



R E P O R T

THE SELF-DETERMINATION PLAYBOOK:

**HOW THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION EXPLOITS
SEPARATIST MOVEMENTS IN EUROPE**





CENTER FOR DEFENSE REFORMS

THE SELF-DETERMINATION PLAYBOOK: HOW THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION EXPLOITS SEPARATIST MOVEMENTS IN EUROPE

Publisher

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Ukraine Office

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This publication was prepared within the framework of program funded by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. (Federal Republic of Germany), with the support of the Ukraine Office of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung.

SUMMARY

Alongside measures aimed at destabilizing the European Union, Russian intelligence services are conducting operations to support separatist movements within EU member states. Their interaction with organizations operating in Ireland, Catalonia (Spain), Flanders (Belgium), Saxony (Germany), Savoy (France), Moravia (Czech Republic), and Veneto (Italy) has been identified. These organizations include both far-right and far-left groups. Far-right separatist movements are characterized by deep integration into identitarian networks, as well as a persistent tendency toward the radicalization of their activities.

Key elements of the identified networks are structures showing signs of serving as fronts for Russian intelligence services, particularly Russian military intelligence (GRU). Among them are the Serbian security company EBSSA, where separatists from Ireland and Flanders underwent military-tactical training; the outlet Geopolitica.ru, which collaborates with a leader of the Catalan separatist movement; the “Foundation to Battle Injustice,” established by GRU officer Yevgeny Prigozhin, with which an adviser to the leadership of the Savoy separatists maintains ties; and “Pravfond,” from which representatives of autonomist circles in Moravia received funding.

In addition, links have been identified between separatist groups and organizations serving as instruments of Russian soft power, namely the Rossotrudnichestvo foundation and the Coordination Council of Russian Compatriots Abroad (KSORS), both connected to separatists in Saxony and the Italian region of Veneto. Evidence has also been uncovered of activities by front organizations linked to the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB), specifically the FSB’s 2nd Service operating within Irish republican circles and the FSB’s 5th Service working with separatist groups in Italy.

Such separatist actors seek not only to achieve independence for their respective regions, but also to increase tensions between EU member states. One example is the German separatist movement “Free Saxony,” which advocates for the incorporation of Polish territories into a newly established state.

The activities of separatist groups within the identitarian movement are coordinated with its nominal leader, Martin Sellner. It has been established that Sellner is employed by the German far-right magazine Compact and the journal Sezession. Both publications have a history of receiving funding and maintaining partnerships with organizations affiliated with the Russian government, including the Center for Continental Cooperation (Zentrum für Kontinentale Zusammenarbeit). Sellner’s direct employer and ideological mentor is Götz Kubitschek, one of the key ideologues of the “New Right,” who visited Moscow in 2025 and maintains professional and business relations with Filip Fomichev, a guest lecturer at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow and an associate of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy (SVOP).

Another characteristic feature of separatist movements is their aspiration to obtain political representation. In this, they are often supported by political parties that have documented ties to the Russian Federation. The clearest example is the activity of Filip Dewinter, one of the leaders of the Flemish separatist party Vlaams Belang, who, despite publicly distancing himself from Russia, was exposed for cooperating with “Voice of Europe,” a front organization for Russian intelligence services. Similarly, the separatist movement in Saxony (“Free Saxony”) closely cooperates at the regional level with the party “Alternative for Germany” (AfD), representatives of which were exposed for cooperation with the FSB’s 5th Service.

IRELAND

Because of its neutral status, its open border with the United Kingdom, and gaps in its legal framework for countering hostile foreign intelligence services, Ireland has long been viewed by Russia – and previously by the Soviet Union – as a convenient operational hub. Among other objectives, such operations were aimed at destabilizing the United Kingdom and, by extension, weakening Washington’s key ally in Europe. As British historian and intelligence scholar Christopher Andrew [notes](#) in *The Sword and the Shield: The Mitrokhin Archive and the Secret History of the KGB*, based on the archive of Vasili Mitrokhin, an officer of the KGB’s First Chief Directorate, the Soviet KGB supplied weapons to the Irish Republican Army (IRA) for this purpose.

Because of its neutral status, its open border with the United Kingdom, and gaps in its legal framework for countering hostile foreign intelligence services, Ireland has long been viewed by Russia – and previously by the Soviet Union – as a convenient operational hub

A revealing case for contemporary Russian intelligence operations is that of Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) officer **Sergey Prokopyev** (*Сергей Прокопьев*), who was [stationed](#) in Ireland from 2019 to 2022 under diplomatic cover as an adviser in the political section of the Russian Embassy. One of his core lines of activity was influence work targeting Irish radicals from both republican and loyalist milieus. The [purpose](#) of these contacts was to exacerbate confrontation between these groups against the backdrop of Brexit and the difficulties surrounding preservation of the open Irish border. The intended effects included internal destabilization of the United Kingdom, deterioration of Irish-British relations, and subsequent negative spillover into the United Kingdom’s relations with the European Union and Ireland’s relations with NATO. A key success for Prokopyev was the establishment of a special relationship with a member of the Irish parliament, operating under the call sign “Cobalt,” who voluntarily assisted him by using his own influence and contacts, including to provoke conflict within the Irish government. Ireland’s [official](#) response in 2022 was to expel Sergey Prokopyev and two of his colleagues: SVR officer **Vladimir Vasilchik** (*Владимир Васильчик*) and GRU Colonel **Igor Molyanov** (*Игорь Молянов*).

The exposure of Prokopyev’s activity demonstrates Russian intelligence interest in engaging radical republican and loyalist environments in Ireland in order to destabilize the United Kingdom, undermine Anglo-Irish relations, and pursue other objectives of the Russian government, including objectives connected to Russia’s war against Ukraine.

IRISH REPUBLICAN SOCIALIST PARTY

Within the republican milieu, particular attention in this context should be paid to the **Irish Republican Socialist Party (IRSP)**, which advocates Northern Ireland's withdrawal from the United Kingdom and its unification with the Republic of Ireland, as well as to its armed wing, the **Irish National Liberation Army (INLA)**, which is [proscribed](#) by the British government and listed among organizations associated with Irish terrorism.

As early as 2015, the IRSP joined an international network of separatist movements built by the FSB's Second Service – the Service for the Protection of the Constitutional System and the Fight Against Terrorism – [under the cover](#) of the **Anti-Globalization Movement of Russia (AGMR)**. That same year, an IRSP delegation, including **Sean Carlin** and **Michael McLaughlin**, [took part](#) in the "Dialogue of Nations" conference in Moscow organized by AGMR. During the conference, IRSP representatives demanded the "full military, economic, and political withdrawal of the EU, NATO, and the United Kingdom from Ireland." As part of the same visit, the IRSP delegation also traveled to the occupied territories of Donbas and [held meetings](#) with representatives of the region's so-called "trade unions."

Nathan Hastings, one of the leaders of the separatist milieu in Ireland, during military-tactical training in Serbia, 2025



After Russia launched its full-scale invasion in 2022, the IRSP became [involved](#) in the network of the international **Anti-Imperialist Front** (AIF), which actively engages with the **Communist Party of the Russian Federation** (CPRF) and conducts influence activity aligned with the interests of the Russian government in the course of the Russia-Ukraine war. In March 2023, for example, an AIF delegation [took part](#) in the so-called “Anti-Fascist Caravan” – a trip to the occupied territories of Donbas designed to create the appearance of “international support” for the so-called “DPR” and “LPR.” In April 2025, AIF representatives [visited](#) Moscow to participate in the “Second International Anti-Fascist Forum,” organized by the CPRF and used as a platform for coordinating left-wing movements from different countries.

*EBSSA instructor
Yevgeny
Petrushin, call
sign «Gestapo»,
a former special
operations officer
with the FSB
Alpha Group*

The **Irish Republican Socialist Party** also participates in the Anti-Imperialist Platform (AIF). In October 2022, party representative **Nathan Hastings** [spoke](#) at the AIF forum in Athens. During the event, he stated the IRSP’s “firm intention to challenge the imperialist forces of Britain.” According to the [Irish Independent](#), the forum was funded by the Russian side, and representatives of the so-called “DPR” and “LPR” also took part in the event.



Given the Soviet experience of supporting the IRA and the current trend toward radicalization in Russia’s hybrid war against the West, Nathan Hastings’ tactical and firearms [training](#) in Serbia in 2025 is noteworthy. Open-source analysis indicates that the training was conducted by the Serbian private company **EBSSA** (*European Bodyguard & Security Services Association*), which bears indicators of a Russian intelligence front organization. EBSSA is [owned](#) by former Russian special forces operative **Rustam Bogdanov** (Рустам Богданов). Its instructor cadre is

also [composed](#) largely of former personnel from Russian security and military structures, including [the GRU](#). EBSSA training is [conducted](#) on infrastructure associated with the private Russian military company ENOT Corp, which previously operated in Serbia and cooperated with Russian military intelligence, the GRU. Fighters trained through EBSSA were later [recruited](#) into the so-called Wagner PMC, a GRU front organization. Overall, EBSSA trains mercenaries for deployment in conflict zones worldwide, including in Russia’s military aggression against Ukraine.

At the same time, the **Irish Republican Socialist Party** (IRSP) continues active political and civic work aimed at worsening British-Irish relations and removing Northern Ireland from the United Kingdom. In a 2025 statement, the IRSP [announced](#) the intensification of its YES FOR UNITY campaign, aimed at [organizing](#) a referendum on Irish unification. [Under](#) the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement of April 10, 1998, Northern Ireland’s status may be changed by a majority vote of its population. The IRSP [declares](#) support

for this mechanism; however, in the same statement it notes that if, in its assessment, the referendum process is blocked, “republicans will be forced to consider other politically driven alternatives,” without specifying what those alternatives would entail.

Historically, the IRSP’s armed wing has been the **Irish National Liberation Army** (INLA). Despite being formally proscribed, the INLA [continues](#) to appear in violent incidents on the island of Ireland. In 2024, the [Belfast Telegraph](#), citing sources in the British intelligence community, reported that the INLA may have received funding from Russia.

Today, Nathan Hastings is one of the [leaders](#) of the radical republican group **Fronta Poblachtach** (*Republican Front*), which also conducts influence activity aimed at worsening British-Irish relations and [radicalizing](#) anti-migrant sentiment in Ireland. Fronta Poblachtach [organizes](#) actions and protests against the “British presence in Ireland”; some of its activities are directed against NATO, the United States, and the European Union, and the group actively [recruits](#) new members.

A common feature of nearly all separatist movements examined in this study is an attempt to obtain political representation. In 2024, Nathan Hastings [ran](#) as an independent candidate in local elections to Dublin City Council.

The IRSP and the INLA also participate in pro-Russian influence activity along other lines, including in relation to the Russia–Ukraine war. For example, in October 2022, an anti-Ukrainian rally [took place](#) in Dublin, organized by the **Coordinating Council of Russian Compatriots in Ireland** (CCRCI), a structure that functions as an instrument of Russian influence abroad. Individuals connected to the IRSP, including Nathan Hastings, took part in the event.

The IRSP actively participated in an anti-Ukrainian rally in Dublin organized by the Coordinating Council of Russian Compatriots (CCRC), 2022



During the rally, representatives of Russia's state-run Channel One interviewed Hastings, who publicly repeated [claims](#) about the "neo-Nazi Kyiv regime" and "killings in Donbas," echoing the official position of the Russian government.

The Coordinating Council of Russian Compatriots in Ireland (CCRCI) also interacted with another Irish organization, the **Truth and Neutrality Alliance** (TNA), founded in 2022. TNA presents itself as a movement for Irish neutrality and opposes NATO membership; among other activities, it has participated in [protests](#) against the use of Shannon Airport by the U.S. Air Force.

One of TNA's leaders is **John Connolly**, a former Real IRA member sentenced to 14 years in prison for terrorist activity. Open sources also [link](#) him to the Continuity IRA (CIRA). In May 2025, Connolly took part in an event marking the 80th anniversary of the Soviet victory, organized by the CCRCI. During his speech, he publicly supported Russia's position on the war against Ukraine and displayed a photograph of an Irishman who, according to him, had died in Ukraine. In October 2024, Connolly also visited the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Dublin. The meeting was attended by Deputy Head of Mission **Igor Alekseyev** (Игорь Алексеев).

John Connolly, a former Real IRA member sentenced to 14 years in prison for terrorist activity, at an event organized by the Russian Embassy in Dublin, 2025

As for the **IRSP** and **Fronta Poblachtach**, both organizations have already announced that in 2026 they will continue their activity aimed at "getting Britain out of Ireland." In its January 1, 2026 statement, the IRSP declared its intention to "redouble" efforts to achieve "Irish unity" and announced plans to build organized working-class communities across Ireland. Fronta Poblachtach [began](#) the year with a campaign against "British and European imperialism."



CATALONIA

At the peak of confrontation between Catalan independence supporters and the government in Madrid in 2016–2017, officers of Unit 29155 of the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces (GRU) – a unit long [associated](#) with political destabilization and regime-disruption operations – [operated](#) in Barcelona with the aim of exploiting the crisis to [destabilize](#) Spain. To [escalate](#) the crisis, Russian intelligence services used a set of subversive tools ranging from propaganda and disinformation operations to financial and organizational support for key actors.

Spain opened a number of criminal investigations related to Russian financing of, and [links](#) to, separatist actors, including the investigation known as the “Volhov case.” However, in March 2025 Spain’s High Court [closed](#) a key case against former Catalan head of government and former Junts per Catalunya separatist leader **Carles Puigdemont**. Since 2023, Junts per Catalunya has been part of the coalition supporting Spain’s government.

