

When Blame Means Confession: Unrevealing Tactics of Russian Influence in French Elections

“**O**ur task is to support these politicians and their parties in the West in every possible way, helping them *apertum* and *secretum* to achieve good election results,” [wrote](#) Dmitry Medvedev, former President of Russia and now Deputy Head of the country’s National Security Council, in a lengthy message posted on Telegram on 3 February 2024. Specifically, Medvedev called for support for Western “anti-system parties, both right and left,” which would be more “decent” and “reasonable” than European governments that “want the death of their homelands.” A quaint Russian proverb says, “What comes out of a drunk man’s mouth is what the sober man has in his mind.” This rant by the former Russian President illustrates this popular wisdom well.

In this context, in France, it is hard not to think of the Rassemblement National (RN) and La France Insoumise (LFI), two parties set at the extremes

of the political spectrum, one on the right and the other on the left. Together, these forces have garnered significant votes, fluctuating between 30 and 40% at each election for the past decade. While there is still much to distinguish these two political parties, and while a political alliance or any kind of coalition seems impossible between them, they do meet the Russian criteria of parties that “stand up today against all the vices of liberal globalism” and whose coming to power in Moscow’s eyes “could radically improve the political landscape of the West.”

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The fact that the far left and the far right cannot join forces to form a government is firmly anchored in French political culture. For the time being, this



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The illustration is inspired by French artist Minch's cartoon, 1934.

saves democracy and causes the Kremlin's disappointment, but Moscow benefits in other ways: the rise of the extremes is a self-perpetuating phenomenon, the political debate becomes radicalized, polarization increases, and moderate and classical political forces are either overwhelmed or forced to follow the extremes in radicalization which, in retrospect, leads to further polarization and ultimately to instability and chaos. A destabilized and weak West could be even more profitable to Russia than a strong, albeit authoritarian one. Destabilization not only weakens the Kremlin's potential geopolitical rivals but also discredits the democratic form of government, a constant internal threat to Putin's regime.

Why is France important?

Throughout the Cold War, the Soviet Union aimed to divide the Western enemy. There was division within the Western camp, firstly between the

shores of the Atlantic Ocean, then within Europe itself between different states, and finally within individual countries between various social groups. With the emancipation of Eastern European countries from the Communist yoke and their accession to NATO and the EU, the goal of pitting Central and Eastern Europeans against Western Europeans was added.

In Western Europe, France has always been an essential country in terms of Soviet and later Russian strategy. A former empire, a former world power relegated to the ranks of the middle power but retaining its nostalgia and ambition for greatness virtually intact, could be an interesting partner for Moscow if taken intelligently. The key to dialogue could be Paris's age-old rivalry with the Anglo-Saxons, now dominant in the Western world. De Gaulle's policy of national independence, a certain flirtation with the non-aligned movement, and a critical and wary attitude towards the po-

litical and cultural hegemony of the United States were all branches to which Moscow could cling.

The supposedly Russophile attitude of France's cultural elites and intellectuals, yesterday of the left and today of the right, who admired Russian culture with its ballets and operas and its classical literature, could also appeal to the public. De Gaulle, Giscard, Mitterrand, Chirac, Sarkozy, and Macron, each in his own way, had a specific vision of France in the world and an ambition to play in the big league and stand up, if need be, to the biggest player among all, Washington.

France is a permanent member of the UN Security Council, a very select club of nuclear powers, and one of only two European countries, along with the United Kingdom, with an army capable of projecting itself beyond its borders. Even though France's economy is smaller than Germany's, it has always tried to play a more significant political role than the latter in the post-World War II period. Having France on its side or, better still, under its influence would mean a severe setback for the West and a victory for Moscow, capable of leading to other victories through the domino effect.

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The French political system has always been highly polarized, and anti-system parties have always enjoyed the support of a significant proportion of the electorate. In the post-war decades, this role was fulfilled by the French Communist Party, peaking at 30-35% in each election, without ever being able to take power at the national level. With the decline and virtual disappearance of the Communist Party, it was the far right of the Front National,

later the Rassemblement National, that absorbed opponents of the system as well as a constellation of small far-left parties, eventually reunited in Jean-Luc Mélenchon's France Insoumise. The existence of relatively strong anti-system parties and a sharply divided political class gave Moscow the impression of a situation that could be more easily exploited to its advantage.

