



Ideology and influence in the debate over Russian election interference

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Abstract

The salience of the debate over Russian political interference in the USA has increased significantly during the Trump administration. However, there is no consensus over how to respond to the interference of this openly illiberal power. This paper argues that we need to reconceptualize our understanding of Russian influence to understand this high level of contestation. While the current understanding of Russian influence is characterized as a problem of unwanted information flows, we argue that we also need to take seriously the ideological influence that the Russia regime has in the USA—that the appeal of the Russian regime’s conservative and populist ideology can help to explain this division. By taking ideological attraction seriously, we can explain why it is currently difficult for the USA to respond to this threat and why solutions to Russian interference based on the information flow models need to be reconsidered.

Keywords Russia · USA · Ideology · Populism · Propaganda · Disinformation

Introduction

The presidency of Donald J. Trump has been mired by accusations of undue Russian interference both within the administration and within American political life more broadly. According to a report by the *New York Times* in late 2018, while it cannot be definitely demonstrated that this interference tipped the scales of the 2016 election, there is ‘a plausible case ... [that] Russia could have made the difference’ (Shane and Mazzetti 2018). As a report by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (2017: ii) put it, ‘Russian efforts to influence the 2016 presidential election represent the most recent expression of Moscow’s longstanding desire to

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undermine the US-led liberal democratic order, but these activities demonstrated a significant escalation in directness, level of activity and scope of effort compared to previous operations.’ The Trump administration has furthermore faced several scandals involving alleged links between Russians and members of his team with high security clearances (Lee and Yourish 2017). These staff members allegedly took meetings with Russians acting in official or unofficial capacities, or were suspected by the US intelligence services of being potential targets for Russian blackmail.

These allegations of Russian interference in the US election process have taken place against a backdrop of a generalized anxiety over Russian interference in political processes in the West more broadly. This anxiety is only compounded by a growing understanding of Russia as military threat in many Western circles, which has resulted in increasing defense expenditures among the majority of the European allies (NATO Public Diplomacy Division 2018).

Despite the fact that a potential ideological and military competitor has dramatically increased its attempts to interfere in US domestic politics, there is little domestic consensus over whether this interference should be taken seriously. A 2018 poll showed that 40% of Republicans, when asked their opinion about the alleged help that Russia gave to the Republican Party, responded it was either appropriate, or that it ‘wouldn’t be a big deal’ (Birnbaum 2018). Reflecting this sentiment, many legislators in the Republican Party have been unwilling to take action in response to these allegations (Wagner and Guskin 2017). Donald Trump has publicly proclaimed his admiration for Vladimir Putin and dismissed intelligence findings, even though key officials in the US government have repeatedly declared that Russia is the most important threat facing the USA, particularly after the Russian actions in Ukraine (Ambrosio 2017; Sullivan 2019). This open admiration of Russia found among some members of the Republican Party often goes hand in hand with a policy of accommodating Putin’s government, a trait which is echoed among many populist elites in the West (Keating and Kazcmarska 2019). But given the scope of the allegations of interference by a clearly illiberal power that is also framed as a major security threat, why has a clearer policy consensus against Russian interference not formed?

We argue that to answer this question, we need to broaden the conception of Russian influence found in much of the literature. The scholarship on this subject to date has focused primarily on the effects of Russian propaganda and disinformation on Western audiences. From this perspective, the purpose of Russian influence is to make Russia look appealing, denigrate Western institutions, or confuse the public by inundating public political discourse with multiple conflicting narratives. The problem of Russian influence, from this perspective, is framed primarily as unwanted flows of information. Prospective solutions, therefore, are based on either curtailing or responding to these unwanted flows, to either block the disinformation and propaganda coming from Russia or to present the true facts about the state of the world in the public sphere.

While we agree that propaganda and disinformation are important factors in understanding how the Russian regime influences the USA, we argue that the scholarship has overlooked a crucial factor that helps to explain why there is a lack of policy consensus over an appropriate reaction to interference in Western political processes: the ideological attraction of conservative values espoused by the Russian



regime. By taking ideological attraction seriously, we can better explain why there is a sharply divided domestic response to Russian interference, because the attractive nature of this conservative ideology leads to a degree of ideological alignment in growing Western populist constituencies. Thus, in addition to the ‘supply side’ problems that arise out of the unwanted information flows that the current scholarship has identified, we must consider also consider ‘demand side’ factors such as ideological attraction when crafting solutions to combat Russian interference.

