

AMERICAS

Extremists Turn to a Leader to Protect Western Values: Vladimir Putin

By ALAN FEUER and ANDREW HIGGINS DEC. 3, 2016

As the founder of the Traditionalist Worker Party, an American group that aims to preserve the privileged place of whiteness in Western civilization and fight “anti-Christian degeneracy,” Matthew Heimbach knows whom he envisions as the ideal ruler: the Russian president, Vladimir V. Putin.

“Russia is our biggest inspiration,” Mr. Heimbach said. “I see President Putin as the leader of the free world.”

Throughout the presidential campaign, Donald J. Trump mystified many on the left and in the foreign policy establishment with his praise for Mr. Putin and his criticism of the Obama administration’s efforts to isolate and punish Russia for its actions in Crimea and eastern Ukraine. But what seemed inexplicable when Mr. Trump first expressed his admiration for the Russian leader seems, in retrospect, to have been a shrewd dog whistle to a small but highly motivated part of his base.

For Mr. Heimbach is far from alone in his esteem for Mr. Putin. Throughout the collection of white ethnocentrists, nationalists, populists and neo-Nazis that has taken root on both sides of the Atlantic, Mr. Putin is widely revered as a kind of white knight: a symbol of strength, racial purity and traditional Christian values in a world under threat from Islam, immigrants and rootless cosmopolitan elites.

“I’ve always seen Russia as the guardian at the gate, as the easternmost outpost of our people,” said **Sam Dickson**, a white supremacist and former Ku Klux Klan lawyer who frequently speaks at gatherings of the so-called alt-right, a far-right fringe movement that embraces white nationalism and a range of racist and anti-immigrant positions. “They are our barrier to the Oriental invasion of our homeland and the great protector of Christendom. I admire the Russian people. They are the strongest white people on earth.”

Fascination with and, in many cases, adoration of Mr. Putin — or at least a distorted image of him — first took hold among far-right politicians in Europe, many of whom have since developed close relations with their brethren in the United States. Such ties across the Atlantic have helped spread the view of Mr. Putin’s Russia as an ideal model.

“We need a chancellor like Putin, someone who is working for Germany and Europe like Putin works for Russia,” said **Udo Voigt**, leader of Germany’s National Democratic Party. That far-right group views Chancellor Angela Merkel as a traitor because she opened the door to nearly a million migrants from Syria and elsewhere last year.

“Putin is a symbol for us of what is possible,” Mr. Voigt said.

The Obama administration has accused Russian interests of meddling in the presidential campaign by spreading fake news and hacking into the computers of the Democratic National Committee and the emails of John Podesta, a leading figure in Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign. But efforts by Russia, which has jailed some of its own white supremacist agitators, to organize and inspire extreme right-wing groups in the United States and Europe may ultimately prove more influential.

His voice amplified by Russian-funded think tanks, the Orthodox Church and state-controlled news media, like RT and Sputnik, that are aimed at foreign audiences, Mr. Putin has in recent years reached out to conservative and nationalist groups abroad with the message that he stands with them against gay rights activists and other forces of moral decay.

He first embraced this theme when, campaigning for his third term as president in early 2012, he presented Russia not only as a military power deserving of international respect, but also as a “civilizational model” that could

rally all those in Russia and beyond who were fed up with the erosion of traditional values.

The Kremlin has also provided financial and logistical support to far-right forces in the West, said Peter Kreko, an analyst at **Political Capital**, a research group in Budapest. Though Jobbik, a neo-Nazi party in Hungary and other groups have been accused of receiving money from Moscow, the only proven case so far involves the National Front in France, which got loans worth more than \$11 million from Russian banks.

Russia also shares with far-right groups across the world a deeply held belief that, regardless of their party, traditional elites should be deposed because of their support for globalism and transnational institutions like NATO and the European Union.

But this means different things to different groups and people. Mr. Putin, for example, has “a natural interest in making a mess in Europe and the U.S.,” Mr. Kreko said.

But for Mr. Heimbach, whose Traditionalist Worker Party uses the slogan “Globalism is the poison, nationalism is the antidote,” the term “international elites” is often an anti-Semitic code for Jews, though he denied any racist intent.

Mr. Putin has never personally promoted white supremacist ideas, and has repeatedly insisted that Russia, while predominantly white and Christian, is a vast territory of diverse religions and ethnic groups stretching from the Baltic Sea to the Pacific Ocean. Nor has he displayed any sign of hostility toward Jews, a fact that has infuriated some of Russia’s more extremist nationalist groups.

In fact, Mr. Putin’s agenda is not purely ideological. It is as much about accomplishing strategic goals like destabilizing Europe and NATO, or forcing the European Union to rescind the sanctions it applied after his forays into Crimea and eastern Ukraine.

This has not stopped people like Richard B. Spencer, who runs the website **AlternativeRight.com** and directs the National Policy Institute, an alt-right group based in Montana, from hailing Mr. Putin as a protector of the white race.

