the 2008 financial and 2014 immigration crises) subdues, the electorates susceptible to Kremlin disinformation will also inevitably decrease in size.

Future studies of disinformation-prone electorates should use a more rigorous research design for tackling these questions. For example, a survey experiment could include treatment and control groups similar to one another with the exception that the treatment group is exposed to Russian disinformation. Significant differences in these groups' positions on key aspects of foreign policies and voting preferences would then be attributable to disinformation exposure. One could then analyze which attitudinal and objective characteristics make the respondents more prone to endorsing disinformation narratives.

REFERENCES

- Bélanger, E. and K. Aarts 2006. "Explaining the Rise of the LPF: Issues, Discontent, and the 2002 Dutch Election." *Acta Politica* 41 (1): 4–20.
- Bergmann, M. and C. Kenney. 2017. *War by Other Means*. Center for American Progress. <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2017/06/06/433345/war-by-other-means/>
- Bessant J. 2018. "Right-Wing Populism and Young 'Stormers': Conflict in Democratic Politics." In *Young People Re-Generating Politics in Times of Crises*, edited by S. Pickard and J. Bessant, 139–159. Cham.: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Braghiroli, S. 2015. "Voting on Russia in the European Parliament: The Role of National and Party Group Affiliations." *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 23 (1): 58–81.
- Braghiroli, Stefano, and Andrey Makarychev. 2016. "Russia and Its Supporters in Europe: Trans-Ideology À La Carte?" *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 16 (2): 213–233.
- Craft, S., S. Ashley, and A. Maksl. 2017. "News Media Literacy and Conspiracy Theory Endorsement." *Communication and the Public* 2 (4): 388–401.
- David, Aaronovitch. 2009. *Voodoo Histories: The Role of the Conspiracy Theory in Shaping Modern History*. London: Penguin Publishing Group.
- Doyle, D. 2011. "The Legitimacy of Political Institutions: Explaining Contemporary Populism in Latin America." *Comparative Political Studies* 44 (11): 1447–1473.
- Galeotti, Mark. 2016. *Hybrid War or Gibrindnaya Voina? Getting Russia's Non-Linear Military Change Right*. Mayak Intelligence.
- Gressel, Gustav. 2017. *Fellow Travelers: Russia, Anti-Westernism, and Europe's Political Parties*. European Council on Foreign Relations, 14 July. www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/fellow_travellers_russia_anti_westernism_and_europes_political_parties_7213
- Györi, Lóránt, Péter Krekó, Jakub Janda and Bernhard Weidinger. 2017. *Does Russia Interfere in Czech, Austrian and Hungarian Elections? A study by Political Capital and European Values Think-tank in cooperation with DöW*. www.kremlinwatch.eu/userfiles/western_experiences_eastern_vulnerabilities_20171012_15273208786863.pdf
- Györi, L. and Péter Krekó. 2019. *Larger Than Life—Who Is Afraid of The Big Bad Russia?* Budapest: Political Capital.
- Hooghe, M., S. Marien and T. Pauwels. 2013. "Where Do Distrusting Voters Turn If There Is No Viable Exit or Voice Option? The Impact of Political Trust on Electoral Behavior in the Belgian Regional Elections of June 2009." *Government and Opposition* 46 (2): 245–273.
- Jackson, P., and M. Feldman, 2011. *The EDL: Britain's 'New Far Right' Social Movement*. Northampton: The University of Northampton.
- Kandrik, Matěj and Matúš Jevčák. 2018. "Unprepared and Vulnerable: The Resilience of the Slovak Republic to Foreign, Foremost Kremlin-Led Disinformation Campaigns." In *Disinformation Resilience Index Central and Eastern Europe*, edited by Volha Damarad and Andrei Yeliseyeu, 1-10 Bratislava: Stratpol
- Klapisis, Antonis. 2015. "An Unholy Alliance: The European Far Right

and Putin's Russia." *European View* 14.