To escalate the crisis, Russian intelligence services used a set of subversive tools ranging from propaganda and disinformation operations to financial and organizational support for key actors

In response to the public controversy triggered by Russian interference in Catalonia-related processes, Brussels called for stronger counter-disinformation measures. For example, the EU’s **East StratCom Task Force** significantly [expanded](#) monitoring of fake narratives about Catalonia. In the subsequent period, the volume of public information material by Russian state media focused on Catalan independence declined; in particular, in 2025 no separate publications on this topic were identified on the Spanish-language version of Russia Today. At the same time, the issue of Russian influence on Catalan separatists has appeared less frequently in public expert discourse.

Given that influence agents remain one of the key tools of Russian active measures, analysis of the current situation in Catalonia does not provide grounds to conclude that Russia has abandoned its interest in Catalan separatism or its potential use for Russian objectives. Preconditions for potential covert influence also remain: [according](#) to polling by the Centre d’Estudis d’Opinió (CEO), as of 2025, 39 percent of Catalans supported full independence for the region.

THE POLITICAL PARTY SOM CATALANS ("WE ARE CATALANS")

In this context, the far-right, xenophobic political party **Som Catalans** ("We Are Catalans") deserves attention. The party [opposes](#) what it calls "Spanish colonialism" and demands full independence for Catalonia from Madrid. A characteristic [feature](#) of its activity is influence work aimed at discrediting negotiations between the Catalan government and Madrid on autonomy issues and at reactivating separatist aspirations in the region. Som Catalans takes a confrontational position even toward other pro-independence groups in the region: in October 2025, on the eighth anniversary of the 2017 referendum, the party [published](#) criticism of Catalonia's main separatist leaders for allegedly "submitting to Madrid."

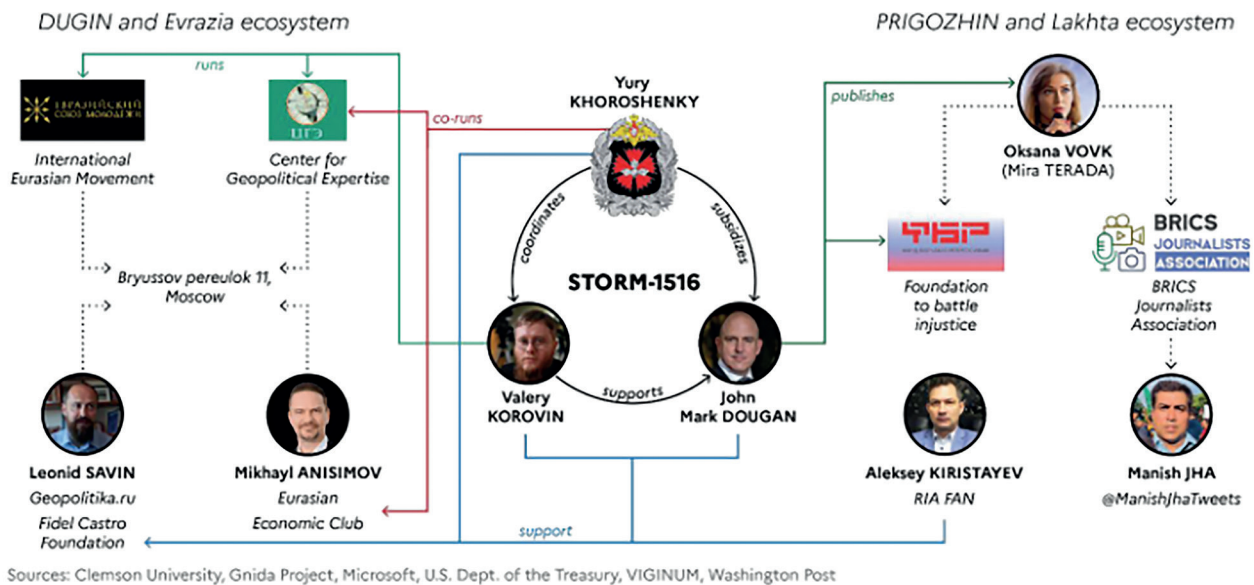


Enrique Ravello, leader of the Catalan separatist party Som Catalans, acting as an «international observer» at the pseudo-referendum in occupied Crimea

One of the party's co-founders and leaders, **Enrique Ravello Barber**, [comes](#) from the Spanish neo-Nazi organization **CEDADE** (*Círculo de Amigos de Europa*), with which **Alexander Dugin** (Александр Дугин), now a strategic adviser to the Russian presidential administration, had been [building](#) ties since the late 1980s. Before founding Som Catalans, Ravello led the **Republican Social Movement** (*Movimiento Social Republicano*, MSR), which was Dugin's key [partner](#) in building an influence network in Spain. Among other things, the MSR [organized](#) Alexander Dugin's visit to Spain and the presentation of the Spanish-language edition of his book *The Fourth Political Theory*. The foreword to that edition was

written by Ravello's close associate, CEDADE founder **Isidro-Juan Palacios**. In 2025, Spanish far-right actors from Democracia Nacional, founded by former CEDADE members, [joined](#) the new neo-Nazi international network "Paladins," created by Dugin and Kremlin-linked Russian oligarch **Konstantin Malofeyev** (Константин Малофеев).

In 2014, Enrique Ravello [visited](#) occupied Crimea as a so-called "international observer" at the illegal referendum. The visit was organized by the **Eurasian Observatory for Democracy and Elections** (EODE), headed by Belgian activist **Luc Michel**, who had professional ties to Alexander Dugin. EODE was financed by the Russian government and used in efforts to legitimize the occupation of Ukrainian territories. During the visit, Ravello gave an interview to Russian state media outlet [Russia Today](#), in which he claimed that the referendum was "transparent and legal."



Enrique Ravello is currently an author for Geopolitika.ru, an outlet within the GRU-linked ecosystem

Today, **Enrique Ravello** is an [author](#) for Geopolitika.ru, whose [partner](#) is the Center for Geopolitical Expertise (CGE) headed by **Valery Korovin** (Валерий Коровин). [According](#) to the U.S. Department of the Treasury, CGE and its personnel worked directly with a GRU unit, while the activity of Korovin and other CGE personnel was directed by a GRU officer and a CGE-affiliated individual identified in [open sources](#) as Yuri Khoroshevsky (Юрий Хорошевский), CGE's deputy director. According to the American research organization [RAND](#), Geopolitika.ru is controlled by Russian-government-affiliated oligarch **Konstantin Malofeyev** (Константин Малофеев). Ravello also translates materials from Geopolitika.ru and from Katehon, another Dugin-linked think tank, for various Spanish-language platforms.

Despite his illegal visit to occupied Crimea, Enrique Ravello visited Kyiv in July 2015, where he [took part](#) in a so-called "Constitutional Forum" organized by political analyst **Oleksii Kalinichenko**, who had worked in structures connected to Viktor Medvedchuk – a known Russian agent of influence who was later formally suspected by the Ukrainian government of treason. According to Ukrainian sources, the "Constitutional Forum" formed part of efforts to [promote](#) ideas aligned with Russian interests in the context of destabilizing Ukraine. Kalinichenko also served as deputy head of the organization Civic Union, which promoted the federalization of Ukraine – a project that, according to the Foreign Intelligence Service of Ukraine, was viewed as an [instrument](#) in Russian intelligence operations aimed at subjugating Ukraine.

Enrique Ravello visited Kyiv in July 2015, where he took part in a so-called «Constitutional Forum» organized by political analyst Oleksii Kalinichenko, who had worked in structures connected to Viktor Medvedchuk – a known Russian agent of influence



Ravello (left) has professional ties to Filip Dewinter, one of the leaders of Flemish separatism, who is connected to organizations affiliated with Russian intelligence services

INTERNATIONAL TIES OF SOM CATALANS

Today, Som Catalans is developing links with European far-right political forces, many of which have repeatedly appeared in studies on Russian influence in Europe.

These include the [Freedom Party of Austria](#) (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*, FPÖ), which has a cooperation agreement with Russia's ruling United Russia party; Italy's [Lega Nord](#), which signed a cooperation agreement with United Russia in 2017 and conducted financing talks with representatives of the FSB's Fifth Service; and **Germany's Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)**, whose representatives have been [exposed](#) as cooperating with Russian intelligence services, including the FSB, in activities aimed at undermining German assistance to Ukraine. The network also includes **Romania's Alliance for the Union of Romanians** (*Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor*, AUR), whose presidential candidate Călin Georgescu was [exposed](#) as having links to the GRU, as well as the Belgian separatist party **Vlaams Belang**, which [became](#) one of the Russian government's key partners in activities aimed at legitimizing the so-called "separatist enclaves" in Donbas and the occupation of Crimea. Enrique Ravello is a partner and close friend of one of Vlaams Belang's leaders, **Filip Dewinter**, who has long-standing and close [ties](#) to structures bearing indicators of Russian intelligence front organizations. Som Catalans [supported](#) the publication in Spain of Dewinter's book *Inch'Allah? The Islamization of Europe* in Spanish and Catalan.

Today, Som Catalans is developing links with European far-right political forces, many of which have repeatedly appeared in studies on Russian influence in Europe



On April 30, 2023, Som Catalans, together with representatives of AfD, AUR, and Vlaams Belang, signed a declaration against the European Union, «This EU Is Not Europe»

One of this network's key lines of activity is influence work aimed at the fragmentation of the European Union. On April 30, 2023, Som Catalans, together with representatives of AfD, AUR, and Vlaams Belang, [signed](#) a declaration against the European Union titled "This EU Is Not Europe." In February 2026, the founding conference of the new Make Europe Great Again (MEGA) alliance [took place](#) in Brussels, chaired by Filip Dewinter. Enrique Ravello was among the participants. MEGA's main objective is the "weakening of the EU's supranational institutions."

Som Catalans' links with the far-right radical separatist movement in Flanders, Schild & Vrienden, also warrant attention. Enrique Ravello and Schild & Vrienden leader **Dries Van Langenhove** cooperate within the identitarian movement, whose activity aligns with the interests of the Russian government and is aimed at radicalizing anti-migrant sentiment. In recent years, Som Catalans has [used](#) the slogan "Més independència, menys immigració" ("More independence, less immigration") in its activity. Under the pretext of defending Catalan identity, Som Catalans [calls for](#) "stopping the Islamization of Catalonia." The party also sharply criticizes [the United States](#) and NATO.

The links between the far-right **Schild & Vrienden** movement and the key Belgian opposition separatist party **Vlaams Belang** require separate attention.

One of this network's key lines of activity is influence work aimed at the fragmentation of the European Union

BELGIUM. FLANDERS

The 2023 report of Belgium's State Security Service (VSSE) [points](#) to the accelerated radicalization of far-right groups in Belgium. Similar trends are also visible in parts of the Flemish nationalist and separatist milieu, some representatives of which have links to the Russian Federation.

According to VSSE, one driver of this radicalization is the spread within the far-right environment of so-called "accelerationism" – the idea of an inevitable racial civil war that must be accelerated through terrorist violence. A second ideological component of right-wing extremism is "identitarianism," which in the contemporary context refers to a far-right ideology of ethnocultural isolation. As noted in the Center for Defense Reforms report "Operation Tsargrad," an important factor in the radicalization of identitarian groups in Europe is the influence of individuals and organizations linked to the Russian government.

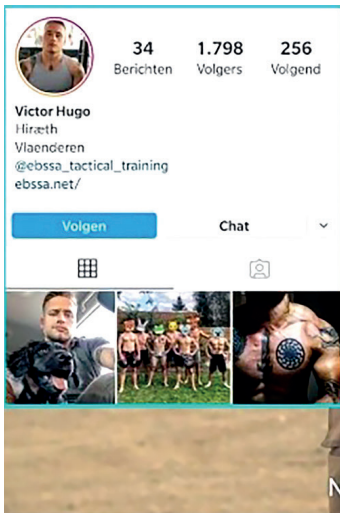
One driver of this radicalization is the spread within the far-right environment of so-called «accelerationism» – the idea of an inevitable racial civil war that must be accelerated through terrorist violence

In Belgium, one of the key actors in the far-right identitarian environment is the separatist organization Schild & Vrienden ("Shield and Friends"), which [advocates](#) independence for Flanders, one of the country's three regions alongside Wallonia and the Brussels-Capital Region. Its activity combines ideas of Flemish ethnocultural nationalism, identitarianism, and [accelerationism](#), spread primarily among young people.

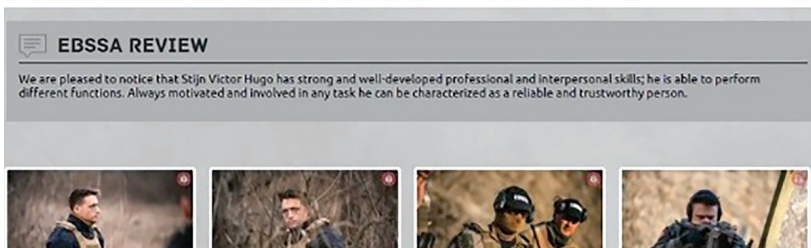
The separatist movement Schild & Vrienden was founded in 2017 by **Dries Van Langenhove**, a former member of the Belgian Chamber of Representatives from the separatist **Vlaams Belang** party, which has repeatedly [appeared](#) in authoritative Western studies on Russian influence.

[Analysis](#) of internal communications among the organization's activists in closed Discord chats indicates systematic dissemination of hate speech, encouragement of violence, and calls for the outbreak of civil war on ethnic grounds. Dries Van Langenhove [urged](#) members to obtain firearms permits, writing that in Belgium "it is still possible to get a permit" and that they should take advantage of this.