This article proceeds by providing an overview of the current literature on propaganda and disinformation to show how Russian influence is considered a problem of information flows. It argues that this affects not only how Russian influence is understood, but what should be done about it. It then puts forward an argument for why the attractiveness of the conservative ideology championed by the Russian regime should be taken seriously and how this helps to contribute to the lack of consensus over an appropriate response to Russian political interference that we are currently observing in the USA.

The characterization of Russian influence in the current literature

Given the allegations of election tampering and general attempts to influence Western publics, the propaganda and disinformation¹ operations of Putin’s Russia have attracted a great deal of scholarly and media attention in the past few years (Van Herpen 2016: 67–98; Kragh and Åsberg 2017; Aro 2016; Paul and Matthews 2016; Aron 2015; Hansen 2017a; Lucas and Nimmo 2015; MacFarquhar 2016; Reire 2015; Giannetti 2017; Pomerantsev 2015; Hellman and Wagnsson 2017: 155–157). While many of the existing analyses map out the nature of this threat to provide solutions, we argue that they all share a common problem: they focus on the production side of Russian propaganda and disinformation, viewing Russian influence as primarily, if not entirely, as a problem of information flows. Some have framed this as the ‘weaponization of information’ (Hansen 2017a: 28; Hansen 2017b) or ‘censorship through noise’ (Coppins 2020), through which Russia attempts to actively confuse Western publics through its disinformation, creating distrust, doubt and division (Waltzman 2017: 4; Jensen et al. 2019: 223), or alternatively choosing to focus on the shortcomings and hypocrisies in Western society to create a moral equivalence between Russian and Western governments (Aron 2015).

Reflecting this focus on information flows, Christopher Paul and Meriam Matthews’ characterize contemporary Russian propaganda as having ‘high numbers of channels and messages and a shameless willingness to disseminate partial

¹ While there is certainly some overlap between the concepts, we view propaganda as the dissemination of new or reinterpreted information that attempts to win the public over, whereas disinformation involves the dissemination of blatantly false information in order to confuse, sometimes by putting conflicting narratives into the public sphere to make the separation of truth from falsehood difficult Martin (1982) Disinformation: An instrumentality in the propaganda arsenal. *Political Communication* 2(1): 47–64, Hendricks and Vestergaard (2019) *Reality Lost: Markets of Attention, Misinformation and Manipulation*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer Open.



truths or outright fictions' (Paul and Matthews 2016: 1). Similarly, Matthew Sussex argues that Russian information warfare attempts to '[break] down the boundaries between fact and fiction' and control information (Sussex 2017: 509). Others focus on the role that Government Organized NGOs (GONGOs) and 'vertically integrated propaganda networks' play in the transference of this unwanted information to the West (Pallin and Oxenstierna 2017: 13–15). While Russian influence is thus characterized in a diversity of way in the current literature, we argue that what binds all of these ideas together is a specific underlying conceptualization of the problem, namely the production of false information by the Russian state or their proxies and the multitude of ways that this false information can reach Western publics.

This characterization of Russian influence and unwanted information flows naturally leads a focus on the role of modern information technology in the literature, since this greatly lowers the relative cost of such efforts (Waltzman 2017: 4). As Hansen put it, 'new information technology is the force multiplier, which allows a sender to reach a global audience instantly and with a massive amount of information in the hope of influencing modes of thought' (Hansen 2017b: 2). Additionally, social media offers a means to target specific audiences, so that propaganda and disinformation can be tailored to different groups (Baines and Jones 2018: 15). This has resulted in the Russian ability to create pro-Russia troll campaigns to sow confusion among Western audiences over what is true or false or to sway public opinion in its favor (Aro 2016: 124–125; Office of the Director of National Intelligence 2017: ii–iii; Tucker et al. 2018: 23).