Krastev, Ivan and Stephen Holmes. 2018. "Explaining Eastern Europe: Imitation and Its Discontents." *Journal of Democracy* 29 (3): 117–128.

Lubbers, M., and P. Scheepers, 2007. "Explanations of Political Euro-Scepticism at the Individual, Regional and National Levels." *European Societies* 9 (4): 643–669.

Nye, Joseph S. (1990). "Soft Power." *Foreign Policy* 80.

Onderco, Michael. 2019. "Partisan Views of Russia: Analyzing European Party Electoral Manifestos since 1991." *Contemporary Security Policy* 40 (4): 526–547.

Pakier, Małgorzata, and Joanna Wawrzyniak. 2015. *Memory and Change in Europe: Eastern Perspectives*. Oxford: Berghahn Books.

Perneger, Thomas V. 1998. "What's Wrong with Bonferroni Adjustments." *British Medical Journal* 18 (April).

Political Capital. 2014. *The Russian Connection the Spread of pro-Russian Policies on the European Far Right*. www.riskandforecast.com/useruploads/files/pc_flash_report_russian_connection.pdf.

Political Capital. 2018. *Összeesküvés-Elméletek, Álhírek, Babonák a Magyar Közvéleményben*. https://politicalcapital.hu/rendezvenyek.php?article_read=1&article_id=2323

Popescu, Oana and Rufin Zamfir, eds. 2018. *Propaganda Made-To-Measure: How Our Vulnerabilities Facilitate Russian Influence. A Study of Romania, Bulgaria, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova*. Bucharest: GlobalFocus Center.

Ramiro, L. 2016. "Support for Radical Left Parties in Western Europe: Social Background, Ideology and Political Orientations." *European Political Science Review* 8 (1): 1–23.

Rebegea, Corina. 2019. "Question More"- But Not Too Much. Mapping Russia's Malign Master Narratives in Central and Eastern Europe. In *Challenges in Strategic Communication and Fighting Propaganda in Eastern Europe. Solution for a Future Common Project*, edited by Dan Sultanesco, 75-83. Amsterdam: IOS Press.

Rooduijn, M. 2018. "What Unites the Voter Bases of Populist Parties? Comparing the Electorates of 15 Populist Parties." *European Political Science Review* 10 (3): 351–368.

Sakwa, R. 2012. "Conspiracy Narratives as a Mode of Engagement in International Politics: The Case of the 2008 Russo-Georgian War." *The Russian Review* 71 (4): 581–609.

Schmitt, O. 2017. *Pourquoi Poutine est notre allié?* Lille: Hikari Editions. <http://www.revue-interrogations.org/L-extreme-droite-francaise>.

Shekhovtsov, Anton and Alina Polyakova. 2016. *What's Left of Europe if the Far Right Has Its Way?* Washington D.C.: Atlantic Council. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/what-s-left-of-europe-if-the-far-right-has-its-way/>

Snegovaya, M. 2015. *Putin's Information Warfare in Ukraine: Soviet Origins of Russia's Hybrid Warfare*. Washington D.C.: Institute for the Study of War. www.jstor.org/stable/resrep07921

Snegovaya M. 2021. Fellow travelers or Trojan horses? Similarities across pro-Russian parties' electorates in Europe. *Party Politics*. March. doi:10.1177/1354068821995813

Stéphane, F., and O. Schmitt, 2015. "L'extrême-droite française contemporaine et le monde: une vision 'alternative' des relations internationales." *Revue Interrogations* 21.

Swyngedouw, M. 2001. "The Subjective Cognitive and Affective Map of Extreme Right Voters: Using Open-Ended Questions in Exit Polls." *Electoral Studies* 20 (2): 217–241.

Taggart, Paul. 1998. "A Touchstone of Dissent: Euroskepticism in Contemporary Western European Party Systems." *European Journal of Political Research* 33: 363–388.