Emmanuel Macron: the Enemy Who Tried to Be the Friend

In the 2017 elections, among the four leading contenders, Emmanuel Macron appeared to be the least pro-Russian of all. In addition to Marine Le Pen, the only presidential candidate Putin met personally in March 2017, and the leftist Jean-Luc Mélenchon, Sarkozy's Prime Minister, François Fillon, the center-right candidate, was also adopting quite a clear pro-Kremlin posture as he was referring to Putin as "my friend Vladimir." Later, Fillon went under investigation by the special Foreign Interference Commission of the French Parliament after becoming a member of the board of directors of two Russian petroleum companies.

So naturally, Russia tried to sink candidate Macron with its usual interference and dissemination of false information. Operation "Macron Leaks" was triggered on 5 May 2017 at 7:59 pm, one minute before the start of the electoral propaganda-free period. The objective was to spread false information about candidate Macron, who could not deny the accusations because of the restrictions on electoral campaigns imposed by the law.

Despite this attempt, Macron won the elections and remained a fair player as he attempted to restore relations with Moscow. For several years, Macron thought he could find a way out of the impasse in relations with Russia by favoring direct dialogue with Putin. He even harshly criticized diplomats who warned him about the Russian President's manipulations, [calling](#) them "deep

state” and obstructers of the President’s policy of détente with Russia.

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After several unsuccessful attempts by Macron to establish an entente with Moscow, things changed. The French President still believed for several months after the invasion of Ukraine, if not in friendship, at least in the possibility of stopping the war, as he was the only Western leader to call Putin almost every other day. Finally, during his summer visit to Ukraine (June 2022), the rupture became total, and Macron mourned the loss of his Russian policy. His Bratislava [speech](#) at Globsec 2023 is considered a turning point. Macron’s second term in office no longer has the Gaullo-Mitterrandian accents, and Paris now appears as Ukraine’s most fervent supporter. France goes further than its German ally in asserting the necessity of Ukrainian victory and now considers that there are no red lines in military support for Kyiv, not even in sending Western troops on the ground.

Kremlin’s Objectives in the French Parliamentary Elections

On 12 March 2024, the French National Assembly voted in favor of the Ukraine Aid Strategy, which, in addition to military aid, includes support for the country’s accession to the EU. With 372 votes in favor and 99 against, the favorable vote went beyond the parties supporting the President. In addition to the presidential majority, the Socialist Party, the Greens, and the vast majority of the Republican Party (center-right) approved the text, while the RN largely abstained and the LFI [voted](#)

against it. This vote thus set the course for the Kremlin’s actions on the French political scene.

The dissolution of the Assembly by the President on the evening of 9 June and the calling of early elections just three weeks after the dissolution might have led one to believe that Russian interference would be less forceful. However, the Kremlin’s disinformation agents have quickly adapted, stepping up their efforts to influence our public debate. A research study conducted by Florent Lefebvre, who analyzed data from Visibrain, a social network monitoring platform, revealed an army of 8,000 fake X communities accounts created mainly between 9 and 13 June, which supported the RN and spammed the Nouveau Front Populaire (the coalition of the left parties) and Macron’s Renaissance/Ensemble X communities with content [hostile](#) to the government. On 30 June, the Swedish media outlet SVT Nyheter identified 108 pro-Kremlin disinformation articles spread by 1,000 bots from the time of the dissolution. These articles mentioned Emmanuel Macron (63 times), Marine Le Pen, and Jordan Bardella (62 times). Macron was portrayed negatively, while Le Pen and Bardella were [not](#).

Several reports have documented the influence of the Kremlin’s digital disinformation networks since 9 June. The Doppelgänger network promoted pro-Russian political positions on a [dozen fake news sites](#) and sites impersonating authentic French media whose articles were promoted by Facebook ads and widely relayed by bots.

The CopyCop network, which uses generative AI, has created two new websites [plagiarizing](#) and using the content of French media and two inauthentic websites publishing false content and deep-fakes. On 26 June, this network distributed a disinformation article linking to a clone of the Ensemble coalition website, which featured the false information item that President Macron had promised to pay a EUR 100 bonus to citizens who

would give their voting proxies to supporters of the presidential party.

Social networks were also [invaded](#) by the false advertisement announcements of the French army calling for youngsters to join the military operation of the French Armed Forces in Ukraine.

Gaza War: a Boon for Moscow

To influence elections effectively, it is first necessary to impose the framework within which voters will reason when casting their ballots. Winning an election always takes place on a terrain that is favorable to you. Thus, election campaigns are the first and foremost battles over the media's agenda to shape voters' preoccupations: the economy, jobs, global warming, immigration, external or internal security, etc.