Importantly for the argument we wish to put forward in this paper, Russia's influence through propaganda and disinformation is frequently characterized as disruptive and unwanted, but essentially non-ideological. Peter B. Doran and Donald N Jensen, for example, argue that Russian propaganda is not about the promotion of a foreign policy agenda, but 'it is designed to confuse, distract, and disrupt Western states' (Doran and Jensen 2018). A major report for the French government equally argued that the largest difference between Russian and Soviet interference is that the Russians 'have given up any pretense of ideology' (Jeangène Vilmer et al. 2018: 53). Anne Applebaum also argued that Russian influence campaigns have no positive ideological content. As she notes 'The Kremlin is not trying to "sell" itself or its model, as it did during the Cold War. Instead, it offers support to anti-European or anti-democratic ideas in whatever form they exist ... Instead of agitating, it seeks to keep audiences distracted and cynical. Instead of offering a positive vision, Russia promulgates nihilism' (Applebaum 2018: 29).

As a case in point to how far this trend toward portraying Russian influence as essentially non-ideological has gone, in a recent report on Russia's promotion of illiberal populism among populist political groups in the West, which might suggest that ideology is central to this relationship, the authors argue explicitly that 'these pathways are utilitarian means not ideological ends' (Rosenberger and Morley 2019: 1), since the purpose is not to spread some type of Russian ideology, but to use any means available to destabilize European and North American democracies, undermining the European project and transatlantic ties (Rosenberger and Morley 2019: 6).



This widespread focus on disruptive but non-ideological information flows then frames proposed solutions to the problem, which revolve primarily around the ways in which these information flows can be curtailed and/or corrected with the right information (Paul and Matthews 2016: 10–11; Walker 2018: 21; Helmus et al. 2018: 75–93; Chivvis 2017: 320; Baines and Jones 2018: 16–17; Aro 2016: 130; Pomerantsev 2014: 7; Farwell 2018: 38–40, 41–42; Hampson et al. 2017: 2). For instance, Waltzman argues that the solution to the Russian influence problem is ‘a coordinated effort between national government organizations, military, intelligence community, industry, media, research organizations, academia and citizen organized groups’ (Waltzman 2017: 3–4), that would map and monitor sources of Russian propaganda and disinformation, or focus on how the influence is being generated. Hansen similarly argues that the challenge revolves around how to ‘counteract information spread ... which is deliberately false’ (Hansen 2017a: 34) by increasing cognitive resilience, or the ability for European publics to ‘withstand pressure’ from the spread of these ideas by building a “cognitive firewall” (Hansen 2017a: 34), again focusing on identifying, mitigating, or blocking the information flows.

In other cases where a spectrum of potential solutions is given, such as Maria Hellman and Charlotte Wagnsson’s four strategies of either confronting, blocking, naturalizing and ignoring Russian propaganda, the central variables for the construction of these ideal types ignore the possibility of ideological attraction, engaging instead with the state’s level of engagement with the disinformation and whether the state has an orientation toward domestic or foreign audiences (Hellman and Wagnsson 2017: 5–6). Finally, even for scholars focusing specifically on the relationships between Russia and other Western populist groups, while the first recommendation is to strengthen democracy to remove the breeding grounds for populist groups, equal if not more detail is given to strengthening cyber defenses, to ‘continue to develop means to better detect and counter the networks that manipulate their platforms to undermine democratic discourse’ (Rosenberger and Morley 2019: 6–7). The importance of this framing is not only how it is ubiquitous in the current literature, but how these ideas have subsequently found their way into policy. Both NATO and the European Union, for example, have set up offices to identify and respond to disinformation, particularly coming from Russia (MacFarquhar 2016), though focusing primarily on debunking false information (Vilmer 2017).

If we use this model of Russian influence to understand the lack of consensus over Russian interference, we would therefore claim that it is a direct result of the Russian propaganda and disinformation efforts. Through these efforts, the Russian regime has managed to disrupt the waters enough that it is unclear to many political actors whether the threat is significant. Western audiences have become either confused or sedated with respect to the problems of Russian interference, leading to the lack of consensus that we observe, which prevents the formation of a broadly supported political project to actively fight this interference.

