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Fellow Travellers or Ships Passing in the Night? Russia's illiberal outreach to the European Radical Right

For certain traditionalist, populist and ultranationalist political movements in Europe, Putin's Russia has in the last five years emerged as a source of ideological inspiration and active support. This engagement has been the source of no small degree of speculation and alarmism in western public discourse, and recent evidence of Russian interference in elections fuels alarmist commentary on the extent and coordination of 'Putin's Fifth Column' in Europe. This study aims to map the substantive and discursive links between Russia and radical right actors in Europe and assess the extent to which the relationship is affected by logics of strategic convenience and ideological congruence.

Since the 'Conservative Turn' at the beginning of Putin's third presidential term the Russian state has associated itself with ideological positions of traditionalism, illiberalism and normative competition with the transatlantic West. While incorporating domestic nationalist topoi of Russian exceptionalism, the conservative image of Russia has international thematic resonance. Political movements in Europe characterised by nationalism and a populist hostility towards a constructed liberal elite have lauded Putin as a model of a strong leader who looks after the interests of his own country, promotes traditional values and does not let himself be bullied by the EU, US and the global establishment. As the 'Che Guevara of the Right', Putin's government can mobilise sympathy and support from the radical right in manner I describe as 'illiberal outreach'.

Illiberal outreach between Russia and the European radical right occurs across multiple settings, some of which, such as financial transactions, are not yet transparent. Politically, radical right groups have lobbied for the lifting of sanctions and Europe's disengagement from NATO, and have sent election monitors to assert the legitimacy of referenda in Crimea and elsewhere. Conferences, media appearances and visits taking place in Russia serve as key platforms for articulating and reinforcing the discursive framework of the relationship.

The complexity and volume of these discursive interactions suggest the insufficiency of characterising illiberal outreach as cynically instrumental. By analysing the discursive content of these interactions over time and with reference to the wider priorities (such as electability and the near-term goals of Russian foreign policy) and statements of the actors involved, I aim to evaluate the role of ideology in shaping the relationship. My analysis suggests that while attributing illiberal outreach to a common world-view is an oversimplification, actors with an ideological agenda do play a larger role than expected in driving the relationship and setting normative terms of Russia's international engagement.