Vachudova, M.A. 2008. "Tempered by the EU? Political Parties and Party Systems Before and after Accession." *Journal of European Public Policy* 15 (6): 861–879.

Vasilopoulou, S. 2013. "Continuity and Change in the Study of Euroskepticism: Plus ça change?" *Journal of Common Market Studies* 51: 153–168.

Visser, M., M. Lubbers, G. Kraaykamp and E. Jaspers. 2014. "Support for Radical Left Ideologies in Europe." *European Journal of Political Research* 53 (3): 541–558.

Volkens, A., P. Lehmann, T. Matthieß, N. Merz, S. Regel, and B. Weßels, 2018. *The Manifesto Data Collection*. Manifesto Project (MRG/CMP/MAR-POR). Version 2018a.

Volha, Damarad and Andrei Yeliseyev. 2018. "Disinformation Resilience Index Central and Eastern Europe," Stratpol.

Werts, H., P. Scheepers and M. Lubbers. 2013. "Euro-Scepticism and Radical Right-Wing Voting in Europe, 2002–2008: Social Cleavages, Socio-Political Attitudes and Contextual Characteristics Determining Voting for The Radical Right." *European Union Politics* 14 (2): 183–205.

Wilson, A. 2015. "Four Types of Russian Propaganda.: Aspen Review, (4): 77–81.

Appendix 1. List of pro-Russian Parties in Eastern Europe

	COUNTRY	NAME	PARTY FAMILY
1.	Bulgaria	Ataka	Right-wing nationalist
		Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP)	Social Democratic
		Alternative for Bulgarian Rebirth	Center-Left
		Patriotic Front (IMRO)	National conservative
		Movement for Recharging Bulgaria	Social liberal
2.	Croatia	Croatian Party of Rights (HSP)	Right-wing nationalist conservative
		Human Shield Party in Croatia	Populist (not classified as left or right)
3.	Czech Republic	Dawn – National Coalition	Radical right
		Workers’ Party	Radical right
		Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia	Radical left
		Party of Civic Rights	Social democratic
		SPD – Freedom and Direct Democracy	Radical right
		Tricolor Citizens’ Movement	National conservative
3.	Estonia	Estonian Independence Party (EIP)	Radical right
4.	Hungary	Jobbik	Radical right / National conservative
		Fidesz	National conservative
		Christian Democratic People’s Party	National conservative
		Mi Hazánk	Radical right
5.	Latvia	Latvian Russian Union (LKS)	Social democratic
		Social Democratic Party “Harmony”	Social democratic
6.	Lithuania	Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania—Christian Families Alliance (LLRA)	National conservative
		Order and Justice (TT)	National conservative
		Labor Party	Social liberal
7.	Romania	Social Democratic Party (PSD)	Social democratic
8.	Poland	Confederation Freedom and Independence—KORWiN	Radical right / National conservative
		Zmiana	Populist (not classified as left or right)
9.	Slovakia	Kotleba – People’s Party Our Slovakia, L’SNS	Right-wing nationalist
		We Are Family	Right-wing nationalist / radical right
		Slovak National Party, SNS	National conservative
		Communist Party of Slovakia	Radical left

Appendix 2. Logistic Regression Analyses Explaining Pro-Russia Voting: Full Model

Table 3. Logistic regression analyses explaining voting for a pro-Russian party compared to voting for a mainstream party (without Bonferroni adjustments). (SPD and Dawn of Direct Democracy combined in one DV)

