

# Populist Voters Don't Mind Putin's Help

Matteo Salvini and other populist leaders are learning that Russian “interference” may not be a vote-killer.

By [Leonid Bershidsky](#)

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Matteo Salvini **Ministero Difesa** / Flickr

Italian Interior Minister Matteo Salvini, leader of the nationalist-populist League party, is having a hard time waving off accusations that one of his close aides plotted to get Kremlin funding for the political force. It should be clear by now that such aid is readily available to European populist parties. If voters don't see it as a deterrent — and so far they don't — then it's only going to become more brazen.

The first report of a Moscow meeting between Gianluca Savoini, Salvini's former spokesman, and some Russians with high-level government contacts appeared in the Italian magazine *L'Espresso* in February. At the meeting, an oil deal was supposedly discussed: The Russian state-owned oil company Rosneft would sell some Russian diesel fuel to an Italian intermediary at a discount; the intermediary would then sell it on to Italy's Eni SpA and use

the profit to fund the League.

Last week, BuzzFeed [published](#) what it said was the transcript of a secret recording of that meeting. It contains some titillating details about how the proposed deal would be structured to hide the Russian involvement, the amount of fuel to be sold (250,000 tons a month for a year), the size of the discount (4 percent) — and a Russian demand for a kickback. BuzzFeed calculated the Italians stood to receive about \$65 million so the League could “sustain a campaign.”

As in February, there’s still no evidence that the deal actually took place, that the League received any Russian money or that Salvini even knew about the negotiations. An Italian lawyer, Gianluca Meranda, has since [come forward](#) claiming that he’d been present at the meeting and that the transaction hadn’t been completed. And Salvini has [said](#) that he’s “never taken a ruble, a euro, a dollar or a liter of vodka in financing from Russia.”

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As Samuel Greene, director of the Russia Institute at King’s College London, [pointed out](#) in a recent Twitter thread, it’s natural for Putin to offer enticements to potential allies, and he doesn’t much care about European laws (or Russian ones, for that matter). “What should be much more surprising and troubling,” Greene wrote, “is the increasing number of players in our own political establishments who are willing to sell out — politicians and voters who no longer think our own rules matter. That’s the threat.”

As I’ve [written](#) before, European populists are perfectly aware of the toxicity of accepting Russian money in any form. In some countries, Italy among them, political slush funds are not unheard of — but Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election has drawn so much attention, including from intelligence services, that accepting the Kremlin’s financial aid increases the probability of getting caught. That explains Salvini’s obvious caution — and that of Brexit campaign funder Arron Banks, who apparently turned down [offers](#) of lucrative Russian deals.

And yet the aftermath of the sting operation that brought down the Austrian government just before the European Parliament election in May suggests voters may increasingly be willing to shrug off such Russian involvement. Austrian Vice-Chancellor Heinz-Christian Strache, then leader of the Freedom Party, the junior partner in the ruling coalition, was recorded holding talks with a woman he thought was a Russian billionaire’s niece. He discussed a plan to buy Austria’s biggest tabloid newspaper to ensure favorable coverage for his party and told her she could make an illegal donation to the party through a special foundation.

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Then-Chancellor Sebastian Kurz forced Strache to resign and dissolved the coalition. But the Freedom Party’s support didn’t collapse. In the European Parliament election, it won 17.2 percent of the vote, less than the 20.5 percent it garnered in the 2017 national election but still a surprisingly high percentage under the circumstances.

Strache himself received the second highest number of votes among Freedom Party

candidates and won one of the party's three European Parliament seats. He refused to take it, saying he didn't want to move to Brussels. Indeed, he only paid a political price because his coalition partner, Kurz, used the scandal to shake off an uncomfortable alliance with the far right. The Freedom Party is polling close to 19 percent in the run-up to the national election in October.

The League's polling numbers are on the rise [despite](#) the Russia scandal. It's conceivable that populist voters simply don't care about the Kremlin scare, either because they're generally sympathetic toward Russian President Vladimir Putin (who cleverly [echoes](#) hard right rhetoric as he seeks allies in Europe) or because they write off media reports of Russia scandals as fake news. The more Russia scandals hatch and pass without consequences, the more the latter perception will be reinforced: one can't cry wolf too many times. Voters also know these parties have a harder time gaining funding and may simply be willing to ignore such freelancing if it helps their larger anti-establishment cause.

It has long been clear that legal forms of aid, such as French nationalist Marine Le Pen's Russian bank loans, are fine with such politicians' supporters. The Brexit Party's voters have also brushed off concerns about Russian interference in the 2016 referendum. Ultimately, if voters keep showing they don't mind politicians' Kremlin links, all the politicians need to do is set up legal structures to receive Putin's aid with a minimum of risk. That may not be straightforward, but it's more a technical task rather than a political one.

So far, the European establishment has failed to impress on a significant number of voters the idea that Putin is a threat. That's part of its general vulnerability. Whether or not the Kremlin may become an agenda-setting player in European politics, the record so far suggests it will continue to look for open doors and increasingly find them.

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