Not all of the alt-right has fully embraced the Russian leader. Stephen K. Bannon, Mr. Trump's new chief strategist, who until he entered the White House ran Breitbart News, which he has called a platform for the alt-right, has a complicated view of Mr. Putin. In a speech in 2014, he said that Mr. Putin ran a "kleptocracy," but also that "we, the Judeo-Christian West, really have to look at what he's talking about as far as traditionalism goes."

Mr. Spencer, who held a much-discussed conference in Washington in November, produced a video last year in which he claimed that "an understanding" between Mr. Trump and Mr. Putin might bring together Slavic and American Caucasians and eventually "foretell a unified white world." This summer, he echoed those remarks when he told *The Nation* magazine, "I think we should be pro-Russia because Russia is the great white power that exists in the world."

In an interview this past week, Mr. Spencer — he made headlines at his conference by shouting "Hail Trump!" — offered a more measured version of this sentiment, referring to Mr. Putin as "a normal leader in an abnormal world."

"He wants to conserve his nation and his people," Mr. Spencer said. "He recognizes certain enemies and certain traditions that should remain, like the church and the state. These are very normal conservative ends."

Mr. Spencer acknowledged that Mr. Putin did not share his ideology, but played that down, saying, "We can look to Putin as someone we can admire and understand."

Mr. Putin's fans in Europe generally avoid white supremacist ideas, at least in public, but have also praised him for his nationalistic pride and his views on Islamic extremism, immigration and traditional sexual mores.

When ordinary people see that "a man can kiss a man in the street in Germany, they look to the east and Russia and see that this kind of a new life has been stopped there," said Mr. Voigt, the German far-right leader. "For us, this is hope."

Mr. Voigt added that he and his party "agree 100 percent with Putin's position" on homosexuality: "We are absolutely against gender politics for my country and for Europe."

Not all of Europe's right-wing populists are smitten with Mr. Putin, though most tend to see him much more favorably than their own entrenched elites. "I'm more a fan than not," said Tom Van Grieken, the leader of Vlaams Belang, a Belgian group that champions independence for the Dutch-speaking region of Flanders. "He does a good job for Russian interests. But I'm not sure he is good for the rest of the world."

In Mr. Putin's favor, Mr. Van Grieken insisted that Russia had been demonized by a Belgian establishment that "is a slave to America," adding, "Putin is not black or white, but 50 shades of gray."

Last year, in an effort to unite disparate and occasionally feuding far-right groups and to place Russia squarely at the center of the expanding movement against liberal elites, a Russian political party, Rodina, organized a gathering of nationalist figures from Europe, the United States and elsewhere in a cramped conference room at St. Petersburg's Holiday Inn.

Fyodor V. Biryukov, a leader of the Rodina, or Motherland, party, said it was the first time that activists in the vanguard of "a new global revolution" had gotten together to rail against same-sex marriage, political correctness, radical Islamists and New York financiers. He said the Kremlin had not supported the event, "but "did not bother us, either."

Among the Europeans at the conference were representatives from Britain First, a far-right nationalist party, and Golden Dawn, the Greek neo-fascist group. At least two Americans were also there.

One of them was Mr. Dickson, the former Klan lawyer, who flew in from Atlanta and gave a speech that ended with a cry in halting Russian: "God save the czar!"

The other was Jared Taylor, the founder of the white supremacist think tank American Renaissance, who said that the descendants of white Europeans risked being swept away by a wave of Africans, Central Americans and Asians.

In recent years, Mr. Taylor has struck up ties with European groups, inviting officials from the National Front, Vlaams Belang and the British National Party to speak at his American Renaissance events.

“There is a worldwide awakening of nationalism among European countries — and I include the United States in that,” Mr. Taylor said. “All across Europe, we are seeing the rise of parties expressing the idea that Europe, in order to remain Europe, must remain European. I have a feeling of intense kinship for those that wish to preserve their nation and their culture.”

Mr. Heimbach has made three trips to Europe in the last three years, meeting with officials from the Golden Dawn in Greece, the New Right in Romania and Mr. Voigt’s National Democratic Party in Germany to discuss fundraising and organizing strategies. In Prague in September, he addressed members of the Workers’ Party of Social Justice, which opposes NATO and the European Union, has sought to criminalize homosexuality and has called for the Czech Republic to restore relations with Russia.

“We white Americans can never be truly separated from our European brothers and sisters,” Mr. Heimbach told the crowd, “because we are all bonded together by shared blood, heritage and destiny.”

Tomas Vanas, the Czech party’s chairman, said in a telephone interview this past week that he stood together with Mr. Putin and others to resist “the perverse liberal values of the Western world.”

From home in Ohio last month, Mr. Heimbach described his visits to Europe as field trips that help him learn how to make the white nationalist movement in the United States a “real political force.” He also spoke about creating a broader, worldwide network, which he called, with a nod to Comintern, the old Communist International, “the Traditionalist International.”

In this, as in many things, Mr. Putin’s Russia, now the home of a new global alliance of far-right groups called the World National-Conservative Movement, was the template.

“Russia has already taken its place on the global stage by organizing national movements as counterparts to Atlanticist elites,” Mr. Heimbach said. “Intellectually, they’ve shown us how it works.”

Hana de Goeij contributed reporting.

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