

Trickle Down Soft Power: Do Russia's Ties to European Parties Influence Public Opinion?

Abstract

Do states' partnerships with foreign elites influence international public opinion? During Russia's annexation of Crimea, the Kremlin strengthened its ties with far-left and far-right European parties – leading some European elites to express more explicit pro-Russian positions. This paper analyzes how these elite-level ties influence ordinary individuals' foreign policy attitudes, offering insight into the conditions under which soft power “trickles down.” By leveraging public opinion data before and after the conflict in Crimea (2012-2017), and employing an estimation strategy that follows the same logic as a standard differences-in-differences (DID) strategy, I demonstrate that Russia's linkages with anti-establishment parties (AEPs) led to greater confidence in Vladimir Putin over time, but had limited impact on favorability toward Russia, the United States, and NATO. These findings have important implications for autocratic public diplomacy, our conceptualization of soft power, and Russian foreign policy.

State and non-state actors often partner with foreign elites to influence policy outcomes outside their country's borders (Keck and Sikkink 1999, 90; Lebovic and Saunders 2016, 110; Putnam 1988, 434). These cross-border linkages help shape elite political behavior by establishing political norms and transmitting information to facilitate elite coordination over international policies (Betsill and Bulkeley 2004, 489; Evans 2000, 240; True and Mintrom 2001, 30). While existing studies demonstrate that dense elite-level ties can change elite political calculus (Haas 1992, 17; Holmes 2013, 830; Keck and Sikkink, 2014), there is less discussion about the spillover effects of these cross-border linkages on ordinary individuals' political attitudes.

This paper assesses how political relationships at the elite-level influence public opinion, providing insight into how soft power "trickles down." For instance, in Europe, Russian officials host party leaders at international conferences, invite foreign politicians to appear on their broadcasting networks, and even fund fringe European parties (Herpen 2015; Laruelle et al. 2015). These linkages have begun to pay off as far-right and far-left parties increasingly vote in favor of Russian policies in the European parliament, oppose expanding economic sanctions on Russia, and make public statements supporting pro-Russian policies (Klapisis 2015). Although others have tracked how the Kremlin uses linkages with European parties to shape policies important to Russia, there is little discussion about whether voters who support these parties have grown to adopt more pro-Russian views (Akçali et al. 2015; Polyakova et al. 2016; Taylor 2017; Walker 2016). Is it true that an overlooked factor of the Kremlin's influence is Russia's "growing soft power among Western populists" (Keating and Kaczmarek 2018b)?¹

Despite these types of claims, it is not apparent how denser elite ties with would promote more

¹In the United States, there is evidence that President Donald Trump's reluctance to criticize Vladimir Putin has created more favorable attitudes toward Russia among Republicans (Helderman and Hamburger 2017; Nussbaum 2017). In 2015, there was almost no partisan gap in Americans' attitudes toward Russia. Just two year later, 41% of Republicans had a favorable view of Russia, compared to just 16% of Democrats (Vice 2017).

favorable attitudes toward states at the mass level. First, there is an assumption that pro-regime messages cascade down to voters via anti-establishment elites through the media (Hegedűs 2016, 3). Second, while party cues are a powerful force in shaping citizens' attitudes on foreign policy issues (Cohen 2003; Entman 2004; Kam 2005; Zaller 1992), individuals do not blindly mimic elites stances (Ciuk and Yost 2016, 328; Guisinger and Saunders 2017, 439; Kertzer and Zeitsoff 2017, 545). Moreover, many voters care more about domestic issues like immigration rather than foreign policy, which could result in them ignoring elite foreign policy cues (Polyakova et al. 2016, 10). Consequently, it remains an open question whether Russian ties to European elites trickle down to influence Russian soft power.

I use data from the *Pew Global Attitudes & Trends Project* (2012-2017) and rely upon an estimation strategy that follows the logic of a standard differences-in-differences (DID) strategy to test whether increased elite interaction between anti-establishment parties (AEPs) and the Kremlin has had spillover effects on European voters' attitudes toward Vladimir Putin and Russia – assessing whether cross-border ties are influencing Russian soft power in the region. I also examine whether these linkages adversely impact favorability toward the United States and NATO since there has been increased attention on the Kremlin's goal of undermining confidence in the U.S. and western international institutions (Pomerantsev 2015).

I find a growing gap between AEP and non-AEP voters in their levels of confidence in Vladimir Putin, indicating that elite-level linkages have the potential to trickle down and shape foreign public opinion. In short, autocrats can boost their international influence during contentious geopolitical periods by cultivating networks with foreign elites. However, there is little evidence that AEP voters are adopting less favorable attitudes toward the United States and NATO. The findings underscore the importance in carefully operationalizing soft power since analyzing different dependent variables leads to different inferences about the effectiveness of Russian public diplomacy. From a foreign policy perspective, this paper also sheds light on when “useful idiots” or “Trojan Horses” within democratic countries can augment autocratic legitimacy and promote policies that

favor powerful non-democratic states ([Orenstein 2014](#); [Walker 2016](#)).

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. First, I discuss how transnational elite linkages can trickle down to impact mass public opinion, highlighting Russia's partnerships with European far-left and far-right parties. The following section explains the data and the research design, detailing the similarities to a DID identification strategy. Next, I present the results of the empirical models. Finally, I discuss the implications of the results, potential limitations of the study, and emphasize areas for future research.