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To provide the best framework for extremist parties, one needs to exacerbate society's internal divisions, emphasizing problems of identity, culture, and race, and insist on the looming demographic changes that are supposed to be at the root of this all. The conflict in Gaza and the internal tensions within French society on this subject offered Moscow a godsend.

France is home to Europe's largest Muslim and Jewish communities. On top of this, the French left and far left have a long tradition of support for Palestine and the Palestinians in the face of Israeli occupation, while the far right and part of the classical right are characterized by mistrust, if not outright hostility, to the development of Islam in the country.

An in-depth study by the National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS), a public organization overseeing state-sponsored scientific research, [analyzed](#) millions of X accounts and the content of their Tweets and revealed that users with links to Russia were behind the worsening of the dissemination of the most violent images of civilian deaths in Gaza, accompanied by anti-Semitic messages and violent attacks against the government's double standards: support for Ukraine and conscious blindness on Gaza.

These digital storms combined with specific active physical measures, such as the appearance of graffiti in the streets of Paris in the form of the Star of David, just like bloody hand stains on the Holocaust memorial, are proven to have [links](#) with Russia. The [CNRS study](#) also demonstrated that even the concept of Islamo-leftism, an alliance between the left and Islam, something ubiquitous and very controversial in the French public debate, was in reality promoted by an employee of the troll factory based in Novosibirsk, Russia. This concept, which was very fashionable among the right, was even adopted by the Minister of Higher Education, undoubtedly without any idea of its origin. The most insidious, long-term, low-intensity interference is the most effective.

Could the RN and the LFI's Criticism of Russia be Trusted?

During the European and Parliamentary election campaigns, Marine Le Pen's party put a lot of effort into shedding the image of a pro-Moscow party. Jordan Bardella, the party's new rising star, made relatively decent statements on the war in Ukraine, strongly condemning Russian aggression and supporting Ukraine's territorial integrity and its right to defend itself, including by sending in French weapons. The main criticism of Macron's policy in this area concerned the possibility of sending French troops to the region and

delivering Kyiv weapons capable of striking Russian territory. “I will not let Russian imperialism absorb an allied state like Ukraine,” Bardella said in a televised debate, [pledging](#) both “support for Ukraine and avoiding an escalation with Russia in the interest of France and the French people.”

Bardella’s statements are in line with the official position of the RN since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Marine Le Pen, still the president of the party and its true leader, was forced to admit shortly after the invasion that it was “an aggression” and support Ukraine’s territorial integrity.

The French media were quick to point out with amusement that during the 2022 presidential election campaign, the RN had to destroy millions of election leaflets showing Marine Le Pen shaking hands with Vladimir Putin. Two years later, during the early parliamentary elections, Ms. Le Pen continued to distance herself from Russia.

Nonetheless, electoral concerns likely dictated this distancing. In 2022, by not supporting the Russian invasion, the RN was able to keep its voters and even increase its number, while another populist far-right party, Eric Zemmour’s *La Reconquête*, sought to justify Putin’s war in Ukraine by blaming the West, saw its scores halved before and after the invasion. Aware of the danger, Le Pen’s team contented themselves with a brief and swift condemnation of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, preached the virtues of negotiations, and went to great lengths to focus the campaign on the themes of French purchasing power and rising insecurity and criminality in French cities and their suburbs.

Two years on, the same trend persists, but we have reason to believe that it remains rather superficial and that the RN has not fundamentally changed by concealing its pro-Kremlin ties and sympathies.

For a start, the party’s criticism of Russia remains milder than that expressed by the mainstream parties. Bardella’s condemnations of the invasion were immediately followed by his own statements on the necessity of not putting French troops on Ukrainian soil and his opposition to the delivery of missiles capable of reaching Russian territory. Yet France is already delivering SCALP missiles, with a range of almost 300 km, and French military personnel, instructors, and some intelligence officers are already present in Ukraine. This would be a significant change in policy if the RN came to power.

Later, just a few days after the French parliamentary elections in which the French far-right party, despite its historic first-round score (33.2%), won only a quarter of the seats in the National Assembly and found it had no chance of governing, the party’s leadership announced its alliance in the European Parliament with Victor Orbán’s *Fidesz* whose geopolitical alignment with Moscow [remains](#) solid and unchanged. This announcement also came immediately after the return of the Hungarian Prime Minister from his trip to Moscow, a visit severely criticized by European politicians.

