

By Christopher Dickey and Anna Nemtsova

Putin picks Le Pen to rule France

MOSCOW — Russian interference in the American elections last year was downright subtle compared to what we've seen this week in the run-up to French presidential elections.

The two-round vote on April 23 and May 7 could change politics, defence, and the economy in Europe more radically—and more in Russia's favour—even than the chaos spawned by Donald Trump's iffy triumph in the United States.

And on Friday (24), Putin endorsed his candidate: far-right-wing, anti-European-Union, anti-NATO, anti-immigrant, anti-American, pro-Trump candidate Marine Le Pen.

Of course, Putin said, "We don't want to influence in any way the events going on [in France]," but his government received Le Pen as if she already were settled in as the head of state in Paris.

Olga Bychkova, deputy chief editor of the independent radio station Echo of Moscow, said that the reception accorded Le Pen in Russia was impressive. "She first had meetings with the leaders of the Duma [Russia's parliament], then she was taken to an exhibit devoted to France at the Kremlin, then she met with Putin. That is a kind of program Moscow organizes for state leaders," Bychkova said.

The French news magazine *L'Express* was quick to note the anomaly as well, calling it "altogether exceptional" that Putin would receive a presidential candidate so close to an election.

In 2014, when Le Pen's National Front Party could not secure any loans from French banks, she turned to Russia and received millions of dollars from a now defunct institution there. Putin, at the same time, received endorsement from her party for his takeover of Crimea. She has consistently blamed Washington for starting the new "cold war." So it was widely assumed that Le Pen was in Moscow Friday as a loyal ally looking for more funding. We may not learn the outcome of that financial venture for some time. (The original loan and quid pro quo for Crimea was revealed by hackers.)

"Whether she hoped to receive money for her campaign or not, it does not matter, she came to Russia for Putin's support and she has already received it," says Bychkova.

The Putin meeting was much more impressive than a loan, in fact. It was the president of Russia placing his bet, if not indeed staking his claim, on the presidency of a country that is a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, that was a founding member of the European Union, and after decades of estrangement from NATO has become, over the last 10 years, a key member of that alliance once again.

A Le Pen victory would be an orgasmic triumph for Putin, and he seems to think his explicit/implicit endorsement will



Russian President Vladimir Putin shakes hands with Marine Le Pen, French National Front (FN) political party leader and candidate for the French 2017 presidential election, during their meeting in Moscow, Russia on Friday (24) — Sputnik/Mikhail Klimentyev/Kremlin via REUTERS

do her good. Certainly much of the French political class would seem to give him encouragement in that regard.

At the first major debate last Monday among five leading contenders for the French presidency, three of them found ways to parrot Moscow's line on critical issues. Le Pen spoke sceptically of NATO and of a united European defence system, which comes up a lot since the Trump administration has made itself appear so very unfriendly to the traditional North Atlantic Alliance that Russia hates and fears.

Le Pen said she was defending the "freedom of the French" and wouldn't want "to force our soldiers to go to wars we haven't decided on." Ergo, adieu NATO's core mutual defence clause.

Far-left candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon, grizzled and tenacious as a badger, was the crowd favourite in the debate even though he's far behind in the polls. "The world has become again very dangerous," he said. "I want to be the president of peace. There should be a security conference from the Atlantic to the Urals. It's the moment to negotiate the borders."

Nothing could be more musical to Putin's ears as he's trying to do that already by using various forms of hybrid warfare on every one of his European frontiers, terrifying even his longtime ally in Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko.

But Mélenchon has no prayer, it would seem, of making it past the first round in the voting on April 23. The erstwhile favourite to reach the runoff against Le Pen on May 7 was François Fillon, prime minister for five years under former President Nicolas Sarkozy. He, too, was singing

Putin's song in Monday's debate, picking up on Mélenchon's proposal and talking about "a fundamental principle, which is the right of people to determine their own futures." In context, that would mean the people of Crimea and eastern Ukraine, whose futures are being sucked back into a new Russian empire and who have very little say about it.