Foreign Messages, Domestic Elites, and International Opinion

Countries invest time, resources, and energy trying to shape international public opinion because they understand that sympathetic foreign audiences can help them achieve their political objectives. By making other countries admire and emulate their achievements, values, or political system, states maintain greater latitude to pursue their foreign policy goals without facing international resistance ([Nye 2004](#)). Foreign public opinion is also a critical strategic asset as modern warfare becomes as much a battle over public opinion as it is over physical terrain ([Gilboa 2008](#), 60; [Goldsmith and Horiuchi 2012](#), 557; [Payne 2009](#), 124). With borders becoming increasingly less important for the transmission of information, countries have invested more resources into trying to shape public opinion in foreign countries – hoping to utilize countries' own citizens as potential allies to pursue their foreign policy goals ([Shamir and Shikaki 2005](#), 312).²

One strategy countries use to shape public opinion in other countries is establishing ties with foreign political parties, which allows states to utilize local elites as credible messengers for

²Studies on international public opinion find that attitudes toward foreign nations can influence a country's ability to sustain military coalitions ([Goldsmith and Horiuchi 2012](#)), increase foreign direct investment ([Rose 2016](#)), and affect the success of international negotiations ([Shamir and Shikaki 2005](#)).

their political narratives (Gilboa 2008, 59). Rather than directly targeting citizens through foreign broadcasting, transmitting political messages through trusted domestic elites is more likely to influence attitudes. Page, Shapiro and Dempsey (1987) find that individuals rarely listen to foreigners directly, but may be exposed to foreign narratives through familiar domestic elites (32). This is because domestic elites are more likely to be perceived as credible by citizens (Druckman 2001, 1061; Hayes and Guardino 2011, 832). Also, most people do not have developed preferences on specific international policies or foreign countries (Converse 1964; Rosenau 1961), making party cues important in forming political positions (Kam 2005; Zaller 1992).

Recent work examines how non-democratic states cultivate networks with foreign political parties in order to increase their international influence (Herpen 2015; Shambaugh 2013). Like democratic countries, autocrats foster ties with political parties in other countries for political leverage, personal gain, and to improve the reputation of their country. According to Walker: “By nestling their activities within the democracies, relying as much as possible on local voices, and using the guise of soft power, authoritarians can introduce their ideas and narratives with unprecedented facility” (Walker 2018, 16).

Russia in particular has sparked concern due to its active efforts to strengthen ties with foreign political parties (Larrabee et al. 2017, 54). For example, the Kremlin forges alliances with far-right European nationalists who are attracted to the Kremlin for its anti-EU message, as well as the far-left who view Russia as an ally against U.S. hegemony (Pomerantsev 2015, 43). While the specific reasons European elites partner with the Kremlin vary, scholars have noted that the density of ties between far-right and far-left European parties and Kremlin officials grew after the conflict in Crimea – when Russia was searching for international backing for its actions in Ukraine (Laruelle et al. 2015, 2; Orenstein, 2014; Polyakova et al. 2016, 6).³

³These party linkages to the Kremlin did not appear overnight, but the conflict in Crimea has brought these relationships to the spotlights and has forced party leaders to take more explicit pro-Russian stances (Klapisis 2015, 14).

For example, Marine Le Pen's *National Front* in France has accepted loans from Russian-owned banks and has called for building stronger ties with Russia after the annexation of Crimea. *National Front* party officials also served as election observers in Crimea following the annexation in 2014 (Akçali et al. 2015). Le Pen has frequently defied U.S. and European stances on Putin and criticized the sanctions against Russia. She has supported Putin on Crimea and visited Moscow during the height of the conflict, accusing the European Union of starting a "new Cold War" - a narrative frequently promoted by the Kremlin itself (Klapisis 2015, 44).

According to close observers of Russian soft power in Germany, "Russia has more assets in Germany than in any other Western country. For example, the Left Party of Germany (*Die Linke*) is the direct heir of the Socialist Unified Party of Germany (SED), which ruled the GDR. In essence, only the name has changed. There are indirect signs that they still use SED money to this day, and their leadership ranks have for years included people who have various connections to Russia or to the USSR" (Kirillova 2018). *Die Linke* party leaders traveled to Crimea to serve as election observers and met with Aleksandr Zakarchenko, the leader of the Donetsk People's Republic, the separatist government in Eastern Ukraine supported by Russia (Shekhovtsov 2015). Andreas Maurer, the chairman of the *Die Linke*, was the first German politician to publicly advocate recognizing Crimea as a part of Russia (Pomerantsev 2015, 43). *Die Linke* party leaders also helped spread a false Russian story about the rape of a 13-year old girl by migrants, demonstrating their lack of hesitance to spread Russian disinformation to their supporters (Wesslau 2016). In publications followed by *Die Linke* members, "emphasis was put on comments and reports of German supporters of Russian policies" (Pynnöniemi and Rácz 2016, 136). This is critical since it clearly demonstrates that pro-Russian narratives are more likely to appear in these media outlets.⁴

⁴While many focus on direct exposure to Russian state-sponsored propaganda (Xie and Boyd-Barrett 2015, 79), pro-Russian statements often appear in the national media via Kremlin-friendly elites (Watanabe 2017). In fact, pro-Russian voices often set the tone for the rest of the media in Germany – particularly on foreign policy (Kirillova 2018).

The *United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP)* has been the prominent pro-Russian party in Great Britain, with former party leader Nigel Farage frequently appearing on the Russian foreign broadcasting network *Russia Today (RT)* to promote the Kremlin's political narratives. Additionally, "the voting records of UKIP's Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) show support for Russia's annexation of Crimea" (Polyakova et al. 2016, 22). According to Klapsis (2015), Farage's "pro-Russian leanings have become more apparent as a result of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict" (29). During the course of the conflict in Crimea, he has also moved the party's foreign policy closer to Russia, while criticizing the EU's sanctions against Russia and publicly expressing admiration for Vladimir Putin (Polyakova et al. 2016, 18).

