



**Clandestine diplomacy in France and Germany:
Russia's and China's support for radical right-wing parties**

BY

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Abstract

In recent years, an increasing number of politicians and researchers have expressed concern over foreign hybrid threats that aim to undermine democratic systems. At the center of this scholarly work and political discourse are Russia's hybrid activities. Among the instruments employed by Russia is clandestine diplomacy, a covert form of cultivating subversive foreign organizations, individuals, or movements. This study examines the concept of clandestine diplomacy with regards to China. In particular, the study investigates whether China may be incentivized to cooperate with European radical right-wing parties, such as the German Alternative für Deutschland and the French Rassemblement National. The paper follows a two-fold approach. First, Russia's clandestine diplomacy strategy concerning the AfD and the RN is examined. Based on these findings, it will be analyzed whether the Russian model of clandestine diplomacy constitutes an applicable and plausible tool for China. The findings allow for the presumption of China being incentivized to collaborate with the AfD and the RN. Given the deteriorating relationship between Chinese and German as well as French leadership, China may in the future partly adopt the Russian model of clandestine diplomacy and apply new, more subtle ways of cultivating the radical right-wing parties.

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List of abbreviations

AfD	Alternative für Deutschland
ANSA	Agenzia Nazionale Stampa Associata
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BFM TV	Business FM TV
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BRICS	Brasil, Russia, India, China, South Africa
CAI	Comprehensive Agreement on Investment
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CCTV	China Central Television
CDU	Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands
CIS-EMO	Commonwealth of the Independent States-Election Monitoring Organization
ECU	European Currency Unit
EDF	Électricité de France
EMA	European Medicines Agency
EU	European Union
FN	Front National
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
GDR	German Democratic Republic
HHLA	Hamburger Hafen und Logistik AG
JA	Junge Alternative
KDP	Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands
KGB	Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti

MEP	Member of European Parliament
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation
MP	Member of Parliament
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NPD	Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands
NSDAP	Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei
RN	Rassemblement National
SPD	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands
SRP	Sozialistische Reichspartei
UFWD	United Front Work Department
ZDF	Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen

1 Introduction

In 2016, the European Commission and the High Representative adopted a joint framework on countering hybrid threats and fostering the resilience of the EU as well as its individual member states.¹ The framework was introduced only months after the EU had acknowledged the urgent security threat arising from Russia's hybrid operations.² Ever since, hybrid threats, commonly referred to as a mixture of military and non-military actions aiming at influencing foreign decision-making,³ have not only dominated Europe's security landscape but have shaped the EU's foreign policy towards Russia.

Germany and France, as the EU's most influential economic and political actors, are particularly vulnerable to Russian hybrid actions. Due to the countries' leading roles in shaping European decision-making, Russia considers them to be a welcome lever for pressuring the EU and thus has an incentive to steer German and French politics towards its strategic interests. Already in 2017, US Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman Richard Burr expressed strong concerns over Russia's active interference in German and French elections.⁴ In particular, Russia was accused of consciously fostering the Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany, AfD) and the Front National (National Front, FN); two parties belonging to the far-right of the political spectrum. The elections resulted in the AfD entering the Bundestag for the first time and Marine Le Pen, presidential candidate of the FN, being elected to the second round where she eventually lost against Emmanuel Macron.

Russia's ties with the AfD and the FN, which in 2018 was renamed Rassemblement National (National Rally, RN), have been well documented and examined. The strained bilateral relations between the Kremlin and the German as well as the French government have urged Russia to look for alternative cooperation partners. Russia's support for radical right-wing parties spans diverse areas and aims at exacerbating existing tensions

¹ European Commission, "FAQ: Joint Framework on countering hybrid threats," accessed July 16, 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/it/MEMO_16_1250.

² European Parliament, "Russia," accessed July 16, 2021, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/177/russia>.

³ The European Center of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, "Hybrid threats as a concept," accessed July 16, 2021, <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/hybrid-threats-as-a-phenomenon/>.

⁴ Saim Saeed, "US intelligence chief: Russia interfering in French, German elections," Politico, accessed July 16, 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/us-intelligence-chief-russia-interfering-in-french-german-elections/>.

within the target countries in order to limit the support for the central government. Covertly cultivating polarizing parties constitutes a form of hybrid interference and is referred to as clandestine diplomacy.⁵

China's foreign policy interests, as well as its relationships with Germany and France, carry a striking resemblance to those of Russia. Like Russia, China opposes liberal, democratic values and seeks to actively expand its geopolitical sphere of influence. China's increasing prominence and aggressive presence on the global economic and political stage have strained its relationships with Western powers. Similar to Russia, Sino-EU disputes predominantly circle around the protection of human rights. The present thesis argues that these similarities allow for the assumption of China potentially engaging in clandestine diplomacy and discusses whether the Russian model of clandestine diplomacy constitutes an applicable tool for China. Thus, the paper sheds light on an issue that will potentially be of great relevance for the future of Germany and France and hence of the EU.

This paper is organized as follows. Subsequent to the introduction and the presentation of the current state of the literature in the second chapter, the third chapter outlines the relationships between the respective countries from a historical perspective. A brief overview of Russia's and China's past and contemporary relations with Germany and France is of great value to properly understand their motivation to engage in clandestine diplomacy. Having arrived at the present situation, Chapter 4 introduces the concepts of hybrid interference and clandestine diplomacy. Particular attention is given to four liberal principles which make democracies especially vulnerable to hostile interference from foreign actors. The following chapter critically examines Russia's clandestine diplomacy strategy. Apart from analyzing the various reasons incentivizing Russia, the AfD, and the RN to collaborate, five areas of dynamic cooperation are considered. On the basis of this analysis, the penultimate chapter turns to China. Prior to shedding light on the nature of a potential Chinese clandestine diplomacy strategy, this thesis reveals the current status of China's engagement with the AfD and the RN. A final thought is devoted to arguing

⁵ Mikael Wigell, "Hybrid interference as a wedge strategy: a theory of external interference in liberal democracy," *International Affairs* 95, no. 2 (2019): 263.

that European policy-making should pay special attention to China when debating democratic deconsolidation and clandestine diplomacy.

2 Literature review

The concept of hybridity constitutes a fairly new topic in academic research. The term hybrid warfare was coined by Frank Hoffman in the mid-2000s and refers to an operational approach to warfighting which apart from utilizing traditional military force includes unconventional tactics.⁶ Concerning Russia, the concept gained momentum in the aftermath of the country's annexation of Crimea in 2014. Aiming at finding an adequate explanation for Russia's successful intervention on Ukrainian territory, a growing body of scholars dedicated its work to the idea of hybrid warfare as a contemporary and subtle approach to war.⁷ Thus, the sources referred to in this paper are to a large extent no more than seven years old.

By developing a strategy to counter and address hybrid threats, NATO paved the way for hybrid warfare to be placed on the global political agenda. Albeit enjoying increasing popularity in public, academic, and policy debates, the concept is not exempt from criticism. Several voices claim that the term hybrid inadequately connotes that new methods of warfare are employed leading to a misconception of a country's military capabilities.⁸ Moreover, literature critical of hybrid warfare questions the concept's ability to appropriately distinguish between acts of war and foreign policy.⁹ In order to address these concerns, Mikael Wigell, Program Director of the Finish Institute of International Affairs,¹⁰ introduced the notion of hybrid interference. In his publication called "Hybrid interference as a wedge strategy: a theory of external interference in liberal democracy", Wigell defines hybrid interference as non-military tools targeting the unity of foreign countries. Among the three instruments categorized as hybrid interference is clandestine diplomacy, a form of covertly cultivating polarizing networks or individuals.¹¹ This thesis employs Wigell's definition of clandestine diplomacy as the theoretical basis of its analysis.

⁶ Frank G. Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars*, (Arlington: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, 2007): 28ff.

⁷ Bettina Renz, "Russia and 'hybrid warfare'," *Contemporary Politics* 22, no. 3 (2016): 284 f.

⁸ Id. at 297.

⁹ Andres Monaghan, "The 'War' in Russia's 'Hybrid Warfare'," *Parameters* 45, no. 4 (2015): 67ff.

¹⁰ Finish Institute of International Affairs, "Mikael Wigell," accessed July 14, 2021, <https://www.fiia.fi/en/expert/mikael-wigell>.

¹¹ Wigell, "Hybrid interference as a wedge strategy," 263.

In regard to Russia's strategy of clandestine diplomacy, in particular Russia's support for the AfD and the RN, a large volume of work is published and accessible. Since numerous authors have studied the topic, this literature review solely mentions the most prominent researchers whose contributions constituted important sources for the present thesis.

Among the first institutions addressing Russia's ties with far-right parties was the Budapest-based Political Capital Institute. In their report "Russia's Far-Right Friends" from 2009 the authors Péter Krekó and Krisztian Szabados claim that Eastern Europe's far-right movements and politicians experienced a shift in their perception of Russia from considering the country their greatest enemy to admiring Russia's authoritarian leadership.¹² Following this publication, the institute continued investigating Russia's influence on far-right parties publishing several reports of which some are referred to in the present paper. Due to the work of the Political Capital Institute and subsequent academic literature, research on Russian ties with the European radical right continued to advance. To date, one of the leading researchers in this field is Anton Shekhovtsov, lecturer at the University of Vienna, research fellow at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs, and expert at the European Platform for Democratic Elections. In his book "Russia and the Western Far-right: Tango Noir", which was published in 2018, Shekhovtsov draws a comprehensive picture of the relations between Russia and far-right organizations in Europe, Canada, as well as the US and provides a valuable collection of sources dealing with the issue.¹³ Apart from this book, Shekhovtsov has published various articles in academic journals. In particular, his contributions dealing with Russia's electoral observation missions serve as an important source for Chapter 5 of this thesis. Shekhovtsov as well as the Political Capital Institute repeatedly collaborated with Marlene Laruelle, another prominent scholar in this research area. In 2015, Laruelle edited the book "Eurasianism and the European Far-right" to which apart from Shekhovtsov other renowned researchers such as Jean-Yves Camus made contributions. Like Shekhovtsov's book, this publication focuses on the cooperation between Russia and the radical right.

¹² Péter Krekó and Krisztian Szabados, "Russia's Far-right Friends," Political Capital Policy Research & Consulting Institute, accessed July 15, 2021, https://www.riskandforecast.com/post/in-depth-analysis/russia-s-far-right-friends_349.html.

¹³ Anton Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far-right: Tango Noir*, (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2018).

Although constituting a valuable source for this thesis, the above publications are limited with regards to their coverage on the AfD. Founded in 2013, the party gained significant political influence by entering the Bundestag in 2017. At that time, the books had already been or were about to be released. Despite a rising number of studies focusing on the AfD, academic literature extensively analyzing the party's connections to Russia is more limited. Thus, in addition to consulting academic literature, the thesis heavily relied on journalistic articles. In an attempt to offer an in-depth and objective perspective on the topic, a variety of French, German, and English language news magazines were incorporated in the research. Sources from which information was obtained include *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro*, and *Le Parisien* in France, as well as *Tagesschau*, *Der Spiegel*, *Deutsche Welle*, *Handelsblatt*, and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in Germany. English language articles referenced in this paper were primarily published by Reuters and BBC.

Analyzing the wide range of sources, there is a striking consensus that Russia is engaging in clandestine diplomacy by actively cultivating the AfD and the RN. Thus, the goal of this thesis was not to discuss the existence of structural cooperation but to provide an analysis of the various reasons, tools, and means of Russian clandestine diplomacy. By compiling the diverse areas of collaboration, the foundation for comparing and applying existing Russian clandestine diplomacy to a potential Chinese strategy is laid.

In comparison to Russian interference, literature on China's relations to European populist parties is scarce. Concerning the AfD, the article headlined "*Chinas Freunde bei der AfD*" (China's friends at the AfD)¹⁴ published by *Tagesschau* in 2020 represents one of the few sources directly dealing with the ties between China and the populist party and thus provided helpful guidance on the topic. In French media information on structural cooperation between the RN and China could not be found. Concerning China's hostile operations in Europe, Jichang Lulu was among the first authors to uncover the efforts of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to influence the activity of the European Parliament. As a result of her paper "Repurposing democracy: The European Parliament China

¹⁴ Andrea Becker and Georg Heil, "Chinas Freunde bei der AfD," *Tagesschau*, accessed July 05, 2021, <https://www.tagesschau.de/investigativ/kontraste/afd-china-101.html>.

Friendship Cluster” individual connections between the AfD and China could be examined.

The shortage of potential literature was further enhanced by a linguistic barrier. The study was limited to French, English, German, and potentially Spanish publications. The deficient knowledge of the Russian and Mandarin languages restricted the number of sources and presents an important limitation of this study.

Given the lack of accessible literature and with it the missing evidence for a Chinese clandestine diplomacy strategy in Germany and France, the present thesis should be understood as an approach to provide a theoretical framework of why and how future cooperation between China and the AfD or the RN could exist. For developing this framework, the more extensive academic as well as journalistic literature dealing with China’s soft power strategy in Europe was reviewed. In this context, the book “Hidden Hand: Exposing How the Chinese Communist Party is Reshaping the World” allowed for understanding the variety of tools China is using to covertly interfere in the political, public, and academic landscape of the West. Published by Clive Hamilton, Professor of Public Ethics at the Charles Sturt University in Canberra,¹⁵ and Mareike Ohlberg, a leading German sinologist, the book provided a detailed description of China’s strategic interests in Germany and France. Further material on China’s growing influence in Europe was gathered from reports by the Mercator Institute for China Studies, Europe’s largest independent research institution dealing with contemporary China and the country’s relations with Europe.¹⁶ Moreover, the AfD’s and RN’s respective websites and the social media channels of politicians constituted valuable sources for analyzing the parties’ perceptions of China as well as the pro-Chinese stance of individual members.

This thesis was written over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to contain the spread of the virus, European countries introduced a range of policy measures including the closure of borders and several public institutions, such as universities and libraries. Governments further imposed national lockdowns lasting for months. Given the

¹⁵ Clive Hamilton, “About,” accessed July 15, 2021, <https://clivehamilton.com/about/>.

¹⁶ Mercator Institute for China Studies, “Über uns,” accessed July 15, 2021, <https://merics.org/de/ueber-uns>.

closure of public spaces as well as the travel restrictions, the COVID crisis significantly constrained the access to available literature.

Research on hybrid threats has revealed various complex structures of Russian support for European radical right-wing parties. However, empirical work is deficient with regards to how the phenomenon of clandestine diplomacy could potentially apply to China. The present paper aims at closing this gap by examining whether the existing Russian means of clandestine diplomacy could serve as a role model for China. Thereby the study puts forth a concept of Chinese hybrid interference that, similar to the Russian strategy, may consciously circumvent ruling governments and exploit democratic values.

3 Historical background

Prior to analyzing Russian and Chinese hostile interference targeting Germany and France, a closer look at the historical relationships between the four countries is necessary. Analyzing the bilateral relations from the past until the present represents the basis for understanding their interconnectedness and with it the need for Russia and China to seek an alliance with the AfD and the RN. Thus, this chapter first discusses Russia's relations with France and Germany and then examines Sino-French and Sino-German cooperation, respectively. The chapter concludes by presenting the reasons derived from historical and present circumstances for Russia and China to engage in clandestine diplomacy.

3.1 History of Russia's relationship with France and Germany

France shares a long-standing history with Russia, of which for the purposes of the present study the period following World War II is particularly relevant.

Under the presidencies of Charles De Gaulle, France positioned itself between Soviet Russia and the US. Whereas most Western countries maintained strained relations with the USSR during the Cold War, the French president pursued an approach strategy. Seeking to establish a reunited Europe from the Atlantic to the Ural Mountains free of American interference and domination, De Gaulle's policies shaped the ongoing pro-Russian perceptions of parts of the French political elite and military establishment.¹⁷ The countries' military cooperation dates back to the Franco-Russian alliance and the Triple Entente, which respectively were concluded in the late 19th and early 20th century. By signing these agreements, the parties committed themselves to provide military support if one of them was to be attacked by the German empire.¹⁸

France's strong communist tradition and its alignment with the Russian ideology further fostered the establishment of close ties between the two nations. For instance, until the collapse of the USSR, the Russian language was widely taught at secondary school level

¹⁷ Angela Stent, "Franco-Soviet Relations from de Gaulle to Mitterrand," *French Politics and Society* 7, no. 1 (1989): 17.

¹⁸ William L. Langer, "The Franco-Russian Alliance (1890-1894)," *The Slavonic Review* 3, no. 9 (1925): 573 f; John A. C. Conybeare and Todd Sandler, "The Triple Entente and the Triple Alliance 1880-1914: A Collective Goods Approach," *The American Political Science Review* 84, no. 4 (1990): 1198.

in France.¹⁹ Moreover, during the Cold War, Paris served as an interlocutor when tensions between Moscow and Berlin were rising.²⁰

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, France and Germany diplomatically paired with Russia in the so-called Yekaterinburg Triangle aiming at stabilizing Europe.²¹ In the 1990s, Russia became member of the Council of Europe and ratified the European Convention on Human Rights.²² Subsequently, in the early 2000s, the French-Russian relationship flourished. The joint stance of Jacques Chirac, Gerhard Schröder, and Vladimir Putin on the US' invasion of Iraq served as a foundation to strengthen EU-Russian relations in the fields of economy, justice, freedom, and security.²³ Chirac's successor Nicolas Sarkozy continued the pro-Moscow course. By deepening the two countries' economic ties, he supported the interests of his influential electorate constituting of key French businessmen. At the peak of the cooperation stands Sarkozy's decision to sign a contract for the sale of two amphibious assault ships to Russia. This highly controversial agreement constituted the first major arms deal between a NATO country and Russia.²⁴ By celebrating 2010 as the "Year of Russia" in France and the "Year of France" in Russia, the political leaderships of both countries openly demonstrated their delight over the well-established entente.²⁵

In an effort to find the underlying reasons for the development of the Russian-French friendship, the deeply rooted Russophilia of the French political elite, as well as France's geographic location need to be considered.²⁶ In the previous century, France has not

¹⁹ Marlene Laruelle, "Russian Soft Power in France: Assessing Moscow's Cultural and Business Paradiplomacy," *Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs* (2018): first page.

²⁰ Stent, "Franco-Soviet Relations from de Gaulle to Mitterrand," 15.

²¹ Thomas Gomart, "France's Russia Policy: Balancing Interests and Values," *The Washington Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (2007): 147.

²² Council of Europe, "Council of Europe and Russian Federation," accessed June 13, 2021, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/moscow/field-office>.

²³ Gomart, "France's Russia Policy," 150.

²⁴ Roy Isbister and Yannick Quéau, *An ill wind*, (London and Brussels: Saferworld and Group for Research and Information on Peace and Security, 2014): 1.

²⁵ Marcel H. Van Herpen, "The Foreign Policy of Nicolas Sarkozy: Not principles, opportunistic and amateurish," *Cicero Foundation Great Debate Paper* 10, no. 1 (2010): 6.

²⁶ Marlene Laruelle, "Russia's Bedfollowing Policy and the European Far-right," *Russian Analytical Digest* 167 (2015): 2.

presented major threats related to the territory, population, and legitimacy of Russia,²⁷ making it a convenient political partner.

In comparison to the French-Russian relationship, Germany and Russia share a fairly recent history of political and territorial power conflicts. Following Russia's victory in World War II and the German division however, the German-Russian relationship slowly started to ease. In the following decades, the German Social Democrats played a central role in the conceptualization of Germany's Russia policy.

In the 1960's German chancellor Willy Brandt adopted the *Neue Ostpolitik* (New Eastern Policy), striving for normalizing the relationship between East and West Germany. By successfully implementing agreements such as the Treaty of Moscow in 1970, increasingly intertwined economic, political, and cultural networks between the USSR and Germany were established.²⁸ Brandt's "change through rapprochement" policy influenced political decision-making far beyond the end of his term and represented the logic behind the partnership for modernization established by former foreign minister Frank Walter Steinmeier in 2008. The success of Brandt's *Neue Ostpolitik*, interpreted by many Social Democrats as the key towards paving the way for German unification, led to the expectation that a cooperative policy would result in a democratic and peaceful Russia.²⁹

In the late 1970s, the USSR-German relationship experienced distress due to armament disputes but relaxed during the second term of chancellor Helmut Kohl.³⁰ In the aftermath of the unification, Kohl pushed through Russia's admission to the G8 and agreed with Mikhail Gorbachev on the withdrawal of Soviet troops from the GDR.³¹

²⁷ Stent, "Franco-Soviet Relations from de Gaulle to Mitterrand," 14; John Lewis Gaddis, *Der Kalte Krieg. Eine neue Geschichte*, (München: Siedler Verlag, 2007): 232.

²⁸ William Glenn Gray, "Paradoxes of "Ostpolitik": Revisiting the Moscow and Warsaw Treaties, 1970," *Central European History* 49, no. 3/4 (2016): 424.

²⁹ Stefan Meister, "Germany: Interdependence as Vulnerability," in *The Kremlin's Trojan Horses: Russian Influence in France, Germany, and the United Kingdom*, (Washington DC: Atlantic Council Policy on Intellectual Independence, 2016): 14.

³⁰ Andreas Rödder, "Sicherheitspolitik und Sozialkultur. Überlegungen zum Gegenstandsbereich der Geschichtsschreibung des Politischen," in *Geschichte der Politik. Alte und Neue Wege*, ed. Hans-Christof Kraus and Thomas Nicklas, (München: Historische Zeitschrift Beihefte Bd. 44, 2007): 97f.

³¹ Roman Goncharenko, "Kohl und Russland: Eiszeit, Wende, Aufbruch," Deutsche Welle, accessed June 03, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/de/kohl-und-russland-eiszeit-wende-aufbruch/a-39291203>.

Kohl's successor Gerhard Schröder aimed at enhancing the civil society exchange between Russia and Germany and together with Putin established the Petersburg Dialog in 2001.³² Generally, Schröder is known for being one of the main *Russlandversteher* (person with a heightened understanding of Russia) within his party. Shortly after leaving office in 2005, he became board chairman of the Russian-German pipeline Nord Stream.³³ When touching on the subject of fossil fuels, Germany's dependence on Russian natural gas needs to be emphasized. Following the phase-out of nuclear energy in 2011, Germany is facing a loss in domestic energy supply making the country highly dependent on foreign sources.³⁴ In 2019, Germany received 51% of its natural gas imports from Russia.³⁵ Considering this context, it is not surprising that, despite strong opposition from other EU countries and the US and in spite of continuing diplomatic disputes with Russia, Germany continues to back the expansion project Nord Stream 2.³⁶ To date, Russia is listed at position 13 of Germany's most important trading partners.³⁷

Following her inauguration in 2005, Chancellor Angela Merkel started moving away from the Russia-friendly political guidelines of her predecessors. The beginning of her chancellorship coincided with great institutional changes in Europe. Central Eastern European countries, such as Poland and the Czech Republic, formerly being part of the Warsaw Pact, acceded to the EU. The political elites of these countries voiced their anti-Russian views demanding retribution for 45 years of Soviet occupation. In order to avoid jeopardizing Germany's claim to leadership in the EU and NATO, the Merkel administration decided to adopt a more critical Russia-policy.³⁸

Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 constitutes a major turning point in the so-far predominantly upward trajectory of Russian-German and Russian-French relations.

³² Meister, "Germany: Interdependence as Vulnerability," 13.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Jeremy Stern, "Germany will never back down on its Russian pipeline," *Foreign Policy*, accessed June 06, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/02/25/germany-will-never-back-down-on-its-russian-pipeline/>.

³⁵ BP p.l.c., *Statistical Review of World Energy 2020*, (London: BP p.l.c., 2020): 43.

³⁶ Deutschlandfunk, "Wie abhängig ist Deutschland von russischem Erdgas?," accessed June 06, 2021, https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/nord-stream-2-wie-abhaengig-ist-deutschland-von-russischem.2897.de.html?dram:article_id=483727.

³⁷ Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Energie, *Fakten zum deutschen Außenhandel*, (Berlin: Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Energie, 2020), accessed July 19, 2021, https://www.bmwi.de/Redaktion/DE/Publikationen/Aussenwirtschaft/fakten-zum-deutschen-aussenhandel.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=20.

³⁸ Alexander Rahr, "Merkels Russlandpolitik," *WeltTrends - Das außenpolitische Journal* 131, 25. Jahrgang (2017): 32.

Merkel and Hollande harshly criticized Russia's actions on Ukrainian ground for violating international law stating that the annexation is criminal and unacceptable.³⁹ As a response to the illegal behavior, the EU has imposed sanctions on Russia, including restrictions on economic cooperation as well as diplomatic and individual measures.⁴⁰ In return, Russia has banned the import of certain agricultural products from the EU.⁴¹

Crimea is not the only Ukrainian territory under Russian influence. Shortly after the overthrow of President Viktor Yanukovich by the pro-EU Maidan movement, pro-Russian separatists in parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions sought to break away from Kyiv. Since then, the situation in Eastern Ukraine is tense and the ceasefire agreed on in 2020 has been frequently broken in the first months of 2021.⁴² France and Germany have been trying to mediate between Ukraine and Russia and participated in peace talks, which are currently deadlocked. In April 2021, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky, Macron, and Merkel urged Russia to withdraw its troops from the Ukrainian border.⁴³

Shortly after, the EU-Russian relationship was further strained. Following the poisoning and incarceration of the Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny, the EU has enforced new travel bans and asset freezes against senior Russian officials. Russia reacted by imposing entry bans on 8 EU officials.⁴⁴

Russia's continued military support of the Assad regime during the Syrian conflict and the French accusations of Russia committing war crimes during its airstrikes on Aleppo further deteriorated the EU-Russian relationship.⁴⁵ Even though French president Macron

³⁹ Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, "Merkel nennt Annexion der Krim verbrecherisch," accessed June 03, 2021, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/70-jahre-kriegsende/gedenken-in-moskau-merkel-nennt-annexion-der-krim-verbrecherisch-13585275.html>; France inter, "Hollande à Poutine: annexer la Crimée serait inacceptable," accessed June 03, 2021, <https://www.franceinter.fr/monde/hollande-a-poutine-annexer-la-crimée-serait-inacceptable>.

⁴⁰ European Council, "EU restrictive measures in response to the crisis in Ukraine," accessed June 03, 2021, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/ukraine-crisis/>.