It's not like borders have never been re-drawn in Europe, said Fillon, citing the example of Kosovo, which in fact was freed from the savage Russian-backed government of a genocidal Serbian president in 1999. To address problems in the Middle East, Fillon said, France should work with Russia and Iran. No mention of the US.

But Putin wouldn't bet on Fillon at this point no matter how much their minds meld, because a series of scandals have turned Fillon, once the front-runner, into the third-runner.

Le Canard Enchaîné, a satirical and investigative weekly broadsheet that doesn't publish on the web, revealed a few weeks ago that Fillon—who claims he believes in Thatcherite smaller government, lower taxes, fewer state employees, and fewer protections for private sector employers, and who has called for the eventual elimination of 500,000 public sector jobs—put his wife and two children on the public payroll for jobs they allegedly did not do or were not qualified to do at all. And his family then took home roughly \$1 million in public funds. On Wednesday (22), after the debates, *Le Canard Enchaîné* reported that Fillon's consulting firm also was paid \$50,000 and promised a percentage of the revenues by a

Lebanese pipeline builder for, among other things, arranging a meeting with Vladimir Putin on the sidelines of a conference in St. Petersburg in 2015.

So, cozy as Fillon and Putin may be, and ideologically capacious as the Russian president and the far-left badger Mélenchon may be, the Kremlin's bold handicapper decided to go with Le Pen on Friday. She will be by far the most destructive for NATO and the EU. She has looked like a pretty solid front runner in the first round of the French elections. The question at this point is whether she can sustain momentum into round two—and against whom.

For the moment, that person appears likely to be Emmanuel Macron, a boyish looking 39-year-old former Rothschild banker and economy minister who bailed out of the wildly unpopular Socialist government of President François Hollande last year to found a centrist movement called *En Marche!* that has been drawing support from both the left and the right.

Macron, in the debates last Monday and at every opportunity, has been absolutely firm in his support for the European Union and NATO, and wary of the disruptive, destructive sort of "deconstruction" that US President Donald Trump and his ideologues favour in Europe.

When Le Pen, who tried laughing at Macron to put him down in the debate, said he'd spoken seven minutes while saying nothing, his riposte was short and sharp.

"Unlike you," Macron told Le Pen, "I don't want to make a pact with Putin. I want the Europeans." The latest IFOP-Fiducial tracking poll on Thursday (23)

gave Macron a 1% edge on Le Pen in the first round, and a 61.5 to 38.5 margin in the second round among those who intend to vote. But given what we saw with Trump and Brexit last year, there's no reason for complacency. Many voters are still undecided, many may just stay home. And in the 30+ percent range, the odds are similar to playing Russian roulette with two bullets in your six-shooter.

Can Putin pull the trigger? Already, the Macron campaign has complained of massive hacking attacks. FBI Director James Comey marvelled in his testimony before Congress earlier this week that "the Russians were unusually loud" in their quasi-covert interference with America's elections, and "it was almost as if they didn't care if we knew."

That was nothing to what we're seeing now with the French elections.

People may joke darkly about Trump as the Putinian candidate. But about Le Pen there is now no doubt at all.

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Opinion

By Denis Mac Shane

London terror and Poland's disgrace

The mood was somber in the House of Commons. The Prime Minister, Theresa May, faces that moment every national leader dreads. She has to rise to tell the nation of evil acts, innocent people killed, an attack on the heart of democracy, against the British Parliament where Winston Churchill united the British people against Hitler.

She has to find words of sorrow at the murder of a policeman, a husband and father. Mrs. May has to explain that this act of terrorism is atrocious. The ideology behind it must be confronted. But it stops at the individual criminal and the ideology.

The British Prime Minister sits alongside her ministers who are men and women, white and black, catholic and Muslim. She knows her country and how any act of dividing Britain on the basis of race or religion has always been futile. Already the Muslim Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, has made an important statement condemning the evil act. Up and down, Britain the mosques of the British Muslim community condemn the attack on Westminster and the deaths and injuries.