In Italy, the far-right political party *Lega Nord* has increasingly shown sympathy toward the Kremlin's political narratives. *Lega Nord* consistently advocates anti-migrant, pro-business, and Eurosceptic views, but did not promote explicit pro-Russian policies until Matteo Salvini, the party leader, met Aleksei Pushkov, chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Duma, when traveling to Moscow and Crimea in 2014 (Akçali et al. 2015, 113). Shortly after a meeting with Vladimir Putin in Milan, Salvini expressed support for ending economic sanctions toward Russia and normalizing economic relations with the Kremlin (Klapsis 2015, 52). Salvini visited Moscow twice between October and December 2014 when the conflict in Ukraine was in its peak. This led to the eventual establishment of the Lombardia-Russia Society, an organization that arranges contacts between like-minded Russian and Italians (Laruelle et al. 2015, 9). The *Lega Nord* party leader has also expressed support for the Crimean referendum and complimented Putin's leadership during the conflict (Klapsis 2015, 44)

All the evidence points to the fact that the aforementioned parties took more active pro-Russian policy stances after 2014. Yet, only a few studies have examined the impact of the Kremlin's ties to the European far-right and far-left on European public opinion during this period, which is critical if one wishes to understand how autocrats augment their international influence. Most likely, influence at the elite-level trickles down to the mass-level via the media (Hegedűs 2016;

Pynnöniemi and Rácz 2016; Watanabe 2017).⁵ European elites with linkages to the Kremlin not only promote pro-Russian policy positions in their respective parliaments, but also express these views publicly through the media. These pro-Russian party cues can then shift citizens' attitudes on foreign policy issues over time (Cohen 2003; Kam 2005), causing AEP voters to adopt more pro-Russian attitudes themselves (**H1: Spillover Hypothesis**).

Alternatively, while far-right and far-left party leaders in Europe have shown sympathy toward Russia and have promoted pro-Russian policies, their support may not trickle-down to their supporters. Individual ambivalence, especially regarding foreign policy issues, could make citizens miss party cues on Russia (Almond 1950, 232). While low issue salience is related to greater reliance on heuristic information processing, it could also mean that elite endorsement may fall on deaf ears (Ciuk and Yost 2016, 330).⁶ There is also strong evidence that the reason people vote for fringe European parties has little to do with international relations, making them less sensitive to elite cues on foreign policy issues (Polyakova et al. 2016, 10). While autocrats can leverage economic and business ties to influence political elite behavior (Walker 2016, 50), they are predicted to be disadvantaged at public diplomacy due to their lack of international legitimacy (Avgerinos 2009, 126; Entman 2004, 55; Nye, 2013).⁷ Therefore, Russian soft power may not trickle down to party supporters who pay less attention to foreign relations (**H2: No Spillover Hypothesis**).

Finally, supporters of far-right and far-left parties may be consistently more favorable toward Russia due to other confounding factors, and Russia's partnerships with AEP leaders after the

⁵Hegedűs (2016) finds that whatever pro-Russian sentiments exist among supporters of the pro-Kremlin Hungarian parties *Fidesz* and *Jobbik* is "likely connected to party-controlled public broadcasting and private media outlets" (3).

⁶Moreover, the influence of party cues is contingent on the strength of the party system which varies across Europe (Brader, Tucker and Duell 2013).

⁷Others note that this may not be true and simply reflects a bias in the study of soft power (Keating and Kaczmarska 2018a).

outbreak of conflict in Crimea might have little impact on individuals' foreign policy preferences. In short, AEP voters' attitudes toward Russia may be consistently different than other citizens even before they receive pro-Russian messages from party elites (**H3: Consistency Hypothesis**).

In sum, I assess whether Russian elite networks with European AEPs is shifting public opinion among supporters of these groups. It is possible that voters exhibit more pro-Russian views due to a more pro-Russian information environment. Conversely, while certain party elites in Europe may adopt pro-Russian policy positions, low issue saliency may mean that supporters of these parties do not change their views over time. Consequently, it is possible that the downstream consequences of Russia's partnerships with far-left and far-right European parties is overstated.

Data

I rely on the *Pew Global Attitudes & Trends* project, a set of worldwide representative public opinion surveys, and narrow my analysis to four European countries: France, Germany, Great Britain, and Italy, which are surveyed in every year. Since others have emphasized how attitudes toward a foreign leader greatly impact individuals' respect toward that country, I use individuals' level of confidence in Vladimir Putin from 2012-2017 (with missing data in 2013) as the main measure of Russian soft power (Balmas 2018, 500). I code respondents as confident in Putin if they said they had *a lot of confidence* or *some confidence* in Vladimir Putin. In the sample, only 21% of respondents had confidence in Vladimir Putin, highlighting that Russian soft power is still relatively weak (Nye 2013). I also examine general favorability toward Russia from 2012-2017 (with missing data in 2016) as an alternative measure of Russian soft power since there are debates on how the concept should be operationalized (Goldsmith and Horiuchi 2012, 556).

Some may be skeptical that the Kremlin cares whether foreign citizens adopt more favorable attitudes toward Putin or Russia. Instead, the Kremlin may care more about fostering animosity toward the West (Pomerantsev 2015). Therefore, I also test whether supporters of AEPs are more

likely to hold stronger anti-American and anti-NATO stances after party leaders cultivated closer ties to the Kremlin. Data for the United States extend from 2012-2017, while attitudes toward NATO were asked in 2012, 2013, 2015, and 2017. In the Supplementary Information (Appendix C), I also assess whether supporters of AEPs are more likely to blame the Ukrainian government and the West for the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, support lessening economic sanctions on Russia, and oppose arming the Ukrainian military against Russian aggression. However, the data for these dependent variables is only available in 2015, making it impossible to assess changes overtime.

The independent variable of interest is a dummy variable *Anti-Establishment Party (AEP)*, which indicates if an individual supports the *National Front*, *Die Linke*, *UKIP*, or *Lega Nord*. Although there are debates about the *extent* to which these parties are friendly toward Russia, with some parties taking explicitly more pro-Russian stances, all had party leaders express favorable views of Russia, received financial support, or have attended Kremlin-sponsored conferences (Akçali et al. 2015). Additionally, these parties have become the center of attention for both academic and policy-oriented studies on Russia’s growing international influence, making it important to assess to what extent these groups serve as conduits for the Kremlin’s political narratives (Orenstein 2014; Polyakova et al. 2016).