Schild & Vrienden's ties to the Serbian private company European Bodyguard & Security Services Association (EBSSA), discussed in the Ireland section, merit particular attention. EBSSA bears indicators of a Russian military intelligence, or GRU, front organization and provides military-tactical training services.



Nee, zeker niet.



Stijn Lorins, known as Victor Hugo, an activist of the separatist S&V movement and former French Foreign Legion serviceman, is a tactical training instructor at the Russia-linked company EBSSA



Weerbaar, the «Active Club» of Flemish separatists, where training in contact combat sports is conducted

S&V activist and former French Foreign Legion serviceman **Stijn Lorins** is a tactical training [instructor](#) at **EBSSA**. Lorins, known in the Flemish far-right scene under the alias “Victor Hugo,” is also a [trainer](#) at **Weerbaar**, the so-called Active Club founded by Schild & Vrienden.

The Flemish Weerbaar is part of the decentralized international network of “Active Clubs” – sports cells founded by American extremist Robert Rundo. These clubs provide physical training in contact combat sports and [conduct](#) indoctrination into accelerationist and neo-fascist ideas.

The financing of Schild & Vrienden has repeatedly been the subject of public debate. In 2019, the online company Autodoc – an auto-parts retailer founded by individuals from Russia – placed large volumes of advertising on European far-right websites, including on the Flemish nationalist outlet Scepter, whose editor-in-chief at the time [was](#) Dries Van Langenhove. According to [The New York Times](#), the use of such advertising mechanisms is one method for financing and sustaining far-right movements in Europe in Russia’s interest.

SCHILD & VRIENDEN AND FENIKS

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the far-right movement **Feniks** emerged among former and [current](#) members of Schild & Vrienden. It played a visible role in protests against quarantine restrictions in Belgium and later [became](#) a prominent actor on the radical wing of the Flemish nationalist environment. In its texts and public activity, the movement [cultivates](#) the distinctiveness of Flemish identity, stresses its difference from Walloon identity, and promotes an anti-Belgian frame by arguing that Flanders and Wallonia “live in parallel realities” and that Belgian identity rests mainly on a complex administrative construction. This discourse is not a direct call for secession, but it clearly [operates](#) within the field of Flemish separatist nationalism.

Kris Roman, a Belgian far-right figure linked to pro-Russian influence networks, plays a visible [role](#) in the Feniks milieu. [According to](#) an investigation by De Morgen, as early as the early 2000s he established contacts with the circle of retired KGB and FSB General Alexander Nikitin, as well as with Sergey Voytsinsky, a militant from the fascist paramilitary group Russian National Unity. Representatives of the Russian diplomatic corps in Belgium regularly participated in the work of Euro-Rus, the think tank headed by Roman. Roman also systematically took part in campaigns aligned with Russian interests, including [activity](#) around the so-called “DPR representative center” in Belgium and the [legitimization](#) of pseudo-elections in the occupied territories of Ukraine.

One of the ideological [inspirations](#) for the Feniks environment is **Robert Steuckers**, a Belgian ideologue of the New Right milieu and a long-standing [colleague](#) of Alexander Dugin. In 2023, Steuckers co-authored Feniks’ programmatic manifesto, “Essays Against the Globalist Narrative,” in which the movement set out its anti-globalist, illiberal, and identitarian positions, including criticism of mass migration, supranational liberal

Robert Steuckers (left), one of the ideological inspirations behind the Feniks movement, is a long-standing colleague of Alexander Dugin, strategic adviser to the Russian Presidential Administration



institutions, the destruction of cultural distinctiveness, and social atomization. Earlier, Steuckers translated and published Dugin's texts and cooperated with him in publishing projects, including around the journal *Elementy*. Researcher Anton Shekhovtsov has [characterized](#) him as one of the key intermediaries between Dugin and European far-right circles. Today, Steuckers [publishes](#) on Geopolitica.ru, whose links to the GRU were established in the previous section of this report, and also [participates](#) alongside Kris Roman in the work of the Center for Euro-Russian Studies.

STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS UNDER RUSSIAN INFLUENCE AS A PERSONNEL PIPELINE FOR FLEMISH SEPARATISTS

Representatives of KVHV, a personnel pipeline for Flemish separatism, developed relations with the United Russia party starting in the 2000s. Moscow

Important sources of personnel replenishment for parts of the Flemish nationalist and separatist activist environment have been, and remain, the **Catholic Flemish Student Association** (*Katholiek Vlaams Hoogstudentenverbond*, KVHV) and the **Nationalist Student Association** (*Nationalistische Studentenvereniging*, NSV). A number of prominent figures in the radical Flemish milieu, [including](#) Schild & Vrienden leader Dries Van Langenhove, passed through these organizations. Since at least the mid-2000s, this environment has [maintained](#) contacts with Russian

state, diplomatic, and security-linked structures. Representatives of the Catholic Flemish Student Association, including its Ghent branch, repeatedly visited Russia at the invitation of United Russia's youth wing, where they met with members of the State Duma of the Russian Federation and with Alexander Dugin. Members of KVHV and NSV also participated in the camp at Lake Seliger, which was used by Russian intelligence services for youth recruitment and for providing military-tactical skills.

An important connective node between KVHV, NSV, and the pro-Russian environment was the **Euro-Rus** think tank created by Kris Roman. This structure provided not only ideological but also personnel overlap: individual members of the student organizations, including **Kevin Ranson**, worked at Euro-Rus, while leaders of KVHV's Ghent cell [served](#) as Roman's stable access channel to the student activist base. As a result, this created a

standing communications bridge between the Flemish nationalist student environment and pro-Russian influence networks.



In the reverse direction, representatives of United Russia's youth wing, as well as the Nashi movement, [visited](#) Belgium and held joint events with KVHV and NSV. The public content of these events centered on anti-migrant, anti-American, and anti-Western rhetoric. **Roman Labin** also [played](#) a visible role in this environment. He is the coordinator of the Russian diaspora in Belgium and the son of **Viktor Labin**, who, together with his sons, was [sanctioned](#) by the U.S. Department of the Treasury for supplying weapons components to the Russian Federation. According to available data, Roman Labin coordinated interaction between parts of the student activist milieu

Contacts between the Russian environment and these student structures were not only political, but also practical and organizational, creating a durable infrastructure of presence

and Russian diplomatic missions in Belgium, while his construction company carried out renovation work at KVHV premises in Ghent. This indicates that contacts between the Russian environment and these student structures were not only political, but also practical and organizational, creating a durable infrastructure of presence.

It is notable that former NSV president **Erland Pison** later [married](#) a Russian woman – the daughter of a Federal Security Service employee – and since 2019 has worked as an assistant to European Parliament member **Thomas Vandendriessche** of the separatist Vlaams Belang party.

IDENTITARIAN NETWORKS AND THE RADICALIZATION OF ANTI-MIGRANT SENTIMENT

Today, Schild & Vrienden, Feniks, KVHV, and NSV [operate](#) within the broader transnational environment of the European identitarian movement, certain elements of which have links to the Russian Federation. In 2023, for example, NSV [organized](#) a speech in Leuven by one of the key leaders of the European identitarians, **Martin Sellner**; that same year, **Feniks** provided its platform for an interview with **Alexander Markovics**, one of the [founders](#) of Austria's Identitäre Bewegung; and in 2025 Dries Van Langenhove and Sellner publicly [appeared](#) among the organizational core of the Remigration Summit, a transnational forum [bringing](#) together identitarian activists from different European countries.

Martin Sellner, a close friend and partner of Dries Van Langenhove, is one of the key [leaders](#) of Austria's **Identitäre Bewegung**, which the German government has designated as extremist, and of the [broader](#) European identitarian milieu. Despite Sellner's public role as the "face" of the identitarians, his [mentor](#), employer, and strategic partner is **Götz Kubitschek**, the chief ideologue of Germany's New Right. Sellner works at Kubitschek's



Publisher Götz Kubitschek (left), employer of identitarian movement leader Martin Sellner, in Moscow at the invitation of his business partner, a member of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Moscow, 2025

institute, the **Institut für Staatspolitik** (IfS), one of the key intellectual and organizational platforms of the German far-right environment. In 2023, Germany's Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution classified the Institut für Staatspolitik as an extremist organization.

At the same time, IfS partners include structures connected to Russian intelligence services, including the **Suvorov Institute in Austria**, whose partner is the **Russkiy Mir Foundation**, and, until recently, the **Center for Continental Cooperation** (*Zentrum für Kontinentale Zusammenarbeit*), headed by **Yuri Kofner**, director of the Eurasian Club of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The professional and political contacts of Götz Kubitschek also deserve attention. His business and professional partner is **Philipp Fomichov**, a visiting lecturer at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow and an author for Russia in Global Affairs, a journal founded by the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy (SVOP), which, according to the Swedish Defence Research Agency, was [created](#) by Russian intelligence officers. Kubitschek himself is a regular guest on Russian state channels Russia Today and Sputnik. In November 2025, he [visited](#) Moscow at Fomichov's invitation, where he signed a long-term cooperation agreement with the publishing house Silene Noctiflora. In 2024, Fomichov, in turn, visited Germany and participated in the Winter Academy of the Institut für Staatspolitik, where Martin Sellner is a regular participant and lecturer.

Martin Sellner, a close friend and partner of Dries Van Langenhove, is one of the key leaders of Austria's Identitäre Bewegung, which the German government has designated as extremist, and of the broader European identitarian milieu



*Martin Sellner,
leader of the
European
identitarian
movement,
during training
at the Flemish
separatists'
Active Club*

organizations are also visible. Schild & Vrienden, Martin Sellner, and other European identitarian structures conduct joint events, including in [Belgium](#) in 2023 and in [Italy](#) and [Switzerland](#) in 2025. Sellner also trained at Schild & Vrienden's Active Club. This indicates that interaction among these milieus is not limited to media or symbolic support; it includes personal participation in joint events, organizational coordination, and elements of practical training.

Sellner is also a staff member of IfS's journal **Sezession** and a correspondent for **Compact**. The latter [received](#) funding from the Russian-government-affiliated Institute of Democracy and Cooperation to organize conferences attended by Russian intelligence officers and agents, including FSB agent **Vladimir Sergiyenko** (Владимир Сергиенко) and KGB General **Vladimir Yakunin** (Владимир Якунин). Thus, this is not merely a matter of ideological affinity among European far-right milieus, but of their inclusion in a broader circle of contacts and platforms involving Russian state, quasi-state, and intelligence-linked structures.

Within this network, direct horizontal links among European identitarian

POLITICAL DIMENSION

After the annexation of Crimea and the invasion of Donbas in 2014, the Russian Federation invested significant [resources](#) in developing cooperation with Flemish separatist political parties. The central actor in this environment is Flanders' largest opposition [party](#), **Vlaams Belang** (VB).

VB representatives participated in activities aimed at legitimizing Russia's occupation of Ukrainian territories and supporting Moscow-controlled entities in Donbas. In particular, they acted as so-called ["international observers"](#) at the pseudo-referendum in occupied Crimea and at the so-called ["elections"](#) in the "DPR" and "LPR." Such trips to the occupied territories were coordinated through the Eurasian Observatory for Democracy and Elections – the structure discussed in the Catalonia section – which is [linked](#) to the GRU through the so-called Wagner PMC.

In addition, VB representatives repeatedly visited Russia, where they held official meetings with Russian government figures, including [former](#) Roscosmos head **Dmitry Rogozin** (Дмитрий Рогозин), who [played](#) a visible role in advancing Russian influence in right-wing and radical circles

in the West. Party representatives also [traveled](#) to Syria, where they visited Russian Armed Forces military bases and met with Bashar al-Assad.

After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, VB [changed](#) its public rhetoric and formally condemned the Kremlin's military aggression. However, Vlaams Belang [continues](#) to conduct influence activity beneficial to the Russian government, including efforts to lift anti-Russian sanctions, [oppose](#) arms deliveries to Ukraine, [radicalize](#) anti-migrant sentiment, and inflame separatism. In addition, VB continues to cooperate with other European political forces exposed as having links to Russia, while individual party representatives continue to [maintain](#) contacts with structures identified as Russian intelligence front organizations.



One of the leaders of the separatist party Vlaams Belang with Sergey Naryshkin, head of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR)

In this context, particular attention should be paid to **Filip Dewinter**, a VB vice president of the Flemish Parliament. Dewinter has repeatedly visited the Russian Federation, where, among other meetings, he [met](#) with the current head of the SVR and then chairman of the State Duma, **Sergey Naryshkin** (Сергей Нарышкин), as well as with [Leonid Slutsky](#) (Леонид Слуцкий), chair of the State Duma Committee on International Affairs. He also served several times as a so-called "observer" in Russian parliamentary and presidential elections.

Dewinter also participated in campaigns bearing indicators of coordinated influence activity beneficial to Russia. In particular, he [introduced](#) a resolution in the Belgian Parliament calling for the lifting of anti-Russian sanctions and [took part](#) in the presentation of the Yalta International Economic Forum in Crimea, a platform used by Russia to promote narratives of the "normalization" of Crimea's occupation.

The nature of Dewinter's relationship with Russian Consul General in Antwerp **Georgy Kuznetsov** (Георгий Кузнецов), who was expelled in 2022 on suspicion of espionage for Russia, requires separate analysis. After being appointed to Antwerp in 2021, Kuznetsov began actively building local contacts, and Dewinter played a visible role in this process. In particular, he formally received the Russian consul general in the Flemish Parliament building roughly one month before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and he invited him as an honored guest and speaker to a public event organized in Antwerp by the Hertogfonds foundation on March 10, 2022.