And then comes the message from another woman prime minister, Beata Szydlo of Poland. Her statement is not one of solidarity, of sorrow or support. No. The message from Warsawhttp://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-europe-migrants-poland-idUKKBN16UoTC is that this evil act was the fault of the European Union's immigration policy.

Mrs. Szydlo is wrong on all counts, but living in the post-factual world that she inhabits that does not seem to inhibit her much. Of note, the terrorist criminal who carried out the attack was born in Britain, raised in Britain and is as British as Prime Minister May or David Beckham. Khalid Masood was not an immigrant. Moreover, he has nothing to do with "Europe". His mother was British, he was born and grew up in south England and has nothing to do with recent immigration movements in Europe.

Szydlo appears to live so much inside her ideologically tainted head that she is apparently completely unaware that the word "immigrant" in Britain, when it is used by the nationalist populist demagogues in politics or the press, more often than not has the adjective "Polish" in front of it.

Moreover, most analysts of the Brexit referendum in June 2016 accept that the main driver for the Brexit vote was the mass arrival of Polish citizens in the years since Poland joined the European Union in 2016. So when Mrs. Szydlo now condemns EU immigration policy, many if not most people in Britain will think she is talking about the right of a million Poles to come to Britain. She is thus condemning her own people. Most poignantly, the top demand of the nationalist Eurosceptic forces in Britain is to slow down, stop and even reverse the number of Poles and other European "immigrants" coming to Britain.

In contrast to the Polish Prime Minister going way low, the British Prime Minister insisted to the House of Commons that Britain would not bring in new measures, or seek to single out the British Muslim community. And most British people are ashamed of the xenophobic attacks on Europeans, including Poles, after the triumph for populist nationalist xenophobia in the Brexit campaign.

They dislike Islamist ideology with its emphasis on the supremacy of just one religion, its belief that women should stay at home to have children and obey their husbands, and its contempt for western democratic ideals like a free press and an independent judicial system.

The House of Commons has many MPs who are hardline supporters of Brexit and who look forward to shutting Britain borders to stop Poles and other European Union citizens coming freely to live, work, love and settle as free Europeans in a free Britain. But not one of them in the Commons sought to link the terrorist act of an indoctrinated and wicked British killer with the issue of European immigration.

That Beata Szydlo has done so should always be remembered in the annals of European political dialogue as a true moment of infamy.

That Mrs. Szydlo lowered herself to the level of linking the Westminster terror atrocity with the EU's immigration policy is a matter of true disgrace. Szydlo has not only shown her ideologically tainted colours by reacting in a hasty, ill-judged manner, apparently aiming at satisfying a domestic political need.

Worse, her attitude is also eerily akin to that of vicious Communist operators of the past. They could never resist the temptation, callously and without a human heart, to use any and all circumstances to make real-world events fit their distorted world view.

That the sub-leader of a nation that has known so much Communist and Fascist terror begs disbelief. Today's terror threat from Islamist ideology financed by the Gulf states is the negation of everything Europe and Poland stands for.

About the Author

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- *New York Times News Service*

By James Kanter and Elisabetta Povoledo

EU at 60, still looking for something to celebrate

ROME — Proclaiming "Europe is our common future," 27 leaders of the European Union signed a statement Saturday (25) in Rome declaring their commitment to integrating the Continent even as a series of crises has badly weakened the efforts and Britain prepares to leave the bloc.

The statement, known as the Rome Declaration and signed on the anniversary of the day the bloc's foundations were laid 60 years ago, underscored the aspirations of a "unique union with common institutions and strong values, a community of peace, freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law."

In a nod to reality, however, the leaders acknowledged that they were "facing unprecedented challenges, both global and domestic," including "regional conflicts, terrorism, growing migratory pressures, protectionism and social and economic inequalities."