⁴¹ Auswärtiges Amt, "Deutschland und die Russische Föderation: Diplomatische Beziehungen," accessed June 03, 2021, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/aussenpolitik/laender/russischefoederation-node/bilaterale-beziehungen/201542>.

⁴² Martha Wilczynski, "Sieben Jahre Leid und Ungewissheit," Tagesschau, accessed June 08, 2021, <https://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/europa/krieg-ukraine-101.html>.

⁴³ Der Spiegel, "Merkel, Macron und Selenskyj verlangen russischen Truppenabzug," accessed June 08, 2021, <https://www.spiegel.de/ausland/ukraine-konflikt-merkel-macron-und-selenskyj-verlangen-russischen-truppenabzug-a-fd978820-2582-47d3-97df-e7a98280575a>.

⁴⁴ Tagesschau, "Russische Sanktionen gegen Sassoli," accessed June 08, 2021, <https://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/asien/russland-eu-sanktionen-107.html>.

⁴⁵ BBC, "Syria conflict: France wants Russia on war crimes charges," accessed July 21, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-37611151>.

continues to advocate for rethinking the EU's stance towards Russia and the imposed sanctions,⁴⁶ German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas confirms that the Russian-EU relations are at their lowest point.⁴⁷

3.2 Historical background of Sino-French and Sino-German relations

France was among the first European countries to engage in diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China in 1964. For almost three decades, Sino-French relations developed predominantly smoothly but then experienced severe setbacks in the 1990s. France's weapon sale to Taiwan caused a temporary closure of the French Consulate-General in Guangzhou. Diplomatic ties were fully restored in 1994 after France agreed on prohibiting domestic companies from engaging in arms sales to Taiwan.⁴⁸ Following the establishment of special economic zones under Deng Xiaoping,⁴⁹ the Sino-French relationship was characterized by mutual high-level state visits and intensified economic cooperation.⁵⁰ In 1997, Jacques Chirac and his Chinese counterpart Jiang Zemin signed the joint Sino-French Declaration for a Global Partnership, aiming at establishing a multipolar world.⁵¹ Roughly 7 years later, Chirac and Hu Jintao renewed the agreement bringing their global partnership to a strategic level.⁵²

By meeting the Dalai Lama in 2008, president Nicolas Sarkozy provoked the spontaneous decision of the Chinese government to not participate in an EU-China summit planned to

⁴⁶ Le Figaro, "UE-Russie: Macron demande à recadrer la relation car les sanctions ne sont plus efficaces," accessed June 03, 2021, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/ue-russie-macron-demande-a-recadrer-la-relation-car-les-sanctions-ne-sont-plus-efficaces-20210525>.

⁴⁷ Tagesschau, "Maas lehnt härtere Sanktionen ab," accessed June 07, 2021, <https://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/europa/maas-russland-sanktionen-101.html>.

⁴⁸ Eberhard Sandschneider, "China's Diplomatic Relations with the States of Europe," *The China Quarterly* 169, Special Issue: China and Europe since 1978: A European Perspective (2002): 37.

⁴⁹ Clyde D. Stoltenberg, "China's Special Economic Zones," *Asian Survey* 24, no. 6 (1984): 637; Uli Franz, "Porträt: Deng Xiaoping," Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, accessed June 08, 2021, <https://www.bpb.de/internationales/asien/china/44262/deng-xiaoping?p=all>.

⁵⁰ Sandschneider, "China's Diplomatic Relations," 37.

⁵¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "China and France aim to build a long-term full partnership," accessed July 22, 2021, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/ziliao_665539/3602_665543/3604_665547/t18031.shtml.

⁵² Jacques Chirac and Jintao Hu, "Conférence de presse conjointe de MM. Jacques Chirac, président de la République et Hu Jintao, président de la République Populaire de Chine, sur la coopération entre la France et la Chine et les échanges commerciaux franco-chinois, l'organisation d'un référendum à Taiwan, l'embargo sur les ventes d'armes à la Chine, la question du Tibet et les droits de l'Homme en Chine, Paris le 27 janvier 2004," République Française, accessed July 22, 2021, <https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/146030-conference-de-presse-conjointe-de-mm-jacques-chirac-president-de-la-re>.

be held in Lyon.⁵³ Sarkozy's meeting took place amid ongoing tensions between Tibet and the Chinese government caused by an uprising in Tibet, which was brutally put down by the Chinese army.⁵⁴ The relationship between France and China started normalizing again after French Prime Minister Francois Fillon, as well as Sarkozy undertook state visits expressing words of reconciliation.⁵⁵

Sino-French relations flourished under the presidencies of Hollande and Macron. To further discuss economic concerns and deepen the cultural and scientific exchange, the High-Level Economic and Financial Dialogue as well as the High-Level Dialogue on Human Exchanges were launched in 2013 and 2017, respectively.⁵⁶ In 2016, the French energy company EDF decided to enter a joint venture with the state-controlled China General Nuclear Power Corporation to build the UK's controversial Hinkley Point C nuclear power plant.⁵⁷ One year earlier, Hollande was received by Xi Jinping convincing the latter of committing to a legally binding climate agreement. Having the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases signing the Paris climate agreement was a major progress in mitigating climate change.⁵⁸

To date, the centerpiece of the Sino-French relation continues to be economic cooperation. In 2019, Macron and Xi Jinping signed several bilateral trade agreements at the heart of which is a €30 billion aviation deal. In the latter China commits itself to purchase 300 aircrafts from Airbus.⁵⁹ In terms of exports, China ranks 7th of France's

⁵³ Tagesschau, "Ich bin bei meiner Terminplanung frei," accessed June 07, 2021, <https://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/sarkozydalailama102.html>.

⁵⁴ Doris Simon, "Die EU und die Tibet-Frage," Deutschlandfunk, accessed June 07, 2021, https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/die-eu-und-die-tibet-frage.795.de.html?dram:article_id=117953.

⁵⁵ Deutsche Welle, "France's Sarkozy in China to repair ties, push gently on Iran," accessed June 07, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/frances-sarkozy-in-china-to-repair-ties-push-gently-on-iran/a-5515232>.

⁵⁶ François Godement, "China – a challenge for France?," European Council on Foreign Relations, accessed June 07, 2021, https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_china_a_challenge_for_france/.

⁵⁷ Deutsche Welle, "France EDF to go ahead with China-funded nuclear power station in UK," accessed June 07, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/france-edf-to-go-ahead-with-china-funded-nuclear-power-station-in-uk/a-19433416>.

⁵⁸ Simon Roger and Harold Thibault, "Climat: François Hollande se félicite du soutien de Pékin," Le Monde, accessed June 07, 2021, https://www.lemonde.fr/climat/article/2015/11/02/hollande-en-visite-en-chine-pour-s-allier-un-acteur-majeur-sur-le-climat_4801077_1652612.html.

⁵⁹ Rym Momtaz, "Macron steals Trump's thunder with Chinese airbus order," Politico, accessed June 06, 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/macron-steals-trumps-thunder-with-chinese-airbus-order/>.

most important trading partners. Concerning French imports however, China is the second largest supplier causing France's largest bilateral trade deficit.⁶⁰

In contrast to France, Germany was more hesitant in establishing diplomatic relations with China. It was only in 1972, following the United Nations General Assembly decision to recognize the People's Republic of China as "the only lawful representatives of China to the United Nations",⁶¹ when Germany started engaging in diplomatic relations with China. Thus, in contrast to Russia, China lacks strong cultural or historical bonds with Germany.⁶² For US foreign policy, and thus also for West German foreign policy, China was seen as a counter pole to the Soviet Union resulting in an American-Chinese policy of détente.⁶³ With the end of the Cold War however, China lost its strategic significance and the focus shifted towards economic interests.⁶⁴

Condemning the Chinese government's suppressive response to the student movement in Tiananmen Square in 1989, the European Economic Community canceled all high-level contacts and set up an arms embargo against China.⁶⁵ The German-Sino relationship subsequently cooled significantly and only improved in the mid-1990s, when the German government refrained from linking human rights to its economic transactions with China and emphasized the "One China Policy".⁶⁶

Under Schröder's chancellorship, regular high-level state visits between Chinese and German politicians led to a further relaxation of the diplomatic relations. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Germany's former ideological reluctance and hostile relationship towards communism slowly started to break down, allowing for a strengthening of the Chinese-German partnership. China's economic rise was considered

⁶⁰ Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires Étrangères, "Relations bilatérales," accessed June 07, 2021, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/dossiers-pays/chine/relations-bilaterales/>.

⁶¹ United Nations General Assembly, "Restoration of the lawful rights of the People's Republic of China in the United Nations," (1971), A/RES/2758(XXVI): 2.

⁶² John Kampfer, "Russia and China in Germany," *RUSI Occasional Paper* (2020): 3.

⁶³ Thomas Heberer and Anja Senz, "Die deutsche Chinapolitik," in *Deutsche Außenpolitik*, ed. Thomas Jäger, Alexander Hösse and Kai Oppermann, (Wiesbaden: VS Verlage für Sozialwissenschaften, 2011): 674.

⁶⁴ c.f. Francis Fukuyama, "Das Ende der Geschichte," *Europäische Rundschau - Vierteljahreshefte für Politik, Wirtschaft und Zeitgeschichte* 17, no. 4 (1989): 15.

⁶⁵ Deutsche Welle, "EU's uneasy relationship with China endures 20 years on," accessed June 04, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/eus-uneasy-relationship-with-china-endures-20-years-on/a-4290281>.

⁶⁶ Ying Huang, "Deutsche Chinapolitik unter Helmut Kohl," in *Die Chinapolitik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland nach der Wiedervereinigung*, (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2019): 58.

a strategic opportunity, making the country's integration to the international community a policy priority. Together with his French counterpart Chirac, Schröder promoted the lifting of the EU arms embargo against China. Even though their efforts failed due to disagreement within the EU and the opposition of the US, mutual trust and bilateral relations between Germany and China continued to expand. China's accession to the WTO in 2001 facilitated access for German companies to the Chinese market and served as a major drive for German investment in China.⁶⁷ In response to the strong domestic pressure for strengthening Germany's human rights policy, Schröder implemented the so-called *Rechtsstaatsdialog* (Constitutional State Dialogue), a German-Chinese platform for dealing with human rights issues.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, Germany's foreign policy kept being oriented towards economic interests, pushing potential human rights conflicts further into the background. Having left office, Schröder became an advisor to the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs supporting the transformation of an old Chinese embassy building located in Bonn into a center for Chinese medical practices.⁶⁹

By clearly rejecting a lifting of the EU arms embargo, Merkel distanced herself from the economy-focused foreign policy of her predecessors. Two years after her inauguration, she received the Dalai Lama, not only causing disagreements with the Chinese leadership but with her coalition partner. The Social Democrats as well as East and Southeast EU members advocated for continuing with Schröder's China-friendly course, considering China as a crucial trading partner.⁷⁰ Thus, after pursuing a tense and value-oriented China policy, Merkel gradually adopted an interest-oriented policy based on economic cooperation. Shortly after beginning her second term, Merkel established German-Chinese government consultations which since then have been held biannually.⁷¹ In 2017, the relationship reached its peak. Despite ongoing discrepancies concerning China's human rights violations, Germany and China closely cooperated on the G20 summit in

⁶⁷ Ying Huang, "Deutsche Chinapolitik unter Gerhard Schröder," in *Die Chinapolitik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland nach der Wiedervereinigung*, (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2019): 97 ff.

⁶⁸ Id. at 98.

⁶⁹ Andreas Lorenz, "Gerhard Schröder Opens Doors for German Companies in China," *Der Spiegel*, accessed July 06, 2021, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/hugging-the-panda-gerhard-schroeder-opens-doors-for-german-companies-in-china-a-659417.html>.

⁷⁰ Jens Thurau, "Kommentar: Einfach nur peinlich - Angela Merkel und das Schweigen zu Hongkong," *Deutsche Welle*, accessed June 04, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/de/kommentar-einfach-nur-peinlich-angela-merkel-und-das-schweigen-zu-hongkong/a-54124619>.

⁷¹ Die Bundesregierung, "Dialog fortsetzen und Zusammenarbeit erweitern," accessed June 07, 2021, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/themen/buerokratieabbau/deutschland-china-1898686>.

Hamburg and the latter handed over a pair of Pandas to the Berlin Zoo.⁷² In the same year, numerous companies in Germany were acquired by Chinese investors.

2020 marks the fifth consecutive year of China being Germany's most important trading partner.⁷³ Recently, the EU and China concluded in principle the negotiations for a Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI). Merkel in her role as president of the European Council as well as Macron played a crucial role in finalizing the long-delayed agreement.⁷⁴

Despite the flourishing economic cooperation, the Sino-German and Sino-French relationships have repeatedly suffered from disputes regarding human rights. Merkel and Macron expressed concerns about China's intervention in Hong Kong but kept emphasizing the need for a joint EU response and a continued exchange with the Chinese government.⁷⁵

In 2021, in coordination with the UK, US, and Canada, the EU has imposed sanctions on Chinese officials and organizations being accused of human rights abuses against the Uyghur minority group.⁷⁶ China has reacted with punitive measures on ten EU politicians and scientists as well as four organizations, blaming them for harming China's sovereignty and maliciously spreading misinformation.⁷⁷ In response to the Chinese counter-sanctions, the European Parliament voted to freeze the ratification of the CAI.⁷⁸

⁷² Katja Iken and Danny Kringiel, "China's Panda Propaganda," Der Spiegel, accessed July 21, 2021, <https://www.spiegel.de/geschichte/chinas-panda-diplomatie-tierische-staatsgeschenke-a-1153032.html>.

⁷³ Auswärtiges Amt, "Deutschland und China: Bilaterale Beziehungen," accessed June 04, 2021, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/aussenpolitik/laender/china-node/bilateral/200472?openAccordionId=item-200478-0-panel>.

⁷⁴ European Council, "EU and China reach agreement in principle on investment," accessed June 04, 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_2541.

⁷⁵ Redaktionsnetzwerk Deutschland, "Merkel besorgt über Entwicklung zwischen China und Hongkong," accessed June 04, 2021, <https://www.rnd.de/politik/nach-sicherheitsgesetz-merkel-besorgt-uber-entwicklung-zwischen-china-und-hongkong-RNNOCUAA3NKOXWB4G5SV2FH44A.html>; Reuters, "Macron à Xi: La France défend le principe "un pays, deux systèmes" pour Hong Kong," accessed June 06, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/chine-hong-france-idFRKBN23D0GS>.

⁷⁶ Emily Rauhala, "U.S., E.U., Canada and Britain announce sanctions on China over the abuse of Uyghurs," The Washington Post, accessed July 21, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/xinjiang-sanctions-european-union/2021/03/22/1b0d69aa-8b0a-11eb-a33e-da28941cb9ac_story.html.

⁷⁷ Tagesschau, "China verhängt Sanktionen gegen EU-Politiker," accessed June 05, 2021, <https://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/asien/china-sanktionen-103.html>.

⁷⁸ The Guardian, "EU parliament freezes China trade deal over sanctions," accessed June 06, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/20/eu-parliament-freezes-china-trade-deal-over-sanctions>.

Human rights issues however are not the only point of contention between the two European countries and China. With the inauguration of Xi Jinping in 2012, a significant change in China's domestic and foreign policies was introduced. Nowadays, China is enforcing its power-political interests more aggressively and is stressing the role of the CCP as the leading entity of the country. Thus, the German conviction *Wandel durch Handel* (change through trade), stating that tightening economic ties with the Western world would transform China's authoritarianism into an open and more democratic country, eventually proved wrong.⁷⁹

In 2019, the European Commission published an outlook paper in which China is labeled an economic competitor and strategic rival.⁸⁰ Macron shares this opinion by stressing that the period of European naivety towards China has come to an end.⁸¹ For instance, concerning the deployment of 5G infrastructure Germany passed an IT security law in 2021 requiring vendors to declare that their critical components do not affect Germany's public security and cannot be used for espionage by other nations.⁸² Even though this law does not officially exclude vendors from the domestic rollouts, it makes Huawei's participation in the deployment of Germany's 5G network highly unlikely. Similarly, France aims at keeping Huawei out of its domestic 5G infrastructure deployment. Recently, the French Constitutional Council amended law provisions requiring French phone companies to introduce their own 5G network.⁸³

Moreover, China's trade practices including state subsidies for Chinese companies had been subject to harsh French and German criticism.⁸⁴ Pursuing a united EU stance towards China with a focus on geopolitical issues and independence rather than economic

⁷⁹ Noah Barkin, "Germany's Strategic Gray Zone with China," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, accessed June 09, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/03/25/germany-s-strategic-gray-zone-with-china-pub-81360>.

⁸⁰ European Commission and HR/VP, "EU-China – a strategic outlook," accessed July 19, 2021, <https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/communication-eu-china-a-strategic-outlook.pdf>.

⁸¹ Philip Blenkinsop and Robin Emmott, "EU leaders call for end to 'naivety' in relations with China," Reuters, accessed July 21, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-china-idUSKCN1R31H3>.

⁸² Bundesamt für Sicherheit in der Informationstechnik, "Neues IT-Sicherheitsgesetz ebnet Weg für eine moderne Cyber-Sicherheit in Deutschland," accessed June 07, 2021, https://www.bsi.bund.de/DE/Service-Navi/Presse/Pressemitteilungen/Presse2021/210528_IT-SiG20.html.

⁸³ Helene Fouquet and Tara Patel, "France's Huawei Ban Begins to Kick In With Purge in Urban Areas," Bloomberg, accessed June 07, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-03-01/france-s-huawei-ban-begins-to-kick-in-with-purge-in-urban-areas>.

⁸⁴ Tobin Harshaw and Kevin Rudd, "Emperor Xi's China Is Done Biding Its Time," Harvard Kennedy School – Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, accessed June 08, 2021, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/emperor-xis-china-done-biding-its-time>.

collaboration,⁸⁵ Macron and Merkel refused to participate in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).⁸⁶ During their summit in June 2021, the G7 leaders agreed on launching the "Build Back Better for the World" plan, an infrastructure initiative aimed at funding green infrastructure projects in developing countries.⁸⁷ Thus, the G7 will be competing with and rival the BRI.

The G7's concord on the new infrastructure project may imply a relaxation of the US-French and US-German relationships. The anxiety caused by President Trump over Berlin's and Paris' future relationship with Washington, as well as over potential trade tensions will likely dissolve under President Biden. Hence, united in Western democratic values, Germany and France may turn to the US looking for a joint stance towards China.

Even though at first sight the ties of France and Germany to China seem to fundamentally differ from their cooperation with Russia, some crucial similarities can be discovered.

First, Russia and China were major communist powers questioning and challenging the liberal world order. Therefore, cooperation between the two European and the two communist countries during the Cold War was limited. With the dissolution of the USSR and the subsequent relaxation of the systemic rivalry between communism and the market economy, both China and Russia experienced intensified cooperation with France and Germany. This period of relaxation was accompanied by economic growth and mutual agreements. In recent history however, tensions between the two western and eastern countries increased. Disagreements involve the issue of human rights, in particular the jailing of or crackdown on oppositions and people that do not fit the cultural perceptions of the political leadership. These violations of human rights caused the imposition of sanctions by the EU on China and Russia, respectively. Furthermore, the French, as well as the German economy are highly dependent on the Chinese market, but one may not underestimate Germany's dependence on Russian gas. Aiming at economic independence, the protection of human rights, and the containment of an increasingly

⁸⁵ Blenkinsop and Emmott, "EU leaders call for end to 'naivety'."

⁸⁶ Deutsche Welle, "China's Xi pushes new 'Silk Road' in France," accessed June 07, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/chinas-xi-pushes-new-silk-road-in-france/a-48055637>.

⁸⁷ Group of Seven, "Carbis Bay G7 Summit Communiqué," accessed July 19, 2021, <https://www.g7uk.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Summary-of-Carbis-Bay-G7-Summit-Communique-PDF-248KB-2-Pages.pdf>.

aggressive foreign policy, the two European countries took a harsher stance on China and Russia.

Nevertheless, China and Russia still pursue policy interests that necessitate cooperation with Germany and France. The countries' foreign and domestic policy priorities, as well as the benefits resulting from having close ties with Germany and France are discussed in the following.

3.3 Requirements to look for alternative cooperation partners

First, Russia intends to retain or expand its influence in the Middle East and Eastern European countries. Fearing the European integration of its neighboring countries and its loss of ideological and political influence on former Soviet states, Russia has a deeply rooted interest in building a counter pole to the EU and NATO. In order to actively establish a stable network of pro-Russian countries, Putin presented the idea of the Eurasian Economic Union. The union, which was established in 2015, currently consists of Armenia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Belarus.⁸⁸ Germany and France are firmly embedded in NATO and the EU and are able to shape decisions taken within those institutions. Hence, having firm ties with both countries is key to protecting Russia's foreign policy interests.

With regards to maintaining close ties with its neighboring countries, Belarus currently seems of particular importance to Russia. After the contested presidential election in 2020 and the following protests against Alexander Lukashenko, the EU imposed sanctions on Belarus.⁸⁹ Knowing that these sanctions further increase the massive economic pressure on Lukashenko and taking advantage of Belarus' economic dependence on Russia, Putin continues supporting the Belarusian president to avoid the country's rapprochement to the EU. Impeding a potential integration into the EU and regaining influence over Ukraine's future political direction also was a major reason for Russia to annex Crimea. Most importantly however, the annexation of Crimea secures Russia its strategic access to the naval base at Sevastopol, which is home to Russia's Black Sea Fleet.⁹⁰ By declaring

⁸⁸ Eurasian Economic Union, "About," accessed July 21, 2021, <http://www.eaeunion.org/?lang=en#about>.

⁸⁹ European Council, "EU imposes sanctions on Belarusian economy," accessed July 23, 2021, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/06/24/eu-imposes-sanctions-on-belarusian-economy/>.

⁹⁰ Center for Strategic and International Studies, "Crimea's Strategic Value to Russia," accessed June 11, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/crimeas-strategic-value-russia>.

Russia's annexation illegal and imposing sanctions, Germany and France among others, contributed to Russia's political isolation and weakened economy.

Similarly, China aims at expanding its geopolitical sphere of influence and retaining power. China's core interests contain maintaining its national unity, expanding its sea power towards the South and East China Sea, as well as challenging the liberal Western world order.⁹¹ All three objectives however experienced strong opposition from the West, including Germany and France. For instance, after years of hesitantly expressing concerns about the growing tensions over disputed waters, France and Germany decided to send warships through the South and East China Sea, respectively.⁹² By doing so, the countries support the US, the UK, and Japan in preventing a Chinese unilateral expansion.⁹³

Moreover, China's protectionist economic measures are not in line with the rules of the international trade system causing other countries to take actions against China's trade practices.⁹⁴ For strengthening its leading role in the world economy, China largely depends on foreign markets willing to import its products, as well as on foreign acquisitions that allow for an exchange of technological know-how. Since China is currently facing a trade war with the US, the EU constitutes an indispensable market. Thus, Chinese domestic development seems difficult without peaceful cooperation with the EU.

Similarities between Chinese and Russian interests can also be found on the level of domestic affairs. Putin's domestic agenda entails the strengthening of the United Russia Party and the retention of his position as president. Likewise, Xi Jinping aims at institutionalizing the CCP to expand control over the state and legal institutions.⁹⁵ Creating welfare for its citizens presents a powerful source of legitimacy. The prosperity

⁹¹ Jinghao Zhou, "China's Core Interests and Dilemma in Foreign Policy Practice," *Pacific Focus* XXXIV, no. 1 (2019): 33f.

⁹² Le Figaro, "La marine française a patrouillé en mer de Chine méridionale," accessed June 11, 2021, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/la-marine-francaise-a-patrouille-en-mer-de-chine-meridionale-20210209>; Johannes Leithäuser, "Deutschland entsendet Fregatte in ostasiatische Gewässer," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, accessed June 11, 2021, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/deutschland-entsendet-fregatte-in-indo-pazifik-raum-17224589.html>.

⁹³ Torben Börgers, "Japans Botschaft an China," *Tagesschau*, accessed June 11, 2021, <https://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/asien/japan-manoever-frankreich-usa-101.html>.

⁹⁴ Zhou, "China's Core Interests and Dilemma in Foreign Policy Practice," 39.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.* In order to maintain the leadership of Xi Jinping, the Constitution of China has been amended removing the presidential term limits.

of a society is among others shaped by the economic, technological, and military situation of a country.⁹⁶ Imposed EU sanctions, including asset freezing and restrictions on technology provisions, eventually have negative effects on the wellbeing of a country's population. Consequently, popular support for the ruling government may be weakened.

In sum, China's and Russia's common strategic objectives entail geopolitical expansion, economic growth, and domestic consolidation of power. It may not be impossible for China and Russia to pursue these goals without strategic cooperation with France and Germany, but it may be more challenging due to Germany's and France's role in shaping decision-making at the EU and NATO level as well as their economic prowess. Given the deteriorating relationships and opposing positions, it seems difficult for China and Russia to develop strategic partnerships with Germany's and France's ruling governments.

This argumentation is affirmed when analyzing the perceptions of French and German citizens towards Russia and China. According to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2020, roughly 70% of German and French citizens have an unfavorable view of China.⁹⁷ A less drastic but nevertheless negative picture can be found when looking at Russia. In 2020, 64% of the German and 57% of the French population expressed an unfavorable view of Russia.⁹⁸ Considering these surveys, ruling governments aiming at retaining power are not incentivized to seek and publicly promote close collaborations with either Russia or China.

Thus, it seems plausible that Russia and China will look for alternative cooperation partners within the German and French political landscapes. For the countries to accomplish their interests more easily, cooperation partners should share skepticism towards the EU, the US, as well as NATO and pursue a business-friendly policy. Moreover, for the cooperation to be expedient, partners should be able to continuously influence political decision-making. For political actors to actively impact the direction of present and future politics in democratic systems, they need to be backed by a certain

⁹⁶ Herfried Münkler, *Imperien. Die Logik der Weltherrschaft – vom Alten Rom bis zu den Vereinigten Staaten*, (Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 2007): 76 ff.

⁹⁷ Pew Research Center, "Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries," accessed June 14, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/10/06/unfavorable-views-of-china-reach-historic-highs-in-many-countries/>.