Filip Dewinter is the founder of **Hertogfonds**, a foundation that declares support for Flemish culture but also serves as a [platform](#) for advancing a Flemish identitarian and separatist agenda. The foundation's administrator is Flemish political activist **Jan Penris**, who acted as an "observer" at the

so-called referendum in Crimea and at “elections” in occupied Donbas and is under Ukrainian sanctions. Other Russia-linked activists also speak at Hertogfonds events. For example, on December 14, 2024, the foundation hosted Eddy Hermy, co-founder of the Flemish nationalist movement N-SA, which [included](#) the Euro-Rus association founded by Flemish far-right activist Kris Roman, who has long-standing ties to Russia. Hertogfonds also promotes claims about “unfair economic relations between Flanders and Wallonia” and raises the issue of holding a [referendum](#) on regional independence.

Despite public attempts to distance himself from Russia, in 2023 Filip Dewinter cooperated with Voice of Europe, which Czech authorities and the European Union exposed as a platform for Russian influence operations in Europe. [According to](#) the Czech counterintelligence service BIS, through

Vlaams Belang ultimate objective is the dissolution of the Belgian state structure and the creation of a sovereign Flemish state with Brussels as its capital

covert financing and control of **Voice of Europe**, Viktor Medvedchuk sought to influence public opinion in Europe and create conditions for weakening support for Ukraine; according to Czech authorities, he secretly financed political activity, including support for European politicians sympathetic to Russian interests. Medvedchuk’s partner Artem Marchevsky, in turn, was assessed by the Council of the EU to be the covert [head of](#) Voice of Europe, while the platform itself was used for systematic international media manipulation, remuneration of propagandists, and construction of an influence network targeting representatives of political parties in EU countries. As part of his [cooperation](#) with Voice of Europe, Filip Dewinter conducted influence activity aimed at strengthening far-right and Euroskeptical forces ahead of the European Parliament elections.

As for Vlaams Belang more broadly, Flemish independence is not merely a political slogan but a core programmatic objective of the party. In its declaration of principles, Vlaams Belang [identifies](#) “Flemish independence” as the first point of its identity and states directly that it fights for an independent Flanders. Its ultimate objective is the dissolution of the Belgian state structure and the creation of a sovereign Flemish state with Brussels as its capital. The same [approach](#) is embedded in the 2024 electoral program, where the title of the first section – “Flemish state-building: our future is an independent Flanders” – frames the entire document in separatist terms. The program states that independent Flanders and Wallonia are the “only option,” envisions a separation treaty with Wallonia, the transformation of the current language border into a state border, and the retention of Brussels as the capital of the “Flemish Republic.” Moreover, the party already describes the institutional design of a post-Belgian state, including direct elections for a minister-president in an independent Flanders and the abolition of federal levels of authority. Separatism is therefore not a peripheral issue or electoral rhetoric for Vlaams Belang; it is the core of the party’s ideology and long-term political project.

FREE SAXONY

According to Germany's Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV), Russian influence operations in Germany are aimed at undermining trust in state institutions, calling into question the mechanisms of the democratic state, and deepening social polarization, including through attacks on the federal government and parliament. Regional movements that question the authority of the federal government may be one potential vector for such activity. In this context, links between the Russian Federation and autonomist and separatist movements in Germany, particularly in the eastern German state of Saxony, deserve attention.

Saxony is of special interest because several factors combine there to increase the resonance of anti-federal messaging: high levels of distrust toward the federal government, a pronounced regional identity, and the specific historical experience of the eastern German states

Saxony is of special interest because several factors combine there to increase the resonance of anti-federal messaging: high levels of distrust toward the federal government, a pronounced regional identity, and the specific historical experience of the eastern German states. According to the [Sachsen-Monitor](#), the share of Saxony residents who report low or no trust in the federal government is among the highest in Germany. Combined with a persistent sense of Saxon distinctiveness and the legacy of the German Democratic Republic, this creates an environment in which demands for broader regional autonomy – and even separation from the Federal Republic of Germany – find heightened political sensitivity.

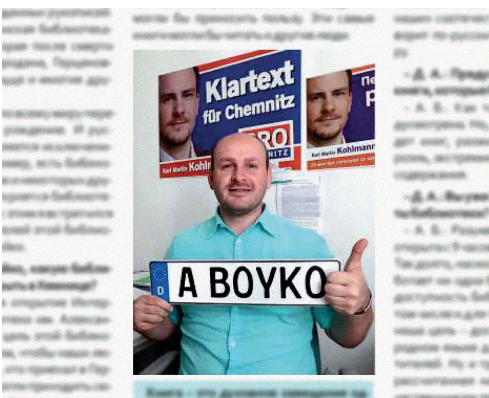
It was in this environment that the movement and party **Freie Sachsen** (*Free Saxony*) was [created](#) in 2021. It initially [functioned](#) as a protest platform against COVID-19 restrictions but later shifted toward an openly anti-federal and separatist agenda. According to Saxony's Office for the Protection of the Constitution, the movement's activity is [directed](#) against the very existence of the Federal Republic of Germany as a state, while in its own programmatic positions Freie Sachsen advocates maximum autonomy for Saxony up to and including "Säxit" – the state's exit from the Federal Republic of Germany. Movement representatives have also openly [spoken](#) about the possibility of creating a separate Saxon state and have included within their imagined "historical Saxony" not only parts of present-day Thuringia, Brandenburg, and Saxony-Anhalt, but also certain territories currently under Polish jurisdiction. This is therefore not merely a regionalist protest project, but a political



*Demonstration
by the Free
Saxony party
in Chemnitz,
2024*

movement with a distinct autonomist-separatist orientation operating in an environment of heightened distrust toward the federal center and thus potentially convenient for external influence operations.

The [founder](#) and leader of the movement is German lawyer Martin Kohlmann, who is under observation by Saxony's state Office for the Protection of the Constitution because of his affiliation with the right-wing extremist milieu. After studying at Leipzig University and the University of Basel, Kohlmann completed legal training in the Russian Federation, in Krasnoyarsk, from 2007 to 2010. Upon returning to Germany, he specialized in work with the Russian-speaking community and provided legal support to Russian companies in Germany, as well as to German companies [investing](#) in the Russian Federation.



*Alexander Boyko
and the leader
of the Saxon
separatists
(in the
background),
co-founders of the
Tolstoi cultural
association*

In 2014, Martin Kohlmann and **Alexander Boyko** (Александр Бойко), a representative of the Russian diaspora in Germany, [co-founded](#) the **Tolstoi** cultural association (*Tolstoi eingetragener Verein*), focused on work with the Russian-speaking community. The association publishes the magazine **Berliner Telegraph**, [registered](#) at the address of the **Russian House** in Berlin. The Russian House is controlled by the Russian state agency **Rossotrudnichestvo** (Россотрудничество), which the [Council of Europe](#) assesses as an instrument of Russian “soft power.”

The association and its publication [maintain](#) contacts with Russian diplomatic missions in Germany, including the embassy and consulate, and in 2017 appeared among the partners of a cultural festival in occupied Crimea.

For many years, Berliner Telegraph, which long advertised Kohlmann's legal services, has [published](#) materials that present Russia positively,



Representatives of the Free Saxony party in the Russian parliament at a meeting with Maria Butina, convicted in the United States as a Russian agent of influence. Moscow, 2023

criticize Germany's federal center, and justify Russian aggression against Ukraine.

The separatist party Freie Sachsen [maintains](#) contacts with the Russian Federation, including through personal visits by its representatives to Russia both before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and after 2022.

In 2021, party founder Martin Kohlmann visited Russia. During the trip, he [held meetings](#) with Russian politicians and civil society representatives, although public details of these contacts were not disclosed.

In 2023, a Freie Sachsen delegation [visited](#) the State Duma of the Russian Federation at the invitation of United Russia deputy **Maria Butina** (Мария БУТИНА), who had previously been [convicted](#) in the United States as an unregistered Russian agent of influence. During the visit, a working meeting [took place](#) in the Russian parliament, where the parties discussed "expanding cooperation at all levels."

The delegation included Ralf Heber and Alyona Dirksen. Heber is a representative of the **Saxon Entrepreneurs' Action Alliance** (Aktionsbündnis Sächsischer Unternehmer) and one of the party's [sponsors](#). He [maintains](#) personal contacts with **Jürgen Elsässer**, owner of the Compact platform, which, as discussed in the section on separatist groups in Flanders, was exposed as cooperating with organizations affiliated with Russian intelligence services.

The separatist party Freie Sachsen maintains contacts with the Russian Federation, including through personal visits by its representatives to Russia both before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and after 2022



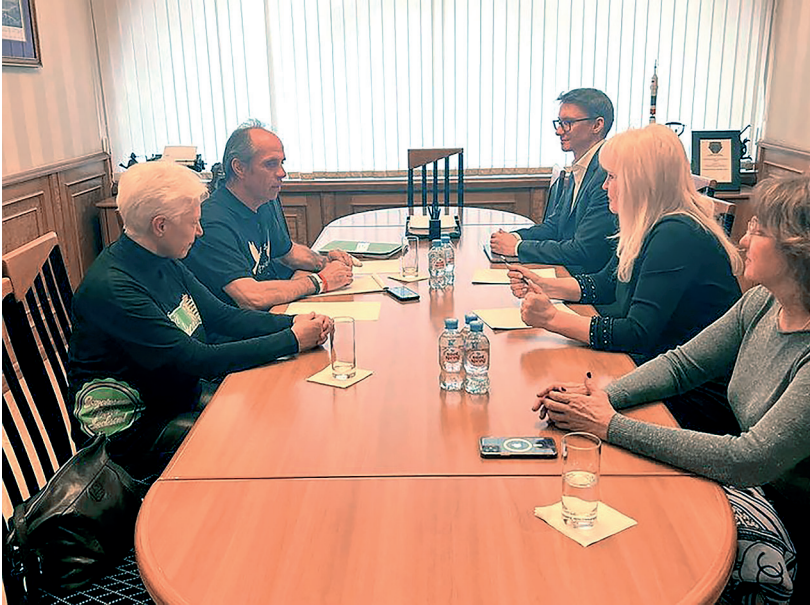
Alyona Dirksen, representative of the Free Saxony party and founder of Russian-German Brotherly Souls, an organization that collects humanitarian aid for «Novorossiia»

Heber has repeatedly visited Russia. As a representative of Freie Sachsen, he [appeared](#) on Russia Today Deutschland criticizing the German federal government. He currently also [organizes](#) “**Russian Evenings**” (*Russischen Abend*) in Saxony, where the Russian Federation is presented in a positive light.

The **Saxon Entrepreneurs’ Action Alliance** was [registered](#) in 2022 with legal support from Martin Kohlmann. Individuals connected to Freie Sachsen are involved in the organization’s activity, and its public activity in a number of cases overlaps with the political messaging of this milieu. In 2023, representatives of the alliance visited the Consulate General of the Russian Federation, where they publicly called for Germany to stop supplying weapons to Ukraine.

Alyona Dirksen, an entrepreneur and owner of the Russian cuisine restaurant Rodina in Saxony, plays a visible role in these contacts. She founded the organization Russian-German Brotherly Souls, which since 2015 has cooperated with the organization Patriots of Novorossiia. As part of this activity, humanitarian aid is [collected](#) for children in Donbas, whom the organization presents as “victims of the Armed Forces of Ukraine,” while Dirksen herself has repeatedly visited occupied Donetsk.

Public data from her VKontakte [page](#) indicate that she continues to visit Russia and maintain political contacts in Europe’s far-right and Euroskeptic environment. In November 2024, for example, Dirksen participated in an event of the Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN) group in the European Parliament, among whose participants were **Kostadin Kostadinov**, leader of Bulgaria’s Vazrazhdane party, and AfD Bundestag member **Boris Gamanov**.



Ralf Heber, one of Free Saxony's donors and founder of the Saxon Entrepreneurs' Alliance, at a meeting with the international «peacekeeping» movement Women's Dialogue. Moscow, 2024

In March 2024, **Ralf Heber** again visited Moscow, where he acted as an international [observer](#) in Russia's presidential election and publicly praised its conduct. During this [visit](#), at a meeting with **Elena Semerikova** (Елена Семерикова), chair of the Women's Dialogue International Peace Movement, he also announced a future visit to Russia by Martin Kohlmann. Taken together, these episodes indicate that the milieu around Freie Sachsen consists not only of the party itself, but also of a related business-activist

environment in which Russian contacts are combined with anti-Ukrainian influence activity and involvement in broader networks of far-right international cooperation.

Freie Sachsen is not an isolated Saxon anomaly. It [grew out](#) of the far-right environment of **Pro Chemnitz**, which had been under observation by Saxony's Office for the Protection of the Constitution (LfV Sachsen) on suspicion of right-wing extremist activity. Martin Kohlmann led the movement, and in 2021 a substantial part of its activist base moved into the Freie Sachsen party he created.

[According to](#) Saxony's Office for the Protection of the Constitution, Freie Sachsen currently functions as an interregional network bringing together far-right activists from different German federal states.

Personnel links among Pro Chemnitz, Freie Sachsen, and AfD representatives are also visible at the level of individuals. For example, Arthur Estrele, [head of security](#) for Pro Chemnitz, [worked](#) as an assistant to then-AfD Bundestag [member](#) Ulrich Oehme, who is now a member of the Chemnitz city council.

Oehme maintained professional and personal [contacts](#) with **Vladimir Sergiyenko** (Владимир Сергиенко), an agent of the FSB's Fifth Service identified in open sources as linked to that service. In 2021, Oehme and Sergiyenko jointly [founded](#) the **Institute for Social Research** (IfP) in Chemnitz, formalizing their cooperation in institutional form.