While this likely accounts for some causal weight in an explanation for why the USA has failed to build a broadly supported political project against Russian political interference, we argue that it is missing a crucial element to explain the phenomenon. In particular, why are the effects of these information flows not roughly uniform across the population? Why do we not see roughly equal numbers disagree



over whether Russian interference should be a threat or not across different political constituencies? What might account for the fact that populist political elites, in particular, are more likely to downplay this alleged interference and suggest policies of accommodation toward the Russian regime?

Taking ideological attraction seriously

We argue that these questions are not answerable without putting forward an understanding a slightly more complex model of influence. In addition to propaganda and disinformation, we must take into consideration the effects of the ideological attraction of the Russian conservative values in the West (Simons 2015; Neumann 2015). The content of these conservative values revolve around traditional, often Christian values, strong leadership and illiberal nationalist policies (Keating and Kazmarska 2019). This ideological attraction is different from propaganda and disinformation because it is not simply about the Russian government influencing the USA, and the West more broadly, in a ‘false’ way. Instead, this mode of influence operates because particular Western constituencies react positively to the ideological values being generated, promoted, and enacted by the Russian government (Keating and Kazmarska 2019).

Studies of Russian politics point to a ‘conservative turn’ in the values expressed by the Russian government, especially since 2011, following a decade of what was characterized as ‘ideological emptiness’ (Popescu 2006; Robinson and Milne 2017; Lough et al. 2014). Since this time, the Russian government has made considerable efforts to present Russia as the leader of a white, conservative and patriarchal Europe in the face of the destructive liberal values pushed forward by the USA and their European allies (Neumann 2016: 1382–1383; Oliker 2017: 10–12; Romashko 2019: 39–42).² Not unlike under Alexander III, Putin’s Russia is striving to be the conservative pole among a concert of great powers.³ In practice, this means resisting liberal values by highlighting the continuity of Russian greatness, emphasizing the importance of spiritual and moral values held in the Orthodox Church, and posing as the defender of a ‘European civilization’ under threat from both radical Islam and Anglo-Saxon liberalism (Putin 2013; Rossiiskaia Federatsiya 2015: Points 3 and 30; Østbø 2017).

While there is nothing about this ideological shift that invalidates the idea that a conservative state might actively try to disrupt Western liberal states through propaganda and disinformation, we would like to argue that the character of the conservative values emanating from Russia, and their attractiveness to Western populists, also needs to be taken into account. Unlike its predecessor, the Soviet Union, the

² Domestically, some scholars have argued that the maintenance of conservative ‘spiritual-moral values’ have become so important to the regime that they have been defined as a national security issue Østbø (2017) Securitizing “spiritual-moral values” in Russia. *Post-Soviet Affairs* 33(3): 200–216.

³ In a direct homage to the Tsar, Putin unveiled a monument of Alexander III in the Crimea in 2017 Luhn (2017) *Putin seeks reflected glory of Russian tsars as he unveils statue in Crimea*. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/11/19/putin-seeks-reflected-glory-russian-tsars-unveils-statue-crimea/>.



conservative ideology of the Russian regime lies within an ideological spectrum already found in the more populist elements of the Republican Party and among conservative parties in Europe (Rehman 2017). As such, the conservative values championed by the Russia government are already present to some degree in the mainstream ideological spectrum.

These values are very typical of what Cas Mudde has called the populist radical right (Mudde 2007: 26). This includes certain ideas found in all populist groups, such as an understanding of society as divided into ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elites,’ tied together with a political framework based on some idea of the promotion of the general will or popular sovereignty (Mudde 2016: 25–26; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018: 1669). This focus means that populist movements of any stripe will tend to oppose liberal democratic values such as minority rights, separation of powers and independent media, since these promote the illegitimate bypassing of the popular will (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018: 1670). But populism itself is a thin-centered ideology, which means it is often tied to other ideological elements (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018: 1669–1700). This can include authoritarianism (Mudde 2007: 22), where the concept of authoritarianism includes not only an obedience to and respect for authority, but also a heavy emphasis on the normative importance of order (Mudde 2007: 23, 145–146). Leadership is often important in these contexts, where leaders will be portrayed as having exceptional characteristics that lead them know the will of the people (Mudde 2004: 558, 560), which they then personally enact.

