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Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

By: Maciej Kisilowski

Russian meddling matters, but the main threat to liberal democracy lies closer to home

Russian meddling and disinformation have been the subtext of recent European elections: first in Moldova, where pro-European liberals triumphed late last month, and now in the Czech Republic, where the billionaire populist Andrej Babiš prevailed this past weekend.

The threat in both countries – and elsewhere – is live and real. Yet fixation on the Kremlin obscures a deeper and arguably more troubling reality: the genuine public appeal of right-wing populists and nationalists, and the extent to which that appeal is reshaping politics across the democratic world.

Russia's electoral interference is well documented. For decades, far-right parties in France, Italy, and Austria have courted the Kremlin in exchange for financial and other support.

But it is a mistake to exaggerate the electoral impact of these collaborations – or to assume that wielding the "Russia card" can discredit populists.

The United States offers a cautionary tale. Democrats' obsession with President Donald Trump's alleged collusion with Russian President Vladimir Putin in 2016 did not derail his movement.

Investigations confirmed Russian interference, but rather than weaken Trump, they fortified his narrative of persecution and defiance.

Despite these scandals – and despite anti-meddling measures introduced by President Joe Biden's administration – Trump returned to the White House in 2024 with an even stronger mandate.

Beyond the US, one would be hard-pressed to find a case where branding an opponent "pro-Russian" has actually stopped an authoritarian-conservative force.

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The reason is simple: for many far-right voters, Putin's Russia is not toxic.

While countries like the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland experienced Soviet oppression, Putin's self-styled "healthy conservatism" mirrors what right-wing voters genuinely seek at home.

Whether calling themselves national conservatives, traditional social democrats, or liberals-turned-patriots, today's right-wing movements converge on a creed: rejection of liberal universalism; exaltation of national pride and egoism; restoration of ethnic, gender, and cultural hierarchies; and hostility to long-term climate responsibility.

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Seen this way, alignment with Russia is not the cause of their ideology but its logical consequence.

Yet much Western commentary persists in treating anti-immigrant fervor, hostility to LGBT rights, or opposition to aid for Ukraine or the Green New Deal as Kremlin-manufactured wedge issues. That is a grave analytical error.

The Cold War

At a pro-democracy conference in Budapest last month, I asked the audience – many old enough to remember communist dictatorship – to imagine that the Cold War had been fought on the assumption that communism was merely a cover for a Russian imperial project.

Red Army occupation and KGB plots mattered, of course. But communism's staying power also lay in its appeal to real grievances.

The Cold War was ultimately won not by McCarthyite paranoia but by taking

communist ideology seriously and embedding carefully chosen elements of the socialist critique, most visibly the welfare state, into liberal democracy.

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We face a parallel challenge today. The most effective alternatives to authoritarian conservatism often involve compromise with parts of the right-wing agenda.

Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, despite roots in Italy's neo-fascist movement, governs with pro-European pragmatism.

In Denmark, Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen sidelined the far right with what might be called "white progressivism": a Social Democratic platform combined with restrictive immigration policies.

In Romania, Bucharest Mayor Nicușor Dan won the presidency this spring as a socially conservative reformer.

Even in Hungary, the first real challenger to Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in 15 years, Péter Magyar, is a conservative insider turned dissident.

The main threat lies closer to home

But accommodation must be done right. The outgoing Czech prime minister, Petr Fiala, learned this painfully.

His strategy of placating voters by leaning on Christian conservative values was ill-suited for one of Europe's most secular societies.

He failed to address the right's most locally resonant theme: resistance to the economic sacrifices that need to be made to meet NATO spending targets, provide aid to Ukraine, and pursue the green transition.

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These positions may align with Kremlin interests, but they are also easily explained by the narrow self-interest of local voters.

For an industrial worker in Moravia, tangible threats are the cost of living and underfunded public services, not climate change or Russia.

That is why the debate over democratic strategy cannot be left to moderate conservatives, who often are preoccupied with the cultural dimension of the far-right agenda.

In their fixation on the alleged excesses of "woke culture," these moderates sometimes resemble naïve Western academics in the mid-20th century who embraced sweeping indictments of the excesses of capitalism.

The more consequential response in that earlier era came from Christian Democrats in Europe and Republicans such as President Dwight Eisenhower in the US.

Fiercely anti-communist, they never waved the ideological white flag. Yet they were pragmatic enough to accept welfare provisions as the price of a democratic consensus that marginalized revolutionary forces.

Today, it is staunch progressives who face a similar choice. Outrage at the egoism, shortsightedness, and bigotry of today's right-wing voters is entirely justified.

But outrage is not strategy. The unavoidable question is this: Which anxieties and prejudices of conservative voters can be accommodated, and which lines must not be crossed?

Russian meddling matters. But it belongs on page two. The main threat to liberal democracy lies closer to home: in its defenders' failure to confront the political reality voters keep signaling.

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