⁹⁸ Pew Research Center, "Views of Russia and Putin remain negative across 14 nations," accessed June 14, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/12/16/views-of-russia-and-putin-remain-negative-across-14-nations/>.

part of the domestic population. Additionally, it may not be necessary for said partners to be in power. It may just suffice to cause tensions in domestic policy shifting the focus from foreign policy to points of contention between the actors to improve the public perception of Russia and China.

Eurosceptic, right-wing populist parties, that have recently gained momentum in the political landscape of various European countries, may present suitable partners. The Identity and Democracy Group unites these parties on the European level and constitutes the fourth largest political group in the European Parliament. The majority of its MEPs belong to Italy's Lega Party, the German AfD, and the French RN.⁹⁹

Prior to 2018, the RN, which was founded in 1972, was named Front National. Under Marine Le Pen, who in 2011 succeeded her father as the FN's president, the party underwent a crucial transition. In an effort to appeal to more voters, Marine Le Pen pushed the party towards becoming part of the political mainstream while getting rid of its racist and anti-Semitic past.¹⁰⁰ Compared to the RN, the AfD has a relatively short history. Founded in 2013, the party quickly gained momentum in German politics by promoting nationalist and Eurosceptic views. Whereas in the 1970s the two major parties SPD and CDU dominated German politics and commanded 90% of the vote, they had collectively sunk to just above 50% in 2017.¹⁰¹ This development led to an increased fragmentation of Germany's political landscape allowing the AfD to rapidly acquire influence.¹⁰² Given the RN's rebranding under Marine Le Pen and its alignment with the interests of the AfD as demonstrated by their affiliation to the same European Parliament group, a joint investigation of the parties appears reasonable.

Today, the AfD is the third strongest fraction in the Bundestag and the largest opposition party.¹⁰³ According to current polls, the AfD is predicted to achieve 11% of the votes in the German federal election in September 2021, representing a drop of 2 percentage

⁹⁹ Identity and Democracy, "Members," accessed June 11, 2021, <https://www.idgroup.eu/members>.

¹⁰⁰ Daniel Stockemer, *The Front National in France*, (Cham: Springer International Publishing AG, 2017): 10, 23 ff.; Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far-right*, XXIV.

¹⁰¹ Kampfer, "Russia and China in Germany," 4.

¹⁰² c.f. Wolfgang Rudzio, *Das politische System der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, (Wiesbaden: Springer Verlag, 2019): 103 ff.

¹⁰³ Benedikt Peters, "5 Reasons For The Far-right Rising In Germany," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, accessed June 24, 2021, <https://projekte.sueddeutsche.de/artikel/politik/afd-5-reasons-for-the-far-right-rising-in-germany-e403522/>.

points compared to 2017.¹⁰⁴ In comparison to the AfD, the RN has realistic chances to provide the next French president. One year ahead of the presidential elections in 2022, poll after poll predicts a rematch between Macron and RN leader Marine Le Pen.¹⁰⁵ Concerning the French legislative elections in 2017, as well as the French regional elections in 2021, the RN scored poorly. The party won eight seats in the French National Assembly and no region.¹⁰⁶

The AfD's and RN's Eurosceptic stance as well as their electoral successes would make them attractive cooperation partners for Russian and Chinese political leaders. In order for the parties to be able to steer foreign and domestic policies towards the interests of Russia and China and to weaken the support for the central government, the two autocratic regimes may actively support them. For non-military practices aiming at sabotaging other countries' strategic interests, the term hybrid interference was coined.¹⁰⁷ The concept is illustrated in the following.

¹⁰⁴ Bundestagswahl 2021, "Bundestagswahl 2021: Umfragen, Prognosen und Projektionen," accessed June 11, 2021, <https://www.bundestagswahl-2021.de/umfragen/#afd>.

¹⁰⁵ Maxime Vaudano, "Un an avant une présidentielle, les sondages sont souvent loin du compte," Le Monde, accessed June 11, 2021, https://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2021/05/20/un-an-avant-une-presidentielle-les-sondages-sont-souvent-loin-du-compte_6080892_4355770.html.

¹⁰⁶ Assemblée Nationale, "Vos députés," accessed June 11, 2021, <https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/dyn/les-groupes-politiques>; Tagesschau, "Le-Pen Partei geht leer aus," accessed July 18, 2021, <https://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/europa/frankreich-regionalwahlen-hochrechnung-101.html>.

¹⁰⁷ Wigell, "Hybrid interference as a wedge strategy," 262 ff.

4 The hybrid interference theory

Much of the debate and research on hybridity has focused on hybrid warfare as the execution of military and non-military activities aimed at achieving strategic objectives. Through the mixing of unconventional measures, such as sabotage, economic coercion or disinformation, and conventional military power, hybrid warfare is blurring the boundaries between peace and war.¹⁰⁸ The concept has been exposed to criticism from security analysts and scholars claiming that hybrid warfare neglects to distinguish between acts of war and foreign policy. Even though there is no doubt that policy tools such as spreading disinformation or election meddling do pose significant threats to national security, their categorization as warfare seems questionable. These subtle policy activities deployed by authoritarian regimes rather than military interventions currently constitute the most pressing challenges for Western democracies.¹⁰⁹ In an attempt to take this criticism into consideration, Mikael Wigell coined the term hybrid interference. In his work he defines the concept as “the synchronized use of multiple non-military means of interference tailored to heighten divisions within target societies”.¹¹⁰ Hence, hybrid interference adopts a variety of covert non-kinetic strategies to interfere in other countries’ domestic politics manipulating their strategic interests. Eventually, the targeted country and its government may either voluntarily implement steps that serve the interests of the attacking country, or their decision-making capacity will be paralyzed and weakened.¹¹¹

As a strategy, hybrid interference incorporates three major instruments which are clandestine diplomacy, geoeconomics, and disinformation.¹¹² Clandestine diplomacy refers to a form of political interference which includes covert action targeted at fostering counter-elites or subversive organizations. The ultimate goal is to spread uncertainty, promote polarization within the political landscape, and weaken the support and credibility of the ruling government. One advantageous feature of clandestine diplomacy is its deniability resulting from the inclusion and participation of secret intelligence

¹⁰⁸ Id. at 265 ff.

¹⁰⁹ Mikael Wigell, “Democratic Deterrence: How to Dissuade Hybrid Interference,” *The Washington Quarterly* 44, no. 1 (2021): 51.

¹¹⁰ Wigell, “Hybrid interference as a wedge strategy,” 262.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Id. at 263.

services.¹¹³ Clandestine diplomacy is often accompanied and reinforced by the deliberate dissemination of false information, referred to as disinformation.¹¹⁴ With the rise of social media, echo chambers allow for a fast distribution of disinformation potentially eroding public trust in political institutions and enhancing polarization.¹¹⁵ Lastly, geoeconomics relates to economic interference, which in comparison to classical geopolitical policies, involves the use of subtle economic means that do not openly confront the targeted country and its government. Therefore, geoeconomics is based on the “carrots and sticks” principle, implying the selective offering of economic rewards and punishments to certain members of the targeted community. Consequently, the actors not receiving the benefits are put under pressure, undermining the cohesion of the community itself and weakening its counter-balancing potential.¹¹⁶

Germany and France as Western democracies are particularly vulnerable to hybrid interference since liberal democratic principles can be exploited and undermined. State restraint, free media, pluralism, and economic openness as fundamental democratic values provide openings for foreign actors to interfere in domestic politics.¹¹⁷ In liberal democracies the state and with it the government shall be restrained by self-binding and constitutional mechanisms to set limits to state power.¹¹⁸ The relationship between society and state is determined by the rule of law, allowing for the protection of human rights and individual liberties. Being restrained from surveilling the society and preserving basic civil freedoms, democratic states have fewer possibilities to protect themselves against hybrid interference than authoritarian regimes do.¹¹⁹ Similarly, free, uncensored media provide fertile ground for hybrid interference. Besides facilitating the potential appearance of foreign media outlets distributing polarizing messages, freedom of expression may lead to the distribution of fake news, coordinated foreign disinformation campaigns, and conspiracy theories. Furthermore, political and civic pluralism constitutes

¹¹³ Len Scott, “Secret Intelligence, Covert Action and Clandestine Diplomacy,” *Intelligence & National Security* 19, no. 2 (2004): 330.

¹¹⁴ James H. Fetzer, “Information: Does It Have To Be True?,” *Minds and Machines* 14 (2003): 228.

¹¹⁵ Wigell, “Hybrid interference as a wedge strategy,” 264.

¹¹⁶ Antto Vihma and Mikael Wigell, “Unclear and present danger: Russia’s geoeconomics and the Nord Stream II pipeline,” *Global Affairs* 2, no. 4 (2016): 379.

¹¹⁷ Wigell, “Hybrid interference as a wedge strategy,” 268.

¹¹⁸ Larry Diamond, Marc F. Plattner and Andreas Schedler, “Introduction,” in *The self-restraining state: power and accountability in new democracies*, ed. Andreas Schedler, Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999): 1–10.

¹¹⁹ Wigell, “Hybrid interference as a wedge strategy,” 269.

a crucial characteristic of liberal democracies. While ensuring peaceful competition with regards to influencing political decision-making,¹²⁰ political pluralism can be exploited by external actors. Through foreign interference, pluralistic conflicts may accumulate and exacerbate reaching a highly polarized and competitive level where democratic governability will be undermined.¹²¹ Lastly, foreign actors may interfere in the open market economy. Through trade, investment deals, and acquisitions foreign countries are able to establish an economic presence in the target country that allows for the creation of dependency relationships to influential local businessmen.¹²²

Taken together, hybrid interference is a relatively new concept implying that foreign actors can manipulate other countries' strategic interests via applying non-military instruments, namely clandestine diplomacy, geoeconomics, and disinformation. France and Germany are particularly vulnerable to hybrid interference due to their liberal democratic values that include state restraint, free media, pluralism, and economic openness.

This study contributes to the scholarship on hybrid interference by closely examining the instrument of clandestine diplomacy in the context of Russian and Chinese support for France's and Germany's most popular right-wing parties. Analyzing Russia's and China's interests in pursuing disinformation and geoeconomics strategies is beyond the scope of this work, but a growing body of scholars suggests that both France and Germany have been targeted by Chinese and Russian geoeconomics and disinformation operations.¹²³

As previously described, clandestine diplomacy refers to the covertly fostering of subversive organizations, such as radical political parties, to create disarray and weaken the support for the ruling government in the targeted country.¹²⁴ Even though democratically legitimized, the AfD, as well as the RN can both be considered radical

¹²⁰ Robert Rohrschneider, "Pluralism, Conflict, and Legislative Elites in the United Germany," *Comparative Politics* 29, no. 1 (1996): 44 ff.

¹²¹ Wigell, "Hybrid interference as a wedge strategy," 270.

¹²² *Id.* at 272.

¹²³ c.f. Vihma and Wigell, "Unclear and present danger;" Alina Polyakova and Spencer P. Boyer, "The Future of political warfare: Russia, the West, and the coming age of global digital competition," *Foreign Policy at Brookings Brookings Institution* (2018): 3 ff.; Rose Bernard, Gemma Bowsher, Richard Sullivan, and Fawzia Gibson-Fall, "Disinformation and the Epidemics: Anticipating the next wave of biowarfare," *Health Security* 19, no. 1 (2021): 7 ff.

¹²⁴ Wigell, "Hybrid interference as a wedge strategy," 263.

parties. A radical New Right party is defined as an anti-establishment parliamentary group having a hostile view towards representative democracy and pluralism and aiming at the ideal of an ethnocratic society.¹²⁵ Considering this definition, there is a broad scholarly consensus that the AfD and the RN both belong to the radical New Right.¹²⁶ Hence, cultivating and supporting the AfD and RN as a foreign actor constitutes a form of clandestine diplomacy.

Within empirical research Russian clandestine diplomacy targeted at France and Germany has been widely acknowledged and studied. The work published on Russia's ties with the AfD and RN is versatile but has predominantly been either limited to single cooperation mechanisms or barely addressed the AfD. This study aims at closing this gap by compiling the diverse areas of collaboration between Russia, the AfD and the RN, respectively. In order to draw a comprehensive picture of Russia's interference policy, the study sheds light on how the four democratic values outlined above make Germany and France vulnerable to Russia's clandestine diplomacy strategy. By doing so, the analysis is illustrating how Russia is exploiting and undermining the French and German democratic systems.

Concerning a Chinese clandestine diplomacy strategy, literature is considerably limited. This lack of research may be caused by the non-existence of a collaboration between China and European right-wing populist parties. However, even if this presumption holds true, given the deteriorating relationship between Germany's and France's governments and China, the latter may have a future interest in establishing ties with the AfD and RN. Thus, there is a driving need to test the relevance of the clandestine diplomacy theory with respect to China. Drawing on the thorough analysis of Russian interference, the question of whether China may pursue a strategy similar to Russia is evaluated. Therefore, the likelihood, plausibility, and potential nature of future collaborations between China and the two parties are discussed.

¹²⁵ Jens Rydgren, "The Sociology of the Radical Right," *Annual Review of Sociology* 33 (2007): 243.

¹²⁶ c.f. Carl C. Berning, "Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) – Germany's New Radical Right-wing Populist Party," *ifo DICE Report* 15, no. 4 (2017): 16 f.; Jens Rydgren, "Radical right-wing parties in Europe: What's populism got to do with it?," *Journal of Language and Politics* 16, no. 4 (2017): 1.

5 Russia's clandestine diplomacy strategy

This chapter investigates the ties between Russia and the two populist parties and discusses the implications of the radical right as a means for Russian hybrid interference. Prior to analyzing the existing relations, the following subchapter focuses on the respective objectives each actor pursues by engaging in mutual cooperation.

5.1 The benefits of clandestine diplomacy

The potential reasons for Russia to engage in clandestine diplomacy have been briefly touched on previously and are now elaborated upon in more detail. The tense relations with France's and Germany's ruling governments have resulted in aggravating circumstances for Russia to pursue its foreign policy interests. Following this development, Russia is urged to seek new political cooperation partners.

Already in 2013, the AfD announced the formation of closer ties with Russia as one of its main principles. According to remarks of Alexander Gauland, founding father of the AfD and one of two heads of the party, Russia has been a "positive godfather at decisive milestones in German history".¹²⁷ Gauland further expresses his admiration for Otto von Bismarck's foreign policy thereby requesting a recultivation of his reinsurance policy toward Russia.¹²⁸ Gauland's statements are in line with the party's foreign policy guidelines, which include the strengthening of economic ties with Russia.¹²⁹ Therefore, the party is a strong advocate for the completion of the pipeline Nord Stream 2.¹³⁰

Most importantly however, the AfD demands a normalization of the Russian-German tensions and emphasizes that relaxation of the relationship with Russia constitutes a prerequisite for a stable and long-lasting peace in Europe.¹³¹ Thus, the AfD advocates the

¹²⁷ Peter Carstens, "AfD nimmt sich Bismarck zum Vorbild," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, accessed April 15, 2021, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/bundestagswahl/aussenpolitisches-konzept-afd-nimmt-sich-bismarck-zum-vorbild-12569281.html>.

¹²⁸ Roger Köppel, "Dr. Alexander Gauland im Gespräch mit Roger Köppel von der Weltwoche," *Alternative für Deutschland*, accessed June 18, 2021, <https://www.afd.de/alexander-gauland-im-interview-mit-der-weltwoche/>; Carstens, "AfD nimmt sich Bismarck zum Vorbild."

¹²⁹ Alexander Häusler, *Die Alternative für Deutschland. Programmatik, Entwicklung und politische Verortung*, (Wiesbaden: Springer Verlag, 2016): 45, 141, 225.

¹³⁰ Alternative für Deutschland, "Alexander Gauland: AfD begrüßt Dänemarks Genehmigung zur Fertigstellung von Nord Stream 2," accessed June 18, 2021, <https://www.afd.de/alexander-gauland-afd-begruesst-daenemarks-genehmigung-zur-fertigstellung-von-nord-stream-2/>.

¹³¹ Alternative für Deutschland, "Außenpolitik: Verhältnis zu anderen Staaten," accessed April 15, 2021, https://www.afd.de/aussenpolitik_sicherheit/.

lifting of the EU sanctions.¹³² According to Gauland's "Thesis on Foreign Policy", Russia's relationship with Ukraine is comparable to Germany's relationship with the cities of Aachen and Cologne.¹³³ By stating that Russia's military interventions to annex Crimea can be considered as the recollection of Russian ground, Gauland shows understanding for Russia's actions on Ukrainian territory.¹³⁴ Nevertheless, the AfD regards the annexation of Crimea as a violation of international law.¹³⁵

The RN goes one step further and apart from promoting the removal of sanctions publicly welcomes the annexation of Crimea.¹³⁶ Prior to the French presidential elections in 2017, Marine Le Pen announced that she would recognize Crimea as part of Russia if elected president.¹³⁷ The RN's chairwoman openly admires Putin for his patriotism and efforts to protect the Christian heritage of European civilization.¹³⁸ Sharing these values, the RN calls for the development of a strategic alliance with Russia.¹³⁹ The pro-Russian stance of the RN is particularly visible when looking at the voting behavior of its MEPs. The Political Capital Institute analyzed six resolutions on Russia and found that Marine Le Pen's party voted in favor of Russia's interests more than 90% of the time.¹⁴⁰

Moreover, Russia has a deeply rooted interest in undermining the EU and NATO. Both the AfD and the RN hold Eurosceptic and anti-US views. In its election program for the parliamentary elections 2021, the AfD promotes Germany's exit from the European

¹³² European Council, "EU restrictive measures."

¹³³ Raphael S. Cohen and Andrew Radin, *Russia's Hostile Measures in Europe: Understanding the Threat*, (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2019), accessed July 19, 2021, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1793.html.

¹³⁴ Dietmar Neuerer, "Interview mit Alexander Gauland," Handelsblatt, accessed April 15, 2021, <https://www.handelsblatt.com/politik/deutschland/landtagswahlen-2014/interview-mit-alexander-gauland-so-genau-nehmen-wir-es-auch-nicht-mit-dem-voelkerrecht/10674354-3.html>.

¹³⁵ Justus Bender, "AfD-Sprecher Gauland äußert Verständnis für Russland," Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, accessed June 18, 2021, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/nach-annexion-der-krim-afd-sprecher-gauland-aeussert-verstaendnis-fuer-russland-12859603.html>.

¹³⁶ Le Figaro, "Le Pen: l'annexion de la Crimée «pas illégale»," accessed June 16, 2021, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/2017/01/03/97001-20170103FILWWW00096-le-pen-l-annexion-de-la-crimée-pas-illegale.php>.

¹³⁷ Beata Stur, "Marine Le Pen supports Russia's annexation of Crimea," New Europe, accessed June 16, 2021, <https://www.neweurope.eu/article/marine-le-pen-supports-russias-annexion-crimea/>.

¹³⁸ Le Figaro, "Marine Le Pen fait l'éloge de Vladimir Poutine «le patriote»," accessed June 16, 2021, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/politique/le-scan/citations/2014/05/18/25002-20140518ARTFIG00118-marine-le-pen-fait-l-elogue-de-vladimir-poutine-le-patriote.php>.

¹³⁹ Marine Turchi, "Les réseaux russes de Marine Le Pen," Mediapart, accessed June 17, 2021, <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/190214/les-reseaux-russes-de-marine-le-pen?onglet=full>.

¹⁴⁰ ZDF, "Putins Freunde in Europa," accessed June 17, 2021, <https://webstory.zdf.de/putins-geheimen-netzwerk/putins-freunde-in-europa/>.

Union.¹⁴¹ Similarly in 2016, Marine Le Pen promised to hold a Frexit referendum if elected. For the European parliament elections in 2019 however, the RN changed its strategy and removed the goal of France leaving the EU from its agenda.¹⁴² In an interview with the French news channel BFM TV in 2021, Marine Le Pen called for a fundamental change in France's foreign policy particularly advocating a French withdrawal from the integrated military command of NATO.¹⁴³ Likewise, AfD politicians associated with *Der Flügel* (the wing), a party internal association that presents far-right views and holds certain important offices, demand Germany's exit from NATO.¹⁴⁴

Given the ideological proximity and the willingness to steer the French and German political decision-making towards Russian interests, the AfD and the RN provide attractive cooperation partners for Russia.¹⁴⁵ Both parties do not oppose Russia's aim of expanding its influence, polarize the French and German political environment, and adopt a critical stance towards the EU and NATO. Hence, by cultivating these parties, Russian influence can be increased, and the country's values and ideas can be spread.

Russia's support for radical right-wing parties may not exclusively serve its foreign policy interests but allows for the legitimization of the Kremlin's power. Sanctions imposed by Western countries do not merely lead to diplomatic isolation of Russia but significantly weaken the country's economic and financial system. In the past seven years, the Ruble experienced a substantial depreciation.¹⁴⁶ The Russian leadership tries to prevent inflation from escalating, fearing an intensification of the already significant discontent in large

¹⁴¹ Alternative für Deutschland, "Unser Programm zur Bundestagswahl 2021," accessed June 16, 2021, <https://www.afd.de/wahlprogramm/>.

¹⁴² Nathalie Guilmin and Annick Cappelle, "Marine Le Pen ne veut plus sortir la France de l'Union européenne," RTBF, accessed June 16, 2021, https://www.rtbf.be/info/dossier/elections-2019/detail_marine-le-pen-ne-veut-plus-sortir-la-france-de-l-union-europeenne?id=10196519.

¹⁴³ Robin Verner, "Marine Le Pen voudrait rétablir "des relations normales" avec la Russie et quitter le commandement intégré de l'Otan," BFM TV, accessed June 17, 2021, https://www.bfmtv.com/politique/marine-le-pen-voudrait-retablir-des-relations-normales-avec-la-russie-et-quitter-le-commandement-integre-de-l-otan_AV-202105250147.html.

¹⁴⁴ Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, "Nato ist Instrument amerikanischer Geopolitik," accessed June 18, 2021, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/afd-vize-alexander-gauland-haelt-nato-austritt-fuer-irrweg-14224338.html>.

¹⁴⁵ Marlene Laruelle, Lóránt Györi, Péter Krekó, Dóra Haller and Rudy Reichstadt, *From Paris to Vladivostok*, (Budapest: Political Capital Kft, 2015): 28 f.

¹⁴⁶ Markus Ackeret, "Russland zeigt sich unbeeindruckt von den Sanktionen," Neue Zürcher Zeitung, accessed June 17, 2021, <https://www.nzz.ch/international/russland-sanktionen-bewirken-keinen-kurswechsel-ld.1603336>.

segments of society caused by years of economic stagnation.¹⁴⁷ The deteriorating economic situation further underscores the need to anchor opposition to the sanctions in Western public discourse. AfD and RN politicians may transmit Eurosceptic and pro-Russian messages, providing legitimacy to the Kremlin's narrative of Russia falling victim to unfair European practices.

Despite the large overlap between the objectives Russia pursues in cooperating with the AfD and the RN, one distinction needs to be made. The AfD plays a minor role in German political decision-making. So far, the traditional parties of Germany's political landscape refuse to form a coalition with the AfD on the federal or state level. Hence, it is unlikely that the AfD will form part of the government in the near future. Nevertheless, with an increasingly fragmented party landscape, government participation of the AfD, particularly on the state level, constitutes a plausible scenario for the medium and long term. In comparison to the AfD, the RN has serious chances of winning the upcoming presidential elections.¹⁴⁸ Marine Le Pen could therefore take an office that, in the unitary state of France,¹⁴⁹ encompasses far-reaching competencies and powers. Considering the distinct positions of the AfD and the RN in their respective political power structures, the Russian interests in the two parties may differ.

By supporting the RN, Russia aims at actively influencing France's future political orientation. The RN's high poll ratings and Marine Le Pen's Russia-friendly course appear to be a promising option for Russia to escape its political isolation.¹⁵⁰ Significantly shifting Germany's policy by cultivating the AfD however, is less plausible. Hence by cooperating with the AfD, Russia may polarize the political and societal environment thus weakening Germany's unity.

¹⁴⁷ Katharina Wagner, "Angst vor Sanktionen schwächen den Rubel," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, accessed June 17, 2021, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/finanzen/russland-wie-die-angst-vor-sanktionen-den-rubel-schwaecht-17307149.html>.

¹⁴⁸ Harris Interactive, "Baromètre d'intentions de vote pour l'élection présidentielle de 2022 – Vague 3," accessed June 17, 2021, https://harris-interactive.fr/opinion_polls/barometre-dintentions-de-vote-pour-lelection-presidentielle-de-2022-vague-3/.

¹⁴⁹ European Committee of the Regions, "France," accessed June 17, 2021, <https://portal.cor.europa.eu/divisionpowers/Pages/France-Introduction.aspx>.

¹⁵⁰ Mohamed Bassiouni Abd ElHalim, "Expansion of Putinism: Why does Russia support the Far-Right in Europe?," *Future for Advanced Research and Studies*, accessed June 16, 2021, <https://futureuae.com/m/Mainpage/Item/2883/expansion-of-putinism-why-does-russia-support-the-far-right-in-europe>.

However, the cooperation does not only benefit Russia. The AfD and the RN also have reasons to seek a close alliance. As previously discussed, Germany's well-established parties consciously sideline the AfD. By traveling to Moscow, AfD politicians receive the political attention they are lacking in Germany allowing them to present themselves as statesmanlike.¹⁵¹ Russia offers the AfD a foreign policy stage that supports the party in attracting East German voters. Surveys conclude that positive perceptions of Russia and Putin are far more widespread in East than in West Germany.¹⁵² It also is in East Germany where the AfD receives most of its electoral support. In the East German states of Saxony, Brandenburg, Thuringia, as well as Saxony-Anhalt the AfD is the second strongest party in their respective state parliaments.¹⁵³

Similar to the AfD, the RN is missing domestic cooperation partners. Jean-Marie Le Pen's repeated anti-Semitic and racist remarks have caused controversy and damaged the RN's reputation. Even though Jean-Marie Le Pen was excluded from the party in 2015 and despite the efforts of Marine Le Pen to rebrand the party and soften its image,¹⁵⁴ the RN continues to face difficulties in building alliances with other parties.¹⁵⁵ Domestic isolation is not limited to the party system but extends to banks. Fearing damage to their reputation, French banks refuse to finance the RN.¹⁵⁶ Cooperation with Russia, which has a large media presence in France, appears to allow for a promotion of the RN agenda at no cost. Russian state media as a means of influencing German public discourse in favor of the

¹⁵¹ Benjamin Bidder, "Vereint gegen liberale Werte: Wie Russland den rechten Rand in Europa inspiriert und fördert," Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, accessed June 17, 2021, <https://www.bpb.de/politik/extremismus/rechtsextremismus/253039/wie-russland-den-rechten-rand-in-europa-inspiriert>.