Empirical Strategy

My empirical strategy is similar to a standard DID where the main goal, “is to compute the difference of the mean outcomes of treated and controls after the treatment and subtract the outcome difference that had been there already before the treatment had any effect” (Lechner 2011, 176). Traditionally, the treatment is denoted by D , $d \in [0,1]$ while the treatment period is denoted with T , $t \in [0,1]$. In my design, this would mean that non-AEP voters’ (i.e. the control group) attitudes toward Putin prior to 2014 are denoted by Y_1^C and their attitudes after Crimea are expressed by Y_2^C . Meanwhile, AEP voters (i.e. the treated group) are denoted as Y_1^T in the pre-treatment period and

Y_2^T after treatment. Consequently, the DID estimator is defined as follows:

$$DID = (Y_2^T - Y_2^C) - (Y_1^T - Y_1^C) \quad (1)$$

Unlike a traditional DID, the *intensity* of treatment varies overtime after the initial establishment of cross-national party linkages in 2014. Russia annexed Crimea in late February 2014 and became engaged in a bloody proxy war in Eastern Ukraine over the next year – an event that captured considerable media attention within European countries (Lichtenstein et al. 2018; Roman, Wanta and Buniak 2017). As detailed above, AEP voters received more pro-Russian cues from party leaders who cultivated close ties to the Kremlin during this time (Pynnöniemi and Rącz 2016).⁸ However, the Pew surveys were administered in March/April of their respective years – shortly after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Hence, there is a possibility that not enough time had passed for AEP voters to internalize the pro-Russian cues coming from their preferred elites.

Luckily, having cross-sectional data in from 2014-2017 allows me to assess how AEP voters change their attitudes relative to non-AEP voters three full years after the conflict. This cross-sectional data may be unbalanced, meaning that unbalanced covariates and error terms across the treatment and control groups may be causing biases in the coefficient estimates (Lee and Kang 2006, 271). Because of this, I control for the respondent's gender (51% female), age ($\mu=51$), and education (49% higher education) to make sure that observed compositional differences between samples are not driving different trends in the dependent variables over time. As some previous work has shown, younger people and men are generally more pro-Russian (Vice 2017).

⁸While some may be skeptical about the direction of causation, it is unlikely that voters support populist European parties due to their pro-Russian stances since foreign policy is not the primary issue that voters use to evaluate parties (Polyakova et al. 2016). Therefore, it is more likely that parties are helping voters form their attitudes toward foreign countries and international institutions rather than vice-versa.

While the identification strategy in this paper provides me many of the advantages of a traditional DID design it also comes with some shortcomings. Specifically, one key assumption of this design is that any change in the dependent variable for the control and treated groups would follow a *common trend* absent treatment. When this assumption holds, the *Control group* can be used to infer the counterfactual change in favorability toward Russia for the *Treatment group* in the absence of pro-Russian cues. While this assumption cannot be tested with only two time periods, having additional cross-sectional data in the *pre-treatment period*, allows me to apply the DID estimator to pretreatment data in order to test for preexisting differences in the trends of the outcome variable between treatment and control (Abadie 2005, 2). If linkages between AEPs and the Kremlin are having some sort of spillover effect on voters of these parties, these effects should only be visible after 2014 when voters began to receive more pro-Russian cues from party elites.

Main Results

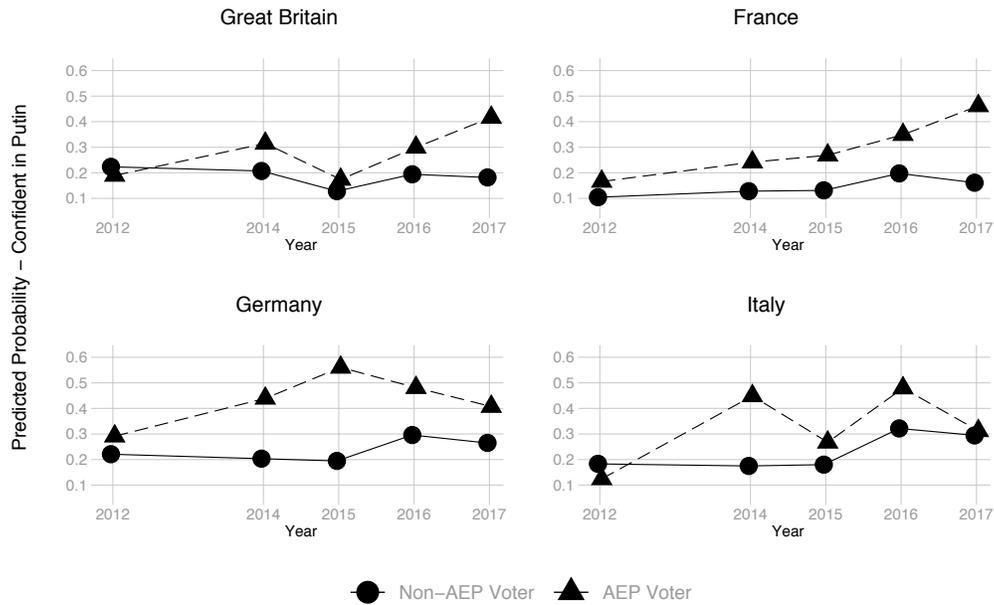
I begin by testing whether AEP voters are more pro-Putin than their fellow citizens after 2014 – the period when the Kremlin began to cultivate ties with far-right and far-left party leaders. The main coefficient of interest is the interaction between *AEP* and *Year* (DID estimator), which tests whether there is a growing gap between AEP voters and other citizens’ attitudes toward Putin over time. The specification is included below, with controls included in \mathbf{X} and ε_{ij} denoting unobserved heterogeneity.

$$Y_{ij} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Party}_{ij} + \beta_2 \text{Year}_{ij} + \beta_3 \text{Party} \times \text{Year}_{ij} + \mathbf{X}\beta + \varepsilon_{ij} \quad (2)$$

In all the cases, I find a growing gap in confidence in Putin between AEP and non-AEP voters beginning after 2014. In the United Kingdom, over 42% of *UKIP* supporters had confidence in Putin compared to only 19% of non-supporters in 2017. *National Front* supporters in France also exhibit more pro-Putin views, with over 45% of *National Front* supporters expressing confidence