The ceremony took place in a hall in Rome that was richly decorated in frescoes depicting scenes from the ancient world. It is the same room where the Treaty of Rome was signed March 25, 1957, by six countries. That event helped lay the groundwork for today's union.

Moments after signing, Christian Kern, the Austrian chancellor, raised his fists in triumph. A keynote speaker, Donald Tusk of Poland, president of the European Council, recalled that his 60th birthday this month made him the "same age as the European Community," a forerunner of the union, and a beacon for freedom and dignity for Poles during

the Communist era, when "it was forbidden to even dream about those values."

But behind the pomp and ceremony were concerns about the prospect of the project's failure — even its collapse. With Britain starting this Wednesday (29) a two-year timetable to leave the union, Prime Minister Theresa May was absent from the gathering. And in a speech at the Vatican Friday (24), Pope Francis warned the leaders that their union "risks dying" as nations, and citizens, turned inward.

Underlining the disaffection with the union, protesters took to the streets Saturday afternoon, shutting down Rome neighbourhoods and railing against European technocrats, capitalism and shadowy economic powers.

Met by a large police presence, they marched under several banners, including those of trade unions and left-wing parties. Smoke bombs went off, and tensions rose between protesters and officers, but the march did not degenerate into rioting. Tight security measures were put into place days before.

"Europe was a dream that has turned into a nightmare," said Mario De Giorgi, 50. "We are Italians who want more rights and a better life, what we had before the euro."

That single currency, the bloc's flagship economic project, is viewed by many as unfairly benefiting countries like Germany while imposing painful austerity on others like Greece.

"The euro is a killer currency; it has destroyed the world," said Chiriac Tibe-

riu, who said he was part of the Romanian branch of the Five Star Movement, an anti-establishment party. "Europe has to disappear and be replaced with something that guarantees real freedom," he said.

There also is rising dissatisfaction with Europe's claims to moral leadership on human rights since the introduction of tougher policies to limit the entry of refugees and migrants fleeing war-torn and poverty-stricken countries in the Middle East and Africa.

But at other marches and sit-ins, many celebrated the treaty. The March for Europe held a rally close to the Roman palazzo where the signing took place. "Europe gave us 60 years of peace, so I felt I had to give something back," said Mauro Armadi, 23, who had travelled to Rome from Taranto, in Puglia, to show his support for the treaty.

Tobias Lundquist, 26, who had travelled to Rome from Sandviken, Sweden, said, "With the European Union, we cast off our dark history and came together to solve problems at a table, not a battlefield."

Tusk encouraged the demonstrators filling the streets of European capitals this weekend to connect with the bloc's history to understand how far the Continent had come.

Since the signing of the treaty, which created important precursor institutions to the European Union, the bloc has more than quadrupled in size. It is the largest trading bloc in the world and the biggest donor of development and hu-

manitarian aid; it has absorbed formerly Communist countries in Eastern Europe and has created a giant single market with more than 500 million consumers.

It has also knocked down barriers to freedom to travel and work in neighboring states, creating lifelong bonds across frontiers that were formerly guarded. Above all, the bloc's founding idea of making war between nations with mutual self-interest unthinkable has held.

Yet the project is reeling from recent crises that helped push the British to vote to leave the bloc in a referendum last June. Britain's rejection prompted concerns that populist leaders opposed to the European project could be on the cusp of taking power in other countries.

That threat was beaten back this month in the Netherlands, where the centre-right party of Prime Minister Mark Rutte won more votes than Geert Wilders, who opposes the European Union.

Still, uncertainty remains over the outcome of the French presidential election in April, with a second round in May, and Germany's elections in September.

But Jean-Claude Juncker, president of the European Commission, the bloc's executive body, said, "Let us not lose perspective." As daunting as the challenges may feel today, he said, they were "in no way comparable to those faced by our founding fathers." Europe, he said, had already "managed to achieve almost eternal peace."