¹⁵² Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk, "Die Ostdeutschen und Russland: Ein besonderes Verhältnis," accessed June 17, 2021, <https://www.mdr.de/nachrichten/welt/osteuropa/land-leute/wie-russisch-ist-der-osten-russland-ostdeutsche-100.html>.

¹⁵³ Sachsen, "Wahlergebnis Sachsen," accessed June 17, 2021, <https://www.wahlen.sachsen.de/landtagswahl-2019-wahlergebnisse.php>; Landtag von Sachsen-Anhalt, "So hat Sachsen-Anhalt gewählt," accessed June 17, 2021, <https://www.landtag.sachsen-anhalt.de/wahlergebnis>; Thüringer Landtag, "Abgeordnete und Fraktionen," accessed June 17, 2021, <https://www.thueringer-landtag.de/abgeordnete/abgeordnete-fraktionen-sitzordnung/>; Landtag Brandenburg, "AfD-Fraktion," accessed June 17, 2021, <https://www.landtag.brandenburg.de/fraktionen/AfD/bb1.c.376482.de?referer=bb1.c.164531.de>.

¹⁵⁴ Kait Bolongaro, "Le Pen's Le Pen problem," Politico, accessed June 17, 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/marine-le-pen-jean-marie-le-pen-problem-france-national-front-rally/>.

¹⁵⁵ The Guardian, "Could Marine Le Pen finally triumph with her third tilt at French presidency?," accessed June 17, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/18/could-marine-le-pen-finally-triumph-with-her-third-tilt-at-french-presidency>.

¹⁵⁶ The Local, "National Front cries foul over French banks' refusal to loan Le Pen money," accessed June 17, 2021, <https://www.thelocal.fr/20161222/national-front-cries-foul-over-refusal-of-french-banks-to-loan-money/>.

AfD may also constitute a major incentive for the German party to engage in a partnership with Russia.¹⁵⁷

Stemming from the analysis above, it can be concluded that Russia, as well as the RN and AfD have well-founded reasons for cooperating. The nature and extent of the existent collaboration are critically analyzed in the following chapter.

5.2 Means of clandestine diplomacy

The cooperation between Russia and the two radical parties takes place in several areas. Five central aspects of collaboration, namely political visits, electoral observation missions, media, financing, and distribution of extreme far-right views will be addressed.

5.2.1 Political visits

The personal links between the RN and Russia are long-standing and versatile.¹⁵⁸ Thus, this chapter only highlights some of the numerous important individual connections between RN politicians and Russia. During the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Jean-Marie Le Pen traveled to Moscow to meet Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, chairman of the Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia and a famous right-wing populist,¹⁵⁹ to establish a short-living alliance between the two parties.¹⁶⁰

In the following decade, Jean-Marie Le Pen's visits to Moscow accumulated allowing for a strengthening of the party's ties with Russia. From 2012 onwards, following Marine Le Pen's decision to replace her father as the party's leader, visits of FN officials to Moscow became increasingly official, regular, and systematic.¹⁶¹ Even though Marine Le Pen in her role as new FN president explicitly expressed the wish to meet Vladimir Putin,¹⁶² her first visits to Moscow ended at the Duma where she got in touch with Alexander Babakov, who later played an important role in arranging Russian financial support for the FN.¹⁶³

¹⁵⁷ Bidder, "Vereint gegen liberale Werte."

¹⁵⁸ Laruelle et al., *From Paris to Vladivostok*, 24; Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far-right*, 189 ff.

¹⁵⁹ Vincent Jauvert, "Poutine et le FN: révélations sur les réseaux russes des Le Pen," *L'Obs*, accessed April 29, 2021, <https://www.nouvelobs.com/politique/20141024.OBS3131/poutine-et-le-fn-revelations-sur-les-reseaux-russes-des-le-pen.html>.

¹⁶⁰ Beatrix Futák-Campbell, "Political Synergy: How the European Far-Right and Russia Have Joined Forces Against Brussels," *Atlantisch Perspectief* 44, no. 1, Special Edition: Putin's Russia (2020): 31.

¹⁶¹ Laura Motet, "Visites, financement: le Front National et la Russie, une idylle qui dure," *Le Monde*, accessed April 22, 2021, https://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2016/11/18/le-front-national-et-la-russie-une-idylle-qui-dure_5033857_4355770.html.

¹⁶² *Le Figaro*, "Marine Le Pen Veut Aller en Russie," accessed April 22, 2021, <http://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/2011/05/02/97001-20110502FILWWW00503-marine-le-pen-veut-aller-en-russie.php>.

¹⁶³ Motet, "Visites, financement."

According to Marine Le Pen, it was only in 2017 when she met the Russian president. Her father as well as her former advisor on foreign policy issues Aymeric Chauprade, who as MEP employed the daughter of Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov as an intern,¹⁶⁴ contradict this statement claiming that she had already unofficially met the Russian president twice before.¹⁶⁵

However, Marine and Jean-Marie Le Pen are not the only members of the Le Pen family maintaining strong contacts with Russia. In 2012, Marine Le Pen's niece Marion Maréchal Le Pen was received by the former Duma President Sergei Naryshkin, Putin's roommate at the KGB.¹⁶⁶ Marion Maréchal, who was a member of the France-Russia friendship group in the National Assembly,¹⁶⁷ further confirmed that she frequently visited the Russian Embassy in Paris upon the advice of her aunt.¹⁶⁸

In 2014, the year in which Russia annexed Crimea, FN political visits to Russia reached their peak.¹⁶⁹ For instance, Aymeric Chauprade, who lectures at the Russian-funded Institute of Democracy and Cooperation,¹⁷⁰ attended the international forum "Large Family and Future of Humanity" in Moscow.¹⁷¹ The meeting, which promoted traditional family patterns, was held in the aftermath of a fierce public debate on legalizing same-sex marriage in France.¹⁷²

Since its inception, the AfD has officially taken a pro-Russian course, which was supplemented by pro-Kremlin views including remarks such as the one of Alexander Gauland that the EU sanctions against Russia in response to the annexation of Crimea are

¹⁶⁴ BBC, "Putin spokesman Peskov's daughter working as EU intern," accessed April 29, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-47370408>.

¹⁶⁵ Marine Turchi and Mathias Destal, "Alte Freundschaft zwischen Le Pen und Putin," Euobserver, accessed April 29, 2021, <https://euobserver.com/news-de/137687>.

¹⁶⁶ Nicolas Lebourg, "Les dimensions internationales du Front national," *Pouvoir* 157, no. 2 (2016): 110.

¹⁶⁷ Assemblée Nationale, "Composition du Groupe d'Amitié France-Russie," accessed April 29, 2021, http://www2.assemblee-nationale.fr/instances/fiche/OMC_PO675791.

¹⁶⁸ Jauvert, "Poutine et le FN."

¹⁶⁹ Motet, "Visites, financement."

¹⁷⁰ Andreas Kemper, *Foundation of the Nation*, (Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2016): 25.

¹⁷¹ J. Lester Feder and Susie Armitage, "Emails Show Pro-Family Activists Feeding Contacts to Russian Nationalists," BuzzFeed News, accessed April 30, 2021, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/lesterfeder/emails-show-pro-family-activists-feeding-contacts-to-russian>.

¹⁷² Claire Demesmay, "There are Always two sides to the truth- French Susceptibility to Russian Propaganda," *DGAPkompakt* 4 (2016): 6.

an “insanity”.¹⁷³ For his openly pro-Kremlin position, Gauland, who had been an influential member of Angela Merkel's CDU for 40 years before joining the AfD, received special appreciation and invitations from, among others, the Russian Embassy in Berlin and the Russian oligarch and media mogul Konstantin Malofeev.¹⁷⁴ The latter praised the performances of Gauland by stating that they “signal that Germany will become Germany again, just as Russia becomes Russia again under Putin”.¹⁷⁵ Malofeev further bore the costs of Gauland’s trip to meet members of the Duma and the senator of the Federation Council Andrei Klimov in 2015.¹⁷⁶ Three years after, Gauland and Beatrix von Storch, chairwoman of the AfD’s federal board, traveled to Moscow to get together with Leonid Slutsky, chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Russian Parliament, for an “informal exchange of ideas”.¹⁷⁷

The number of high-level meetings between the AfD leadership and representatives of the Russian government has continuously increased. In 2018, representatives of the AfD traveled at least 12 times to Russia and the Russian-controlled areas in Ukraine, making Russia the party’s number one destination for political visits.¹⁷⁸ One of these visits was carried out by MP Robby Schlund, who preceding his appointment as chairman of the German-Russian Parliamentary Group,¹⁷⁹ met several members of the Duma.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷³ Deutsche Welle, “Parteinachwuchs von AfD und Putin-Partei kooperieren,” accessed April 28, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/de/parteinachwuchs-von-afd-und-putin-partei-kooperieren/a-19210127>.

¹⁷⁴ Marlene Laruelle and Ellen Rivera, *Collusion or Homegrown Collaboration? Connections between German Far-right and Russia*, (Budapest: Political Capital Policy Research & Consulting Institute, 2019): 10.

¹⁷⁵ Friedrich Schmidt, “Oligarch Malofejew: Zurück zu Zar und Bismarck,” Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, accessed April 28, 2021, <http://www.faz.net/1.4118520>.

¹⁷⁶ Severin Weiland, “Rechtspopulisten: Wie die AfD mit Russland liebäugelt,” Spiegel Online, accessed April 28, 2021, <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/afd-vize-alexander-gauland-will-kein-geld-von-russland-a-1067703.html>; Justus Bender and Mörten Freidel, “Petry ließ sich kaufen,” accessed April 28, 2021, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/afd-russlandreise-wird-von-gauland-nicht-aufgeklärt-15602127.html>.

¹⁷⁷ Handelsblatt, “AfD: Von Storch und Gauland treffen russische Abgeordnete,” accessed April 28, 2021, <https://www.handelsblatt.com/politik/deutschland/afd-bundestagsabgeordnete-von-storch-und-gauland-treffen-russische-abgeordnete/20897470.html?ticket=ST-4691403-ON2FdDSBTAcceW9W2prp-ap1>.

¹⁷⁸ Claudia von Salzen, “Die Krim ist jetzt die russische Krim,” Der Tagesspiegel, accessed April 21, 2021, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/die-russland-reisen-der-afd-die-krim-ist-jetzt-die-russische-krim/24232604.html>.

¹⁷⁹ Deutscher Bundestag, “Die Deutsch-Russische Parlamentariergruppe zu Gesprächen nach Moskau und Kaluga,” accessed April 21, 2021, <https://www.bundestag.de/presse/pressemitteilungen/2019/pm-1906121-reise-russland-647490>.

¹⁸⁰ Robby Schlund, “Vorsitz der Deutsch-Russischen Parlamentariergruppe,” accessed April 28, 2021, <http://robbyschlund.de/2018/06/15/vorsitz-der-deutsch-russischen-parlamentariergruppe/>.

In the first quarter of 2021, high-level politicians of the AfD parliamentary group undertook several trips to Moscow to discuss the German-Russian relations with representatives of the Russian foreign ministry, the Duma, and the Russian central bank.¹⁸¹ The AfD delegation's itinerary further included a trip to the Gamaleja-Institute, whose COVID vaccine Sputnik V is currently pending EMA approval.¹⁸² The AfD's visits to Moscow sparked public controversy in Germany as they took place in the direct aftermath of the incarceration of Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny. In June 2021, Tino Chrupalla, one of the two AfD candidates for the 2021 federal election, followed an invitation of the Kremlin to attend the Moscow Conference on International Security.¹⁸³

The Junge Alternative (Young Alternative, JA), AfD's youth organization, also put efforts into forging deeper ties with Russia. Markus Frohnmaier, former chairman of the JA, initiated the networking activity by attending the "Donbass Forum" in contested Eastern Ukraine where he together with the RN politician Jean-Luc Schaffhauser discussed "Peace for Ukraine".¹⁸⁴ Following this event, he met the Duma deputy and United Russia's top functionary Robert Schlegel to discuss a partnership between the JA and the Young Guard, the youth wing of the United Russia Party. To a subsequent meeting held in Bingen, the JA invited the Kremlin-friendly president of the United Youth Front Nikolai Shlyamin. In the course of this event, which was also attended by several FN representatives, Shlyamin and Frohnmaier agreed on cooperating on the development of a social project supporting young fathers throughout Europe.¹⁸⁵

The visits of AfD and RN parliamentary members to Russia are not exempt from domestic criticism, especially when they involve a trip to Crimea. Since 2015, the annual Yalta

¹⁸¹ Kai Küstner, "Eine Reise mit Fragezeichen: Afd-Delegation in Moskau," Tagesschau, accessed April 28, 2021, <https://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/europa/afd-russland-107.html>.

¹⁸² Focus Online, "Erneute Reise nach Moskau: AfD-Chefin Weidel zu dreitägigem Besuch aufgebrochen," accessed April 29, 2021, https://www.focus.de/politik/deutschland/treffen-mit-russischen-politikern-erneute-reise-nach-moskau-afd-chefin-weidel-zu-dreitaegigem-besuch-aufgebrochen_id_13061132.html.

¹⁸³ Der Spiegel, "Chrupalla als Redner bei Konferenz des russischen Verteidigungsministeriums," accessed July 10, 2021, <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/afd-tino-chrupalla-als-redner-bei-konferenz-des-verteidigungsministeriums-in-moskau-a-77ce3716-0dc8-4dd6-8cd0-995652bdc347>.

¹⁸⁴ Melanie Amann and Pavel Lokshin, "Moscow's Fifth Column: German Populists Forge Ties with Russia," Der Spiegel, accessed April 28, 2021, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/german-populists-forge-deeper-ties-with-russia-a-1089562.html>.

¹⁸⁵ Bellingcat, "Russia Seeks to Influence European Politics Through Youth Wings of Far-Right and Far-Left Parties," accessed April 28, 2021, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2017/04/27/russia-seeks-influence-european-politics-working-youth-wings-far-right-far-left-parties/>.

International Economic Forum attracts businessmen and foreign politicians alike.¹⁸⁶ Several AfD MPs, representatives, and officials followed the invitation of the Russian government to attend the forum in 2018.¹⁸⁷ All deputies repeatedly emphasized that their attendance was decoupled from their official positions.¹⁸⁸ However, on the forum's website Frohnmaier, who gave a short speech at the event's opening, is not only listed as a member of the forum's organizing committee but also appears as a member of the Bundestag.¹⁸⁹ For the 5th anniversary of the conference, the Syrian and French delegations, which were supposed to be led by Bashar al-Assad and Marine Le Pen were assigned an honorable status.¹⁹⁰ Apart from attending the forum, RN and AfD representatives were repeatedly visiting Crimea for "private reasons".¹⁹¹ In 2021, Ukraine imposed sanctions on three RN MEPs, who had previously visited Crimea without Kyiv's permission.¹⁹²

In sum, the AfD and the RN maintain strong diplomatic ties with Russia. The number of trips AfD and RN politicians have undertaken to meet high-level representatives of Russia's leading party, or the Duma has continuously increased. Despite being frequently criticized for traveling to Moscow, both parties have intensified their partnerships with Russia, potentially indicating that maintaining close ties with Russia is more beneficial than domestic political recognition. The following chapter focuses on the parties' engagement in Russian electoral observation missions and thus sheds light on another aspect of cooperation which has evoked harsh domestic criticism.

5.2.2 Electoral observation missions

The Russian presidential election of 2018 revealed a historical peak of foreign election observers. Out of the 1513 registered observers, more than 400 were invited by the lower

¹⁸⁶ Patrick Gensing and Silvia Stöber, "Propagandareise ans Schwarze Meer," Tagesschau, accessed April 29, 2021, <https://www.tagesschau.de/investigativ/krim-russland-afd-101.html>.

¹⁸⁷ Russlanddeutsche für die AfD NRW, "Die Reise von Afd Politikern zum Internationalen Wirtschaftsforum in Jalta," accessed April 29, 2021, <https://russlanddeutsche-afd.nrw/aktuelles/2018/04/die-reise-von-afd-politikern-zum-internationalen-wirtschaftsforum-in-jalta/>.

¹⁸⁸ Gensing and Stöber, "Propagandareise ans Schwarze Meer."

¹⁸⁹ Yalta International Economic Forum, "About," accessed April 29, 2021, <https://yalta-forum.com/>.

¹⁹⁰ Tass, "Crimean head invites Syrian leader to attend Yalta economic forum," accessed April 29, 2021, <https://tass.com/politics/1037771>.

¹⁹¹ Helmut Seifen, "Botschafter: Krim-Reise ist Rechtsbruch," Westfälische Nachrichten, accessed April 29, 2021, <https://www.wn.de/Muensterland/Kreis-Borken/Gronau/3164954-Helmut-Seifen-Botschafter-Krim-Reise-ist-Rechtsbruch>.

¹⁹² Euractiv, "Ukraine sanctions French MEPs for visiting Crimea," accessed April 29, 2021, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/europe-s-east/news/ukraine-sanctions-french-meps-for-visiting-crimea/>.

and upper houses of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation.¹⁹³ The monitoring missions for these invitees were coordinated by Russian non-governmental organizations, such as CIS-EMO. Since its foundation in 2003, CIS-EMO is actively engaging in election observations in former Soviet territories.¹⁹⁴ Over the last decades however, the independence of CIS-EMO has been called into question. Several of its observation missions have revealed findings that contradicted the results of the EU or OSCE but loyally supported the Kremlin.¹⁹⁵

A large proportion of foreign election observers participating in CIS-EMO coordinated missions are former or current members of populist organizations including the RN. Thus, among the observers participating in CIS-EMO's 2018 monitoring mission was Louis Aliot, vice president of the RN and former life partner of Marine Le Pen.¹⁹⁶ RN MEPs further presented the largest foreign delegation observing Russia's referendum on the amendments to the constitution in 2020. Upon request, the European Parliament declared that all MEPs deciding to observe this electoral process are doing so on their own initiative.¹⁹⁷

Following the example of the RN, several AfD MPs traveled to Russia to serve as individual election observers during the elections in 2018 and 2020.¹⁹⁸ During their mission, the politicians had several appearances on Russian media, praising the transparency and organization of the elections.¹⁹⁹ Markus Frohnmaier further released

¹⁹³ Anton Shekhovtsov, *Politically Biased Foreign Electoral Observation at the Russian 2018 Presidential Election*, (Berlin: European Platform for Democratic Elections, 2018): page 3.

¹⁹⁴ Anton Shekhovtsov, "Far-right Election Observation Monitors in the Service of the Kremlin's Foreign Policy," in *Eurasianism and the European Far-right: Reshaping the Europe-Russia Relationship*, ed. Marlene Laruelle, (London: Lexington Books, 2015): 224 ff.

¹⁹⁵ Id. at 228.

¹⁹⁶ Jim Jarassé, "Le numéro deux du FN, observateur de la présidentielle russe à Moscou," *Le Point*, accessed April 19, 2021, https://www.lepoint.fr/politique/le-numero-deux-du-fn-observateur-de-la-presidentielle-russe-a-moscou-18-03-2018-2203454_20.php.

¹⁹⁷ David McAllister and Tomas Tobé, "The European Parliament does not observe the constitutional referendum in Russia," *European Parliament*, accessed April 20, 2021, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20200701IPR82409/the-european-parliament-does-not-observe-the-constitutional-referendum-in-russia>.

¹⁹⁸ Der Tagesspiegel, "AFD Abgeordnete als „Wahlbeobachter“ in Russland- und auf der Krim," accessed April 19, 2021, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/praesidentschaftswahl-in-russland-afd-abgeordnete-als-wahlbeobachter-in-russland-und-auf-der-krim/21085526.html>.

¹⁹⁹ European Platform for Democratic Elections, "European politicians to legitimize constitutional changes in Russia," accessed April 19, 2021, <https://www.epde.org/en/news/details/european-politicians-to-legitimize-constitutional-changes-in-russia.html>.

posts on Twitter²⁰⁰ and Facebook²⁰¹ portraying the participating AfD politicians during their mission. Among the posts was a photo with the headline “We explained the AfD-position, that the anti-economic Russia sanctions must be lifted!”,²⁰² depicting the AfD delegation with Leonid Slutsky, Chairman of the State Duma Committee on International Affairs.²⁰³

The engagement of RN and AfD politicians as election observers is not limited to the official Russian territory. The AfD politician and MP Bernhard Ulrich Öhme traveled to Crimea for observing the presidential elections in 2018.²⁰⁴ Accompanied by former AfD parliamentary employee Manuel Ochsenreiter, who is accused of commissioning an arson attack on a Hungarian cultural center in Ukraine, Öhme subsequently expressed “pleasant surprise” about the “superbly organized election”.²⁰⁵ The trip as well as his election observer mission were funded by the Duma.²⁰⁶ The OSCE and the EU rejected Russia’s “sham elections” in Crimea and did not send any electoral monitors.²⁰⁷

To observe the constitutional referendum in 2020, five RN and two AfD politicians visited Crimea. Among them was Thierry Mariani, MEP and co-president of the openly Kremlin-friendly French-Russian Dialogue Association.²⁰⁸ In one of his interviews on Russian state television Mariani praised the constitutional amendments by emphasizing

²⁰⁰ Markus Frohnmaier (@Frohnmaier_AfD), “Über 110 Millionen Russen sind dazu aufgerufen, diesen Sonntag mit ihrer Stimme zu entscheiden, wer für die nächsten sechs Jahre Russland als Staatspräsident regiert. Wir machen uns ein Bild davon, dass alles fair und demokratisch abläuft und sind vor Ort,” Twitter, accessed April 20, 2021, https://twitter.com/frohnmaier_afd/status/975343740935114752.

²⁰¹ Markus Frohnmaier, “Impressionen von der Wahlbeobachtung zur russischen Präsidentschaftswahl,” Facebook, accessed April 19, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/frohnmaier/posts/1992982524285224/>.

²⁰² Markus Frohnmaier (@Frohnmaier_AfD), “Mit dem Vorsitzenden des Duma-Außenausschusses Leonid Slutsky. Haben #AfD-Position erklärt, dass die wirtschaftsfeindlichen Russland-Sanktionen aufgehoben werden müssen!,” Twitter, accessed April 21, 2021, https://twitter.com/frohnmaier_afd/status/975838627530985472.

²⁰³ Leonid Slutsky, “Bibliography,” accessed April 20, 2021, <https://lslutsky.ru/en/home-page/>.

²⁰⁴ Andrea Becker and Georg Heil, “Auf Kreml-Kosten auf die Krim,” Tagesschau, accessed April 19, 2021, <https://www.tagesschau.de/investigativ/kontraste/afd-russland-105.html>.

²⁰⁵ Der Tagesspiegel, “AfD-Abgeordneter ließ sich von Moskau auf die Krim einladen,” accessed April 19, 2021, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/gegen-das-abgeordnetengesetz-afd-abgeordneter-liess-sich-von-moskau-auf-die-krim-einladen/25912152.html>.

²⁰⁶ Der Spiegel, “AFD Politiker gibt Sponsoring aus Moskau zu,” accessed April 19, 2021, <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/krim-reise-afd-politiker-gibt-sponsoring-aus-moskau-zu-a-4a6c1b1a-e82d-4268-a658-fb78a3fc4ed8>.

²⁰⁷ Harry R. Kamian, “Crimea is Ukraine: Rejecting the Russian Federation’s Conduct of a Sham Election in Crimea,” OSCE, accessed April 20, 2021, <https://osce.usmission.gov/rejecting-russias-sham-election-crimea/>.

²⁰⁸ Anton Shekhovtsov, *Controversial International Observation of the “All-Russian Voting” on Amendments the Constitution in Russia and Russia-annexed Crimea*, (Berlin: European Platform for Democratic Elections, 2020): 13.

that they would eventually establish Crimea's supposed status as part of Russia.²⁰⁹ Prior to resigning from the party Les Républicains (The Republicans) and joining the RN in 2019, Mariani repetitively served as an electoral observer during Russian elections.²¹⁰ In June 2021, the European Parliament sanctioned Mariani for his participation in two election missions in Kazakhstan and Crimea. Until December 2021 Mariani will be excluded from official election observation missions carried out by EU institutions.²¹¹

5.2.3 Media

Media, often considered the fourth pillar of democracy, represents an important tool of soft power.²¹² In the 2021 World Press Freedom Index of the NGO Reporters without Borders, Russia is listed in position 150 of 180 and can be found between the Democratic Republic of Congo and Honduras.²¹³ Since Putin's inauguration in 2012, pressure on independent media has continuously grown due to tighter media legislation that labels journalists foreign agents if spreading information that is not in line with the coverage of Russian state media.²¹⁴ Compared to Russia, Germany and France achieved a good position in the World Press Freedom Index and are ranked 13 and 34, respectively.²¹⁵ This sub-chapter focuses on the media cooperation between the AfD, the RN, and Russia. On the one hand, it is examined how Russia intervenes in the French and German media landscape trying to support the right-wing populist parties. On the other hand, the appearances of AfD and RN politicians in Russian media are analyzed.

²⁰⁹ Crimea24, "В Крым прилетела делегация международных экспертов из Европы," accessed April 20, 2021, <https://crimea24.tv/content/v-krim-priletela-delegaciya-mezhdunarovo/>.

²¹⁰ Shekhovtsov, *Controversial International Observation of the "All-Russian Voting" on Amendments the Constitution in Russia*, 11 ff.

²¹¹ Franceinfo, "Parlement européen: Thierry Mariani sanctionné pour des missions d'observation des élections au Kazakhstan et en Crimée," accessed July 07, 2021, https://www.francetvinfo.fr/politique/front-national/parlement-europeen-thierry-mariani-sanctionne-pour-des-missions-d-observation-des-elections-au-kazakhstan-et-en-crimée_4683175.html.