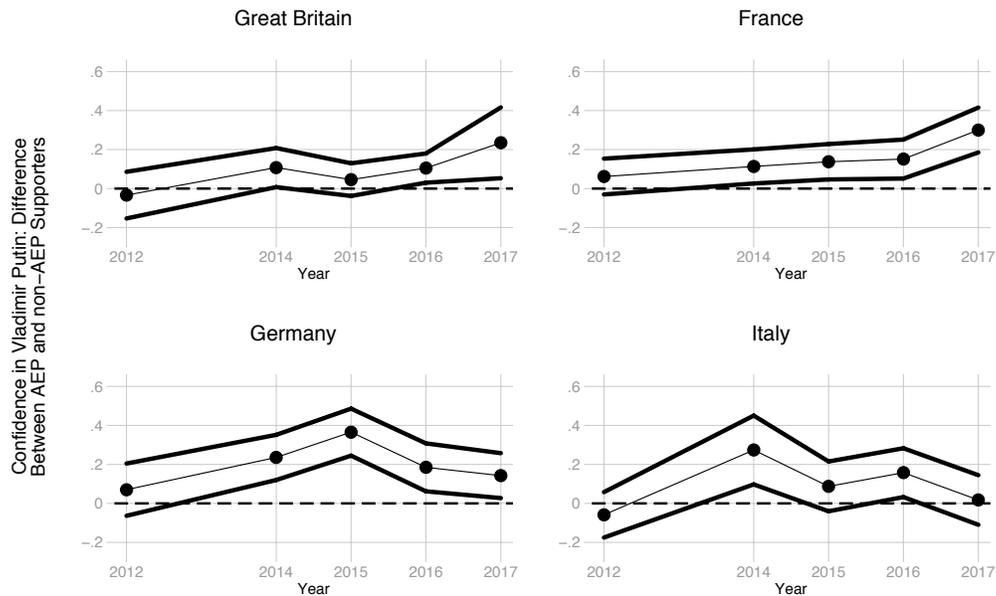
in Putin in 2017, compared to 16% among non-supporters. In Germany, *Die Linke* voters express drastically greater confidence in Putin in 2014 and 2015 but this support declines in 2016 and 2017. Approximately, 41% of *Die Linke* voters express confidence in Putin in 2017 compared to 27% of non-supporters. Finally, in Italy, *Lega Nord* supporters tend to express more pro-Putin views immediately after the outbreak of conflict in Crimea than non-supporters, but this gap disappears over time. Notably, there is no linear upward trend in confidence in the Russian president. Except for France, confidence ebbs and flows over this period, indicating that attitudes towards foreign countries are quite volatile.

Figure 1: Please Tell Me How Confident You Are In Vladimir Putin



Note: AEP refers to Die Linke voters in Germany, National Front voters in France, UKIP voters in Great Britain, and Lega Nord voters in Italy. Germany (N=4,901), France (N=4,958), Great Britain (4,944), and Italy (4,620). Estimated with logistic regression with demographic controls.

Figure 2: Difference in AEP and non-AEP voters in Confidence in Vladimir Putin

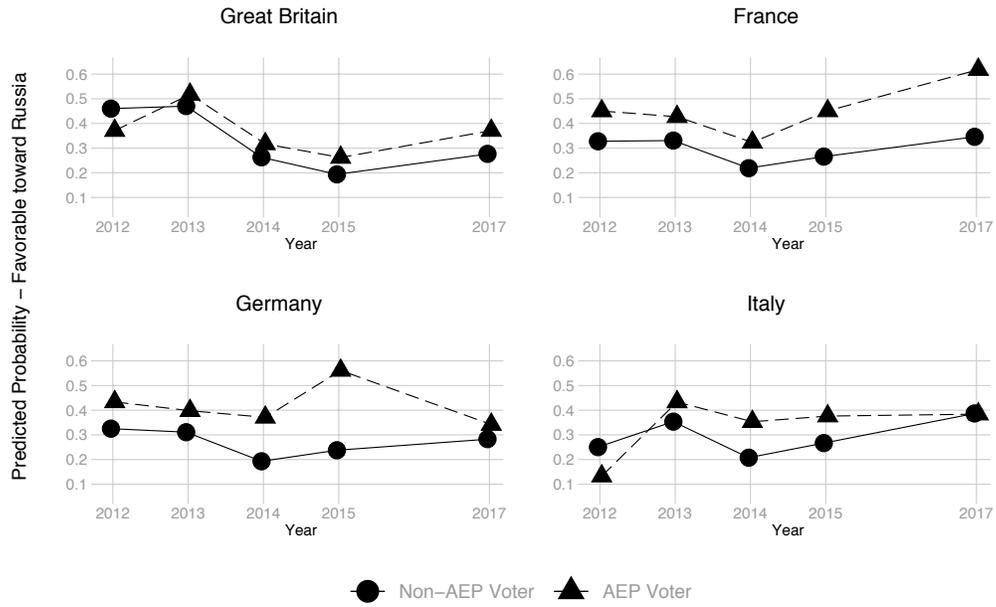


Note: AEP refers to Die Linke voters in Germany, National Front voters in France, UKIP voters in Great Britain, and Lega Nord voters in Italy. Germany (N=4,901), France (N=4,958), Great Britain (4,944), and Italy (4,620). Estimated with logistic regression with demographic controls. AMEs with 95% CIs.