According to Saxony's Office for the Protection of the Constitution, Freie Sachsen currently functions as an interregional network bringing together far-right activists from different German federal states



*Representatives
of Free Saxony
on the banned
Russia Today
television
channel, 2024*

Freie Sachsen cooperates with AfD both through joint protest activity and at the local-government level. After the 2023 local elections in Eilenburg, Saxony, AfD and Freie Sachsen deputies [formed](#) a joint faction in the city council.

Certain former members of Pro Chemnitz also appear in the activity of structures linked to Russian intelligence. Former movement [activist Michael Wittwer](#), for example, [was involved](#) in the network of the so-called **Foundation to Battle Injustice**, [founded](#) by **Yevgeny Prigozhin** (Евгений Пригожин), former head of the Main Directorate of the General Staff's front organization known as the Wagner PMC.

Freie Sachsen [maintains](#) close interaction with the far-right National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD), which now operates under the name Die Heimat ("The Homeland"). Some NPD activists and functionaries simultaneously [participate](#) in Freie Sachsen, and cooperation is visible in joint events and election campaigns.

In 2015, NPD representatives [took part](#) in the International Conservative Forum in St. Petersburg. The event was organized with the participation of the Russian Imperial Movement – a GRU front organization – and the Rodina

Freie Sachsen maintains close interaction with the far-right National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD), which now operates under the name Die Heimat («The Homeland»)

party. The stated purpose of the forum was to create a network of far-right movements in Western countries.

Representatives of the NPD youth wing, **Junge Nationalisten**, [underwent](#) military-tactical training at a GRU facility near St. Petersburg.

The personnel overlap between NPD/Die Heimat and Freie Sachsen is clear. **Stefan Hartung**, co-founder and deputy chair of Freie Sachsen, was for many years a functionary in the Saxon branch of the NPD and currently [holds](#) local mandates from that political force, including in Aue-Bad Schlema and in the district council of the Ore Mountains.

In the 2023 local elections, a number of Die Heimat members ran on Freie Sachsen lists. The NPD youth wing, Junge Nationalisten, maintains contacts with the youth structure of Freie Sachsen, and some of its representatives [cooperate](#) with the party or run on its behalf at the local level.

Notably, according to the 2024 report of the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, it was thanks to Freie Sachsen that Saxony became the leading federal state in Germany in terms of the number of far-right events

The NPD participates in Freie Sachsen's anti-federal activities. For example, on March 14, 2024, in the town of Riesa, **Peter Schreiber**, leader of the Saxon branch of the NPD, appeared as a [guest speaker](#) at a Freie Sachsen rally held under the slogan "Für die Heimat: Keine westdeutschen Verhältnisse in Sachsen!" ("For the homeland: no West German conditions in Saxony!").

Notably, [according](#) to the 2024 report of the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, it was thanks to Freie Sachsen that Saxony became the leading federal state in Germany in terms of the number of far-right events.

Freie Sachsen [maintains](#) stable interaction with far-right media structures, particularly the German outlet Compact. For years, Compact [cooperated](#) with the **Institute for Democracy and Cooperation**, [headed by Natalia Narochnitskaya](#), a [former authorized](#) representative of the Russian president. Together with Vladimir Yakunin, former head of Russian Railways and a former Soviet intelligence [officer](#), Narochnitskaya [was part](#) of the leadership structures of the Russkiy Mir Foundation, which Western analytical materials [view as](#) an instrument for promoting Russian political influence abroad.

After the occupation of Crimea, Compact and Narochnitskaya's institute jointly organized the "Reconciliation with Russia" conference in Berlin, where Yakunin [appeared](#) in person.

The owner and editor-in-chief of Compact is the aforementioned Jürgen Elsässer. According to a joint investigation by [The Insider](#) and

Der Spiegel, Elsässer was part of Vladimir Sergiyenko's circle of contacts; investigative journalists linked Sergiyenko to the FSB's Fifth Service. According to that investigation, Sergiyenko maintained contact with his handler **Ilya Vechtomov** (Илья Вечтомов), an officer of the Ninth Directorate of the Operational Information Department of the FSB Fifth Service. In 2023, Sergiyenko also took part in Compact's "Peace with Russia" conference.

The link between Compact and Freie Sachsen is not only ideological but also organizational and media-based. Movement leader Martin Kohlmann spoke at the 2022 Compact-Sommerfest, and after the German Interior Ministry's July 2024 decision to ban COMPACT-Magazin GmbH, Freie Sachsen openly [supported](#) the outlet and organized a protest under the slogan "Weg mit dem COMPACT-Verbot!" ("Away with the Compact ban!"). In parallel, the party systematically [disseminates](#) Compact materials, including the program "Compact. Der Tag," while the outlet itself regularly covers the movement as a politically aligned ally. This same media ecosystem extends beyond Compact: the activity of Freie Sachsen has also been actively amplified by Russian state media, including RT DE, on whose [broadcasts](#) party representatives criticized the German government's Russia policy in spring 2022; in 2023 the same media outlet [covered](#) their visit to Moscow, and its Telegram channels regularly [announce](#) the party's protest activity in Saxony. BfV reports

Freie Sachsen it is embedded in a broader far-right media space in which Compact serves as a node connecting German right-wing radical actors and Russia-oriented influence networks and functions within a broader environment of right-wing radical, anti-federal, and pro-Russian-oriented contacts

[describe](#) Jürgen Elsässer as a central figure in the far-right environment, and cooperation with Freie Sachsen is cited directly among examples of his activity. Thus, Freie Sachsen does not merely sympathize with Compact; it is embedded in a broader far-right media space in which Compact serves as a node connecting German right-wing radical actors and Russia-oriented influence networks.

Taken together, the facts indicate that Freie Sachsen is not an isolated regional protest project, but functions within a broader environment of right-wing radical, anti-federal, and pro-Russian-oriented contacts. The combination of a separatist agenda, personnel overlap with right-wing extremist structures, stable links to Russian political and media platforms, and inclusion in networks of far-right international cooperation creates favorable conditions for the Russian Federation to use this environment in influence operations aimed at undermining trust in the federal center and intensifying internal destabilization in Germany.

SAVOY (FRANCE)

Historic Savoy, incorporated into France in 1860, retains a distinct regional identity. According to IFOP, in 2025, 51 percent of residents of Savoy and Haute-Savoie supported creating a separate region within France, indicating stronger territorial distinctiveness and demand for institutional separation from the existing administrative model. This type of regionalism is not in itself equivalent to separatism, but it creates a favorable environment for political actors who shift the issue of local identity into the domain of sovereignty, delegitimization of the French center, and challenges to Savoy's belonging to France. Against this backdrop, [Intelligence Online](#) reported that Russia views Savoy separatists as one potential instrument for destabilizing France.

Intelligence Online reported that Russia views Savoy separatists as one potential instrument for destabilizing France

On October 27, 2023, in the city of Chambéry, an organization calling itself the **"Government of the State of Savoy"** (*Gouvernement de l'État de Savoie*) [proclaimed](#) the "creation of a separate state" and [published](#) the **"Savoy Declaration of Independence"** (*Déclaration d'Indépendance de la Savoie*). In its declaration, the organization claims that France allegedly occupied Savoy in 1860, that Savoy's sovereignty, restored in 1815, was subsequently violated, and that the 1947 Paris Peace Treaty supposedly opened the way for the region's "decolonization." This is not a recognized legal position, but rather the separatist milieu's own pseudo-legal construction, used to justify demands for independence. Precisely such marginal but ideologically exploitable initiatives are of interest in the context of Russian influence operations aimed at delegitimizing the state center and amplifying internal fault lines in European countries.

The leader, or "president," of the "Government of the State of Savoy" is local political activist **Thierry Bécourt**. For many years, Bécourt has [headed](#) the **Cercle International de la Bannière de la Paix de Genève**, which maintains partnership contacts with the Russian **International Center of the Roerichs** (*Международный центр Рериха*), an instrument of Russian "soft power." After the occupation of Crimea and the beginning of Russia's aggression against Ukraine in Donbas, structures in this milieu [conducted](#) information influence activity promoting the claim of "cultural unity" between the Russian and Ukrainian peoples, in line with the official position of the Russian government. In its own activity, Bécourt's center also uses Roerich's ideas of "cultural diplomacy" for anti-state criticism of the French center. For example, the center's Pax Cultura project [condemned](#) France's



Thierry Bécourt, president of the self-proclaimed «Government of the State of Savoy,» in front of the Castle of the Dukes of Savoy, where he hopes to take up residence

involvement in the war in Yemen, the development of military-technical cooperation with Middle Eastern partners, and [accused](#) the French authorities of restricting civil liberties during the state of emergency following the Islamist terrorist attacks of 2015.

[The adviser](#) to the president of the “Government of the State of Savoy” is Swiss financier **Pascal Najadi**, who maintains current ties to the Russian political and information environment. Until 2003, he [worked](#) at Dresdner Bank in London, where he developed relations with the Russian Federation. The bank’s clients during this period included Russian state companies Gazprom and Sibneft, as well as oligarchs **Oleg Deripaska** (Олег Дерипаска) and **Vladimir Potanin** (Владимир Потанин). Najadi later [moved](#) the infrastructure of his own consulting company to Russia, where the legal entity **Najadi & Partners** (Наджади и Партнеры) was registered; its co-founder was **Andrey Rudeshko** (Андрей Рудешко), a Russian entrepreneur and graduate of the **Red Banner Institute of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation**, also known as the Andropov Institute. Najadi subsequently [appeared](#) regularly in the Russian information space as a critic of the West and developed ties with anti-globalist and pro-Russian environments.

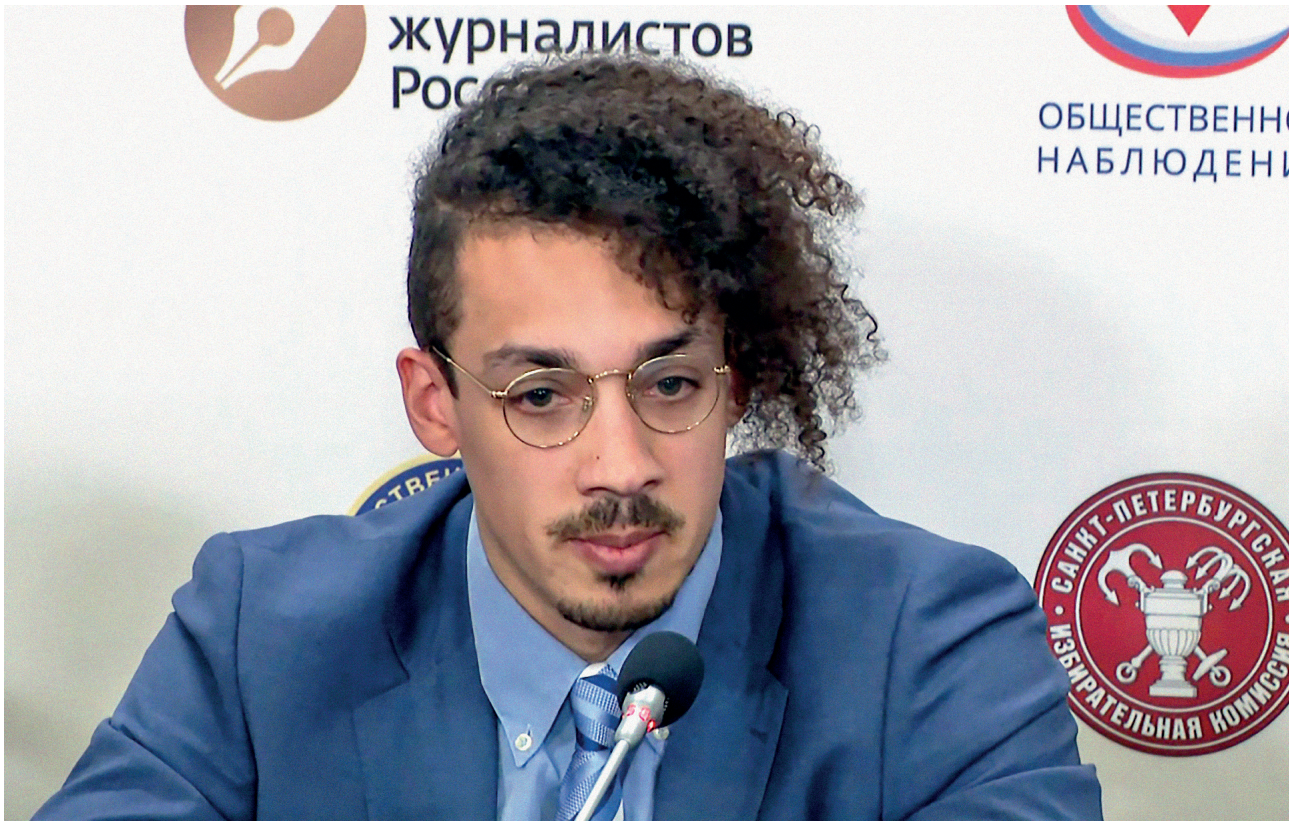
Pascal Najadi subsequently appeared regularly in the Russian information space as a critic of the West and developed ties with anti-globalist and pro-Russian environments



The adviser to the president of the «Government of the State of Savoy» has links to the GRU-affiliated Foundation to Battle Injustice

Najadi's interaction with the **Foundation to Battle Injustice** deserves separate attention. This structure was founded by the aforementioned Yevgeny Prigozhin and is connected to his influence network. In September 2022, in an [interview](#) with the foundation, Najadi accused the West of escalating the war and claimed that arms deliveries to Ukraine allegedly "lead to civilian deaths." The foundation also publicly [supported](#) his documentary Cutting Off the Head of the Snake in Geneva (2023), co-authored by **Astrid Stückelberger**, an honorary professor at the Institute of Bioregulation and Gerontology in St. Petersburg, who also holds official positions in the so-called "Government of the State of Savoy." In addition, the foundation publicly [supported](#) Najadi's We the People movement and its anti-globalist messages. In 2022, Najadi also [signed](#) an open letter initiated by the foundation to the United Nations concerning the Ukrainian website Myrotvorets, in which the resource was called "criminal" and Ukraine was described as a repressive state. Thus, the Savoy separatist project and its representatives are focused not only on regional separatist activism, but also on other influence activity beneficial to the Russian government, including the spread of anti-Western and anti-globalist narratives, the discrediting of state institutions in France and other European countries, the undermining of support for Ukraine, and the promotion of messages aligned with the official position of the Russian government.

