

An axis of illiberalism that threatens Europe

The EU can and must do more to counter Russia and the far right

Just as Vladimir Putin does not conceal his contempt for western liberalism, so his far-right European friends make no secret of their admiration for the Russian president and his policies. Each side vigorously denies that these connections extend beyond the merely political and into the realm of covert Russian financing of the far-right.

However, EU governments, security services and judicial investigators are not convinced. It emerged last week that magistrates in Milan are conducting an inquiry into possible international corruption after BuzzFeed News reported that Italy's ruling hard-right League party sought tens of millions of euros from a clandestine Russian oil deal.

Matteo Salvini, the League's leader, who is the strongman in Italy's unconventional, populist government, denies any wrongdoing. If ever there was a proposed deal, it appears to have come to nothing. However, there are disturbing similarities between the Italian case and the sordid affair in which leaders of Austria's far-right Freedom party (FPÖ) were trapped in a video sting operation discussing the exchange of government contracts for Russian financial support. This scandal brought down the coalition government in Vienna of which the FPÖ formed part.

The mutual backslapping of the Kremlin and the European far-right should not obscure the fact that Russian meddling in EU politics is ideologically fluid, not to say amoral. Unlike in Soviet times, when Moscow lent a helping hand mostly to western communist parties, Russia under Mr Putin engages with the far-right, the radical left and anti-establishment movements. Moscow cultivates ties with and gathers compromising material on mainstream politicians, too. Week in, week out, waves of propaganda and fake news pour out of Mr Putin's Russia

towards EU countries. The objectives are transparent: to sow divisions in European societies, to demoralise the public's faith in liberal political systems and values, to promote Russophile tendencies and to undermine the united front that the EU has adopted towards Moscow, especially since the Kremlin's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and intervention in eastern Ukraine.

To be clear, the troubles of European democracies, like those of the US, are mainly homegrown. Russia did not create them; it exploits them. Moreover, in countries such as Italy, the desire for a close relationship with Moscow is not confined to the far-right, even though the League has gone further than other parties by signing a co-operation pact with Mr Putin's United Russia party. It extends across the entire political spectrum and commands support from the Italian business world, too.

Nonetheless the axis of illiberalism that unites Russia, Europe's far-right, President Donald Trump and the US alt-right represents a pernicious threat to the moderate European political order and the wellbeing of European societies. EU governments, institutions and legal systems can and must do a better job of repelling these assaults. In the first place, they should not hesitate to bring to book far-right politicians and parties if they are discovered to have broken the law, in financial matters or anything else.

Second, they should make a stronger, more systematic effort to counter disinformation from Russia and the domestic far-right, and to educate citizens so that they recognise fake news when it is thrown at them. Lastly, EU sanctions on Russia should stay in place until Moscow stops destabilising Ukraine. The protection of Europe's freedom, prosperity and way of life require a firm pushback against both the far-right and Russian interference.

Un asse illiberale che minaccia l'Europa