Examining favorability toward Russia as the dependent variable yields slightly different results. While the trends remain similar, only the findings for France remain robust and significant over time. *UKIP*, *Die Linke*, and *Lega Nord* voters are not significantly more pro-Russian in 2017 than their fellow citizens, highlighting the importance in testing different operationalizations of soft power. In fact, using this alternative dependent variable can lead to significantly different substantive inferences about the trickle down effects of Russia’s linkages to far-right and far-left parties. Other than France, there does not appear to be any long-term positive impact of Russia’s partnership with elites on mass public opinion.⁹

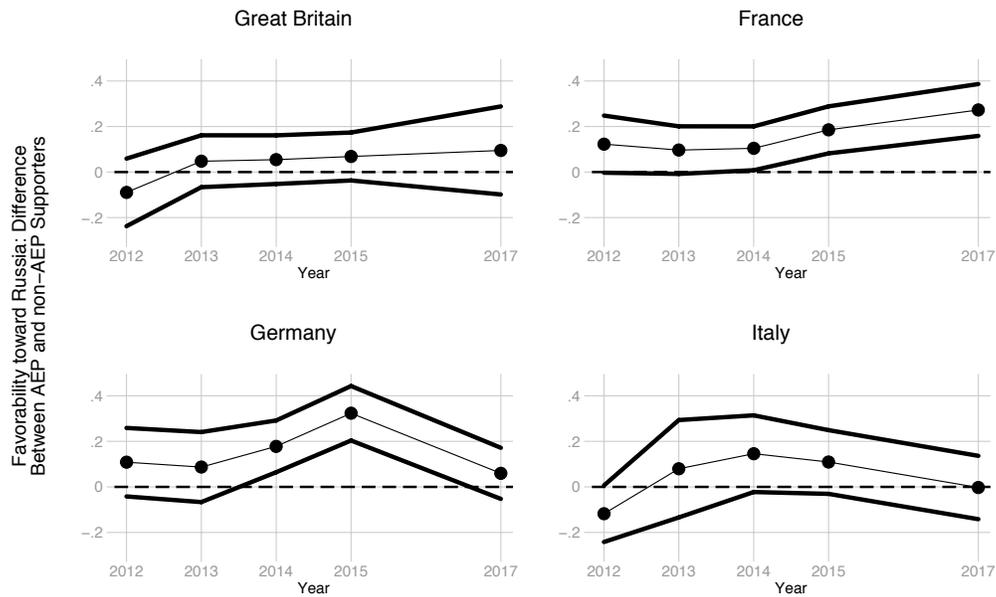
⁹I use the question: *Please tell me if you have a very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable or very unfavorable opinion of Russia* which I collapse into a dummy variable.

Figure 3: Please Tell Me How Favorable You Are Toward Russia



Note: AEP refers to Die Linke voters in Germany, National Front voters in France, UKIP voters in Great Britain, and Lega Nord voters in Italy. Germany (N=4,802), France (N=4,978), Great Britain (N=4,080), and Italy (4,681). Estimated with logistic regression with demographic controls, AMEs with 95% CIs.

Figure 4: Difference in AEP and non-AEP Voters in Favorability toward Russia



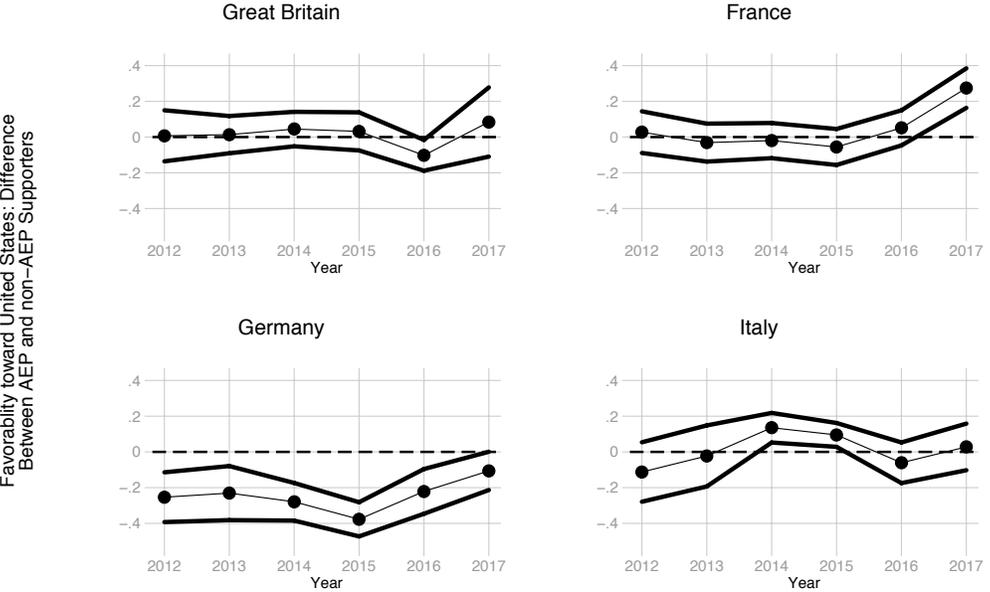
Note: AEP refers to Die Linke voters in Germany, National Front voters in France, UKIP voters in Great Britain, and Lega Nord voters in Italy. Germany (N=4,802), France (N=4,978), Great Britain (N=4,080), and Italy (4,681). Estimated with logistic regression with demographic controls, AMEs with 95% CIs.

However, there are some reasons to believe that confidence toward Putin is a more accurate representative of citizens' stances on a country's foreign policy. As argued by Goldsmith and Horiuchi, "international relations soft power manifests itself in views held by country B's mass public about country A's foreign policy" – rather than simply gauging attitudes toward the country (2012, 556). Moreover, in the present political environment, "since media tend to zoom in on state leaders, often neglecting the state itself the values perceived as a country's most prominent are those professed or represented by its leader. If a national leader is presented in the international media in a positive light, this can improve his or her country's assessment among foreign publics, and likely also among foreign policy makers" (Balmas 2018, 512). Therefore, attitudes toward leaders better approximate how publics view a country's foreign policy actions, making them more consequential for a country's soft power capabilities.