	(1) Dawn/ SPD	(2) Jobbik	(3) Fidesz	(4) SNS	(5) KORWiN	(6) KSCM	(7) LLRA	(8) Order & Justice	(9) Labor	(10) Har- mony
Euroskepticism	0.0960**	0.157***	0.0965***	0.101**	0.331***	0.0991***	0.131***	0.107***	0.0502*	-0.101*
	(0.0472)	(0.0348)	(0.0203)	(0.0429)	(0.0695)	(0.0247)	(0.0418)	(0.0344)	(0.0290)	(0.0525)
Trust in politicians	0.249***	0.108**	-0.0145	-0.00936	0.120	-0.0426	-0.0197	-0.130***	-0.0677*	0.0602
	(0.0573)	(0.0421)	(0.0279)	(0.0532)	(0.108)	(0.0335)	(0.0646)	(0.0493)	(0.0390)	(0.0632)
Placement on left-right scale	0.0513	0.612***	0.840***	0.0534	0.211**	-0.597***	-0.121***	-0.0512*	-0.120***	-0.635***
	(0.0491)	(0.0416)	(0.0340)	(0.0421)	(0.103)	(0.0348)	(0.0358)	(0.0306)	(0.0263)	(0.0682)
Satisfied with economy	-0.0813	-0.0249	-0.0576	-0.137***	-0.171	-0.0854**	-0.0932	-0.0471	-0.0683	-0.116*
	(0.0641)	(0.0536)	(0.0373)	(0.0515)	(0.147)	(0.0351)	(0.0659)	(0.0635)	(0.0481)	(0.0667)
How satisfied with the national government	0.0546	-0.0319	0.0915***	0.184***	0.226*	-0.0409	-0.0758	-0.126**	-0.146***	-0.0640
	(0.0518)	(0.0525)	(0.0310)	(0.0550)	(0.122)	(0.0351)	(0.0620)	(0.0496)	(0.0458)	(0.0708)
Reduce differences in income levels	0.0319	0.205*	0.0578	-0.0114	-0.317	0.270***	-0.276**	0.190	0.00450	-0.119
	(0.103)	(0.105)	(0.0622)	(0.104)	(0.198)	(0.0604)	(0.125)	(0.141)	(0.105)	(0.123)
Allow many/few immigrants	0.683***	0.0862	0.240***	-0.0407	-0.0542	0.0435	0.0261	0.0702	-0.0854	-0.339***
	(0.182)	(0.103)	(0.0663)	(0.102)	(0.272)	(0.0769)	(0.130)	(0.108)	(0.0894)	(0.111)
Education:										
Less than lower secondary	0.0583	0.577	0.867***			-0.252	2.012***	1.244***	0.826	0.00824
	(1.100)	(0.639)	(0.295)			(0.544)	(0.636)	(0.429)	(0.531)	(1.211)
Lower secondary	-0.133	-0.207	0.364**	-0.477	-0.237	0.503*	0.518	0.0221	0.694**	0.0401
	(0.700)	(0.305)	(0.174)	(0.445)	(0.611)	(0.259)	(0.400)	(0.368)	(0.272)	(0.388)
Upper secondary	0.417	0.427**	0.252**	0.0843	0.0685	-0.0936	0.478*	0.583***	0.588***	-0.0684
	(0.294)	(0.204)	(0.123)	(0.268)	(0.442)	(0.168)	(0.257)	(0.220)	(0.180)	(0.275)
Postsecondary non- tertiary	0.0285	0.203	-0.196		0.0986	-0.422*	0.514	0.586*	0.737***	
	(0.417)	(0.356)	(0.199)		(0.640)	(0.251)	(0.345)	(0.312)	(0.236)	
How interested in politics	0.201	-0.0395	-0.175***	-0.302**	-0.0170	0.0376	-0.384**	-0.401***	-0.221*	-0.0626
	(0.157)	(0.0995)	(0.0623)	(0.130)	(0.269)	(0.0866)	(0.163)	(0.139)	(0.126)	(0.159)
Male	0.0585	0.379**	0.196**	0.552***	1.379***	0.263**	0.597**	0.325*	0.179	0.404
	(0.228)	(0.149)	(0.0985)	(0.192)	(0.456)	(0.124)	(0.237)	(0.196)	(0.159)	(0.247)
Age:										
18-24	-0.145	0.280	0.0129	-0.147	1.632**	0.389	0.410	-0.584	-0.521	0.330
	(0.573)	(0.308)	(0.227)	(0.351)	(0.671)	(0.427)	(0.830)	(0.554)	(0.422)	(0.445)
25-24	0.761**	-0.258	0.0429	-0.194	0.526	-0.406	-0.234	0.159	0.117	0.489
	(0.334)	(0.258)	(0.174)	(0.294)	(0.502)	(0.366)	(0.496)	(0.333)	(0.270)	(0.376)
45-54	-0.0329	-0.490**	-0.222	-0.591**	-1.055	0.522**	0.609*	-0.0727	0.344	0.370
	(0.303)	(0.233)	(0.156)	(0.284)	(0.701)	(0.247)	(0.349)	(0.277)	(0.229)	(0.349)
55-64	-0.365	-0.530**	-0.291*	-0.536*	-1.056	0.805***	0.636*	0.112	0.170	-0.402
	(0.332)	(0.222)	(0.149)	(0.278)	(0.677)	(0.222)	(0.348)	(0.292)	(0.223)	(0.401)
≥ 65	-0.610	-1.171***	-0.745***	-0.805**		1.183***	-1.607***	-0.383	-0.507**	-1.016**
	(0.399)	(0.263)	(0.161)	(0.317)		(0.227)	(0.434)	(0.334)	(0.253)	(0.452)
How religious	-0.0129	-0.0158	0.109***	0.0125	0.0689	-0.0623***	0.484***	0.0126	-0.00261	0.147***
	(0.0401)	(0.0292)	(0.0182)	(0.0313)	(0.0705)	(0.0238)	(0.0595)	(0.0373)	(0.0329)	(0.0425)
2006			-0.134							
			(0.185)							