We can see this conceptualization of populism is reflected in many of the narratives put forward by the Russian regime, including a focus on strong leadership and the creation of a conservative order based on illiberal nationalist governance and traditional values. But we can also see how these values resonate with conservative populists in the USA, where these values have been met with increasing open public admiration. For example, former Republican presidential primary candidate Patrick Buchanan argued that Putin was part of an ideological struggle ‘between a debauched West led by the USA and a traditionalist world Russia would be proud to lead,’ where ‘Putin is planting Russia’s flag firmly on the side of traditional Christianity’ (Buchanan 2014). President Donald Trump has praised Putin’s strong leadership style on several occasions (Foer 2016; Meyers 2016). Fellow administration member Rudolf Giuliani similarly noted with admiration that Putin ‘makes a decision and he executes it, quickly. Then everyone reacts. That’s what you call a leader’ (Graham 2016).⁴ Putin is seen to be successful among populist audiences in

⁴ It should be noted that this is not simply a US phenomenon. Similar sentiments are also widely shared among European populist leaders Shekhovtsov (2014) *The Kremlin’s marriage of convenience with the European far right*. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/anton-shekhovtsov/kremlin%E2%80%99s-marriage-of-convenience-with-european-far-right>, Francetv Info (2014) *Marine Le Pen dit partager des “valeurs communes” avec Poutine*. https://www.francetvinfo.fr/monde/europe/marine-le-pen-dit-partager-des-valeurs-communes-avec-poutine_603281.html, Krekó et al. (2015) *Russia’s Far-Right Friends in Europe-Hungary*. *Russian Analytical Digest* 167, Savino (2015). *The Italian russophile rightist parties: a new love for Moscow*, Polyakova (2014) *Strange bedfellows: Putin and Europe’s far right*. *World Affairs* 177(3): 36–41.



delivering consistent effective action that bypass what would normally be considered liberal democratic checks and balances, causing these audiences to look on him positively. As William Wohlforth put it, Putin is portrayed as ‘a mix of James Bond and Otto von Bismarck, beating us at everything’ (Shinkman 2018).

These connections are not just about ideological kinship—they also have effects on how these elites view the potential threat of controversial Russian foreign policy. A Trump foreign policy advisor described the Russian invasion of Crimea as the so-called annexation (Snyder 2016), while Trump himself implied that Crimea was not part of the Ukraine, and when he was corrected by a reporter, he argued that ‘the people of Crimea, from what I’ve heard, would rather be with Russia than where they were’ (Pengelly and Gambino 2016). The Trump campaign was also responsible for watering down language in the Republican manifesto regarding Crimea and subsequently, in office, for opposing sanctions against Russia (Rogin 2016).

In addition to the attraction of this ideology to political elites, Russian ideology also has a larger potential constituency within the USA to buy into these sentiments. This alignment of Russian propaganda with conservative values comes at the same time as support for national-populist parties across all Western states has risen (Mudde 2007; Camus and Lebourg 2016). Recent elections have illustrated how an important part of the electorate in Western countries, usually coming from white working-class backgrounds, have gradually felt disfranchised and alienated, to the verge of becoming ‘strangers in their own land’ (Hochschild 2017), an electoral change that has been characterized by some authors as a ‘crisis of multiculturalism’ (Chin 2017). Through a combination of economic duress caused by the transformation of Western economies, sometimes through brutal deindustrialization, cultural anxiety in the face of new waves of immigration and resentment toward a ‘political correctness’ perceived as a way to silence their grievances, significant parts of the electorate feel disfranchised and gradually vote for the fringes instead of the traditional mainstream parties and candidates, with strong electoral effects (Gest 2016; Inglehart and Norris 2017: 445–447; Polakow-Suransky 2017). Russian conservative values tap into many political myths that have resonance among more authoritarian-leaning citizens, such as interest in a return to a golden age unsullied by liberal reforms that degraded their relative position within society (Schmitt 2016).