²¹² Pratiyush Kumar and Kuljit Singh, "Media, the Fourth Pillar of Democracy: A Critical Analysis," *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews* 6, no. 1 (2019): 370–378; Kathy Gill, "What is the Fourth Estate?," ThoughtCo, accessed July 20, 2021, <https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-the-fourth-estate-3368058>; Joanna Szostek, "Russia and the News Media in Ukraine: A Case of Soft Power?," *East European Politics and Societies* 28, no. 3 (2014): 463–486.

²¹³ Reporters without Borders, "2021 World Press Freedom Index," accessed June 19, 2021, <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>.

²¹⁴ Friedrich Schmidt, "Wie der Kreml unliebsame Medien mundtot macht," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, accessed June 19, 2021, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/wie-der-kreml-unliebsame-medien-mundtot-macht-17314389.html>; Reporters without Borders, "Russia," accessed June 19, 2021, <https://rsf.org/en/russia>.

²¹⁵ Reporters without Borders, "2021 World Press Freedom Index."

Since the beginning of the Perestroika in the 1980s, approximately 2.6 million Russian-born Germans have migrated from the former Soviet Union to Germany.²¹⁶ Today, these emigrants, commonly referred to as the *Russlanddeutsche* (Russia Germans) constitute the largest population group with a migrant background that is eligible to vote. Two main characteristics make this voter group especially attractive for the AfD. First, their possibilities to actively engage in the political process have been limited since the mother tongue of the vast majority is Russian.²¹⁷ Second, due to their exposure to and reliance on Russian state media as well as their political socialization with authoritarian regimes, *Russlanddeutsche* are particularly receptive to patriotic messages promoting traditional values and strict migration policies.²¹⁸

By being the first and only political party producing campaign material in Russian, the AfD has demonstrated a keen interest in gaining their electoral support in the federal elections of 2017.²¹⁹ Moreover, the AfD listed seven Soviet-born candidates of whom two got elected to the Bundestag representing the only Russian-German MPs.²²⁰ Previously, with the exception of the CDU member Heinrich Zertik, Soviet-born politicians were not represented in the German parliament. Besides having a Russian-language campaign strategy and running crucial campaign rallies in cities with a disproportionate amount of Russia German inhabitants, the AfD provides for a large social media presence in Russian.²²¹ The Russian-language engagement of the party spans 10 different social media networks, including an account on the Russian Facebook-like platform Odnoklassniki.²²²

²¹⁶ Statistisches Bundesamt, “Bevölkerung und Erwerbstätigkeit – Bevölkerung mit Migrationshintergrund – Ergebnisse des Mikrozensus 2019,” (Wiesbaden: Statistisches Bundesamt, 2020): 63ff.

²¹⁷ Anne Applebaum, Peter Pomerantsev, Melanie Smith and Chloe Colliver, *Make Germany Great Again*, (London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2017): 16.

²¹⁸ Susanne Spahn, “Russischsprachige im Fokus: Wie Russland und die AfD Einfluss nehmen,” *Institut für Strategie- Politik- Sicherheits- und Wirtschaftsberatung* 548, IPSW Strategy Series: Focus on Defense and International Security (2018): 3f.

²¹⁹ Applebaum et al., “*Make Germany Great Again*,” 16.

²²⁰ Markus Wehner, “Der smarte Anton und der wilde Waldemar,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, accessed April 16, 2021, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/wie-zwei-russlanddeutsche-im-bundestag-fuer-moskau-kaempfen-15519929.html>.

²²¹ Jan Friedmann, “Rechtsruck in Klein-Moskau,” *Der Spiegel*, accessed April 16, 2021, <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/afd-warum-die-partei-bei-russlanddeutschen-so-beliebt-ist-a-1166915.html>.

²²² Applebaum et al., “*Make Germany Great Again*,” 18.

The AfD's efforts to gain the votes of the Russia German population are complemented by the media coverage of Russian state-media operating in Germany. According to a study of the London School of Economics and the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, in which the Kremlin's attempts to influence the 2017 German elections were investigated, the German-language web and radio services of the Russian state broadcasting stations Sputnik, nowadays referred to as SNA, and RT Deutsch clearly favored the AfD in their coverage.²²³ During the last months of the 2017 campaigning period, German chancellor Angela Merkel as well as the German government received the most negative coverage while the AfD received the highest proportion of positive treatment. For instance, Sputnik featured quotas like "rape is increasing due to Merkel" depriving their viewers of receiving impartial and fair reporting. Considering that roughly 77% of AfD members access political news via the internet, perceiving traditional German media as unreliable,²²⁴ creating strong biases in online reporting seems particularly impactful.

Moreover, Russian state TV invited influential Russia German AfD supporters, such as the founder of the "*Russlanddeutsche* for AfD" network in North Rhine Westphalia, Eugen Schmidt. By means of interviewing said personalities, the AfD should be perceived as a mainstream rather than a populist party.²²⁵

Furthermore, the American company BuzzFeed claimed that Russian hackers admitted their interference via Twitter bots in the 2017 elections.²²⁶ By tweeting and re-tweeting pro-AfD messages, political conversations should be focused on the populist party. Following BuzzFeed's reveals, several studies confirmed the existence of a social bot network on Twitter and a disproportionately large AfD-related Twitter traffic but concluded that the general impact generated by bots was small.²²⁷

²²³ Applebaum et al., "*Make Germany Great Again*," 12.

²²⁴ Hubert Klein, *Die AfD und ihre Mitglieder*, (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien GmbH, 2018): 62 f.

²²⁵ Applebaum et al., "*Make Germany Great Again*," 16.

²²⁶ Henk van Ess and Jane Lytvynenko, "This Russian Hacker Says His Twitter Bots Are Spreading Messages To Help Germany's Far-right Party In The Election," BuzzFeed, accessed April 20, 2021, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/henkvaness/these-russian-hackers-say-theyre-using-twitter-bots-to-help>.

²²⁷ Lisa-Maria Neudert, Bence Kollanyi and Philip N. Howard, "Junk News und Bots bei der Bundespräsidentenwahl 2017: Was haben Deutsche Wähler auf Twitter geteilt?," *COMPROP DATA MEMO* 2017.2 (2017): 5; Ulrike Klinger, "Bürger oder Bots? Automatisierte Kommunikation im Bundestagswahlkampf 2017," Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, accessed April 20, 2021, <https://www.bpb.de/gesellschaft/digitales/digitale-desinformation/290557/buerger-oder-bots-automatisierte-kommunikation-im-bundestagswahlkampf-2017>.

Whether the Kremlin's biased media coverage led to the desired AfD support among Russia Germans seems doubtful. The 2017 election results in residential areas with a large Russia German population indeed indicate an above-average level of AfD support. However, in total, only 15% of Russia Germans eventually voted for the AfD. Therefore, the AfD remained the third popular party after CDU/CSU and Die Linke (The Left).²²⁸ Even though the 15% exceeded the AfD's election result of 12.6%, the difference is marginal and may or may not be attributed to Russia's interference.

The conclusion that the Kremlin is only interfering in the German political sphere during election periods is a fallacy. In 2016 for instance, the aunt of the Russia German girl Lisa reported on the Russian state broadcasting station Kanal 1 that her niece has been kidnapped and raped by three refugees. In the following days "The case Lisa" hit the headlines leading to various demonstrations inter alia organized by AfD party activists to criticize Angela Merkel's refugee policy.²²⁹ As revealed by the police later, the abduction, as well as the rape, were purely fictional.²³⁰ The police's statements however were openly mistrusted by press conference statements of Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lawrow.²³¹

Like Germany, France is known to constitute fertile ground for Russian influence and is considered "the most prominent example of Russia's soft power in Western Europe".²³²

In comparison to Germany, France has a small Russian-speaking community. Nevertheless, Russian information portals exist in France just as they do in Germany. Due to their failure to penetrate and compete with conventional media platforms, RT and Sputnik predominantly invested in social media. By doing so, RT has become one of the

²²⁸ Achim Goerres, Dennis Spies and Sabrina Mayer, "How Did Immigrant Voters Vote at the 2017 Bundestag Election? First Results from the Immigrant German Election Study (IMGES)," *Universität Duisburg Essen, Open Minded* (2018): 2 ff.

²²⁹ Tatjana Schmalz, "Zur medialen Integration russlanddeutscher (Spät)Aussiedler nach dem Fall Lisa und ihrer Mediendarstellung bis zur Bundestagswahl 2017," *Zeitschrift für Slawistik* 64, no. 3 (2019): 445 ff.

²³⁰ Medina Schaubert, "Der Fall Lisa – Entwicklungen in Berlin Hellersdorf-Marzahn," Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, accessed April 20, 2021, <https://www.bpb.de/gesellschaft/migration/russlanddeutsche/271945/der-fall-lisa-entwicklungen-in-berlin-hellersdorf-marzahn>.

²³¹ Benedikt Peters, "Vergewaltigungsvorwürfe in Berlin: Russische Regierung mischt sich ein," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, accessed April 21, 2021, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/fall-lisa-vergewaltigungsvorwurfe-in-berlin-russische-regierung-mischt-sich-ein-1.2835114>.

²³² Jean-Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer, *The Macron-Leaks Operation: A Post-Mortem*, (Washington DC: The Atlantic Council, 2019): 23; Laruelle, "Russian Soft Power in France," first page.

French leaders on the live-video application platform Periscope.²³³ Besides the expansion of large Russian media companies towards France, Russia aims at establishing cooperation with French media organizations.²³⁴ Smaller television broadcasters such as ProRussia.tv are part of this desired French-Russian cooperation.²³⁵ Under the direction of FN politician Gilles Arnaud and with the financial support of Russia, ProRussia.tv was active between 2012 and 2014 prior to the launching of a French RT version. The company's logo featured the bear of the United Russia Party clearly demonstrating a pro-Kremlin attitude.²³⁶

Moreover, besides appearing on Russian state TV and its social media channels, far-right politicians including Marine Le Pen and Aymeric Chauprade are frequently featured on Russia's international radio broadcasting service Voice of Russia.²³⁷

Concerning Russia's interference in the 2017 French presidential election, few similarities to the previously mentioned German elections can be discovered. These similarities refer to the biased coverage of RT and Sputnik against the most promising candidates, Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron. However, the extent to which Macron fell victim to disinformation campaigns reached a new level. In February, Russian newspapers, as well as RT France and Sputnik claimed that WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange will reveal interesting information about Macron from Hillary Clinton's email account.²³⁸ Following this statement, an article published by Sputnik presented Macron as an "US agent" backed by a "very wealthy gay lobby".²³⁹ While accusing Macron of corruption, Le Pen benefited from uncritical and favorable coverage through Sputnik.²⁴⁰

²³³ Théo Caubel, Philippine David and Corentin Dionet, "RT France, Sputnik: Dix Choses à Savoir sur les Médias Russes en France," *L'Obs* and *Rue89*, accessed June 19, 2021, <https://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/rue89/rue89-sur-les-reseaux/20170102.RUE6087/rt-france-sputnik-dix-choses-a-savoir-sur-les-medias-russes-en-france.html>.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*

²³⁵ Demesmay, "There are Always two sides," 2.

²³⁶ Webtélévision ProRussia, Facebook, accessed April 20, 2021, https://www.facebook.com/webtelevision.prussia/?ref=page_internal.

²³⁷ Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far-right*, 140 ff.

²³⁸ RT France, "Assange: WikiLeaks a trouvé des informations sur Macron dans des emails de Clinton," accessed April 20, 2021, <https://francais.rt.com/france/33403-wikileaks-macron-clinton-email-assange>.

²³⁹ Sputnik, "Ex-French Economy Minister Macron Could be US-Agent Lobbying Banks Interest," accessed April 20, 2021, <https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201702041050340451-macron-us-agent-dhuicq/>.

²⁴⁰ Ben Nimmo, "The French election through Kremlin eyes," Medium, accessed April 20, 2021, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/the-french-election-through-kremlin-eyes-5d85e0846c50>.

In March 2017, Sputnik headlined that Marine Le Pen is still in front for the first election round contradicting mainstream French media that placed Macron in first place.²⁴¹

Apart from media attacks, Macron was subject to numerous cyber attacks.²⁴² Two days before the final round of the elections, email messages and files about Macron were leaked and distributed on the website Pastebin. The published documents contained misleading information triggering fanciful rumors. Even though France has not officially attributed responsibility for the cyberattack, investigative journalists claimed that the perpetrators were linked to pro-Russian interests.²⁴³

The question of why the Russian media strategy during the elections in Germany and France differed is complex to answer. However, it seems reasonable to argue that two major distinctions between France and Germany were decisive for Russia to pursue different strategies. First, due to the absence of a great Russian-speaking voter group in France, Russian media could not persuade people by solely appealing to them in their native language featuring prominent RN politicians. In order to gain momentum and attention in France scandalous stories about the political opponents that are distributed to voters other than the current consumers of the Russian media channels were needed. Second, in comparison to the AfD, Marine Le Pen had realistic chances to win the election. Implementing a similar disinformation campaign in Germany would have needed lots of resources without provoking a major shift in the political leadership.²⁴⁴

Media cooperation between Russia and the two parties on Russian territory is distinctive from the previously analyzed cooperation since it does not focus on election interference but rather on the legitimization of the Kremlin's power. Veronika Krascheninnikowa, member of the Supreme Council of the United Russia Party and coordinator of the party's working group on foreign policy,²⁴⁵ claims that ties with Russia are highly beneficial to European populist parties, allowing for their national and international legitimization. Right-wing populist politicians are therefore willing to articulate a few supportive words

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Anton Shekhovtsov, *Russian Interference, And Where to Find It*, (Berlin: European Platform for Democratic Elections, 2019): 9.

²⁴³ Jeangène Vilmer, *The Macron-Leaks*, 23.

²⁴⁴ The mechanism of negative political advertisements can be attributed to Gina M. Garramone, "Voters Responses to Negative Political Ads," *Journalism Quarterly*, no. 61 (1984): 250 – 259.

²⁴⁵ Deutsche Welle, "Für die AfD ist Russland ein Gewinnerthema," accessed April 17, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/de/f%C3%BCr-die-afd-ist-russland-ein-gewinnerthema/a-48803982>.

towards Russia.²⁴⁶ Over the course of the abovementioned electoral missions for instance, AfD and RN politicians praised the fairness of the election process on their social media accounts and on Russian state TV.²⁴⁷ During one of his observation missions the AfD MP Stefan Keuter further stated on the Russian state-controlled Pervy Kanal that his “personal view is that the level of organization in Russia is higher even than in Germany”.²⁴⁸ Similarly, Russian government organizations such as Russia’s MFA in Crimea feature photos of the visiting politicians on their social media channels blaming the EU for the implemented sanctions.²⁴⁹

5.2.4 Financing

The Russian model of clandestine diplomacy is not limited to soft power tools but also entails economic support for AfD and RN politicians.

In 2015, Anonymous International hacked text messages between a Kremlin official and a trusted friend of Vladimir Putin in which they exchanged about how Marine Le Pen should be rewarded for recognizing the results of the referendum in Crimea in 2014.²⁵⁰ Even though the RN officially denies the existence of quid pro quo deals,²⁵¹ the micro-party Cotelec, which is chaired by Jean-Marie Le Pen, received a two-million-euro loan from Vernosia Holdings Ltd. This Cypriot company is managed by a former KGB officer and supplied with Russian funds.²⁵² Some months later, Marine Le Pen was loaned €9 million by the First Czech Russian Bank, which has its headquarters in Moscow. Marine Le Pen defended the reception of the foreign loan by arguing that French Banks refused to lend to the party.²⁵³ Before being able to grant another loan to the FN, for which the

²⁴⁶ Veronika Krascheninnikova, “Russland im Netz der Ultrarechten,” *Russlandkontrovers*, accessed April 17, 2021, <http://www.russlandkontrovers.com/russland-im-netz-der-ultrarechten#mor>.

²⁴⁷ c.f. Julie Lechanteux (@JLechanteux), “67% des Russes ont voté, et 77% des votants se sont exprimés favorablement à la réforme constitutionnelle lors de ce référendum, qui s'est bien déroulé,” Twitter, accessed April 21, 2021, <https://twitter.com/JLechanteux/status/1278742034141057024>.

²⁴⁸ Shekhovtsov, *Controversial International Observation*, 24.

²⁴⁹ Russia’s MFA in Crimea (@PMSimferopol), “French politician, the member of the European Parliament, Thierry Mariani, following the results of a 3-day visit to #Crimea, appealed for the EU to lift anti-Russian sanctions and set up mutually beneficial cooperation with Russia,” Twitter, accessed April 21, 2021, <https://twitter.com/pmsimferopol/status/1278772968336883713>.

²⁵⁰ Agathe Duparc, Karl Laske and Marine Turchi, “Crimée et finances du FN: les textos secrets du Kremlin,” *Mediapart*, accessed April 22, 2021, <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/020415/crimee-et-finances-du-fn-les-textos-secrets-du-kremlin>.

²⁵¹ Fredrik Wesslau, “Putin’s Friends in Europe,” *European Council on Foreign Relations*, accessed April 22, 2021, https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_putins_friends_in_europe7153/.

²⁵² Motet, “Visites, financement.”

²⁵³ *Ibid.*

party has applied in order to fund its 2017 election campaign, the First Czech Russian Bank shut down in 2016. Marine Le Pen's loan was eventually passed on to the Russian aircraft supply company Aviazapchast, that in 2019 filed a lawsuit against the RN for failing to repay the loan.²⁵⁴ The dispute was settled in June 2020 with the RN agreeing on immediately repaying €1 million and the missing €8 million by the end of 2028.²⁵⁵

Rumors of covert Russian financial support for other populist parties in Europe exist but are backed by little or no evidence.²⁵⁶ Like French legislation, the German Act on Political Parties does not impose a general ban on foreign loans.²⁵⁷ However, due to extensive public party financing and strict transparency rules, loans do not seem to play as important of a role in German campaign financing. Nevertheless, several former and current AfD politicians are suspected of obtaining financial resources from Russia.

In 2017, former AfD chairwoman Frauke Petry, her husband and MEP Markus Pretzell, as well as Julian Flak, chairman of the party's national convention at the time, flew to Moscow in a private jet paid for by Russia. The visit, which cost approximately €25,000, constitutes the first confirmed instance of Russia financially supporting AfD members. However, the politicians involved, as well as the AfD leadership claimed that the trip was decoupled from party business avoiding potential legal consequences.²⁵⁸ Had Petry and Pretzell undertaken the trip as MEPs, they would have needed to provide the funders' names which they refused to do. Moreover, if the flight was to be considered revenue as defined by the German Act on Political Parties, it could be deemed an illegal foreign contribution.²⁵⁹

In 2019, a joint investigation of the British broadcaster BBC, the Italian newspaper La Repubblica, the German magazine Der Spiegel, as well as the German public-service

²⁵⁴ Paul Sonne, "The Russian bank gave Marine Le Pen's Party a loan. Then weird things began happening," The Washington Post, accessed April 22, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/a-russian-bank-gave-marine-le-pens-party-a-loan-then-weird-things-began-happening/2018/12/27/960c7906-d320-11e8-a275-81c671a50422_story.html.

²⁵⁵ Marine Turchi, "Prêt russe: le RN obtient un rééchelonnement du remboursement," Mediapart, accessed April 22, 2021, <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/080620/pret-russe-le-rn-obtient-un-reechelonnement-du-remboursement>.

²⁵⁶ Wesslau, "Putin's Friends."

²⁵⁷ Parteiengesetz [German Act on Political Parties], January 31, 1994, *BGBI I*: 2563.

²⁵⁸ Bender and Freidel, "Petry ließ sich kaufen."

²⁵⁹ Deutsche Welle, "Report: AfD members' flight sponsored with Russian Money," accessed April 22, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/report-afd-members-flight-sponsored-with-russian-money/a-43872774>.

television broadcaster ZDF, revealed that Markus Frohnmaier could potentially operate as the extended arm of Russia.²⁶⁰ According to a Russian strategy paper, Frohnmaier is supposed to serve as Russia's own completely controlled MP in the Bundestag. Therefore, there is the urgent need for providing campaign support to Frohnmaier during the 2017 German election period. The strategy paper was sent by a former naval counterintelligence officer and was received by Sergei Sokolov, who is a senior official in President Putin's administration. ZDF, Der Spiegel, La Repubblica, and BBC obtained the document through the so-called Dossier Centre. This organization, which aims at investigating the Kremlin's attempts to intervene in European politics, is funded by former Russian oligarch and Kremlin critic Mikhail Khodorkovsky.²⁶¹ Separately, the four organizations received a further document entitled "Frohnmaier election campaign/action plan (draft)", which appears to be written on behalf of Frohnmaier's campaign. Said document states that material, as well as Russian media support is urgently needed and that Frohnmaier will work towards establishing good relations with Russia if elected.²⁶² The AfD politician vehemently denied the allegations claiming that he has never received any financial support and that the documents are fake. So far, there is no official statement confirming or disproving the accusations.²⁶³

5.2.5 Distribution of extreme far-right views

Alexander Dugin, the most prominent personality of the Russian New Right and a theorist of neo-Eurasianism, unites the European radical far-right parties. Dugin advocates for an alliance between Europe and Eurasia as the heartland to oppose the West led by the US.²⁶⁴ Dugin's ideology circles around restoring fascism in Russia and employs racial theories as well as philosophical approaches from, among others, Carl Schmitt, and Martin Heidegger.²⁶⁵

²⁶⁰ Der Spiegel, "Russen setzten auf AfD Abgeordneten Markus Frohnmaier," accessed April 21, 2021, <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/markus-frohnmaier-russen-setzten-auf-afd-abgeordneten-a-1261422.html>.

²⁶¹ Gabriel Gatehouse, "German far-right MP could be absolutely controlled by Russia," BBC, accessed April 21, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-47822835>.

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ ZDF, "Der Fall Frohnmaier," accessed April 21, 2021, <https://www.zdf.de/politik/frontal-21/der-fall-frohnmaier-100.html>.

²⁶⁴ Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far-right*, 43.

²⁶⁵ Marlene Laruelle, "Dangerous Liaisons – Eurasianism, European Far-right and Putin's Russia," in *Eurasianism and the European Far-right: Reshaping the Europe-Russia Relationship*, ed. Marlene Laruelle, (London: Lexington Books, 2015): 1.

According to Marlene Laruelle, “Eurasianism is the Russian version of the European far-right”.²⁶⁶ It therefore is not surprising that since the 1980s, Dugin has been the most-published foreign extreme-right scholar in France.²⁶⁷ Even though the first documented encounter between FN members and Dugin occurred in 2014, when Marion Maréchal Le Pen and Aymeric Chauprade were received by Konstantin Malofeev to discuss Christian family values in Vienna,²⁶⁸ the ties between the RN and Dugin reach far back. In 1992, Alain de Benoist, key figure of the French New Right, and former FN politician Michel Schneider were in contact with the Yuzhinsky Circle, of which Dugin was an active member. In 2011, the now defunct Flash Magazine, of which de Benoist was one of the main contributors, organized an event on the topic “Why we should love Vladimir Putin”. The conference was co-founded by Dugin and Christian Bouchet.²⁶⁹ The latter had been part of multiple extreme-right movements since the 1970s and had left and rejoined the FN various times since the 1990s. One year later, Dugin and Bouchet held another public meeting in Bordeaux titled “Eurasia as an alternative to Liberal Democracy”.²⁷⁰ In 2014, Bouchet, who is further known for maintaining close ties with Avatar éditions which publishes French translations of Dugin’s books, was the FN’s candidate for the mayoral election of Nantes.²⁷¹ However, Bouchet is not the only politician influenced by the Eurasian ideology. In 2017, FN MEP Hervé Juvin participated in a Dugin-sponsored Eurasian conference.²⁷² Similarly, Alain Soral, who served as a member of the FN’s Central Committee and advisor of the Le Pen family, openly admires Dugin’s theories and is actively involved in his network.²⁷³

Apart from maintaining contacts with the RN, Dugin established close ties with the AfD. In 2015, Alexander Gauland and Markus Frohnmaier met Dugin during their trip to St. Petersburg. Shortly after, Frohnmaier, Manuel Ochseneiter, and the Polish Mateusz Piskorski, who got arrested on the suspicion of spying for Russia, founded the “German

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

²⁶⁷ Jean-Yves Camus, “A Long-Lasting Friendship: Alexander Dugin and the French Radical Right,” in *Eurasianism and the European Far-right: Reshaping the Europe-Russia Relationship*, ed. Marlene Laruelle, (London: Lexington Books, 2015): 80.

²⁶⁸ Futàk-Campbell, “Political Synergy,” 31.

²⁶⁹ Camus, “A Long-Lasting Friendship,” 82 ff.

²⁷⁰ Id. at 88.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² Jean-Yves Camus, “Illiberalism in France,” *Les Temps Présents*, accessed June 06, 2021, <https://tempspresents.com/2020/10/16/illiberalism-in-france/>.

²⁷³ Camus, “A Long-Lasting Friendship,” 88.

Center for Eurasian Studies” whose purpose was to organize electoral observation missions to Russia.²⁷⁴ Ochsenreiter, editor in chief of the radical right-wing magazine Zuerst! (First!) calls Dugin, with whom he cooperates on the Russian think tank Katehon,²⁷⁵ a “longstanding fatherly friend”.²⁷⁶

Furthermore, hacked emails of Georgi Gawrisch, an early member of Dugin’s movement, revealed a list of personalities to create an “elite club” serving the interests of Dugin. The list features the publicist Jürgen Elsässer, who already in 2013 interviewed Dugin for his magazine Compact.²⁷⁷ In March 2020, Germany’s Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution has placed the magazine under suspicion and thus classified Compact as an allegedly extremist right-wing publication.²⁷⁸ Besides supporting Dugin’s ideology, Elsässer maintains strong ties with the AfD and frequently participates in events organized by the party. In 2017, he got invited to the AfD’s Russia congress in Magdeburg and gave a speech to an audience, which among others incorporated NPD politicians and holocaust deniers.²⁷⁹ Similarly, the journalist Dimitrios Kisoudis, former assistant of MEP Markus Pretzell and current employee of AfD MP Martin Hess, openly supports Dugin’s theory in his publications.²⁸⁰

In March 2021, it became public that the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution is about to declare the entire AfD a case of suspected right-wing extremism putting the party under surveillance. Shortly after, the AfD filed complaints and

²⁷⁴ Malene Gürgen, Christian Jakob and Sabine am Orde, “Putins blaue Helfer,” taz, accessed May 01, 2021, <https://taz.de/efr/Putins-blaue-Helfer/>.

