

The Kremlin 'hosts' the European extreme right

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On March 22 the Russian International Conservative Forum was held in St. Petersburg, which brought together representatives of mostly marginal Russian and European ultranationalist and neo-Nazi groups. The participants included representatives of Greece's Golden Dawn, Italy's New Force, Bulgaria's Attack, the MEP Udo Voigt, the ex-leader of the National Democratic Party of Germany; and Nick Griffin, ex-leader of the British National Party, among others. Most of the groups are represented in the Alliance for Peace and Freedom, which held its first congress in February in the European Parliament. On the Russian side were representatives of nationalist and monarchist circles, as well as groups of experts. The forum was organised by the nationalist Rodina party, although its current leadership was not present at the meeting, and nor was its founder and political patron, the deputy prime minister Dmitry Rogozin. No official representatives of the Russian government participated in the forum, and the Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov declined to comment.

Commentary

- Although no representatives of the Russian government participated in the forum, it seems clear that it was the unofficial patron of the congress. The Kremlin controls officially functioning nationalist groups, including the Rodina party, and has regularly prevented opposition meetings (in December 2014 a St. Petersburg conference given by Mikhail Khodorkovsky was blocked, as was another St. Petersburg lecture of the opposition political scientist Stanislav Belkovsky in March 2015). The 1,500-participant event was organised and financed through the Rodina party (by Russian business, as the media reported) which may be yet another trace of the government's patronage of the event.
- This congress of the European radical right is one of the Kremlin's measures aimed at creating pro-Russian lobbies in the West. The final resolution of the congress echoed the slogans of Russian propaganda: confrontation with the United States' global hegemony, with the current model of the European Union and with liberal ideology; the need to deepen Russia's integration with Europe and build a common European security system; and finally, the lifting of Western sanctions. The Kremlin is using radical and marginal forces which it sees as useful in promoting pro-Russian slogans, also in extreme and controversial ways, which mainstream political parties and government representatives cannot allow themselves to do.
- The Kremlin's real goal, however, is to win over the big Eurosceptic and nationalist parties in Europe. It seeks alliance with larger parties both the right and left of the European political

scene: the French Front National, Hungary's Jobbik, Greece's Syriza and Spain's Podemos. These parties have gained much popularity in recent years, and are either in power now (such as Syriza), or are considered serious contenders for power (like the Front National), and are entering the mainstream of European politics (for example, by taking seats in the European Parliament). These parties steer clear of such controversial meetings as the one in St. Petersburg (the announced participation of the Front National was later cancelled). Nonetheless, these parties' contacts with Russia are carried out through other, higher-level channels, including through the Presidential Administration, as well as via ideologues close to the Kremlin (such as Aleksandr Dugin; he has had contacts with representatives of Syriza, who have frequented Russia). The Kremlin also provides them with financial support (the Front National received a €9 million 'loan' from Russia last year).