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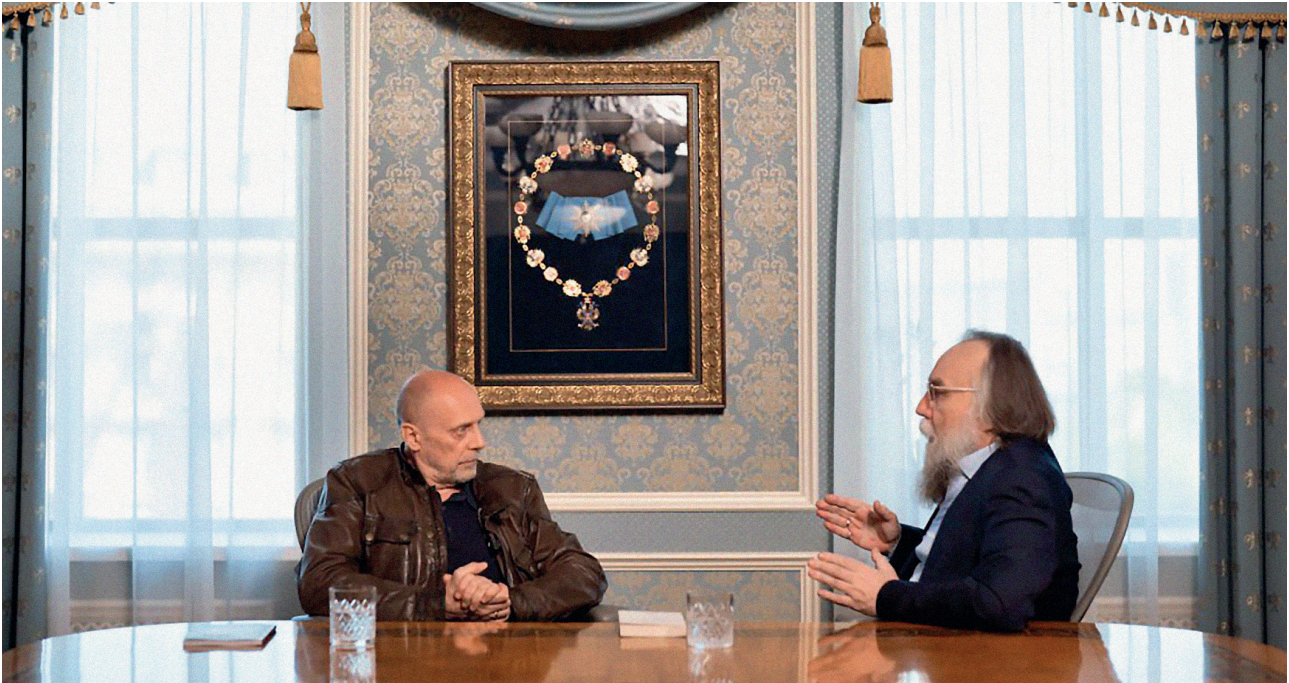


Franck Pengam, media partner of the «Government of the State of Savoy»: «Russia's presidential election was conducted at the highest level.» Moscow, 2024

The media platform that systematically gives Savoy separatists a platform is **Profession Gendarme** (*Profession Gendarme*), a resource [connected](#) to the **Professional Gendarmerie Association** (*Association Professionnelle Gendarmerie*). It was on this site that Savoy's "declaration of independence" was first [published](#), and documents, appeals, and news from the so-called "Government of Savoy" subsequently appeared there on a regular basis. At the same time, Profession Gendarme does not operate in isolation, but within a broader French "alternative media" environment where it intersects with far-right and Russia-linked actors.

In particular, Profession Gendarme [interacts](#) with **Geopolitique Profonde**, [headed](#) by journalist **Franck Pengam**, who is also an author for the **Geopolitica.ru** outlet [mentioned](#) in this report. In 2024, Pengam [acted](#) as a so-called "international observer" in Russia's presidential election. That same year, he [visited](#) occupied Donbas as part of the "**Foreign Journalists for Russia**" project (*Иностранные журналисты за Россию*), implemented with support from Russian parliamentarians **Alexander Babakov** (Александр Бабаков) and **Alexander Vorobyov** (Александр Воробьев). [According to](#) Conspiracy Watch, Pengam is one of the most active French-language transmitters of Russian disinformation.

The media platform that systematically gives Savoy separatists a platform is Profession Gendarme, a resource connected to the Professional Gendarmerie Association



Alain Soral, one of the partners of Profession Gendarme, the media platform of the «Government of the State of Savoy», in Moscow at a meeting with Alexander Dugin, strategic adviser to the Russian Presidential Administration, 2025

Another important node in this environment is the far-right organization **Égalité & Réconciliation** (E&R), [led by Alain Soral](#). As early as 2009, E&R publicly built contacts with the Russian Embassy in France and demonstrated political support for Vladimir Putin. The founder and leader of Égalité & Réconciliation is the aforementioned French far-right politician Alain Soral. For many years, Soral has [maintained](#) ideological and personal contacts with Russian far-right ideologue **Alexander Dugin** (Александр Дугин), whom Le Monde [described](#) as one of the key inspirations of the pro-Russian French far-right scene. Soral [wrote](#) the foreword to the French edition of Dugin's **The Fourth Political Theory** (*La Quatrième théorie politique*), and in the text of the English-language edition Dugin thanked Soral for permission to use the foreword. Le Monde also noted that Dugin and Soral knew each other well, took part in a joint conference in Brazil in 2014, and that Dugin provided Soral with his networks and helped promote him. In 2016, Soral visited Moscow, where at a forum organized by **Rossiia Segodnya** he publicly praised the "Putin model"; according to Le Monde, he was invited to that event by Dugin's circle. In 2025, Soral also [joined](#) by video link the international far-right congress "**Paladins**" in St. Petersburg, which, according to Meduza citing iStories, was founded with the participation of Kremlin-linked oligarch **Konstantin Malofeyev** (Константин Малофеев) and Alexander Dugin.

In 2025, **Profession Gendarme**, **Geopolitique Profonde**, and **Égalité & Réconciliation** became [co-producers](#) of a media product within the

An important node of the Savoyard separatist environment is the far-right organization Égalité & Réconciliation (E&R), led by Alain Soral

“March for Gaza” project, which involved “Government of Savoy” leader **Thierry Bécourt**, Pascal Najadi’s partner **Astrid Stückelberger**, and retired General **Dominique Delawarde**. This product was published on the **Tribune Libre** platform, which also regularly provides a venue for representatives of the so-called “independent state of Savoy.” Tribune Libre also [accompanied](#) Thierry Bécourt’s visit to Russia for the BRICS summit in 2025. Interaction among these structures is stable: they [disseminate](#) each other’s materials, participate in joint events, and mutually amplify anti-government, anti-Western, and in some cases clearly pro-Russian messages. Dominique Delawarde, for example, is a regular contributor to Profession Gendarme, further indicating the density of this information environment.

The contacts between this environment and Savoy separatists are not accidental, but substantive. In 2025, **Profession Gendarme** [held](#) a closed event during which the leader of the so-called “Government of Savoy,” **Thierry Bécourt**, met with **Franck Pengam**. Although the contents of the meeting were not publicly disclosed, Bécourt later [appeared](#) as a representative of the “State of Savoy” on **Geopolitique Profonde**, indicating that the Savoy separatist project was given a platform in a Russia-linked media environment. **François Dubois**, [vice president](#) of the **Professional Gendarmerie Association**, also [took part](#) in Geopolitique Profonde activity as a commentator and broadcast participant.

For Moscow, such activity is useful because it simultaneously weakens the legitimacy of the French state center, feeds internal fault lines, discredits support for Ukraine, and embeds a local separatist narrative in the broader pro-Russian information and political ecosystem

The international dimension of this activity is also revealing. In October 2024, Thierry Bécourt, as a representative of the “State of Savoy,” visited the BRICS summit in Kazan, where in his speech he called Russia a “Christian country,” [accused](#) France of pursuing aggressive policy toward Russia, and stated that Savoy wished to take part in building a “multipolar world.”

Thus, this is not merely marginal Savoy separatism, but an environment that combines demands for Savoy’s separation from France with activity objectively aligned with the interests of the Russian Federation. For Moscow, such activity is useful because it simultaneously weakens the legitimacy of the French state center, feeds internal fault lines, discredits support for Ukraine, and embeds a local separatist narrative in the broader pro-Russian information and political ecosystem.

VENETO (ITALY)

Venetian separatism rests primarily on two blocks of argumentation: historical-cultural and economic. In the first, central importance is attached to the legacy of the **Venetian Republic** (*Serenissima Repubblica di Venezia*), which [existed](#) for more than a thousand years, from the eighth century until 1797. Supporters of Veneto's independence present it as a fully sovereign state with its own institutions, legal system, diplomacy, army, and navy. This is the source of one of the key claims in the Venetian separatist discourse: Veneto's incorporation into Italy in the nineteenth century is interpreted not as natural national unification, but as the loss of historical statehood.

The Venetian [language](#) is also an important element of this argumentation. Separatist environments present it as evidence of the region's distinct cultural and historical identity. In this logic, Veneto is not merely an administrative part of Italy, but a separate community with its own historical tradition that allegedly retains a right to political self-determination.

The second basic component of Venetian separatism is economic. Veneto is one of Italy's most economically developed regions, and local autonomist and separatist discourse consistently includes the claim of an "unfair redistribution" of resources in favor of the central government. It was on this basis that in 2014 the [Plebiscito](#) platform held an unofficial online referendum on creating an "independent and sovereign Republic of Veneto," in which participants overwhelmingly supported the idea of the region leaving Italy. Despite the absence of official status or representativeness, this episode demonstrated the existence in the region of a mobilized environment sensitive to anti-central and separatist rhetoric.

The combination of historical memory, cultural distinctiveness, and economic grievance creates a favorable environment for external exploitation. It is in this context that the Russian Federation gained the opportunity to develop a network of contacts in the region encompassing local politicians, civic activists, media figures, and organizers of pro-Russian initiatives. This is not a case of creating separatism from outside, but of exploiting pre-existing regionalist and anti-central sentiment in the interests of Russian policy.

In the case of Veneto, it is not about creating separatism from outside, but of exploiting pre-existing regionalist and anti-central sentiment in the interests of Russian policy



Palmarino Zoccatelli, head of the Veneto Independence Committee, chair of the Veneto-Russia cultural association, and head of the so-called «DPR representative office» in Verona

The practical effect of such influence goes beyond the Venetian issue itself. It contributes to radicalization of anti-state discourse, fosters a favorable attitude toward Russia as an imagined ally of the “Europe of Regions,” supports anti-Western and anti-NATO narratives, and after the start of Russia’s full-scale war against Ukraine also creates an environment for justifying Russian aggression.

One revealing [example](#) of the overlap between separatist activism and activity beneficial to the Russian government is the **Veneto Independence Committee** (*Comitato Veneto Indipendente*). It is [headed](#) by **Palmarino Zoccatelli**, a former activist of **Lega Nord**, chair of the cultural association **Veneto-Russia** (*Associazione culturale Veneto-Russia*), and head of the so-called “DPR representative office” in Verona. The Veneto-Russia association is a [partner](#) of **Rossotrudnichestvo**, one of the key instruments of Russian influence abroad. In this configuration, Venetian separatism becomes for Russia-linked actors not an independent goal, but a convenient instrument for conducting multidirectional influence activity aligned with the Kremlin’s interests.

The Veneto Independence Committee and the Veneto-Russia cultural association are closely linked organizationally and through personnel. Individual participants in both structures have contacts with Russian state and, in particular, intelligence networks. In addition to Palmarino Zoccatelli, another simultaneous participant in both organizations is **Edoardo Rubini**,

The Veneto Independence Committee and the Veneto-Russia cultural association are closely linked organizationally and through personnel. Individual participants in both structures have contacts with Russian state and, in particular, intelligence networks

vice president of the Veneto Independence Committee and one of the leaders of the regional independence movement, known among other things for [trips](#) to occupied Donbas. **Stefano Valdegamberi**, **Eliseo Bertolasi**, and **Vito Comencini** also belong to the board of the Veneto-Russia association and, at the same time, to the Committee's activist environment.