²⁷⁵ Silvio Duwe and Georg Heil, “Chat belastet Ochsenreiter,” Tagesschau, accessed May 01, 2021, <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/ukraine-afd-ochsenreiter-101.html>.

²⁷⁶ Christian Fuchs and Daniel Müller, “AfD trennt sich nach Terrorvorwurf von Mitarbeiter,” Zeit Online, accessed May 01, 2021, <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2019-01/afd-politiker-manuel-ochsenreiter-brandanschlag-ukraine-terror-vorwurf>.

²⁷⁷ Meike Döffler, Carsten Luther and Zacharias Zacharakis, “Im Netz der russischen Ideologen,” Zeit Online, accessed May 01, 2021, <https://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2015-02/russland-griechenland-verbundung-alexander-dugin-konstantin-malofeev-panos-kammenos/komplettansicht>; Thomas Korn and Andreas Umland, “Jürgen Elsässer, Kremlinpropagandist,” Zeit Online, accessed June 20, 2021, <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2014-07/juergen-elsaesser-russland-propaganda/komplettansicht>.

²⁷⁸ Sebastian Pittelkow and Katja Riedel, “Facebook nimmt Compact vom Netz,” Tagesschau, accessed June 20, 2021, <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/facebook-compact-offline-101.html>.

²⁷⁹ AfD-Fraktion im Landtag Sachsen-Anhalt, “Russlandkongress der AfD-Fraktion in Magdeburg am 12. August 2017,” accessed May 01, 2021, <https://www.afdfraktion-lsa.de/termine/russlandkongress-der-afd-fraktion-in-magdeburg-am-12-august-2017/>.

²⁸⁰ Markus Günther, “Geopolitisches Tamtam,” Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, accessed June 20, 2021, https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/buecher/rezensionen/sachbuch/goldgrund-eurasien-von-dimitrios-kisoudis-13466036.html?printPagedArticle=true#pageIndex_2.

emergency motions arguing that being surveilled would undermine the party's right to equally participate in elections with other political parties. Following these motions, the Cologne administrative court ruled that the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution needs to suspend the party's classification as a suspected case for the moment.²⁸¹

While Dugin's close ties with the AfD, as well as the RN seem undeniable, Dugin's relation to Putin continues to be controversially assessed. While some analysts describe Dugin as "Putin's brain",²⁸² others argue that Dugin's theories are not directly linked to Putin's regime.²⁸³ Officially, the Kremlin is not pursuing any state ideology inspired by Dugin's theories.²⁸⁴ Nevertheless, by fostering exchange with European radical right parties, Dugin as well as the Kremlin share similar allies and hence are at least indirectly connected. Spreading an ideology in the far-right spectrum that is favorable to Russia and promotes distancing from the US, Dugin is serving Putin's cause, benefitting the Russian strategy of clandestine diplomacy. Moreover, for several years Dugin was professor at the Sociology department of the Moscow State University,²⁸⁵ which is led by Viktor Sadovnichiy, member of the United Russia Party and a trusted friend of Putin.²⁸⁶ Given Dugin's role in providing ideological input to the AfD and RN as well as his indirect ties with Putin, it seems plausible to argue that Dugin, whether collusively or not, contributes to the Kremlin's clandestine diplomacy tactics.

²⁸¹ Christoph Kehlbach, "AfD vorerst kein Verdachtsfall," Tagesschau, accessed June 20, 2021, <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/afd-verdachtsfall-gericht-101.html>; Deutsche Welle, "German court suspends surveillance of far-right AfD, for now," accessed June 20, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/german-court-suspends-surveillance-of-far-right-afd-for-now/a-56785125>.

²⁸² Anton Barbashin and Hannah Thorburn, "Putin's brain. Alexander Dugin and the philosophy behind Putin's invasion of Crimea," Foreign Affairs, accessed June 20, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2014-03-31/putins-brain>.

²⁸³ Vadim Rossman, "Moscow State University's Department of Sociology and the Climate of Opinion in Post-Soviet Russia," in *Eurasianism and the European Far-right: Reshaping the Europe-Russia Relationship*, ed. Marlene Laruelle, (London: Lexington Books, 2015): 56 ff.; Anton Shekhovtsov, "Putin's Brain?," *New Eastern Europe* 4, no. 13 (2014): 77 f.

²⁸⁴ Marlene Laruelle, "Introduction," in *Eurasianism and European Far-right: Reshaping the Europe-Russia Relationship*, ed. Marlene Laruelle, (London: Lexington Books, 2015): X.

²⁸⁵ Audrey Tolstoy and Edmund McCaffray, "Alexander Dugin and Russia's War of Ideas," *World Affairs* 177, no. 6 (2015): 27.

²⁸⁶ MDR Sachsen, "TU Dresden und Moskauer Universität wollen kooperieren," accessed June 20, 2021, <https://www.mdr.de/nachrichten/sachsen/dresden/dresden-radebeul/tu-und-moskauer-lomonossow-universitaet-wollen-kooperieren-100.html>.

5.3 Democratic values and vulnerability

The assessment of the various means Russia is using in order to intervene in German and French politics has pointed out that cooperation between Russia and the parties exceeds mutual sympathies and is of structural nature. Hence, Russia consciously engages in clandestine diplomacy as part of its hybrid interference strategy.

Building on the concept of hybrid interference introduced by Mikael Wigell, the subsequent subchapter draws inferences from the discovered practices and applies them to the theoretical framework. Thus, it will be analyzed how the clandestine diplomacy measures outlined above are facilitated by the liberal principles of state restraint, pluralism, free media, and open economy.²⁸⁷

5.3.1 State restraint

State restraint refers to the state's power being restricted under the rule of law. The rule of law requires that state authorities wield their power within a constraining framework consisting of public norms.²⁸⁸ Hence, individuals are protected against state arbitrariness since public authorities' actions are bound to law. In democracies, parties are protected under the rule of law because they constitute a means for the expression of collective opinions and participate in the political will formation of the people.

In Germany, a party's functions and responsibilities, as well as the requirements and procedure for excluding a party from state funding or banning it, are regulated in Article 21 German Basic Law.²⁸⁹ According to said article, parties, whose objectives or the behavior of their supporters aim at impairing or eliminating the free democratic basic order or endangering the existence of the Federal Republic of Germany, are unconstitutional. The requirements for banning a party are high since parties must proceed towards the impairment or elimination of the free democratic order by actively planning qualified preparatory acts.²⁹⁰ The Federal Constitutional Court shall be the only institution deciding on party bans. Until now two parties have been prohibited, the SRP as a successor of the NSDAP as well as the KPD.²⁹¹ In response to these high criteria,

²⁸⁷ Wigell, "Hybrid interference as a wedge strategy," 268.

²⁸⁸ Jeremy Waldron, "The Concept and the Rule of Law," *Georgia Law Review* 43, no. 1 (2008): 6.

²⁸⁹ Grundgesetz für die Bundesrepublik Deutschland, May 23, 1949, *BGBI*: 1.

²⁹⁰ Winfried Kluth, in *BeckOK Grundgesetz*, 47th ed., ed. Volker Epping and Christian Hilgruber, (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2021): GG Art. 21 mn. 206–210.1.

²⁹¹ *Id.* at GG Art. 21 mn 205–205a.

which were reinforced in the Federal Constitutional Court's decision to not ban the NPD, Article 21 German Basic Law got amended allowing for a party's exclusion from state funding and tax advantages.²⁹² The requirements differ from those of the party ban by stating that a party must not actively engage in proceedings in the sense of an actual threat but only have an orientation towards corresponding anti-constitutional goals.²⁹³

The political visits, the electoral observation missions, as well as other forms of clandestine diplomacy outlined above are unlikely to meet that threshold. Article 21, 20 III, 1 III German Basic Law as an expression of the principle of state restraint therefore significantly limit the options of the German government to impose consequences and effectively combat Russia's clandestine diplomacy efforts.

In comparison to Germany, the role of the parties in the French political system appears to be weaker²⁹⁴ since Article 4 of the Constitution limits a party's activities to their contribution in electoral decisions and does not include particular protection for parties.²⁹⁵ The article further includes the guarantee for a free formation of parties, resulting in French parties including the RN to be predominantly organized as registered associations.²⁹⁶ According to Article L212-1 Code de la sécurité intérieure, associations shall be dissolved by decree of the Council of Ministers if they, among others, "either provoke discrimination, hatred or violence against a person or group of persons because of their origin or their membership or non-membership of a particular ethnic group, nation, race or religion, or propagate ideas or theories tending to justify or encourage such discrimination, hatred or violence".²⁹⁷ Even though this requirement may be applicable to the RN, the party cannot be banned because of engaging in clandestine diplomacy. Hence, also in France state restraint extends certain protections to parties that limit the state's ability to combat clandestine diplomacy.

²⁹² Ibid.

²⁹³ Id. at GG Art. 21 mn. 212a-212e.

²⁹⁴ Wolfram Vogel, "Frankreich – Charakteristika des politischen Systems," Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, accessed June 21, 2021, <https://www.bpb.de/izpb/9130/charakteristika-des-politischen-systems?p=all>.

²⁹⁵ Constitution de la République française, October 04, 1958.

²⁹⁶ Thomas Hochmann, "Auflösung des Front National: eine Anleitung," Verfassungsblog, accessed June 21, 2021, <https://verfassungsblog.de/aufloesung-des-front-national-eine-anleitung/>.

²⁹⁷ Code de la sécurité, Ord. no 2012-351 du 12 mars 2012, en vigueur le 1er mai 2012, ratifiée par L. no 2014-1353 du 13 nov. 2014, art. 24-I.

5.3.2 Pluralism

In a democracy, individuals are free to form and join interest groups to aggregate their interests and express their opinions.²⁹⁸ The fundamental rights of freedom of association and freedom of expression constitute indispensable preconditions for pluralism. In Germany and France, the former is protected by Article 9 I German Basic Law and Article 2 of the Loi du 1er juillet 1901,²⁹⁹ respectively. By being part of an association, which enjoys a relatively high degree of autonomy, individuals can compete in the domestic political society for influencing policy-making. The existence of stakeholders with diverse and potentially diverging interests results in a system of institutionalized and innate conflict. In order for democratic pluralism to function properly, a certain degree of social solidarity and tolerance is required, which allows for counterbalancing potential conflicts through cooperation and negotiations. Polarization of the societal and political environment may sow discord and division jeopardizing a society's cohesion and willingness to engage in collective bargaining and consultations.³⁰⁰ Eventually, in a sharply polarized society, parties may have difficulties finding a lowest common denominator and the formation of coalitions will become increasingly complicated or impossible.

Thus, the fostering of radical political parties leads to an increased polarization and a political divide, resulting in pluralism being undermined and threatened from within. As analyzed by Helbling and Junkunz, said political divide may be translated into a social divide. In their study, they found that people identifying with different parties, particularly if they belong to the other side of the party spectrum, oppose each other significantly stronger than people with diverse nationalities. Helbling and Junkunz further showed that the political and hence social disruption in Germany is significantly driven by the AfD.³⁰¹

By providing economic and media support for the AfD and the RN, Russia disrupts cohesion in Germany, as well as in France and contributes to the growing political and

²⁹⁸ Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of democratic transition and consolidation: southern Europe, South America, and post-communist Europe*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996): 41.

²⁹⁹ Loi du 1er juillet 1901 relative au contrat d'association.

³⁰⁰ Wigell, "Hybrid interference as a wedge strategy," 270.

³⁰¹ Marc Helbling and Sebastian Jungkunz, "Social divides in the age of globalization," *West European Politics* 43, no. 6 (2020): 1201 ff.

social divide. This development may further be reinforced and accelerated by Dugin, who delivers far-right slogans and ideologies to both parties.

5.3.3 Free media

As outlined above, freedom of speech is closely related to the concept of pluralism. The right to freedom of speech is of particular importance for media. Free media allows for the distribution of pluralistic and uncensored information. Both France and Germany are bound to the European Convention on Human Rights which in Article 10 provides that everyone has the right to freedom of expression, which apart from the freedom to hold opinions includes the right “to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers”.³⁰² Likewise, the French Constitution which incorporates the *Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen de 1789* (Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789),³⁰³ protects the freedom of expression. Article 11 of the declaration defines the freedom of expression as “one the most precious rights of mankind” and states that everyone has the right to freely speak, print, and write. Similarly, Article 5 I German Basic Law protects the right to freely express one’s opinion stressing that uncensored freedom of press and reporting by means of broadcasts and films shall be guaranteed.

However, free media that are essential for the functioning of a democratic system may also contribute to its decline. Uncensored media triggers the distribution of fake news and disinformation campaigns and allows for biased media coverage. False information and one-sided reporting weaken and shake a democracy’s foundation since collective decision-making in public discourse depends on a common evidence base. A democracy necessitates pluralistic views which need to have a factual basis. The fact that the public opinion in democratic systems is largely shaped by the media can be exploited by hostile actors. Russia’s biased media coverage, as well as Russian bots or trolls can shape public perception of the actual public opinion. For instance, by utilizing the psychological phenomenon of herding, bots can suggest public widespread support for certain ideas,

³⁰² Council of Europe, *The European convention on human rights*, (Strasbourg: Directorate of Information, 1952).

³⁰³ *Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen de 1789*.

causing individuals to be more likely to adopt those views or at least consider them acceptable.

5.3.4 Open economy

In the 2021 Index of Economic Freedom published by the Heritage Foundation Germany and France are respectively ranked 29 and 64 out of 178. In this index economic freedom is defined as “the fundamental right of every human to control his or her own labor and property. In an economically free society, individuals are free to work, produce, consume, and invest in any way they please. In economically free societies, governments allow labor, capital, and goods to move freely, and refrain from coercion or constraint of liberty beyond the extent necessary to protect and maintain liberty itself”.³⁰⁴ Even though France can be considered a relatively open economy, investment in some strategic sectors is restricted.³⁰⁵

The weak regulatory environment and oversight mechanisms in open market economies allow for hybrid interference. Hostile foreign actors can intervene in open market economies by exploiting competition among the variety of economic interests, engaging in trade to cultivate loyalty amid influential personalities, and investing in the establishment of a considerable economic presence in the target country.³⁰⁶ Even though Russia has provided financial support to the RN and potentially also to AfD politicians, one can hardly speak of an undermining of the French or German economic system. Such kind of economic interference can be attributed to the legal framework governing party financing and is thus categorized as state restraint.

The four democratic values examined in this chapter refer to the general concept of hybrid interference, including clandestine diplomacy, disinformation, and geoeconomics. In the context of Russian clandestine diplomacy, the concept of an open economy may be less applicable. On the other hand, an open economic system may play a central role when examining the phenomenon of geoeconomics. Thus, Russia’s clandestine diplomacy is mainly undermining France’s and Germany’s state restraint, pluralism, and free media.

³⁰⁴ The Heritage Foundation, “About the Index,” accessed June 22, 2021, <https://www.heritage.org/index/about>.

³⁰⁵ The Heritage Foundation, “France,” accessed June 22, 2021, <https://www.heritage.org/index/country/france>.

³⁰⁶ Wigell, “Hybrid interference as a wedge strategy,” 272.

5.4 Implications

By establishing close ties with European radical right-wing parties, Russia pursues a two-pronged strategy. On the one hand, it aims at contributing to a poor political and social cohesion in Germany and France respectively to weaken Western alliances. Thus, Russia's means of interference are largely driven by political motives and are oriented towards undermining public trust in democratic institutions.³⁰⁷

On the other hand, the cooperation represents an important source of domestic legitimacy and underpins Putin's efforts to remain in power. The AfD, as well as the RN, in return benefit from Russia's positive coverage and the Kremlin's invitations, allowing them to garner more attention from voters and potentially achieve better electoral results.

Russia's interference activities constitute a form of clandestine diplomacy since they undermine liberal principles without violating the law. Hence, democracies seem to face an inherent contradiction and major threat by protecting means of clandestine diplomacy with the same liberal values that these tools are designed to subvert.³⁰⁸

Stemming from this finding and the analysis of Russian clandestine diplomacy conducted above, the question presents itself whether other countries may also be incentivized to support European radical right-wing parties to enforce their interests. As outlined above, Russia and China share striking similarities concerning their historical and current relationship with France's and Germany's ruling governments, their fear of internal destabilization, their policy interests, as well as their regime. Additionally, since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the economic relations between China and Russia continuously strengthened, resulting in their membership of and collaboration through the BRICS. Apart from the economic partnership, China and Russia further established close diplomatic ties that are driven by their mutual perception of the US as the enemy, which aims at dominating the international order and hence puts their geopolitical interests into jeopardy.³⁰⁹

Given the alignment of interests between China and Russia, the former may adopt a clandestine diplomacy strategy. Thus, the following chapter tests the relevance of the

³⁰⁷ Kampfer, "Russia and China in Germany," 1.

³⁰⁸ Wigell, "Hybrid interference as a wedge strategy," 269.

³⁰⁹ Bobo Lo, "The Sino-Russian partnership and global order," *China International Strategy Review* 2 (2020): 309.

clandestine diplomacy theory with respect to China. First, the chapter sheds light on the potential reasons for China to seek a close alliance with the AfD and the RN. Following the analysis of the respective objectives, the existent ties between the three actors are examined. Lastly, the tools and possibilities available to China to potentially strengthen the collaboration are discussed. Drawing on the in-depth analysis of Russian clandestine diplomacy, the aim of this chapter is to examine whether China may in the future pursue a similar strategy.

6 Is the Russian model of clandestine diplomacy applicable to China?

Official ties between China and the AfD or the RN are rarely discussed or publicly disclosed. Nevertheless, considering China's steadily growing importance in the world economy as well as in global politics, it is worth discussing how China could theoretically engage in clandestine diplomacy.

6.1 Incentives for China, the AfD, and the RN to cooperate

Although Russia and China share similarities that allow for the presumption of China adopting the Russian model of clandestine diplomacy, a major distinction between the two countries needs to be made. Until today, China's socialist market economy shows communist characteristics. The country is operating under the centralized and authoritarian single-party rule of the CCP. Resulting from China's communist past, an ideological closeness to the AfD and the RN appears virtually impossible. Nevertheless, the actors may take a similar line on a few issues.

First, the AfD's and RN's anti-Islam campaigns may tolerate China's repression of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang. In December 2020, the European Parliament adopted a resolution calling for implementing sanctions on China for the country's exploitation of Muslim minority groups. Out of the 681 MEPs present only 20 voted against and 57, including the 23 MEPs of the RN, abstained from the resolution.³¹⁰ Among the politicians voting against the resolution was the AfD member Maximilian Krah.³¹¹ Drawing conclusions from the voting behavior of RN and AfD MEPs, China may be incentivized to support European radical right-wing parties in order to steer European as well as German and French politics towards a China-friendly course. The notion of a common enemy may overcome ideological divergences making the AfD as well as the RN beneficial cooperation partners.

Second, the parties and China may share similar views on environmental protection and climate change. In 2019, China alone was responsible for 27% of global CO₂-equivalent

³¹⁰ Claude Demelenne, "Les amis de Marine Le Pen et le PTB font cause commune pour défendre la Chine qui persécute les musulmans Ouïghours (carte blanche)," *Le VIF*, accessed June 29, 2021, https://www.levif.be/actualite/international/les-amis-de-marine-le-pen-et-le-ptb-font-cause-commune-pour-defendre-la-chine-qui-persecute-les-musulmans-ouighours-carte-blanche/article-opinion-1372571.html?cookie_check=1624956689.

³¹¹ Abgeordnetenwatch, "Sanktionen gegen China wegen Diskriminierung muslimischer Minderheiten," accessed June 29, 2021, <https://www.abgeordnetenwatch.de/eu/9/abstimmungen/sanktionen-gegen-china-wegen-diskriminierung-muslimischer-minderheiten?combine=&&constituency=All&fraction=252>.

emissions.³¹² Although China's leadership acknowledges the threats arising from climate change, its track record on sustainability remains mixed.³¹³ While Xi Jinping made pledges addressing the climate crisis and intensified bilateral cooperation on environmental degradation,³¹⁴ tackling climate change conflicts with China's strategic interests. Through the BRI China aims to build various coal-fired power plants in countries participating in the project. As a result, global greenhouse gas emissions are expected to significantly increase thereby driving global warming towards 2.7 degrees Celsius.³¹⁵ The AfD's environmental strategy seems to be aligned with China's strategic interests. In its program the party advocates for stopping Germany's coal phase-out, rejecting the carbon tax, and abandoning the "green politics" of the established parties.³¹⁶ Similarly, Marine Le Pen described the carbon tax as an unacceptable tax measure.³¹⁷ In 2019, the RN politicians were some of the few MEPs voting against the parliament's approval of reducing EU fleet-wide emissions for new cars by 2030.³¹⁸ In March 2021, the RN presented a counter-draft referendum responding to Macron's proposal to modify Article 1 of the French constitution by adding ecological objectives such as the preservation of the environment.³¹⁹ In its referendum the RN promotes a suspension of

³¹² Tagesschau, "China-Boom auf Kosten der Umwelt?," accessed June 29, 2021, <https://www.tagesschau.de/wirtschaft/konjunktur/china-aussenhandel-exporte-treibhausgase-umweltschutz-101.html>.

³¹³ Anna Holzmann and Nis Grünberg, *Greening China*, (Berlin: Mercator Institute for China Studies, 2021), accessed July 20, 2021, <https://merics.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/MERICSCChinaMonitor%20GreeningChina%202.pdf>: 4.

³¹⁴ European Commission, "China," accessed June 29, 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/clima/policies/international/cooperation/china_en.

³¹⁵ Ma Jun and Simon Zadek, *Decarbonizing the Belt and Road - A Green Finance Roadmap*, (Peking: The Center for Finance and Development, Vivid Economics and ClimateWorks, 2019), accessed July 20, 2021, <https://www.vivideconomics.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Decarbonizing-the-Belt-and-Road-%E2%80%93-Final-Report-English.pdf>: 19.

³¹⁶ Alternative für Deutschland, "Umwelt," accessed June 29, 2021, <https://www.afd.de/umwelt/>.

³¹⁷ Marine Le Pen, "Taxe carbone: une inacceptable mesure fiscale déguisée en vert!," *Rassemblement National*, accessed July 03, 2021, <https://rassemblementnational.fr/communiqués/taxe-carbone-une-inacceptable-mesure-fiscale-deguisee-en-vert/>.

³¹⁸ European Parliament, "Parliament backs new CO2 emissions limits for cars and vans," accessed July 04, 2021, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20190321IPR32112/parliament-backs-new-co2-emissions-limits-for-cars-and-vans>; *Toute l'Europe*, "De 2014 à 2019, comment le Rassemblement national a-t-il voté au Parlement européen?," accessed July 04, 2021, <https://www.touteurope.eu/institutions/de-2014-a-2019-comment-le-rassemblement-national-a-t-il-vote-au-parlement-europeen/#pac>.

³¹⁹ Alexandre Sulzer, "Écologie: ces 15 questions que Marine Le Pen veut poser aux Français," *Le Parisien*, accessed July 03, 2021, <https://www.leparisien.fr/elections/presidentielle/ecologie-ces-15-questions-que-marine-le-pen-veut-poser-aux-francais-09-03-2021-8427728.php>.

wind turbine construction projects and continued investment in nuclear projects.³²⁰ Thus, despite adding environmental issues to its agenda, the RN remains a political party dedicating comparably small efforts and resources to climate protection but focuses on protectionist and nationalist policies.³²¹ By supporting the European right-wing radical parties and eventually shaping German as well as French policy-making, China may face less headwind concerning its environmental practices as well as its global expansion.

Additionally, Germany's and France's reluctance to participate in the BRI may constitute fertile ground for China to cooperate with European right-wing parties. When asked about his opinion on the Chinese initiative Anton Friesen, AfD MP, described the project as a great opportunity for Germany to maintain geopolitical stability and economic growth. According to his statement, the German political leadership is to be blamed for missing the chance of becoming less dependent on Brussel's influential Eurocracy.³²² In its program for the federal elections 2021, the AfD promotes Germany's active participation in the project.³²³ Moreover, in the aftermath of Wang Xi's trip to Europe in September 2020, MP Roland Hartwig published a press release titled "cooperation with China in mutual interest instead of Cold War".³²⁴

Furthermore, similar to Russia, China may have an interest in weakening the unity of the EU. Whereas Russia's incentive to destabilize the EU is founded in its aim to expand its political power and achieve a revision of the post-Soviet order in Eastern Europe,³²⁵ the Chinese interest is rather based on economic considerations. China's objective of becoming the largest economy on the planet could only be jeopardized by unified EU and

³²⁰ Rassemblement National, *15 Questions sur l'environnement – contre-projet de referendum*, (Paris: Rassemblement National, 2021), accessed July 20, 2021, https://rassemblementnational.fr/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/WEB_CONTRE_PROJET_ECOLOGIE_RASS_NAT_.pdf.

³²¹ Valentine Faure, "Stéphane François: «Le Rassemblement national n'est toujours pas converti à l'écologie»," *Le Monde*, accessed July 03, 2021, https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2021/03/24/stephane-francois-le-rassemblement-national-n-est-toujours-pas-converti-a-l-ecologie_6074244_3232.html.

³²² Anton Friesen, "Anton Friesen: Die neue Seidenstraße als Chance betrachten," *Alternative für Deutschland*, accessed June 29, 2021, <https://afdbundestag.de/anton-friesen-die-neue-seidenstrasse-als-chance-betrachten/>.

³²³ Alternative für Deutschland, *Deutschland. Aber Normal. Programm der Alternative für Deutschland für die Wahl zum 20. Deutschen Bundestag*, (Berlin: Alternative für Deutschland, 2021), accessed July 20, 2021, https://cdn.afd.tools/wp-content/uploads/sites/111/2021/06/20210611_AfD_Programm_2021.pdf.

