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Putin Can't Get Europe's Nationalists to Bite

For Italy's Matteo Salvini and politicians like him, it's just not worth taking Russian money.

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Bloomberg

Italian Interior Minister Matteo Salvini's League party is embroiled in allegations it took financial aid from the Kremlin for its European parliamentary election campaign. However much Russia may want to fund Europe's political disruptors, though, it isn't going to work.

Italian magazine L'Espresso has just published an investigation that claims that during Salvini's visit to Moscow in October, his former spokesman discussed a deal with a group of Russian officials. The idea was to sell 3 million tons of Russian diesel, offered by state oil company Rosneft, to Italy's Eni SpA and funnel part of the profit to the League, the magazine said.

The League, Rosneft and the Russian government have all issued denials, and L'Espresso didn't manage to confirm much of the detail of the alleged transaction. But if the story is true, it would fit a pattern of recent allegations made against nationalist political forces in Europe.

Arron Banks, a major donor to the Leave.EU campaign in the 2016 Brexit referendum, was offered an exclusive gold deal in Russia,the Guardian reported in August. That raised the question: what could Banks offer in return?

In 2014, Marine Le Pen, leader of the French far-right party now known as the National Rally, took out a 9.5 million-euro ($10.8 million) loan from Moscow-based First Czech-Russian Bank.

According to French investigative outlet Mediapart, Le Pen's party has been close to publicity-shy billionaire Konstantin Malofeev, a backer of the Russian nationalist right who was deeply, if unofficially, involved in the 2014 Russian campaign against Ukraine. He also appeared in the L'Espresso investigation as the person allegedly behind the initial offer of Russian fuel in July.

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On the one hand, these vague Russian links are of more interest to the nationalists' political opponents than to prosecutors. It would be hard to link the League to Kremlin funds based on L'Espresso's reporting. Arron Banks ultimately didn't take the Russian investment opportunity.

The Le Pen case took a bizarre turn when the bank that issued the loan lost its license in 2016 and criminal cases were opened against its owners in Russia. It turned out the loan had been sold to a Moscow car rental company. Russia's deposit insurance agency sued to take it back on behalf of the First Czech-Russian Bank — but lost the case last year. The trial revealed that Le Pen's party had been servicing the loan diligently, on market terms.

On the other hand, it looks like individuals in Russia intent on making Moscow the center of a kind of nationalist, sovereigntist international are willing to offer money and business opportunities to key European players working to weaken the European Union.

Some of these political groupings need the money, too. Le Pen's party is perennially short of cash despite receiving government funding. The League faced deep financial trouble in July — the month it was allegedly first offered the Russian fuel deal — when a court ruled that 49 million euros could be seized from the party following the conviction of its founder Umberto Bossi for embezzlement.

Yet Europe isn't Russia. Le Pen, Banks and Salvini can be Russia-friendly to varying degrees, but under the rules of the political game, getting caught accepting Kremlin money can be hugely damaging both personally and to the nationalist cause; even a transparent loan from a private bank pushes the envelope. And there's little doubt that anyone knowingly accepting such help eventually will be caught: The media and intelligence services are on a constant lookout for Kremlin activity.

That must be why no proof positive has yet emerged of the Kremlin funding friendly European parties and causes. The resources are available and likely tempting, but no major player is foolhardy enough to accept them. After years of proffering enticing deals, Russian functionaries should understand this.

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The toxicity of Russian money is both good and bad for the Kremlin's relationships with Europe's nationalists. Their admiration for Russian President Vladimir Putin as a successful strongman and enemy of the globalist elite is likely sincere and not motivated by an expectation of handouts. But that is a far weaker link than one a financial relationship would have forged.

For all Salvini's fiery rhetoric about the unfairness and undesirability of EU sanctions on Russia, the Italian coalition government he jointly leads hasn't moved to lift the sanctions or to hinder their regular rollovers.

Putin doesn't really need to fund the nationalist parties; the potential return on investment is relatively low, and the downside is high for the Europeans. Moral support and frequent invitations to Moscow for some vodka and caviar are quite enough for the little he can achieve with these parties.

This opinion piece was first published by Bloomberg View.

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