The most revealing activity in political terms is that of Stefano Valdegamberi, a sitting adviser in the Veneto Regional Council and, until 2023, a member of that council from Lega Nord. He participated as an [“international observer”](#) in pseudo-elections in occupied Crimea in 2017 and in Russia’s 2024 presidential election. According to [OCCRP](#), Valdegamberi cooperated with the International Agency for Current Policy (IACP), a structure that investigators link to Russian influence operations in Europe. The organization was headed by **Sarkis Mirzakhanian**

Sarkis Mirzakhanian (second from right), a graduate of the Diplomatic Academy of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was involved in organizing the visit of Italian separatists to occupied Crimea



Eliseo Bertolasi, a board member of the Veneto Independence Committee, is the representative of the International Russophile Movement in Italy

(*Саркис Мирзаханян*), a graduate of the Diplomatic Academy of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Among other things, IACP interacted with Leonid Slutsky’s Peace Foundation in recruiting European politicians as [“observers”](#) in Russian elections. As part of this cooperation, Valdegamberi promoted in the Veneto Regional Council a [resolution](#) recognizing the annexation of Crimea and calling for the lifting of anti-Russian sanctions, and also [lobbied](#) for a cooperation agreement between Veneto and the so-called “State Council of the Republic of Crimea.”

The role of **Eliseo Bertolasi** is no less indicative. He is a journalist for [Sputnik](#), an analyst at Vision & Global Trends, which cooperates with the **Strategic Culture Foundation** (Фонд стратегической культуры) [linked](#) to the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service, and since 2023 the representative in Italy of



FSB officer
Alexey Stovbun
coordinated
Bertolasi's work
to establish
contacts with Italy's
senior political
leadership

the **International Russophile Movement** (IRM). According to the Center for Defense Reforms report "Soldiers," this structure functions as a Russian Foreign Intelligence Service front organization. Palmarino Zoccatelli also took part in the IRM founding congress in Moscow, further indicating this environment's inclusion in a common network of contacts. Bertolasi is also [linked](#) to the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation: under the supervision of FSB officer **Alexey Stovbun** (Алексей Стовбун), according to available

data, he facilitated Russian contacts with Italy's top political leadership and promoted a campaign to strip Petro Poroshenko of the title of "honorary citizen of Veneto."

Another element of this network is **Vito Comencini**, a former member of the Italian parliament from Lega, participant in trips to the so-called "DPR" and to the Yalta International Economic Forum in occupied Crimea. He also heads the **Suvorov Research Institute** ([Centro Studi Suvorov](#)), which promotes ideas of the "Russian world," and sits on the [board](#) of Veneto Indipendente. Taken together, these facts indicate his integration into an environment in which regionalist and separatist rhetoric is combined with systematic promotion of pro-Russian narratives.

Vito Comencini,
a board member
of the Veneto
Independence
Committee, also
heads the Suvorov
Institute in Italy

The official objective of the Veneto Independence Committee is the [restoration](#) of the sovereignty of the historic "Republic of Venice." In its programmatic document, the movement calls for "reconquering independence by all morally lawful means, including a referendum." To achieve this goal, the organization systematically uses historical-cultural themes as a tool of political mobilization. A revealing [example](#) is the annual commemoration of



the Battle of Lepanto in 1571, in which the forces of the Holy League, with the decisive participation of the Venetian Republic, defeated the Ottoman fleet. Such events are used to cultivate a separate Venetian identity through the heroization of the Venetian Republic's historical role, promotion of its symbols, and emphasis on continuity of its own state-building tradition.

On October 11, 2025, **Palmarino Zocatelli** [organized](#) another such event. Notably, its theme was: “Lepanto 1571: Christian Europe defeats the Turks. 2025: secular Europe is at war with Christian Russia – a paradox in history.” Thus, historical memory of the Venetian Republic was directly combined with a civilizational narrative characteristic of Russian propaganda, in which Russia's contemporary confrontation with the West is framed as a conflict between “Christian Russia” and “secular” or “anti-Christian” Europe.

The participation in this event of the Russian consul general in Milan, **Dmitry Shtodin**, adds further significance. In light of the Robert Lansing Institute's [assessment](#) linking Shtodin to Russian influence operations in Italy, his presence indicates Russian attention to the environment of Venetian regionalism.

Veneto Indipendente operates not only in the cultural-symbolic space but also in the political field, interacting with autonomist and separatist initiatives

This case was not isolated. Russian official institutions and related structures systematically participate in events aimed at promoting Venetian regional identity. For example, on June 3, 2023, Veneto Indipendente [co-organized](#) a major event dedicated to the bicentenary of the **Verona Congress** of 1822. Participants included **Daria Pushkova**, director of the Russian Center for Science and Culture in Rome; **Mikhail Talalay**, a historian of the Russian Academy of Sciences; and key figures of the Venetian separatist milieu, including **Stefano Valdegamberi**, **Eliseo Bertolasi**, and **Vito Comencini**. The Russian Center for Science and Culture is a structural unit of Rossotrudnichestvo, which the EU [regards](#) as one of Russia's instruments of influence abroad.

The substance of this event also had a clearly pro-Russian character. Participants [stressed](#) that “Veneto became the political capital of Europe,” while Russia “redeemed Europe with its blood for freedom, honor, and peace.” In this way, historical memory was once again used to promote the narrative of Russia's special civilizational mission and its opposition to the modern West. Notably, soon afterward, on June 12, 2023, Palmarino Zocatelli, in an interview with *Il Fatto*, [called](#) on Venetians to “resume the struggle for independence.” This indicates a direct link between symbolic politics, historical mythologization, and current separatist mobilization.

At the same time, Veneto Indipendente operates not only in the cultural-symbolic space but also in the political field, interacting with autonomist and



The Veneto independence movement holds protest actions aimed at bringing the issue of regional independence back onto the public agenda

separatist initiatives. A revealing example was the consultative [referendum](#) on expanded autonomy for Veneto, held on October 22, 2017. Turnout was 57.2 percent, and more than 98 percent of participants supported expanded regional autonomy. Formally, the referendum was initiated by the regional authorities under Veneto president Luca Zaia, one of the leading politicians of Lega Nord. However, Veneto Indipendente actively joined the campaign: the committee formally joined the Veneto Sì platform of civic organizations, while its representatives spoke at rallies, gave interviews, and disseminated campaign materials.

As a result, the participation of Russia-linked [actors](#) in Veneto Indipendente gives Russia not only symbolic presence in the environment of Venetian regionalism, but also practical political outcomes: the strengthening of anti-central and separatist sentiment, promotion of pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives, discrediting of sanctions policy, and creation of a local environment ready to legitimize Russian aggression against Ukraine.

A characteristic feature of Veneto Indipendente's activity has been, and remains, the systematic radicalization of anti-government discourse and the framing of autonomy as only an intermediate stage on the road to independence

A characteristic feature of Veneto Indipendente's [activity](#) has been, and remains, the systematic radicalization of anti-government discourse and the framing of autonomy as only an intermediate stage on the road to independence. In this approach, even the 2017 consultative referendum was viewed not as an endpoint, but as a tool for further pressure on Rome and for legitimizing demands for full political self-determination for Veneto. Palmarino Zoccatelli openly articulated this position in an interview with the Russian outlet [Sputnik](#), where he spoke of the “common goal of the citizens of Veneto – to restore independence from the central government” and accused Rome of allegedly reducing the region to “poverty and degradation” and ignoring its aspirations. In this way, socioeconomic grievance was combined with a political narrative about systematic neglect of Veneto's interests by the Italian center.

Movement activists Veneto Indipendente emphasized that «an economic giant – Veneto – remains a political dwarf,» contrasting the region's economic weight with its limited political status within Italy

After the referendum, Zoccatelli continued to promote this line. In a 2022 [interview](#), he argued that even before the shift to an autonomy agenda, the movement had already prepared a law on independence, but that it had been struck down by the Constitutional Court. Such rhetoric allowed even partial or interim political solutions to be presented as proof of Rome's hostility to any real form of regional self-determination. Economic arguments served the same function: movement activists emphasized that “an economic giant – Veneto – remains a political dwarf,” contrasting the region's economic weight with its limited political status within Italy.

An additional mobilization tool was the campaign “**Ricordemo el 22 ottobre 2017**” (“*Let us remember October 22, 2017*”), launched in summer 2023. Through videos and social media posts, Veneto Indipendente activists promoted the claim that the will of the Venetians remained ignored by Rome. Thus, the memory of the referendum was used to sustain a sense of political grievance, an unfinished process, and the need for continued struggle.

Notably, even the adoption in 2024 of the differentiated autonomy law initiated by Lega did not soften the movement's rhetoric. On the contrary, Zoccatelli [criticized](#) regional president Luca Zaia, stating that the process of expanding autonomy had “stalled in Rome,” that the region was “losing time,” and that it was therefore necessary to “resume the struggle” for independence. This indicates that Veneto Indipendente uses even partial concessions by the center not for de-escalation, but to further fuel confrontation with Rome and shift the autonomist agenda into an openly separatist one.

Since at least 2015, the Veneto Independence Committee has maintained contacts with Russian occupation administrations in Donbas (the “DPR” and “LPR”) and participated in activities aimed at their international legitimization. This activity includes political visits, economic contacts, participation in pseudo-elections, and attempts to institutionalize the presence of Russian proxy structures in Italy.

The first revealing episode was an illegal visit by a Venetian political delegation to occupied Donetsk in November 2015. The delegation [included](#) representatives of the Veneto Independence Committee as well as individuals linked to official regional structures, including Palmarino Zocatelli, Vito Comencini, Eliseo Bertolasi, and Gualtiero Mazzi, deputy president of the Province of Verona and a member of Lega Nord. The stated purpose of the trip was to “establish cooperation with the institutions of the self-proclaimed DPR.” After returning, the Committee publicly supported the idea of constitutional changes and autonomy for Donbas within the Minsk process, effectively joining the promotion of a settlement frame favorable to Moscow.

In 2016, Zocatelli led a business delegation from Veneto to occupied Donetsk and Luhansk. In an interview with [Sputnik Italia](#), he stated directly that the priority of the trip was to establish direct contacts between Italian entrepreneurs, local business, and the local “authorities,” and to identify projects for economic cooperation. This was therefore not a symbolic gesture, but an attempt to normalize economic links with occupation administrations. Sputnik Italia also published a [list](#) of Italian business representatives in the delegation from the energy, industrial, and food sectors. Alongside Zocatelli, representatives of Lombardy – Gianmatteo Ferrari and Luca Bertoni, vice president and secretary of the Lombardy-Russia association – also participated in the trip. This points to broader coordination among regional pro-Russian networks in Italy.

Palmarino Zocatelli addresses the residents of the so-called «Donetsk People's Republic» with a welcoming speech



Another line of this activity was participation in the legitimization of occupation pseudo-elections. During the so-called “elections” of leaders and “deputies” in the “DPR” and “LPR” in 2018, Zoccatelli was officially accredited as an “international observer.” According to the European Platform for Democratic Elections ([EPDE](#)), he appeared under No. 27 on the list of representatives from Italy as a member of Lega and vice president of the Veneto-Russia association. Such participation was especially important for the Russian side, because the “international observation” format is systematically used to give pseudo-elections an appearance of external legitimacy.

A logical continuation of this line was the [opening](#) in February 2019 of the so-called “DPR representative office” in Verona, with Palmarino Zoccatelli named as its head. This step marked a transition from isolated contacts and visits to an attempt to institutionalize the presence of a Russian proxy entity in Italy.

After Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine began, the Veneto Independence Committee openly supported Russian aggression. In particular, the committee held a rally in Verona in support of the so-called “DPR” and “LPR” and of Russia’s invasion under the pretext of the “denazification of Ukraine.” The Committee subsequently systematically promoted messages aimed at justifying Russia’s actions and discrediting the Italian government, NATO, and Western support for Ukraine.

Palmarino Zoccatelli at the opening of the representative office of the so-called «Donetsk People’s Republic» in Turin

One of the first such episodes was a public [event](#) in Verona at the end of March 2022 involving Vito Comencini, a board member of the Veneto Independence Committee and a sitting Lega deputy. During the event, Russia’s aggression against Ukraine was justified, while responsibility for the war was placed on the West, which had allegedly “refused to make



concessions to the Kremlin.” **Vitaly Milonov** (*Виталий Милонов*), a State Duma deputy from United Russia, also took part in the event organized by the Veneto-Russia association. This was therefore not merely local pro-Russian activism, but direct involvement of Russian official representatives in shaping a public discourse favorable to the Kremlin in the region.

This activity later focused not only on justifying the war, but also on undermining Italian support for Ukraine. A revealing example was the demonstration in Verona on April 5, 2025 under the slogan “No to European rearmament!” organized by the Verona per la Libertà coalition, Zoccatelli’s Veneto-Russia association, and the independent union Sindacato Libero. The action took place simultaneously with similar protests in other Italian cities against NATO and against Giorgia Meloni’s government, which supplies weapons to Ukraine. In this case, anti-Ukrainian and anti-NATO rhetoric was directly embedded in a broader protest agenda aimed against Italy’s and Europe’s defense policy.

Since at least 2015, the Veneto Independence Committee has maintained contacts with Russian occupation administrations in Donbas (the «DPR» and «LPR») and participated in activities aimed at their international legitimization

Another example was the large-scale billboard campaign with the slogan “Russia is not my enemy,” [initiated](#) by Palmarino Zoccatelli. In summer 2024, dozens of posters appeared in Verona showing a handshake in the colors of the Italian and Russian flags and calling for an end to military aid to Ukraine. The campaign was organized by **Verona per la Libertà**, previously known for anti-lockdown mobilization, together with the Veneto-Russia association. Its financing was provided by private sponsors, including [entrepreneur Stefano Albrighi](#), who in 2016 [visited](#) occupied Crimea as part of activities organized by Sarkis Mirzakhanian. This indicates an overlap between the local protest environment, the Venetian separatist activist base, and broader pro-Russian networks that use anti-war and anti-Western rhetoric to weaken support for Ukraine.