Finally, I assess whether Russia's linkages with AEPs are lowering evaluations of western actors and international institutions by fostering anti-U.S. and anti-NATO views. As noted above, if increased Russian influence should be operationalized as lessened support for the Kremlin's rivals or Western institutions, testing these alternative dependent variables is important to ensure that we are not understating the impact of Russia's networks. Contrary to popular belief, AEP voters are not becoming more anti-American overtime. In fact, *National Front* voters are more favorable toward the U.S. in 2017. I also find that AEP and non-AEP supports' attitudes toward the U.S. and NATO do not drastically diverge after 2014. *UKIP* voters do become slightly more anti-NATO in 2017, but I find the opposite pattern in Italy among *Lega Nord* voters. In Germany, *Die Linke* supporters are consistently anti-NATO.¹⁰

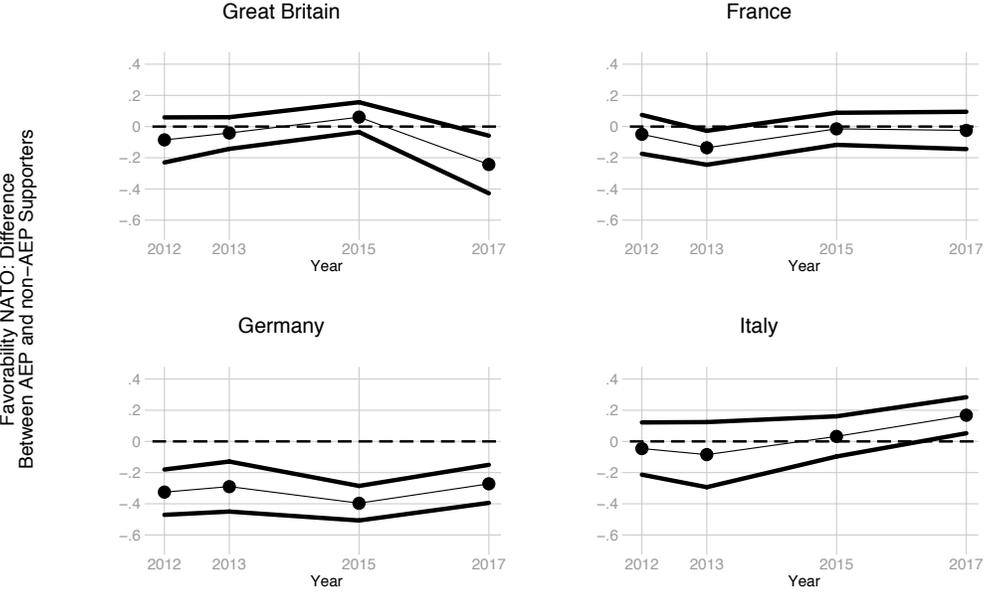
¹⁰All regression tables for the figures are presented in Supplementary Information: Appendix A.

Figure 5: Difference in AEP and non-AEP Voters in Favorability toward U.S.



Note: AEP refers to Die Linke voters in Germany, National Front voters in France, UKIP voters in Great Britain, and Lega Nord voters in Italy. Germany (N=5,760), France (N=5,906), Great Britain (N=5,614), and Italy (5,803). Estimated with logistic regression with demographic controls. AMEs with 95% CIs.

Figure 6: Difference in AEP and non-AEP Voters in Favorability toward NATO



Note: AEP refers to Die Linke voters in Germany, National Front voters in France, UKIP voters in Great Britain, and Lega Nord voters in Italy. Germany (N=5,729), France (N=5,904), Great Britain (N=3,146), and Italy (3,558). Estimated with logistic regression with demographic controls. AMEs with 95% CIs.

Discussion and Limitations

Overall, I find a notable growing gap between AEP and non-AEP voters in their levels of confidence toward Vladimir Putin, indicating that elite-level ties can trickle down to shape soft power at the mass-level. However, even though some AEP voters tend to become more confident in Putin over time, confidence still largely remains below the 50% mark. Results follow a similar pattern when I evaluate favorability toward Russia, but the favorability gap is only statistically significant in France by 2017. Moreover, in the United Kingdom and Italy, there is some evidence that the parallel trends assumption may not hold, meaning that we should be careful in assuming that pro-Russian cues rather than unobserved cofounders, are driving the confidence gap. I also find no evidence of declining support for the U.S. and NATO, highlight that domestic politics play a more important role in determining how citizens form their attitudes toward international institutions (Akçali et al. 2015).

These findings reopen debates about the proper dependent variables in research on international influence. While examining general favorability toward foreign countries is one approach, others evaluate attitudes toward countries' foreign policy, leaders, or specific policy positions (Goldsmith and Horiuchi 2012, 556). With increased attention to “sharp power”, scholars must be more cognizant about how international actors can shape domestic politics (Walker and Ludwig 2017). Moreover, it is critical to continually assess how attitudes change over time. While data from 2012 to 2015 tell a story of Russia's growing influence in Germany, extending the analysis to 2017 indicates that influence among *Die Linke* voters may be short-lived and on the decline. Conversely, support among far-right parties in France and the UK continues to grow – meaning that we should be careful about jumping to conclusions about the extent of Russia's international influence when looking at snapshots of public opinion.

In the Supplementary Information, I also find that supporters of *Die Linke* and the *National Front* are more likely to blame Ukraine and the West for the conflict in Crimea and support de-

creasing sanctions against Russia, but AEP supporters' attitudes toward sanctions in the United Kingdom, and Italy are similar to the rest of the population. *National Front* voters are more likely to oppose arming the Ukrainian government but these effects are not visible for the other parties. While these findings directly measure support for Russian foreign policy initiatives, making them consequential for Russian foreign policy, it is impossible to assess how support changes over time with the present data.

I do note that one limitation of the current study is the small number of AEP voters in some country-years. As I demonstrate in the Supplementary Information, the results for the United Kingdom and Germany are somewhat sensitive to the inclusion of probability weights - indicating possible heteroskedastic error terms or treatment effect heterogeneity (Solon, Haider and Wooldridge 2015). Due to the small number of observations and inconsistencies in models, we should be conservative when generalizing the findings.¹¹ Despite the sensitivity of results there are still several reasons to believe the growing confidence gap in Vladimir Putin between AEP and non-AEP voters is significant and real.

