

Conference

RUSSIA'S INFLUENCE STRATEGY IN EUROPE: MOSCOW AND EUROPEAN POPULIST PARTIES OF THE FAR-RIGHT AND FAR-LEFT

Tempio di Adriano Conference Hall of the Chamber of Commerce of Rome

Piazza di Pietra – Rome (Italy)

May 31, 2017 (3 pm - 6:30 pm)

To register please contact fondazionegermaniconvegni@gmail.com

The conference is organized by the **Gino Germani Institute for Social Sciences and Strategic Studies** and the **Atlantic Council**. It will be held in Rome on May 31st, 2017, from 3:00 pm to 6:30 pm, at the Tempio di Adriano Conference Hall of the Chamber of Commerce of Rome (Piazza di Pietra, Rome).

The event will explore one of the key issues that emerged during the conference "**Russian Soft Power: Moscow's Struggle for Influence in Europe and How the EU Should Respond**", held last year in June, also organized by the Germani Institute and the Atlantic Council.

The objectives of this conference are the following:

- A) To develop a better knowledge and understanding of Russia's influence strategy in Europe, a key element of which is Moscow's encouragement of the European populist surge.
- B) To analyze the growing collaboration between Moscow and Europe's populist forces and assess the implications of such collaboration for the future of security and stability in Europe.
- C) To propose guidelines for a strategic response by the EU, NATO and national governments to address the populist surge and Russia's influence strategy in Europe.

Participation is free of charge. Simultaneous translation (English-Italian and vice-versa) will be provided at the event.

2) Conference Agenda

- 2:40 PM Registration of participants
- 3:00 PM Conference begins

Luigi Sergio GERMANI (Director, Gino Germani Institute for Social Sciences and Strategic Studies, Rome).

Why a conference on Russia's influence strategy and European populism?

Fabrizio CICCHITTO (MP, Chairman of the Foreign Policy and Community Affairs Commission of the Italian Chamber of Deputies)

Russia's political strategy towards Europe

Alina POLYAKOVA (Director of Research, Europe and Eurasia, Atlantic Council, Washington DC)

The Kremlin's "Trojan Horses"? Russia and Europe's Far-Right

Jacopo IACOBONI (Journalist and Writer, *La Stampa*)

Russia and Populist Movements in Italy: the Case of the Five-Star Movement

Anton SHEKHOVTSOV (Institute of Human Sciences, Vienna)

Moscow and Radical Right-Wing Populism in Europe

François GÉRÉ (President, Institut Français d'Analyse Stratégique, Paris)

French Populism: the Highway for Russian Influence

Gustav GRESSEL (Senior Policy Fellow, European Council for Foreign Relations-ECFR, Berlin Office)

Russian Influence and Right and Left-Wing Populist Forces in Germany

Vineta MEKONE (Senior Expert, Operational Support Branch, NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, Riga)

Kremlin information confrontation and its effects on populism and extremism in Europe.

Discussant: **Luciano PELLICANI** (LUISS-Guido Carli University, President of the Gino Germani Institute, Rome).

Conference Moderator : **Federigo ARGENTIERI** (Director, Guarini Institute for Public Affairs, John Cabot University, Rome)

Discussion

6:30 PM Conference ends

3) Background and key topics

Populist forces of the far-right and far-left are an increasingly important factor in European politics. These populist movements share the following three characteristics: 1) a rejection of globalization and an emphasis on the defense of "national sovereignty"; 2) hostility towards the continent's political and economic élites (the "establishment"), perceived as corrupt and incompetent; 3) the will to challenge and delegitimize the fundamental norms and values that underpin liberal democracy.

There is widespread concern among analysts that the expansion of populist movements could potentially destabilize Europe's democratic systems and fuel a dangerous "renationalization" of European states that would lead to a dissolution of the EU and of the transatlantic link, with far-reaching implications for Europe's security and stability.

The challenges posed by the populist surge to the stability of European democracies are amplified by the often close relations between the continent's populist movements and Russia. Most of Europe's populist parties have a strong pro-Russian orientation and close ties to Moscow, and share the latter's hostility to a Western-led liberal international order and to "Western interventionism". The populist surge in Europe has, in fact, become a relevant factor in the geopolitical confrontation between Russia and the West.

One key factor that has fueled the pro-Moscow stance of populist forces are the ideological affinities between the latter and Putin's Russia. Europe's far-right populists are attracted to the new Kremlin nationalist and "Eurasianist" ideology that stresses social conservatism and protection of traditionalist and Christian values, political authoritarianism, defense of national sovereignty, and rejection of the West's value-system (perceived as decadent and nihilistic). Moreover, right-wing populists in Europe (and in the United States) tend to perceive the Putin regime as a model of strong authoritarian leadership, as well as a potential ally in the resistance to radical Islam, in the fight against the secularization of Western societies, in the effort to unwind global economic integration and the struggle to regain national sovereignty and identity.

Europe's far-left populists are attracted to the Kremlin's ideological hostility to globalization and to the US-dominated international capitalist order, and also – in a similar way to far-right populists – tend to perceive Russia as a counterweight to US global power. The above-mentioned ideological affinities – as well as common political objectives (such as weakening the EU and NATO) – has led to growing collaboration between Moscow and European populist forces.

Russia has obviously not caused the current populist surge in Europe, which is fueled by real problems – especially socio-economic, security-related and identity-related ones – that afflict significant sectors of European societies: problems that European élites have not been able to address effectively. However, Moscow appears to be encouraging and exploiting the populist wave in order to advance a number of strategic foreign policy goals in Europe, namely:

- 1) Undermining and eventually disintegrating the EU and NATO (both of which appear to be perceived by the Kremlin as potential threats to Russia's security and great power ambitions).
- 2) Fomenting tensions among Euro-Atlantic states and internal political instability in European countries.
- 3) Weakening public confidence in liberal democracy and in the fundamental values of open societies.

Europe's populist forces are often used by Moscow to spread pro-Kremlin propaganda and disinformation, influence political debates in Russia's favor, exert pressure on national governments and on the EU on issues of importance for the Kremlin, and act as sources of international legitimization of Russian foreign policy (for example, a group of European far-right politicians went to Crimea during the March 2014 referendum as observers, while the OSCE did not send observers).

The support of populist forces has become a key element of Moscow's broader influence strategy in Europe, which includes the use of various "soft power" tools such as disinformation campaigns (which exploit the most innovative information and digital media technologies); energy pressures, cyber-attacks, investments in strategically important economic sectors, development of business relationships with members of political and economic élites, financing of think tanks and cultural institutes.

European élites have not yet been able to formulate a strategic response to populist movements and to Russia's encouragement and support of these forces. Such a response requires the crafting of innovative policies in a number of areas (the economy, irregular immigration, security and public order) aimed at addressing the grievances and root causes that fuel the growth of populism. Moreover, there is a growing need for educational, cultural and media policies specifically aimed at upholding the norms and values of liberal democracy against populist efforts to delegitimize and discredit them.

The challenge of Russian influence activities should be addressed by specific measures to counter disinformation campaigns, such as raising public awareness and knowledge of the problem, public exposure of the methods employed in such campaigns, the development of a counter-narrative of freedom, democracy and the rule of law in order to respond to propaganda operations that seek to undermine public confidence in the values of Western and European open societies. Moreover, stronger counterintelligence and law enforcement measures are needed to counter covert foreign financing of political parties and movements and other forms of covert interference in European politics.

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The Conference organizers are grateful to the United States Embassy to Italy for supporting the event.



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