³²⁴ Roland Hartwig, "Hartwig: Zusammenarbeit mit China im beidseitigen Interesse statt eines neuen Kalten Krieges," *Alternative für Deutschland*, accessed July 05, 2021, <https://afdbundestag.de/hartwig-zusammenarbeit-mit-china-im-beidseitigen-interesse-statt-eines-neuen-kalten-krieges/>.

³²⁵ Joschka Fischer, *Scheitert Europa?*, (Köln: Verlag Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2014): 111.

US action. Therefore, discontent and the spread of US-critical voices within the EU support the strategic interest of China. The nationalist aspirations of the AfD and the RN may serve the Chinese objective of not facing a unified Western hemisphere as a strategic rival and allow for a strengthened German and French dependency on China. With a weakened EU, Germany and France may face greater difficulties selling their products within the European Single Market. Consequently, both countries would increasingly depend on the Chinese market for exporting their goods and services.

In addition, the Chinese economic and industrial strategy, known as “Made in China 2025”, is heavily based on FDI and technology as well as knowledge transfer.³²⁶ By acquiring know-how from foreign companies, China aims at assuming a leading role in crucial industries. Concerning the automotive industry, Germany remains China’s core competitor. Until 2019, the Chinese leadership had adopted a law requiring foreign automakers operating in China to enter into a joint venture with a local partner in which they are allowed to own a maximum of 50 percent.³²⁷ China’s strategic interest in enhancing its access to know-how and facilitating knowledge transfer requires close ties with German car manufacturers.

In 2018, the right-wing trade union Zentrum Automobil (Automotive Centre) entered the works council of Daimler’s main plant as the second largest organization obtaining 13.2% of the votes.³²⁸ Similarly, Zentrum Automobil won mandates at the works councils of Porsche and BMW in Saxony.³²⁹ The founder of Zentrum Automobil Oliver Hilburger, former member of the successful German neo-Nazi band Noie Werte (New Values), maintains strong contacts with the Compact publicist Jürgen Elsässer. Moreover, among the trade union’s representatives at the BMW works council is the local AfD politician

³²⁶ Frederik Kunze and Torsten Windels “»Made in China 2025«: Technologietransfer und Investitionen in ausländische Hochtechnologiefirmen: Chinas Weg zum Konkurrenten um die Zukunftstechnologien,” *ifo Schnelldienst* 71, no. 14 (2018): 3 ff.

³²⁷ Christoph Giesen and Max Hägler, “China öffnet seinen Automarkt,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, accessed July 20, 2021, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/wirtschaft/welthandel-china-oeffnet-seinen-automarkt-1.3947770>.

³²⁸ Marc Röhling, “Tote Ratte im Briefkasten: Wie eine rechte Mini-Gewerkschaft ein Daimler-Werk terrorisiert,” *Der Spiegel*, accessed July 03, 2021, <https://www.spiegel.de/panorama/daimler-werk-untertuerkheim-wie-die-rechte-gewerkschaft-zentrum-automobil-das-unternehmen-terrorisiert-a-9f1e3325-508e-4768-83ee-17f2fd666a2d>.

³²⁹ Alexander Demling, Dietmar Neuerer and Jean-Michel Hauteville, “Far-right unionists gain popularity despite rising wages,” *Handelsblatt*, accessed July 02, 2021, <https://www.handelsblatt.com/english/companies/nationalist-comrades-far-right-unionists-gain-popularity-despite-rising-wages/23582170.html?ticket=ST-1180667-g7zwdj6A6CUZfpeaIO5e-ap6>.

Frank Neufert. Both Hilburger and Neufert attended an event with Björn Höcke, one of the leaders of *Der Flügel*.³³⁰ Work councils, whose task is to represent the interests of the employees, are entitled to engage in corporate decisions.³³¹ Thus, China may be incentivized to establish a partnership with the AfD to increase the party's presence in automotive work councils and eventually interfere in the German automotive industry. By maintaining closer ties with employees, China may further face facilitated access to knowledge and technologies. Lastly, the automotive industry represents an influential and powerful lobby impacting government decisions.

Likewise, the RN is gaining influence on French trade unions.³³² In the 2014 European elections, roughly one third of Force ouvrière (Workers' Force) supporters voted for the FN.³³³ Whereas other unions are openly calling on its members not to vote for the RN, the Force ouvrière, which represents one out of four major French trade unions, is not taking a clear stance against the RN.³³⁴ According to Laurent Berger, general secretary of the Confédération française démocratique du travail (French Democratic Confederation of Labor), the Force ouvrière is becoming the accomplices of the right-wing nationalists.³³⁵ Following the ban of the FN's own trade unions in 1998, its members started looking for alternative organizations eventually joining the Force ouvrière.³³⁶ The sympathies of Force ouvrière supporters towards the RN however are not solely reflected in their voting behavior but are transposed to the political landscape. For instance, the RN

³³⁰ Jan Sternberg, "AfD agitiert Arbeitnehmer," *Neue Westfälische*, accessed July 02, 2021, https://www.nw.de/nachrichten/wirtschaft/22016215_AfD-agitiert-Arbeitnehmer.html.

³³¹ § 7 Gesetz über die Mitbestimmung der Arbeitnehmer [German Codetermination Act], May 04, 1976, *BGBI I*: 1153. It regulates the mandatory quota for employee and union representatives in the supervisory board of listed companies.

³³² Hans Böckler Stiftung, "Rechtspopulisten in Frankreich – Spalten und Herrschen," accessed July 02, 2021, <https://www.boeckler.de/de/magazin-mitbestimmung-2744-29998.htm>.

³³³ Tristan Quinault-Maupoil, "Le FN en tête chez les salariés syndiqués à Force ouvrière et Sud, *Le Figaro*," accessed July 02, 2021, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/politique/le-scan/decryptages/2014/05/28/25003-20140528ARTEFIG00273-le-fn-en-tete-chez-les-salaries-syndiques-a-force-ouvriere-et-sud.php>.

³³⁴ Hans Böckler Stiftung, "Rechtspopulisten in Frankreich – Spalten und Herrschen"; FO Jeunes, "Syndicalisme, sympathisants et extrême droite," accessed July 02, 2021, <https://www.force-ouvriere.fr/syndicalisme-sympathisants-et-extreme-droite?lang=fr>.

³³⁵ Hans Böckler Stiftung, "Rechtspopulisten in Frankreich – Spalten und Herrschen."

³³⁶ Fabian Federl, "Braun, auf rotem Grund," *Der Spiegel*, accessed July 03, 2021, <https://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2017-04/arbeiterklasse-frankreich-front-national-gewerkschaften-praesidentschaftswahl/komplettansicht>.

politician and active member of the Force ouvrière Marie Da Silva got elected deputy mayor of Hayange in 2014.³³⁷

Comparing union density among OECD members, France is listed among the countries with the lowest percentage of trade union members.³³⁸ Given the sharp decrease in members as well as their political rather than sector-specific orientation, French trade unions may constitute a less powerful resource for China to acquire corporate knowledge. Hence, China's support for the RN may be limited to steering French political decision-making and may, in comparison to a partnership with the AfD, merely facilitate a know-how transfer.

Lastly, the successful cooperation with radical right-wing parties in other European countries may serve as an incentive for China to seek the support of the AfD and the RN. In 2017, Italy, Germany, and France jointly asked the European Commission to rethink the rules on foreign investment to protect strategic economic sectors from Chinese companies.³³⁹ Roughly one year later, Xi Jinping visited Italy signing a memorandum on the advancement of the BRI. Thus, Italy became the first major industrial power joining the Chinese project.³⁴⁰ In 2019, Italy was one out of two countries abstaining from a second vote to introduce an EU investment-screening mechanism, which it had previously proposed in collaboration with Germany and France.³⁴¹ Italy's rapid turnaround was caused by the formation of a new government in June 2018 predominantly constituting of Eurosceptic and right-wing populist parties. The new government, composed of two parties namely the Movimento 5 Stelle (5 Star Movement) and the Lega Nord (Northern League), heavily engaged in cooperation with China, for instance allowing the latter to buy into its national electricity network.³⁴² Together with the AfD and RN, the Lega forms

³³⁷ Bertrand Bissuel, "L'adhérent FN, ce nouveau casse-tête syndical," *Le Monde*, accessed July 03, 2021, https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2014/08/05/l-adherent-fn-ce-nouveau-casse-tete-syndical_4466902_823448.html.

³³⁸ Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, "Trade Union Dataset," accessed July 03, 2021, <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=TUD>.

³³⁹ Reuters, "France, Germany, Italy urge rethink of foreign investment in EU," accessed July 08, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-eu-trade-france-idUKKBN15TIND>.

³⁴⁰ Clive Hamilton and Mareike Ohlberg, *Hidden Hand – Exposing how the Chinese Communist Party is reshaping the world*, (London: Oneworld Publications, 2020): 67.

³⁴¹ Council of the European Union, *Interinstitutional File:2017/0224 (COD)*, (Brussels: Council of the European Union, 2019), accessed July 20, 2021, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CONSIL:ST_7170_2019_INIT&from=EN.

³⁴² Ohlberg and Hamilton, *Hidden Hand*, 70.

part of the Identity and Democracy group of the European Parliament. Hence, given Italy's China-friendly course under the right-wing coalition and given the Lega's alliance with the RN and the AfD in the European Parliament, the French and German radical right-wing parties may constitute beneficial cooperation partners for China.

However, not only China may potentially benefit from cooperating, but the AfD and the RN may also be incentivized to pursue a close alliance. First, similarly to Russia, China could provide the AfD with a foreign policy stage on which politicians can present themselves statesmanlike. Even though there is no influential and significant Chinese community in Germany, the AfD may still have reasons for establishing closer ties with China. In the 2021 Saxony-Anhalt state elections the AfD had come first among people under 30.³⁴³ A comparable behavior of young voters was also visible during the 2019 elections in Brandenburg and Saxony.³⁴⁴ At the same time, young Germans between the age of 18 and 34 are the population group sharing the most favorable view of China. 46% consider it more important to have close relations with China whereas only 35% prefer maintaining tight relations with the US.³⁴⁵ Similarly, according to a survey published by the Körber Stiftung in 2021, 46% of Germans expressing a party preference for the AfD stated that Germany should give priority to its economic relations with China, even if this results in human rights violations not being consistently and publicly criticized.³⁴⁶ Thus, compared to the overall German population, AfD supporters are more likely to share a pro-Chinese attitude.³⁴⁷ Strategically this image may be even more lopsided with regards to workers or entrepreneurs whose economic success largely depends on stable economic cooperation with China. In the 2017 federal elections, 18% of workers gave their votes to the AfD, providing for disproportionate support for the party.³⁴⁸ Profiling themselves as

³⁴³ Ben Knight, "Why young eastern German voters support the far-right AfD," Deutsche Welle, accessed July 03, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/why-young-eastern-german-voters-support-the-far-right-afd/a-57847028>.

³⁴⁴ Annick Ehmman, Sascha Venohr and Vanessa Materla, "Männlich, Arbeiter, AfD-Wähler," Zeit Online, accessed July 03, 2021, <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2019-09/waehler-ostdeutschland-analyse-alter-geschlecht-beruf-schulabschluss-religion>.

³⁴⁵ Dietmar Pieper, "Junge Deutsche wandeln sich zu China-Fans," Der Spiegel, accessed July 03, 2021, <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/deutsche-finden-china-immer-besser-usa-schlechter-umfrage-a-823ff983-5426-42da-ab7f-3f3de985715c>.

³⁴⁶ Kantar Public, *Körber-Stiftung - Berlin Pulse - Mai 2021*, (Berlin: Kantar Public, 2021), accessed July 20, 2021, https://www.koerber-stiftung.de/fileadmin/user_upload/koerber-stiftung/redaktion/the-berlin-pulse/pdf/2021/Special_survey_The_Berlin_Pulse_2021_Tabellenbericht.pdf.

³⁴⁷ c.f. chapter 3.3.

³⁴⁸ Deutscher Bundestag, "Kapitel 1.11 Stimmabgabe nach Beruf und Konfession (Zweitstimme)," in *Datenhandbuch zur Geschichte des Deutschen Bundestages*, (Berlin: Deutscher Bundestag, 2018),

China whisperers may put the AfD in a position to be attractive to all voters sharing those foreign policy preferences. Consequently, pursuing a Chinese-friendly course and establishing a partnership with China may be in the AfD's best interest in order to convince and reach out to actual and potential voters.

Similar to the AfD, the RN lacks domestic cooperation partners. As outlined earlier, the lack of partners is not limited to other parties but extends to banks. Like Russia, China may represent a source of liquidity making financial means available to the party. This argument seems particularly valid considering the FN's willingness to sell its headquarters Saint-Cloud to a Shanghai university in 2008.³⁴⁹

Moreover, in comparison to Germany France has a considerably large Chinese diaspora. More than 600,000 people of Chinese descent are living in Paris, making the French capital home to Europe's largest community of Chinese expatriates.³⁵⁰ A large portion of this ethnic group holds French citizenship³⁵¹ making it a small but not insignificant number of voters. Considering the recently close poll results for the presidency, attracting this group may very well tip this scale towards the RN. However, a pro-Chinese course may dissatisfy the party's existent electoral base. In comparison to supporters of other French parties, a slightly larger proportion of RN voters tends to share a very negative view of China.³⁵²

accessed July 20, 2021, https://www.bundestag.de/resource/blob/272928/2bca1c3521f6d1ee3bc7b07f648deda5/Kapitel_01_11_Stimmabgabe_nach_Beruf_und_Konfession_Zweitstimme_-pdf-data.pdf.

³⁴⁹ Juliette Chain and Agnès Leclari, "Une université chinoise achète le siège du Front national," *Le Figaro*, accessed July 04, 2021, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/politique/2008/08/12/01002-20080812ARTFIG00246-une-universite-chinoise-achete-le-siege-du-front-national-.php>; Guillaume Perrault, "Le FN a enfin vendu le «Paquebot»," *Le Figaro*, accessed July 04, 2021, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/politique/2011/04/27/01002-20110427ARTFIG00667-le-fn-a-enfin-vendu-le-paquebot.php>.

³⁵⁰ Amanda Erickson, "It's hard to be Chinese in Paris. Sometimes, it can be deadly," *Washington Post*, accessed July 03, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/03/30/its-hard-to-be-chinese-in-paris-sometimes-it-can-be-deadly/>.

³⁵¹ Marcus Engler, "Staatsangehörigkeit und Staatsangehörigkeitserwerb in Frankreich," Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, accessed July 18, 2021, <https://www.bpb.de/gesellschaft/migration/laenderprofile/246837/staatsangehoerigkeit>; Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques, "Nombre d'immigrés et d'étrangers en 2020," accessed July 18, 2021, https://www.insee.fr/fr/outil-interactif/5367857/details/20_DEM/25_ETR/25A_figure1.

³⁵² Marc Julienne, Richard Q. Turcsányi, Matej Šimalčík, Kristína Kironská and Renáta Sedláková, *French public opinion on China in the age of COVID-19*, (Bratislava: Central European Institute of Asian Studies, 2020): 14.

In a nutshell, all actors have well-founded reasons for establishing strategic cooperation. However, the foregoing deliberations also allow for the conclusion that there is a greater alignment between the strategic interests of the AfD and China relative to the shared interests of the RN and China, rendering cooperation of the former more likely.

By providing a thorough analysis of already existing means of cooperation between the respective actors, the following chapter examines whether this assumption can be verified. Thereby the chapter sheds light on the connections individual influential AfD and RN politicians maintain with China.

6.2 Is there existing cooperation between China and the parties?

Prior to joining the AfD, Alice Weidel, one of the leading politicians and deputy federal spokesperson of the party, studied and worked in China for roughly six years. Weidel, who in her doctoral thesis addresses the Chinese pension system, was employed by Goldman Sachs in China and the Bank of China. In 2017, Weidel, who is fairly fluent in Mandarin, was invited by the Peking University, which on its website praises the CCP for continuously leading the country towards prosperity.³⁵³ According to Weidel, Germany should learn from the Chinese diligence, entrepreneurial spirit as well as border security.³⁵⁴

Besides Weidel, MP Robby Schlund is having strikingly close connections to China. Schlund is listed among the members of the Wirtschaftsförderverein Thüringen international e.V. (Thuringia International Economic Development Agency), an organization which aims at improving the economic, political as well as cultural relations between Thuringia and other countries.³⁵⁵ On the association's website, the majority of content is dedicated to strengthening collaboration with China. In 2020, the organization

³⁵³ Marc Felix Serrao, "Alternative zu Höcke," Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, accessed July 05, 2021, https://www.faz.net/aktuell/wirtschaft/afd-politikerin-alice-weidel-ist-alternative-zu-bjoern-hoecke-14895160.html?printPagedArticle=true#pageIndex_2; Peking University, "Peking University's role in the formation of the Communist Party of China," accessed July 05, 2021, https://newsen.pku.edu.cn/news_events/news/focus/10966.htm.

³⁵⁴ Thomas Schmelzer, "Alternative zu Frauke Petry," WirtschaftsWoche, accessed July 05, 2021, <https://www.wiwo.de/politik/deutschland/alice-weidel-alternative-zu-frauke-petry/19705618.html>; Mark Fehr and Thomas Schmelzer, "Die AfD-Frontfrau mit einer Vorliebe für Döner," WirtschaftsWoche, accessed July 05, 2021, <https://www.wiwo.de/politik/deutschland/bundestagswahl-2017/alice-weidel-die-afd-frontfrau-mit-einer-vorliebe-fuer-doener/20098840-all.html>.

³⁵⁵ Wirtschaftsförderverein Thüringen international e.V., "Akteure," accessed July 05, 2021, <https://economic-development.eu/mitglieder/>.

hosted a Webinar on China Business to which Yaojun Xu, director of the China International Investment Promotion Agency (Germany), was invited as a guest speaker.³⁵⁶ Said agency, which is located in Frankfurt am Main, constitutes the German office of the Chinese Ministry of Commerce.³⁵⁷ Christoph Höppel, the second chairman of the association as well as its member Shuting Zhang, both work in the Bundestag as Schlund's research associates.³⁵⁸

In 2018 Schlund, who apart from his engagement in the German-Russian Parliamentary Group is deputy chairman of the German-Chinese Parliamentary Group,³⁵⁹ traveled to China at the expense of the AfD parliamentary group. During his visit, which he undertook under his official position of deputy chairman, he supposedly endorsed a potential collaboration with the People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries. The latter is known for openly promoting Chinese positions and is managed by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.³⁶⁰ In November of the same year, Schlund visited the China International Friendship Cities Conference in Wuhan of which the People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries was the main organizer.³⁶¹ His trip was paid for by a sub-organization of the latter.³⁶²

In 1984, Helga Zepp-LaRouche, widow of the US conspiracy theorist Lyndon LaRouche, founded the Schiller-Institute in Wiesbaden. The institute's focus rests on the promotion of the New Silk Road. For her engagement, Zepp-LaRouche is regularly featured on

³⁵⁶ Wirtschaftsförderverein Thüringen international e.V., "Webinar China Business," accessed July 05, 2021, <https://economic-development.eu/webinar/>.

³⁵⁷ China International Investment Promotion Agency (Germany), "Unser Hintergrund," accessed July 05, 2021, <https://www.ciipa.de/unser-hintergrund>.

³⁵⁸ Martina Sitte, Annegret Himrich and Silke Heller-Jung, *Köpfe der Gesundheitspolitik 2018: Wer sitzt wo?*, (Berlin: KomPart Verlagsgesellschaft GmbH & Co. KG, 2018), accessed July 20, 2021, https://www.aok-bv.de/imperia/md/aokbv/hintergrund/wer_sitzt_wo.pdf.

³⁵⁹ Deutscher Bundestag, "Internationales: Vorstände der Parlamentariergruppen," accessed July 05, 2021, https://www.bundestag.de/europa_internationales/parlamentariergruppen.

³⁶⁰ Thorsten Benner, Jan Gaspers, Mareike Ohlberg, Lucrezia Poggetti and Kristin Shi-Kupfer, *Authoritarian Advance: Responding to China's Growing Political Influence in Europe*, (Berlin: Global Public Policy Institute and Mercator Institute for China Studies, 2018), accessed July 20, 2021, https://merics.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/GPPI_MERICS_Authoritarian_Advance_2018_1.pdf: 12; Jichang Lulu, "Repurposing democracy: The European Parliament China Friendship Cluster," *Sinopsis* (2019): 21.

³⁶¹ Robby Schlund, "Rückblick: Thüringen und China – Einsatz für die Zukunft," accessed July 05, 2021, <https://robbi-schlund.de/2021/03/22/rueckblick-thueringen-und-china/?fbclid=IwAR3rB4S1M4BKpY9V-i3L4y3PXmKp7RtDaRs4a6tY04pzlTM-KCKYBQIMUoM>.

³⁶² Becker and Heil, "Chinas Freunde bei der AfD."

Chinese media giving interviews to state-controlled broadcasters such as CCTV.³⁶³ Besides managing the Schiller-Institute, Zepp-LaRouche is the federal chairwoman of the right-wing political party Bürgerrechtsbewegung Solidarität (Civil Rights Movement Solidarity), which in its program describes the BRI as the future of Germany and advocates for closer cooperation between Germany and Russia.³⁶⁴ Thus, the AfD and the Bürgerrechtsbewegung Solidarität share similar ideological convictions making a potential collaboration a plausible scenario. Indeed, albeit of small scale, some mutual support between the two parties is visible. On her website, Zepp-LaRouche praises the AfD's election results stating that they are an expression of the public's rejection of the neoliberal policy implemented by the Grand Coalition.³⁶⁵ On the other hand, Marc Jongen, AfD MP, shares an article of Zepp-LaRouche on his website in which she addresses the population's dissatisfaction with the political elite.³⁶⁶

When looking at the AfD's presence on the European level, the China connections of MEP Maximilian Krah stand out. In November 2019, Krah traveled to Huawei's headquarters in the city of Shenzhen. During his visit, Krah gave interviews to the Chinese state media calling on Germany to involve Huawei in its 5G infrastructure rollout. According to travel documents submitted to the European Parliament, the costs of his one-week trip were jointly borne by Huawei, the Chinese state-owned oil and gas corporation China Petroleum, as well as several Chinese municipalities.³⁶⁷ Shortly before traveling to China Krah became vice president of the China-EU friendship group, an association of MEPs sharing the goal to promote economic and cultural ties between China and the EU.³⁶⁸ The friendship group has no institutional standing or statutory authority but is based on the voluntary participation of individual MEPs.³⁶⁹ Until 2019, the friendship group was chaired by British MEP Nirj Deva, who openly promoted the

³⁶³ The International Schiller Institute, "Die Weltlandbrücke aufbauen!," accessed July 06, 2021, <https://schillerinstitute.com/de/unsere-kampagne/baut-die-weltlandbruecke/>.

³⁶⁴ Bürgerrechtsbewegung Solidarität, "Kurzprogramm," accessed July 06, 2021, <https://www.bueso.de/kurzprogramm>.

³⁶⁵ Helga Zepp-LaRouche, "Helga Zepp-LaRouche: German Voters Reject the Neo Liberal Policy," LaRouche Pac, accessed July 26, 2021, <https://www.larouchepac.com/20170926/helga-zepp-larouche-german-voters-reject-neo-liberal-policy>.

³⁶⁶ Helga Zepp-LaRouche, "larouchepub.com: The AfD Party: Old Wine In New Bottles?," Marc Jongen, accessed July 06, 2021, <https://marcjongen.de/larouchepub-com-the-afd-party-old-wine-in-new-bottles/>.

³⁶⁷ Becker and Heil, "Chinas Freunde bei der AfD."

³⁶⁸ Lulu, "Repurposing democracy," 9 ff.

³⁶⁹ Toshi Yoshihara and Jack Bianchi, *Uncovering China's influence in Europe: How friendship groups coopt European Elites*, (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2020): 15.

BRI, supported Huawei's involvement in building Europe's 5G network, and defended the situation of human rights in China.³⁷⁰ The secretary general of the China-EU friendship group Gai Lin purportedly represents the first Chinese citizen to be employed as an EU civil servant and worked as an accredited assistant of Deva's at the parliament.³⁷¹ After losing his seat in the 2019 EU Parliament elections, Deva was replaced in his position as chairman by Czech MEP Jan Zahradil. The latter was appointed lead candidate of the European Conservatives and Reformists Group for the presidency of the EU Commission in 2019.³⁷² Several researchers accuse the friendship group of constituting a lobbying platform for the CCP.³⁷³ According to the US newspaper Politico, the friendship group was suspended in 2021 following concerns of the European Parliament that the group was too close to the Chinese government.³⁷⁴ The argumentation that such friendship groups indeed represent a political tool is backed by China's decision to impose sanctions on several MEPs in 2021. Among the 5 parliamentarians targeted by the sanctions is Michael Gahler, chair of the Taiwan Friendship Group.³⁷⁵

In August 2020, Krah gave an interview to Ochensreiter's magazine Zuerst! in which he praises China's positive contribution to the world economy via its BRI and states that the Taiwanese-Chinese relationship should not be of any concern to the EU.³⁷⁶ Moreover, asked about China's human rights violations in the province of Xinjiang, Krah responded that a massive disinformation campaign is spreading fake news about the actions of the Chinese leadership.³⁷⁷ Krah's pro-Chinese views are supported by several of his party colleagues. For instance, Markus Frohnmaier regards China's economic strategy as a role

³⁷⁰ NirjDevaMEP, "Nirj in a Plenary debate on China," Youtube, accessed July 06, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AdWGS-UHM8>; Yoshihara and Bianchi, "Uncovering China's influence in Europe," 16 ff.

³⁷¹ Lulu, "Repurposing democracy," 13; Hamilton and Ohlberg, "Hidden Hand," 57.

³⁷² Hamilton and Ohlberg, "Hidden Hand," 59.

³⁷³ Nikolaj Nielsen, "MEP friendship groups offer 'backdoor' for pariah regimes," EUobserver, accessed July 05, 2021, <https://euobserver.com/institutional/141654>; Laurens Cerulus, "Beijing's influence in European Parliament draws fresh scrutiny," Politico, accessed July 05, 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/china-influence-european-parliament-friendship-group/>; Yoshihara and Bianchi, "Uncovering China's influence in Europe," 2 ff.

³⁷⁴ Laurens Cerulus, "EU-China 'friendship group' suspended, its chair says," Politico, accessed July 05, 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-china-friendship-group-suspended/>.