At other times, Russian narratives aim to foster the impression; then, while Russia might be a flawed model, Western democracies are no better. Whereas this is often framed as non-ideological, it taps into a broader ideological disaffection toward electoral fueled by an unprecedented degree of professionalization of the political elites, a depoliticization of issues in favor of technical national and supranational agencies and a feeling that electoral results do not drastically impact national policies (Rosanvallon 2008; Mair 2011; Fukuyama 2014). In that sense, the Russian conservative values are good at ‘heightening the contradictions’ of liberal democracies by creating a sense of moral equivalency between Moscow and Western countries, particularly given that they ideologically echo the recent trends with respect to democratic disaffection in the West.

These values are directly fed into the propaganda efforts of the Russian government. As such, Russian propaganda is not simply fake news, but the projection of a worldview that has ideological attraction, finding support from populist groups on



both the left and the right in the West. Russia has been aligning their messaging to traditional conservative concerns such as guns and Christianity, forging ties with domestic groups (Helderman and Hamburger 2017). Russia and its proxies have reached out to a number of groups, including Catholic far-right organizations, anti-gay marriage groups and other social conservatives. These Christian conservative groups, in response, have come to Russia's side on issues in the international spotlight, publicly defending Russia against Western criticism of human rights abuses (Rosenberger and Morley 2019: 2). As Peter Pomerantsev puts it, 'The Kremlin is helping foster an anti-Western, authoritarian Internationale that is becoming ever more popular in Central Europe and throughout the world' (Pomerantsev 2014: 6). This worldview additionally goes hand in hand with the Russian financial, logistical and institutional support to various neo-Nazi, hooligan and other far-right groups parties in Western countries (Shekhovstv 2018; Michael 2019), including the reported involvement of Russian military intelligence in these efforts (Schindler 2017, 2018).

While the degree of support for the values championed by the Russian government is not yet widespread in the USA, there has been a general groundswell of support for Russia among right-wing Americans (Feuer and Higgins 2016). A Gallup poll showed that Putin's popularity among self-identified Republicans increased almost 20 percentage points between 2014 and 2018 (Reinhart 2018).⁵ Another 2017 poll found that 49% of Republicans considered Russia either friendly or an ally (Easley 2017), with almost one in three of all Americans agreeing to this characterization in 2018 (Reinhart 2018). This translates into a sharp divide in the perceptions of Russia as a major national security risk, with 61% of Democrats answering affirmatively, as opposed to only 36% of Republicans (Poushter and Manevich 2017). In sum, there has been a noticeable positive shift toward Russia and the populist ideology that the regime is championing in the Republican Party and, most importantly, among officials within the Trump administration, including Trump himself, that feed into how these elites and their supporters perceive the threat of Russian interference.⁶

Russian conservative values therefore have receptive audiences for a message that, in recent times, has been increasing in popularity (Hawkins 2016; Pabst 2016; Boyle 2016). A recent study has suggested that the number of leaders promoting populist discourses globally has doubled in the last two decades (Lewis et al. 2019).

⁵ Among Democrats, alternatively, it declined by 3 points.

⁶ Again, this is not a phenomenon that is limited to the USA. Similar shifts towards accommodating Russia can be seen in the positions of populist elites across the West. As some scholars have previously argued, this correlation between open admiration of the ideological values put forward by the Russian regime among populist elites and support for Russian foreign policy is symptomatic of soft power influence Keating and Kazemarska (2019) Conservative soft power: liberal soft power bias and the 'hidden' attraction of Russia. *Journal of International Relations and Development* 22(1): 1–27. Previous studies have considered the phenomenon of 'authoritarian diffusion,' which encompasses some of these values, but they did not focus on diffusion into Western states Ambrosio (2010) Constructing a Framework of Authoritarian Diffusion: Concepts, Dynamics, and Future Research. *International Studies Perspectives* 11(4): 375–392, Way (2015) The limits of autocracy promotion: The case of Russia in the 'near abroad'. *European Journal of Political Research* 54(4): 691–706.