For instance, a Pew report that utilizes an alternative measure of support for far-right parties finds that “although confidence in Russian President Vladimir Putin’s leadership is low across Western Europe, those who favor right-wing populist parties are significantly more likely than those who do not to express confidence in Putin” (Taylor 2017). These findings are consistent with those reported in the main text. Unfortunately, their measure of positive affect toward particular parties is only available in 2016 and 2017, making it impossible to know how attitudes have changed over a longer period of time – particularly before and after the Kremlin began to actively cultivate ties with the specified parties. My findings, on the other hand, demonstrate that this gap between anti-establishment party supporters and non-supporters is absent prior the Kremlin’s

¹¹Pew’s international surveys are weighted by gender, age, education, region, urbanity and probability of selection of respondent.

attempt to establish relationships with European populist leaders.¹²

Some critics could also point to the fact that this paper does not assess how Russia's ties with other AEPs change individuals' attitudes, limiting the generalizability of the present study. It is true that Russia's ties with the *National Front*, *Die Linke*, *UKIP*, and *Lega Nord* are not the sole elite linkages the Kremlin has in these countries or in Europe more generally. However, I focus on the Kremlin's growing ties to these particulate parties for several reasons. First, there are data constraints with few or no supporters of other pro-Kremlin parties like the *Alternative for Germany (AfD)*, and the *British National Party (BNP)* in the years of interest, making it impossible to reliably estimate changes in attitudes over time. However, others demonstrate that these voters do tend to be more pro-Russian, at least in 2017 (Taylor 2017). Second, AEPs in the Czech Republic, Spain, and Greece are not surveyed in all five years which limits my ability to estimate within-country variation. However, once again, more recent data does tend to show that supporters of parties like *Fidesz* in Hungary, *PVV* in the Netherlands, and *Syriza* in Greece adopt more pro-Russian views (Taylor 2017). Third, many politicians like Berlusconi and Sarkozy, who have ties to Vladimir Putin, switch political parties making it difficult to track party cues. Alternatively, the parties in this study are sampled each year and are notable domestic players, making them important cases.

One final limitation of the present design is that it cannot measure citizens' exposure to pro-Russian narratives since media consumption measures are not available in the survey. We would expect that AEP voters are receiving pro-Russian cues from favored party elites though the media, making the interaction between partisanship and media consumption an important one to test for future research. While directly modeling the relationship between partisan affiliation, media consumption, and attitudes toward foreign nations is undoubtedly critical, I contend that previous work

¹²As I demonstrate in the Supplementary Information, individuals with far-right attitudes in Great Britain, France, and Italy become more pro-Putin over time compared to self-proclaimed political centrists, highlighting that people with different political ideologies are gravitating toward different global powers.

has plausibly demonstrated that supporters of far-right and far-left parties in Europe have received more pro-Kremlin information from party elites and media outlets (Pynnöniemi and Rácz 2016; Stelzenmüller 2017). Therefore, by relying on within-country comparison of parties that did not develop ties to the Kremlin with those that did develop this linkages, I can make useful inferences about how individuals' attitudes change over time on key foreign policy issues.

Conclusion

Some are concerned that if autocrats continue to establish ties with far-right and far-left parties, they can shift foreign public opinion in ways that undermine democratic governance and the liberal international order (Nye 2017, 16; Rohac, Zgut and Gyori 2017, 11). Prior research reveals that the intensity of Russia's linkages with *anti-establishment parties (AEPs)* increases after the outbreak of conflict in Ukraine (Akçali et al. 2015; Klapsis 2015; Krekó and Győri 2015; Orenstein 2014). According to Vadim Nikitin, "seemingly abandoned by their own governments, some of Europe's disenchanted have started to support previously fringe extremist parties. They have also started to look to Putin for sympathy" (Nikitin 2016). According to Surowiec, while "Russia and the targeted group of European parties enjoy different depths of relationships, their campaigning tends to have polarizing effects on politics in Europe" (Surowiec 2017).

While the role of elite linkages in shaping foreign policy outcomes is a rich area of research, less work focuses on the spillover effects of these linkages on mass public opinion. On one hand, one may expect that citizens' lack of knowledge about foreign policy makes them susceptible to changing partisan cues. Conversely, low issue salience may mean that partisans are not internalizing or adequately exposed to partisan cues (Ciuk and Yost 2016; Guisinger and Saunders 2017). Consequently, it is unclear whether foreign countries can partner with domestic elites to promote their political narratives and change mass public opinion in other countries.

This paper finds evidence that Russia's linkages with anti-establishment elites influences con-

confidence in Vladimir Putin, but has limited impact on Europeans' favorability toward Russia, the United States, and NATO. This is consequential for understanding Russian soft power and the trickle-down effects of autocratic elite-level networks. As partisan voters receive different information about foreign policy, it will be important to track how AEP and non-AEP supporters' attitudes change over time and whether these shifts in public opinion are stable or ephemeral.

Future work should test how political awareness and media consumption moderate the impact of foreign cues. The current study lacks measures of media consumption, making it impossible to assess whether individuals who pay more attention to foreign relations are adopting more pro-Russian attitudes. Additionally, teasing out the precise mechanism by which transnational party networks impact mass attitudes needs to be examined in experimental studies on foreign cues (Dragojlovic 2013, 2015; Guardino and Hayes 2017). It is also important to assess the possibility that the Kremlin's linkages with far-right and far-left parties may be having subtler impacts on public attitudes, such as increased cynicism and distrust in political institutions that this study cannot capture (Pomerantsev 2015). Examining different dependent variables is critical as Russian influence in Europe may materialize in unpredictable ways.

As a final note, Russian officials have actually started to question the strategy of supporting anti-establishment parties in Europe. In March 2018, the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration published a paper that "argues that support for groups like Alternative for Germany and the National Front 'sends the wrong message' domestically, and it isn't enough to overcome 'institutional inertia' or the preferences of the 'EU elite'. This support only aggravates Moscow's isolation" (Meduza 2018). In short, elite networks may be useful in changing elite calculus, but they may not be the most effective strategy for shifting mass public opinion in the long-term.¹³ Therefore, we should continue to monitor the potential trickle-down

¹³The growing polarization over Russia in the United States, for example, may be due the extreme salience of the issue for partisan identity, which may not travel to contexts in which party allegiances are weaker (Brader, Tucker and Duell 2013).

effects of autocrats' elite-level partnerships with foreign political parties and their implications for autocratic soft power over longer periods of time ([Keating and Kaczmarska 2018b](#); [Taylor 2017](#)).

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