Moreover, despite the RN’s pledges not to be on Moscow’s payroll, it continues to back this party in France. In a [message](#) on the social network X, the Russian Foreign Ministry lent its support to the RN with a smiling photo of Ms. Le Pen and the following text: “The French people are looking for a sovereign foreign policy that serves their national interests and a break with the diktat of Washington and Brussels.” This tweet published by the Russian MFA only a few days before the decisive vote embarrassed the RN’s leadership; some even considered it a sort of Kremlin “kiss of death.”

Unlike the RN, the LFI did not nominate its only MP who visited Russia-occupied Crimea. Neither

did it have financial and business interests in Russia. The LFI's pro-Russian bias, however, has deep ideological roots. It is the heir to the traditions of the French radical left for whom the cornerstone of foreign policy is anti-Americanism. Unlike right-wing anti-Americanism, based on the glorification of national sovereignty, left-wing anti-Americanism is internationalist, Third Worldist, and anti-capitalist. It denounces American imperialism and views the entire spectrum of international politics through this analytical prism.

Although today's Russia is in no way socialist or progressive, particularly in view of its oligarchs' crony capitalism, the ultra-conservative official ideology with its Orthodox overtones, and the treatment reserved for minorities, the LFI and especially its leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon remain Moscow admirers. A visceral hatred of the United States and its policies and basic contempt for liberal democracy are the main explanations for this admiration.

Mélenchon never utters the word "America" or the "United States of America," which he stubbornly continues to call "North America." As a consequence, the LFI supports Maduro's regime in Venezuela and Castro's Cuba (at least on paper, their regimes remain socialist), finds extenuating circumstances for Bashar El Assad, and often shies away from criticizing Iranian regime.

The LFI, like the RN, after years of complacency towards Putin's Russia, including when the regime was murdering and poisoning its opponents, annexing Crimea, and waging a proxy war in the Donbas, finally condemned the invasion of Ukraine, but only by paying lip service. Despite calling Putin a "dangerous leader," Mélenchon continued in 2024 to declare that Putin acted "according to what he thought was useful for his country, just as we act according to what we think is useful for our countries," a surprising analogy

to say the least. Although not as loud as before, the LFI still considers that Westerners are at least partly responsible for the war in Ukraine through their neglect of "Russia's geopolitical interests" and the waves of NATO enlargement.

Today, the LFI claims to be the party of peace and negotiations and that France "must take the lead in the peace camp" and "dare to create peace." Mélenchon's "pacifist" position would be tantamount to de facto doing Putin's bidding and accepting a ceasefire while 20% of Ukraine's territory remains occupied. Emmanuel Macron recently described the LFI's attitude as [follows](#): "Those who place limits on our commitment to support Ukraine in defending itself against Russian aggression are not choosing peace but defeat."

In March 2024, Jean-Luc Mélenchon [declared](#): "We are in no condition to confront Russia... no one can defeat a country that spans seven time zones and that has already defeated both Napoleon and Hitler." With such a stance on the Russian regime, the LFI would be a case of useful idiots par excellence to use Leninist terminology. Moscow is not seriously considering the LFI governing France. Still, they are certainly of interest as an anti-system party that could play an essential role in the rise of political polarization and, in turn, strengthen the far right and its arguments.

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In conclusion, the dynamics of Russian influence in French politics highlight the strategic use of support for extreme political parties to further Moscow's geopolitical aims. To some extent, this shows the limits of Russian influence. If 20 years

ago Putin's friends were Schröder, Chirac, and Berlusconi, the mainstream global world leaders, now Moscow has to seek the support of radicals. These are clearly not the first-choice allies, and even these radical parties quite often shy away from showing their alignment with the Kremlin.

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By promoting and manipulating both far-left and far-right factions, Russia seeks to destabilize and weaken Western democracies. Despite recent efforts by parties like the Rassemblement National (RN) to distance themselves from overt pro-Russian positions, the underlying sympathies and historical ties suggest a superficial shift motivated by electoral considerations rather than a

genuine change in stance. Similarly, La France Insoumise (LFI) maintains a critical stance toward Western policies, indirectly aligning with Moscow's objectives through their anti-American and anti-NATO rhetoric.

The Kremlin's tactics capitalize on France's deeply polarized political landscape, leveraging the presence of anti-system solid parties to fuel division and radicalization. This strategy, rooted in a historical context of Soviet attempts to divide the West, remains relevant as Russia aims to discredit democratic governance and strengthen its influence in Europe. Ultimately, while the current political culture in France prevents an alliance between far-left and far-right forces, the rise and sustained presence of these extremes serve Moscow's broader goal of destabilizing Western unity and governance ■