	(1) Dawn/ SPD	(2) Jobbik	(3) Fidesz	(4) SNS	(5) KORWiN	(6) KSCM	(7) LLRA	(8) Order & Justice	(9) Labor	(10) Har- mony
2008		0.163	0.0794	-0.168		-1.010***				-0.281
		(0.668)	(0.185)	(0.192)		(0.197)				(0.256)
2012		3.146***	0.953***			-1.155***				
		(0.584)	(0.181)			(0.230)				
2014		6.303***	0.714***			-0.907***	0.316	-0.451**	-0.610***	
		(0.606)	(0.187)			(0.208)	(0.270)	(0.206)	(0.156)	
2016	0.243	6.533***	1.481***			-0.660***	-0.0260	-0.628***	-1.970***	
	(0.323)	(0.629)	(0.207)			(0.206)	(0.269)	(0.224)	(0.212)	
2018	0.582**	6.517***	0.851***		-0.483	-0.718***				
	(0.273)	(0.627)	(0.202)		(0.485)	(0.210)				
Constant	-8.760***	-12.32***	-5.954***	-2.211**	-5.880***	-0.623	-3.471***	-0.679	1.348*	2.676***
	(1.123)	(1.041)	(0.568)	(0.950)	(1.792)	(0.595)	(1.099)	(0.916)	(0.712)	(1.028)
Observations	2,843	3,077	4,642	1,606	578	5,596	1,604	1,686	1,842	1,113

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < .1$

** $p < .05$

*** $p < .01$

Note: The data on several variables is missing for the year 2004.

**FREE
RUSSIA**



Free Russia Foundation is an independent nonprofit organization with a 501 (c) 3 status registered in the U.S. in 2014.

The work of Free Russia Foundation is focused in three key mission areas:

1. Advancing the vision of a democratic, prosperous and peaceful Russia governed by the rule of law by educating the next generation of Russian leaders committed to these ideals;
2. Strengthening civil society in Russia and defending human rights activists persecuted by the Russian government; and
3. Supporting formulation of an effective and sustainable Russia policy in the United States and Europe by educating policy makers and informing public debate.

Free Russia Foundation is a non-partisan and non-lobbying organization and is not affiliated with any government organization or agency.

www.4freerussia.org
info@4freerussia.org

Washington, DC 2021