Mudde furthermore argues that this far-right populism must be understood not as a pathology of liberal politics, but as the radicalization of values already present within Western societies, particularly the three dimensions of nativism, authoritarianism and populism (Mudde 2007). As he argues, ‘Deep structural changes in European societies produced the current populist wave. Those changes are not likely to be reversed anytime soon, so there is no reason to anticipate that populism will fade in the near future’ (Mudde 2016: 30). Finally, as Larry Bartels notes, the prevalence of political attitudes generally attached to right-wing populism have been very stable since at least 2002. In his opinion, ‘the “wave” of populist sentiment is really more like a reservoir—and its political potential is still largely submerged’ (Bartels 2017), suggesting the potential for even greater political alignment with Russian conservative values should populist political elites successfully mobilize these voters.⁷

The overall effect of the ideological attraction of Russia, supported by Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns that reinforce this message, is that a significant segment of the Trump administration and their supporters do not see the conservative values put forward by Russia as an ideological threat. Thus, instead of opposing these narratives, many in the populist and conservative wing of the party embrace them: There a high degree of narrative alignment on some of the Russian regime’s core messages (Schmitt 2018). As one Republican Representative from California put it, ‘Conservative Republicans like myself hated communism during the Cold War. But Russia is no longer the Soviet Union’ (Helderman and Hamburger 2017). This helps to sustain the lack of consensus about the tolerability of Russian interference that we see, since those in positions of power within the government and their supporters have little a priori interest in campaigning against conservative values that they otherwise agree with.

Conclusion

The Russian government actively engages in propaganda and disinformation campaigns to discredit Western liberalism and has allegedly influenced not only the US electoral process, but senior members of the executive branch of government. There is therefore a puzzle over the relative lack of coordinated opposition to Russian interference in the political processes of the USA. While much of the literature has focused on the effects of Russian propaganda and disinformation, conceptualized as information flows, the key to this puzzle, we believe, lies in the underappreciated effect of ideological attraction. In other words, as we stated in the beginning of this paper, while much of the literature has focused on the supply side of Russian influence, this paper shifts the focus to examine some of the factors involved on the demand side. Through taking this potential for ideological attraction seriously, by

⁷ As Erica Frantz & Andrea Kendall-Taylor Frantz E and Kendall-Taylor A (2017) The Evolution of Autocracy: Why Authoritarianism Is Becoming More Formidable. *Survival* 59(5): 57–68. Point out, the majority of authoritarian regimes at the end of the Cold War were created through coups. Today, democratic decay is on trend to be the most common way to authoritarianism.



taking both the supply and demand side factors together, we believe we can better explain the muted and divided response to Russian interference: that there is not just propaganda and disinformation, but the presence of a shared conservative and populist ideology that changes threat perceptions among key domestic constituencies.

The conservative nationalist values coming from Russia resonate in particular Western audiences, helping to strengthen its propaganda and disinformation efforts and attract ideological allies among Western political elites. This ideological attraction has two important consequences. First, solutions to combat propaganda and disinformation, which generally involve the manipulation or control of information, are unlikely to be the same solutions that will solve the problem of ideological attraction to the values put forward by the Russian authorities. Second, any preexisting ideological attraction means that propaganda or disinformation echoing these conservative values could be more likely to be accepted by these audiences, since they are more likely to accept information that conforms to their preexisting world view.

This failure to reach a political consensus over Russian interference is arguably important for the Russian government, since it allows them to maintain some influence over ideologically inclined members of the Trump administration and populist members of the Republican Party without facing the combined efforts of the American state in opposing this influence. Indeed, the fact that these members of the Trump administration are running the executive branch of government likely limits the ability of the government to respond in a coordinated effort.

To conclude, it is our hope that this paper has been successful in arguing that the ideological attraction of the values put forward by the Russian regime need to be taken seriously. To date, those opposing this illiberal influence have primarily relied on labeling those attracted to these values to be ‘useful idiots’ or Kremlin puppets. While this might be a short-term discursive strategy to delegitimize these actors, it should not ignore the fact that these actors are embedded within a larger phenomenon that makes this type of influence more likely, particularly when and where Russian efforts actively align themselves to promote these values.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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