Thus, after the start of Russia’s full-scale war against Ukraine, the milieu linked to the Veneto Independence Committee moved into systematic influence activity directly aligned with the Kremlin’s interests: justification of Russian aggression, delegitimization of Western support for Ukraine, discrediting of NATO, radicalization of confrontation with Rome, and mobilization of local protest groups against Italy’s defense policy.

At the same time, Venetian separatism itself rests on a combination of historical-cultural distinctiveness, economic grievance, and anti-central sentiment, while the Veneto Independence Committee views autonomy not as a goal, but only as an interim and insufficient stage on the way to independence. Similar to the Catalonia case, a characteristic feature of the Committee’s activity is a systematic attack on the autonomy process, which is framed as blocked by Rome and unsuitable for achieving genuine self-determination. This is precisely what makes the environment connected to the Committee a convenient channel of influence for Russia in Italy.

MORAVIA (CZECH REPUBLIC)

In the first post-communist parliamentary elections in Czechoslovakia in 1990, the regionalist **Movement for Self-Governing Democracy – Society for Moravia and Silesia** (*Hnutí za samosprávnou demokracii – Společnost pro Moravu a Slezsko*, HSD-SMS) [became](#) a notable political phenomenon. It advocated the restoration of Moravia's and Silesia's political and administrative subjectivity, [including](#) through the creation of a so-called “tri-federation” of Czechia, Slovakia, and Moravia. The movement won roughly 10 percent of the vote, demonstrating the existence in the early post-communist period of a significant Moravian regionalist protest against the Prague political center and the unitary model of state administration. The party's [leader](#) was **Boleslav Bárta**, an [agent](#) of communist Czechoslovakia's State Security Service (StB).

*Boleslav Bárta,
leader of the
Moravian
independence
movement of the
1990s and an agent
of Czechoslovakia's
State Security
Service (StB)*

The early Moravian movement was in itself primarily an expression of regionalism and autonomist sentiment, rather than full-fledged separatism. However, already in the 1990s the Moravian issue began to be used by broader radical and anti-system forces for which it served as a convenient tool to attack the Prague center, the liberal agenda,



and the country's pro-Western course. The most revealing example of such exploitation was the radical xenophobic party **Association for the Republic – Republican Party of Czechoslovakia** (SPR-RSC) of **Miroslav Sládek**, which had close [ties](#) to Vladimir Zhirinovsky's Russian Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR) and [belonged](#) to the broader circle of Russia-linked European populist forces. Sharply criticizing Prague, SPR-RSC [proclaimed](#) the creation of a so-called "alternative government in Moravia." [According to](#) Masaryk University professor Miroslav Mareš, in order to obstruct Czechoslovakia's Euro-Atlantic integration, SPR-RSC exploited various conflict drivers, including anti-Roma racism and the issue of Moravia's inclusion in Czechia. In this context, the Moravian issue was used not as an independent regional agenda, but as one plotline in a broader anti-Western and anti-central mobilization.

It is telling that in the 1990s **Vladimir Zhirinovsky** (Владимир Жириновский) himself articulated the theme of Moravia's "occupation" by Czechia. This indicates that the Moravian issue was notable not only for domestic Czech radical forces, but also for Russia-linked political actors who could use it to fuel anti-central sentiment and delegitimize Czech state unity.

Already in the 1990s, official Russian structures, including the Russian consulate in Brno, also provided support to Moravian autonomist and separatist environments, demonstrating Moscow's early interest in using the Moravian issue as a political influence instrument in Czechia.

Since the late 2000s, Russia has used "soft power" tools to work with the Czech pan-Slavic and pro-Moravian environment, within which the idea of Moravia's distinctness from the Czech political center is cultivated. A revealing example is the **Czech-Moravian Slavic Association** (Českomoravský slovanský svaz, ČMSS), created in 2008 and still active today. Its founder and leader is public figure **Zdeněk Opatřil**, who, [according](#) to researchers at the European Values think tank, is a graduate of a "political school" in Moscow. Opatřil is an activist in the pan-Slavic movement and interacts with the Russian Embassy in Czechia and the **Russian Center for Science and Culture** (Российский центр науки и

*Zdeněk Opatřil
(center), founder
of the Czech-
Moravian Slavic
Association, at an
event in the Russian
Center for Science
and Culture
in Prague*



культуры).

Importantly, Opatřil's activity is not limited to the Czech context. He is deputy chair of the Moscow-based **All-Russian Slavic Union**. The organization is headed by Russian publicist and ultranationalist **Oleg Platonov**, who is also a [permanent](#) member of the Izborsk Club, an organization used as an instrument for shaping, coordinating, and providing ideological support to Russian influence-agent networks. In this configuration, the Czech-Moravian Slavic Association appears not as an isolated cultural initiative, but as part of a broader pro-Russian network in which pan-Slavic rhetoric is combined with anti-Western and anti-Euro-Atlantic narratives.

Czech-Moravian Slavic Association functions not only as a cultural or Slavophile association, but as an environment in which pan-Slavic, pro-Russian, and Russian intelligence-linked networks intersect

The composition of ČMSS leadership and membership points in the same direction. Its participants [include](#) **Alexander Stepanov** (Александр Степанов), a former employee of the Russian Embassy in Czechia who was [expelled](#) in 2023 as a threat to national security. He also [headed](#) the Coordinating Council of Russian Compatriots in Czechia and received funding from Pravfond, which is affiliated with the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces. ČMSS leadership also [includes](#) **Tatjana Střelcová**, the daughter of a former Soviet intelligence officer and the wife of former Czechoslovak intelligence officer **Igor Střelec**. Together, these facts indicate that ČMSS functions not only as a cultural or Slavophile association, but as an environment in which pan-Slavic, pro-Russian, and Russian intelligence-linked networks intersect.

After 2021, ČMSS actively [interacted](#) with the **Moravian Round Table** (*Moravský kulatý stůl*), an association of Moravian activists and pro-Moravian civic structures engaged in cultivating Moravian identity and “restoring Moravian subjectivity.” This forum should not automatically be equated with a pro-Russian environment; however, its significance lies in the fact that it serves as a point of intersection for various pro-Moravian actors, some of whom later move into a clearly anti-Western and anti-NATO political agenda.

The participants in the Moravian Round Table include the **Moravané** party, one of the few political forces in Czechia that consistently articulates a pro-Moravian autonomist and [quasi-separatist](#) agenda. In its program, the party demands the “restoration of Moravian statehood” and the “federalization of Czechia.” In addition, Moravané advocates the withdrawal of Czechia – or Moravia separately, as part of a federation – from the EU and NATO.

The leader of Moravané is Czech politician **Ctírad Musil**. He was for many years a member of the **Czech Communist Youth Union** (*Komunistický*



*Ctirad Musil, leader
of the autonomist
Moravané party*

svaz mládeže, KSM), and since 2011 has been [editor-in-chief](#) of its official publication **Mladá pravda**. This is significant because KSM [belongs](#) to the international communist environment connected to the **World Federation of Democratic Youth** (WFDY), a structure used during the Soviet period as a political front for working with left-wing youth, and preserved by Russia in the post-Soviet period as an international platform for contacts, political mobilization, and work with ideologically close left-wing environments. In 2017, KSM [took part](#) in the **World Festival of Youth in Sochi**, organized by WFDY.

Musil's links to Russia-connected structures are not limited to this milieu. He was part of the leadership of the **Czech Society of Friends of the LPR and DPR** (*Společnost přátel LLR a DLR*), which [appeared](#) in Czech Interior Ministry reports on extremist activity linked to support for separatist entities in eastern Ukraine. The society's [leader](#) is Czech journalist **Jaromír Vašek**, who has repeatedly visited occupied Donbas, including in 2022 as an "observer" at the so-called "referendum" on the occupied territories' incorporation into the Russian Federation, and in 2025 has [conducted](#) actions in support of the Donbas "republics." Thus, this is not abstract ideological sympathy for Russia, but practical participation in efforts to legitimize Russian proxy entities.

The activity of this society is coordinated by the **International Slavic Council** (*Международный славянский совет*), headed by **Sergey Baburin** (*Сергей Бабурин*), a former deputy chair of the Russian State Duma. According to former Soviet intelligence officer, KGB lieutenant general, and U.S. émigré



Sergey Baburin, coordinator of the International Slavic Council and a Soviet KGB agent under the codename «Nikolai»

Oleg Kalugin, Baburin [worked](#) for the KGB under the pseudonym “**Nikolai**” (Николай) as early as the Soviet period. In this configuration, the Society of Friends of the LPR and DPR appears as a structure through which Czech activists are embedded in a network connected to Russian political and, according to available data, intelligence circles.

Moravané leader Ctirad Musil also personally visited Russian-occupied Donbas, and in July 2022 he [justified](#) Russia’s full-scale aggression as a “natural reaction” to the actions of the West and Ukraine. Ctirad Musil and Jaromír Vašek also interacted, among other places, through the platform of the [so-called](#) Czech Anti-Capitalist Camp, where in 2017 they discussed the “civil war in Ukraine.”

The deputy chair of Moravané is Czech political activist **Pavel Dohnal**. He also serves as [spokesman](#) for another pro-Moravian movement, the **Moravian National Initiative** (*Moravské národní iniciativy*), which likewise demands the “restoration of Moravia’s independence.”

Dohnal’s ties to Russia-connected networks are visible not only at the level of ideological affinity. In 2018, he [took part](#) in the **International Slavic Congress in Prague**, held at the Russian Center for Science and Culture, an official Russian state venue. The event was organized by the aforementioned All-Russian Slavic Union, and Sergey Baburin participated in person. In this case, this is no longer an abstract sympathy for pan-Slavism, but the inclusion of a pro-Moravian activist in an environment where Russian state institutions, pan-Slavic structures, and Russia-linked

political actors intersect.

It is also indicative that the Moravian National Initiative [maintains](#) communication with Zdeněk Opatřil in projects connected with cultivating Moravian identity. Given Opatřil's already described links to the pro-Russian Slavic environment, this points to a partial overlap between pro-Moravian activism and networks through which Russia works with pan-Slavic and anti-Western circles in Czechia.

The Moravané party is trying to bring its agenda to the parliamentary level through coalitions and coordination with larger political forces, some of which have links to the Russian Federation or promote messages aligned with the Kremlin's interests. A revealing example was the 2017 [signing](#) of a pre-election cooperation agreement with Tomio Okamura's right-populist **Freedom and Direct Democracy party** (SPD). Under this agreement, SPD undertook to support the introduction of the so-called land system – the abolition of the current administrative system of 14 regions and the restoration of self-governing historical lands, one of the Moravian movement's key demands. SPD also [agreed](#) to support Moravané demands

Moravané cooperation with SPD meant an overlap between the Moravian regionalist agenda and a political environment that was already functioning as a conduit for Russia-linked initiatives in Czechia

for official recognition of Moravian nationality.

The political significance of this alliance lay not only in support for individual regionalist demands, but also in the fact that the Moravian agenda obtained an entry channel into nationwide populist politics. This was especially important because SPD representatives have systematically participated in actions beneficial to Russia: they [visited](#) occupied Crimea, [promoted](#) parliamentary recognition of the annexation of the peninsula, and from 2016 [provided](#) the **Institute of Slavic Strategic Studies** (*Institut slovanských strategických studií*) with access to the Czech parliament. The structure was headed by Radmila Zemanová-Kopecká, who was simultaneously deputy chair of the **Coordinating Council of Russian Compatriots in the Czech Republic**, while its partner was the **Ruskiy Mir Foundation**. In this configuration, Moravané cooperation with SPD meant an overlap between the Moravian regionalist agenda and a political environment that was already functioning as a conduit for Russia-linked initiatives in Czechia.

Another vector of political scaling has been Moravané participation since 2023 in the **STAČILO!** coalition together with the **Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia** (KSČM). The coalition openly campaigned for the “restoration of Moravia's land system” instead of the current division into regions and won 4.3 percent of the vote in the 2025 elections, stopping just short of entering parliament. This is important because it is no longer merely marginal agitation, but an attempt to bring the Moravian agenda to the threshold of real parliamentary representation. At the same time, KSČM maintains ties with the Communist Party of the Russian Federation

and [continues](#) them after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine; individual party representatives hold Russian state awards, and its general secretary, Roman Blaško, [lives](#) in Moscow.

The personnel composition of this environment is also revealing. Retired Czech Army officer **Marek Obrtel** [ran](#) in the European Parliament elections on the Moravané list. Obrtel appeared in the Center for Defense Reforms report "Soldiers" in connection with visits by representatives of his paramilitary organization Narodni domobrana to the territories of the "DPR" and "LPR," as well as because of existing links to organizations in the Rossotrudnichestvo network. In 2024, Obrtel was [elected](#) as a deputy of the Olomouc Region from the aforementioned STAČILO! coalition, indicating the penetration of this environment not only into symbolic or protest politics, but also into real regional politics.

Taken together, this shows that Moravané is trying to use coalitions with larger political forces to scale its agenda and move beyond narrow regionalist activism. From Russia's practical perspective, this configuration is useful because it allows Moravian autonomist identity to be combined with anti-Euro-Atlantic, anti-NATO, and pro-Russian political platforms, creating additional channels for fragmenting the Czech political field.

Thus, the Moravian movement in contemporary Czechia combines elements of regionalism, autonomism, and, in some cases, separatist tendencies, when demands for the restoration of Moravian subjectivity move beyond cultural distinctiveness and take the form of a political state-building program. For Russia, this environment is of interest not in and of itself, but as a convenient channel of influence: to fuel anti-central sentiment, merge the regionalist agenda with anti-European and anti-NATO demands, legitimize pro-Russian networks, and fragment the Czech political field.