³⁷⁵ Kate Ferguson, "Chinese sanctions threaten EU investment pact," Deutsche Welle, accessed July 05, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/chinese-sanctions-threaten-eu-investment-pact/a-56995389>.

³⁷⁶ Zuerst!, "Lieblingsfeind des Westens – AfD-Europa-Abgeordneter Dr. Maximilian Krah im ZUERST!-Interview," accessed July 05, 2021, <https://zuerst.de/2020/08/29/lieblingsfeind-des-westens-afd-europa-abgeordneter-dr-maximilian-krah-im-zuerst-interview/>.

³⁷⁷ Beck and Heil, "Chinas Freunde bei der AfD."

model for Germany saying that “learning from China means learning to win”.³⁷⁸ Similarly, Marvin Neumann, former board member of the JA, was praising the Chinese government on his Twitter account stating that the Chinese model constitutes the most promising economic, national, and social system.³⁷⁹ In May 2021 Neumann declared his withdrawal from the party after being harshly criticized for racist remarks.³⁸⁰

In 2021, Andrey Davydov published a study in which he examines the attitudes of European right-wing parties towards China. According to his results, the AfD stands out as a radical right-wing party pursuing an uncommonly pro-Chinese course whereas the RN’s view on China barely differs from the perception of French centralist parties.³⁸¹ Angelos Chryssogelos supports this statement by concluding that a common foreign policy approach of European radical right-wing parties towards China cannot be discovered. He particularly stresses that the RN considers China an unfair economic competitor to be held responsible for the deindustrialization of France.³⁸²

Considering these findings, it seems less surprising that cooperation between RN politicians and China, which is comparable to the one of the AfD, could not be discovered. Even though individual RN members had traveled to China or were part of the European Parliament’s delegation for relations with the People's Republic of China,³⁸³ cooperation based on means of clandestine diplomacy could not be found. Given its protectionist agenda, the RN predominantly describes the Chinese trade practices as a threat to the

³⁷⁸ Markus Frohnmair, “Markus Frohnmair: Von China lernen heißt siegen lernen,” *Alternative für Deutschland*, accessed July 06, 2021, <https://afdbundestag.de/markus-frohnmair-von-china-lernen-heisst-siegen-lernen/>.

³⁷⁹ Jan Sternberg, “Vorsitzender der AfD-Jugend soll wegen rassistischer Tweets aus der Partei fliegen,” *Redaktionsnetzwerk Deutschland*, accessed July 05, 2021, <https://www.rnd.de/politik/afd-jugend-vorsitzender-soll-wegen-rassistischer-tweets-aus-partei-fliegen-USKADW67DZFHP63WU6K-S7A4DE.html>.

³⁸⁰ Markus Balsler and Jens Schneider, “Chef von Jugendorganisation tritt aus AfD aus,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, accessed July 05, 2021, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/afd-junge-alternative-neumann-ruecktritt-1.5282934>.

³⁸¹ Andrey Davydov, “Radical Right Ideologies and Foreign Policy Preference: Attitudes towards Russia, China, and the USA in EU Member States,” Working paper, *Réseau transatlantique sur l’Europe politique* (2020): 25.

³⁸² Angelos Chryssogelos, *Is there a populist foreign policy?*, (London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2021): 15.

³⁸³ Ministry of Transport, “Visit to Singapore by French Secretary of State for Transport, Mr Thierry Mariani, 26 to 27 February 2011,” accessed July 06, 2021, [https://www.mot.gov.sg/news-centre/news/Detail/Visit%20to%20Singapore%20by%20French%20Secretary%20of%20State%20for%20Transport,%20Mr%20Thierry%20Mariani,%2026%20to%2027%20February%202011](https://www.mot.gov.sg/news-centre/news/Detail/Visit%20to%20Singapore%20by%20French%20Secretary%20of%20State%20for%20Transport,%20Mr%20Thierry%20Mariani,%2026%20to%2027%20February%202011;); European Parliament, “Jean-Luc Schaffhauser,” accessed July 07, 2021, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/124755/JEAN-LUC_SCHAFFHAUSER/history/8.

domestic industry.³⁸⁴ Similarly, China's engagement in African states is harshly criticized. In a post published by MEP Dominique Bilde, the EU is blamed for being "the useful idiot of China, in Africa" since it is financing the debt of African countries resulting out of their cooperation with China.³⁸⁵ These findings however do not allow for the conclusion that the RN is never expressing a favorable view of China. In 2013, Marine Le Pen defended the imports of Chinese products.³⁸⁶ Moreover, several FN products, such as the pins for the 2017 presidential campaign, were imported from China contradicting the party's "Made in France" policy.³⁸⁷ Additionally, when touching upon the question of migration, the RN pursues a China-friendly course. Following the resolution on the situation of the Uyghurs adopted by the European Parliament in December 2020, MEP Thierry Mariani defended his abstention by arguing that France is not an NGO.³⁸⁸ Earlier, Mariani released a post on his Twitter account in which he among others addresses the "stupidity of the West" referring to Sweden's decisions to grant political asylum to all Muslim Uyghurs persecuted in China.³⁸⁹ He further claimed that one of China's major domestic interests is "the prevention of Uyghur separatism".³⁹⁰ Already in 2015 Mariani,

³⁸⁴ Dominique Bilde, "FVM, Dr Fischer: laminée par la Chine, l'industrie lorraine vit-elle ses derniers instants?," Rassemblement National, accessed July 07, 2021, <https://rassemblementnational.fr/communiqués/fvm-dr-fischer-laminee-par-la-chine-lindustrie-lorraine-vit-elle-ses-derniers-instants/>; Marine Le Pen, "Les importations de voitures depuis la Chine commencent: un énorme danger à terme pour l'industrie française," Rassemblement National, accessed July 07, 2021, <https://rassemblementnational.fr/communiqués/les-importations-de-voitures-depuis-la-chine-commencent-un-énorme-danger-a-terme-pour-lindustrie-française/>.

³⁸⁵ Dominique Bilde, "Coronavirus: l'Union européenne, idiote utile de la Chine en Afrique," Rassemblement National, accessed July 07, 2021, <https://rassemblementnational.fr/tribunes-libres/coronavirus-lunion-europeenne-idiote-utile-de-la-chine-en-afrique/>.

³⁸⁶ LCI, "Made in China: Marine Le Pen défend le marché de Noël des Champs-Élysées," accessed July 06, 2021, <https://www.lci.fr/politique/made-in-china-marine-le-pen-defend-le-marche-de-noel-des-champs-elysees-1567007.html>.

³⁸⁷ Olivier Beaumont, Nicolas Berrod, Valérie Hacot, Quentin Laurent and Henri Vernet, "La si généreuse campagne de Marine Le Pen," Le Parisien, accessed July 07, 2021, <https://www.leparisien.fr/politique/la-generouse-campagne-de-marine-le-pen-24-05-2018-7734141.php>; David Perrotin and Anais Bordages, "Made in France according to the FN," BuzzFeed, accessed July 07, 2021, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/fr/davidperrotin/fn-made-in-france#.beaka93O>.

³⁸⁸ Aurélie Journée-Duez, "«Si c'est dans l'intérêt de la France...». Le RN renoue avec de sombres pages," Mediapart, accessed July 07, 2021, <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/aurelie-journee-duez/blog/130221/si-cest-dans-linteret-de-la-france-le-rn-renoue-avec-de-sombres-pages>.

³⁸⁹ Thierry Mariani (@ThierryMARIANI), "L'Occident dans sa bêtise!," Twitter, accessed July 07, 2021, <https://twitter.com/ThierryMARIANI/status/1108998385959346177>; Thierry Mariani (@ThierryMARIANI), "«ils ne passeront pas» nous dit #Macronmais la France s'apprête à accueillir les #Ouighours après avoir accueilli les Tchéchènes!," Twitter, accessed July 07, 2021, <https://twitter.com/ThierryMARIANI/status/1317575017023082496>.

³⁹⁰ Thierry Mariani, "Petit-déjeuner débat «Asie centrale, une autre Asie»," Institut Jean Lecanuet, accessed July 07, 2021, <https://www.institutjeanlecanuet.org/content/petit-dejeuner-debat-asie-centrale-une-autre-asie>.

who back then was a member of the party Les Républicains, prepared the Council of Europe's report on the challenges and opportunities of Chinese migration to Europe. In the report, Mariani recommended closer collaboration between the Member States of the Council of Europe and China on border management and the combat against irregular migration.³⁹¹ RN leader Marine Le Pen agrees with the course of Mariani stating that even though the human rights of the Uyghurs need to be respected, imposing sanctions on China is not a desirable response.³⁹²

In sum, due to its rejection of free trade and its protectionist policies, the RN takes a rather skeptical point of view on China, regarding the country as a major economic enemy. Despite accepting China's treatment of the Uyghurs, actual cooperation between the Chinese leadership and the RN could not be found. With regards to the AfD, ties between Chinese institutions and single politicians were discovered. However, the cooperation is founded on an individual basis and is not of structural nature. Thus, a Chinese clandestine diplomacy which is comparable to Russia's means could not be found. Stemming from these results, the question that presents itself is why the parties' collaboration with China does not reach the intensity and dimension of their relationship with Russia.

6.3 Potential reasons for the lack of structural cooperation

Several circumstances possibly contribute to the lack of structural cooperation between the AfD, the RN, and China.

First, the AfD has no uniform view of China. Although individual members admire the Chinese leadership and maintain ties with its government, several AfD politicians oppose and harshly criticize China. For instance, in a Bundestag session in September 2020, AfD parliamentarian Armin-Paulus Hampel sharply pointed out that the German government keeps engaging in trade policies with China despite being aware of China executing numerous Uyghurs.³⁹³ Likewise, Joachim Paul, deputy chairman of the AfD

³⁹¹ Thierry Mariani, *Chinese migration to Europe: challenges and opportunities*, (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2015), accessed July 20, 2021, <http://www.assembly.coe.int/LifeRay/MIG/pdf/TextesProvisoires/2015/20150000-ChineseMigration-EN.pdf>: 12 ff.

³⁹² Mailys Pene-Lassus and Togo Shiraishi, "France's Le Pen vows to stand up against China in Indo-Pacific," *Nikkei Asia*, accessed July 07, 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Editor-s-Picks/Interview/France-s-Le-Pen-vows-to-stand-up-against-China-in-Indo-Pacific>.

³⁹³ Deutscher Bundestag, *Deutscher Bundestag Stenografischer Bericht 174. Sitzung*, (Berlin: Deutscher Bundestag, 2020), accessed July 20, 2021, <https://dserver.bundestag.de/btp/19/19174.pdf>: 21918.

parliamentary group in the Rhineland-Palatinate state parliament, and MP Stephan Brandner complain about China respectively demanding Huawei's exclusion from the rollout of 5G networks and the stop of the sell-out of the German economy through Chinese firms.³⁹⁴ The absence of unity and cohesion among AfD politicians impedes the establishment of a structural cooperation between the party and China. These discrepancies are further reinforced by the inherent contradictions of the AfD's China policy. In comparison to Russia, of which the party has an exclusively positive view, the AfD's willingness to cooperate is highly dependent on the area of collaboration. On the one hand, the AfD considers it an embarrassment that the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany was obtained from China and advocates for its domestic production.³⁹⁵ On the other hand, the party calls on the German government to ensure the export of pork meat to China.³⁹⁶ The AfD is cherry-picking in its economic policy towards China hampering the establishment of a cooperation.

Furthermore, in the last decades China was able to enforce its interests in collaborating with French and German ruling political elites. Thus, China's need to look for alternative political cooperation partners emerged relatively recently. Contrary to Russia, China's greater economic leverage resulting from its attractive market, led to a stable partnership between the Chinese and the German as well as the French government. A flourishing economic and an acceptable political relationship long took priority in European politics, especially since this approach was considered a *fil rouge* of the term of German chancellor Angela Merkel.³⁹⁷ Even after the most recent tensions communication channels between the highest level never ceased to function, as is displayed by a virtual conference between Merkel, Macron, and Xi in July 2021.³⁹⁸

³⁹⁴ Joachim Paul, "Joachim Paul: Huawei vom 5G-Ausbau ausschließen," Alternative für Deutschland, accessed July 08, 2021, <https://www.afd.de/joachim-paul-huawei-vom-5g-ausbau-ausschliessen/>; Stephan Brandner, "Stephan Brandner: Ausverkauf deutscher Wirtschaft und Entwicklungshilfeszahlungen nach China stoppen," Alternative für Deutschland, accessed July 08, 2021, <https://www.afd.de/stephan-brandner-ausverkauf-deutscher-wirtschaft-und-entwicklungshilfeszahlungen-nach-china-stoppen/>.

³⁹⁵ Alternative für Deutschland kompakt, "Peinliche Posse: Bundesverdienstkreuz kam für 5 Euro aus China," accessed July 08, 2021, <https://afdkompakt.de/2020/10/03/peinliche-posse-bundesverdienstkreuz-kam-fuer-5-euro-aus-china/>.

³⁹⁶ Stephan Protschka, "Protschka: Deutsche Schweinehalter entlasten – Exporte nach China wieder öffnen," Alternative für Deutschland, accessed July 08, 2021, <https://afdbundestag.de/protschka-deutsche-schweinehalter-entlasten-exporte-nach-china-wieder-oeffnen/>.

³⁹⁷ Daniel Brössler, "Merkel weiter offen für Zusammenarbeit in China," Süddeutsche Zeitung, accessed July 09, 2021, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/merkel-china-usa-1.5344334>.

³⁹⁸ Brössler, "Merkel weiter offen für Zusammenarbeit in China."

Lastly, in its program for the 2021 federal elections the AfD speaks of the failure of the euro emphasizing that the currency is being rescued with billions of euros every day. Hence, the party promotes the reintroduction of a national currency while allowing for the possibility to parallelly keep the euro or a more flexible unit of account.³⁹⁹ Likewise, the RN calls for the implementation of economic patriotism and intelligent protectionism and advocates for a national currency to defend domestic companies against unfair foreign competition.⁴⁰⁰ During the 2017 presidential campaign, Marine Le Pen repeatedly stressed to replace the euro with looser cooperation resembling the former ECU basket of currencies if elected president.⁴⁰¹ The AfD's, as well as the RN's desired exit from the euro, represent a major financial threat to China. In 2017, Shi Mingde, China's former ambassador to Germany, expressed concerns over a possible disintegration of the eurozone if Le Pen was elected president. During the last years, particularly in the wake of the financial crisis, China continuously purchased European sovereign bonds making euro-denominated assets presumably one third of China's foreign exchange reserves.⁴⁰² The increase in foreign exchange reserves held in euros is coupled with China's sharp decrease in US dollar assets. In 2005, the latter accounted for 79% of China's total reserves compared to 58% in 2014.⁴⁰³ Thus, China has a reasonable interest in promoting an integrated, unified European Union with a stable Euro.⁴⁰⁴ Consequently, supporting the AfD and the RN stands in contrast to China's monetary policy and would eventually jeopardize the country's aim to become the world's dominant economic power.

The outlined facts severely impede the formation of in-depth cooperation. However, this does not imply that a future collaboration is impossible. Recently, controversies between

³⁹⁹ Alternative für Deutschland, *Deutschland. Aber Normal*, 55 ff.

⁴⁰⁰ Rassemblement National, "144 Engagements Présidentiels," accessed July 20, 2021, <https://www.rassemblementnational.fr/pdf/144-engagements.pdf>.

⁴⁰¹ Ingrid Melander, Simon Carraud and Johnny Cotton, "Le Pen says euro a deadweight, capital controls an option if she wins power," Reuters, accessed July 06, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-election-le-pen-eu-idUSKBN17Y259>; Le Parisien, "EXCLUSIF. Présidentielle: pour Marine Le Pen, «l'euro est mort»," accessed July 07, 2021, <https://www.leparisien.fr/elections/presidentielle/exclusif-presidentielle-marine-le-pen-l-euro-est-mort-29-04-2017-6902499.php>.

⁴⁰² Wendy Wu and Laura Zhou, "How could a win by far-right French candidate Marine Le Pen cost China?," South China Morning Post, accessed July 20, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2078063/how-could-win-far-right-french-candidate-marine-le-pen>.

⁴⁰³ Zhou Xin, "China gives up two of its best-kept forex reserve secrets," South China Morning Post, accessed July 08, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3020410/how-much-chinas-forex-reserves-us-dollars-beijing-gives-two>.

⁴⁰⁴ Wu and Zhou, "How could a win by far-right French candidate Marine Le Pen cost China?."

China and the EU are becoming increasingly sharp. Even within political Berlin voices that are disillusioned regarding the long-standing doctrine of *Wandel durch Handel* start to become more adamant.⁴⁰⁵ Also, the industry no longer exclusively views China as a market but considers the country a major competitor. This change in perceptions for instance resulted in more restrictive rules regarding strategic acquisitions and technology transfers.⁴⁰⁶ Therefore, conventional diplomacy may no longer be a sufficient strategic tool for China. Consequently, to better realize its strategic interest, China may resort to means of clandestine diplomacy.

Albeit the interests of China with the AfD seem more aligned rendering cooperation between the two more plausible, cooperation with the RN is also not an illusive scenario. Asked about her foreign policy plans if elected president in 2022, Marine Le Pen promises to pursue a foreign policy in the tradition of Charles de Gaulle.⁴⁰⁷ The latter is known for being the first Western leader to establish diplomatic ties with China. Until now, de Gaulle is enjoying high reputation and admiration among the Chinese leadership. In 2015, a statue of the former French president was unveiled at the National Museum on Tiananmen Square in Beijing where it is permanently displayed ever since.⁴⁰⁸ Thus, if keeping her promise, Marine Le Pen may induce a change in the RN's policy towards China.

Hence, in the following the means and tools China has at its disposal to potentially engage in future clandestine diplomacy are examined.

6.4 Potential Chinese means of clandestine diplomacy

The following analysis focuses on the nature and areas of a potential future collaboration between the two parties and China. Thereby, China's possibilities to support the parties are compared to Russia's means of clandestine diplomacy by examining how China may

⁴⁰⁵ Ruth Kirchner and Steffen Wurzel, "Kein Wandel durch Handel," Deutschlandfunk, accessed July 09, 2021, https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/deutsche-china-politik-kein-wandel-durch-handel.724.de.html?dram:article_id=496376.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁷ Valeurs Actuelles, "Marine Le Pen promet une politique étrangère dans la lignée du général de Gaulle," accessed July 08, 2021, <https://www.valeursactuelles.com/politique/marine-le-pen-promet-une-politique-etrangere-dans-la-lignee-du-general-de-gaulle/>.

⁴⁰⁸ The Straits Times, "France's Charles de Gaulle, 1st Western leader to recognise Beijing, is enshrined in China," accessed July 08, 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/frances-charles-de-gaulle-1st-western-leader-to-recognise-beijing-is-enshrined-in>.

exploit the four democratic values of state restraint, pluralism, free media, and open economy.

6.4.1 State restraint

As outlined above, the high legal barriers for banning a party in Germany and France limit the respective government's ability to effectively combat clandestine diplomacy. Russia's hostile interference through political visits as well as electoral observation missions does not imply any legal consequences for the parties collaborating. Thus, protected under the rule of law, China could potentially adopt the Russian tools of clandestine diplomacy.

Concerning political visits, China may have an interest in inviting AfD and RN politicians due to their anti-US positions. The ongoing trade war with the US caused economic distress in China.⁴⁰⁹ Given the RN's and AfD's opposition to US power, the parties may stand up against the US' objective of providing a unified Western response to China's trade practices. Thus, the AfD's and RN's foreign policy is aligned with China's strategic interest of a divided Western hemisphere with the US becoming increasingly isolated. Consequently, China may be incentivized to invite representatives of the parties for ensuring close coordination and collaboration on a joint stance towards the US. Whereas political visits appear as an effective tool of clandestine diplomacy for Russia and China alike, electoral observation missions solely constitute a beneficial strategy for the former. Contrary to the United Russia Party, the CCP does not derive its legitimacy through elections rendering electoral observation missions unnecessary.

Taking a closer look at China's global expansion goals through the BRI and Germany's as well as France's involvement in the project, an interesting pattern can be discovered. Despite the fact that the French and German central governments refused to formally join the initiative, several local and municipal governments had decided differently. In a press release published on the website of Duisburg, the city labels itself an integral part of the BRI.⁴¹⁰ Duisburg, which is home to the world's biggest inland port and therefore

⁴⁰⁹ United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, "Trade war leaves both US and China worse off," accessed July 12, 2021, <https://unctad.org/news/trade-war-leaves-both-us-and-china-worse>.

⁴¹⁰ Stadt Duisburg, "Johannes Pflug wird China-Beauftragter der Stadt," accessed July 12, 2021, https://www.duisburg.de/rathaus/index.php?showpm=true&pmurl=http://www.duisburg.de/guiapplication/newsdesk/publications/Stadt_Duisburg/102010100000513379.php.

constitutes a crucial hub for China-European railway shipping, agreed on being the western terminus of China's New Silk Route.⁴¹¹ Similarly, the mayor of Hamburg is praising China's infrastructure project for its great potential to boost international trade and declaring Hamburg a possible hub of the initiative.⁴¹² Currently, the Hamburg port operator HHLA is negotiating with Cosco, a Chinese state-owned shipping corporation, about a stake in one of its container terminals.⁴¹³ In France, the cities of Marseille and Lyon participate in the New Silk Route. In 2016 France's second largest city Lyon celebrated the arrival of the first train of the BRI connecting the city with Wuhan.⁴¹⁴ On the other hand, Marseille constitutes an important destination on the Silk Sea route.⁴¹⁵

The signing of individual agreements with local politicians to establish municipal cooperation regarding the BRI is made possible through the guarantee of self-administration for municipalities anchored in French and German law. Said guarantee is constitutionally enshrined in Article 28 II German Basic Law and Articles 72, 34 of the French Constitution. Whereas in Germany the guarantee of self-administration is directly regulated within the constitution, the French constitution seems to provide the central government with the power to shape the competencies of self-administration (c.f. Article 34 III, Article 2 French Constitution). Nevertheless, both constitutions restrict the ability of the central government to interfere in strictly local matters,⁴¹⁶ which participation in local projects of the BRI likely qualifies as.

This form of state restraint paired with China's success in cooperating with municipalities may pave the way for clandestine diplomacy. Successes of radical right-wing parties in municipal elections are not unlikely. In the French municipal elections of 2020, RN politician Louis Aliot was elected mayor of Perpignan. Aliot's victory marks the first time

⁴¹¹ Lisa Hänel, "In Duisburg, China expands trade influence in Germany," Deutsche Welle, accessed July 12, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/in-duisburg-china-expands-trade-influence-in-germany/a-49227168>.

⁴¹² Stadt Hamburg, "Chinesischer Vize-Ministerpräsident Liu He im Rathaus - Chancen für Hamburg durch „Neue Seidenstraße“ von Asien nach Europa," accessed July 12, 2021, <https://www.hamburg.de/pressearchiv-fhh/11892524/2018-11-27-pr-china/>.

⁴¹³ Lothar Gries, "Wie China Europas Häfen entert," Tagesschau, accessed July 12, 2021, <https://www.tagesschau.de/wirtschaft/weltwirtschaft/china-haefen-entern-expansion-problem-101.html>.

⁴¹⁴ François Reynaert, "Comment la Chine lance une "nouvelle route de la soie"," L'Obs, accessed July 28, 2021, <https://www.nouvelobs.com/monde/20161213.OBS2598/comment-la-chine-lance-une-nouvelle-route-de-la-soie.html>.

⁴¹⁵ Angelique Schaller, "Quelle place pour Marseille sur les nouvelles routes de la soie?," La Marseillaise, <https://www.lamarseillaise.fr/economie/quelle-place-pour-marseille-sur-les-nouvelles-routes-de-la-soie-OGLM070349>.

⁴¹⁶ c.f. the principle of subsidiarity.

the RN won a city with more than 100,000 inhabitants.⁴¹⁷ At the same time, RN candidates were reelected in smaller bastions, like Fréjus, Bruay-la-Buissière, and Hénin-Beaumont.⁴¹⁸ To date, there is no AfD politician serving as a mayor of a large German city. However, since 2016, the year in which the first AfD politician conquered a town hall in Germany,⁴¹⁹ the number of AfD mayors slowly increased.⁴²⁰ Thus, China may pursue a strategy of clandestine diplomacy which circumvents the federal governments by talking directly to AfD and RN politicians on the local level. This approach may be particularly beneficial considering that AfD and RN representatives are more likely to get elected for leading positions on the local level and therefore have the possibility to steer the municipal political decision-making towards the interests of China.

This strategy may be complemented by the establishment of sister cities. German and French municipalities with Chinese sister cities may be more open to proposed cooperation with China as a whole. In China, the process of establishing city partnerships is coordinated by the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries which is referred to as the “public face of the CCP’s UFWD”.⁴²¹

6.4.2 Pluralism

Freedom of association and freedom of expression build the cornerstones of a pluralistic society. Both democratic values are relevant for a successful implementation of Russia’s clandestine diplomacy strategy. Dugin’s distribution of far-right ideologies as well as Russia’s financial and media support for the AfD and the RN are protected under the notion of a pluralistic society. However, by providing resources to radical right-wing parties, Russia is disrupting Germany’s and France’s social cohesion and enhances the

⁴¹⁷ Reuters, “Far-right to win southern French town of Perpignan: exit poll,” accessed July 12, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-election-perpignan/far-right-to-win-southern-french-town-of-perpignan-exit-poll-idUSKBN23Z0PM>.

⁴¹⁸ France 24, “French Local Elections,” accessed July 12, 2021, <https://graphics.france24.com/results-french-local-elections-2020/>; Ben Margulies, “What the municipal elections in France told us about the future of the French party system,” The London School of Economics and Political Sciences, accessed July 12, 2021, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/euoppblog/2020/07/03/what-the-french-municipal-elections-can-tell-us-about-the-future-of-the-french-party-system/>.

⁴¹⁹ Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, “Die AfD stellt ihren ersten Bürgermeister,” accessed July 12, 2021, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/sachsen-die-afd-stellt-ihren-ersten-buergermeister-14359869.html>.

⁴²⁰ Der Spiegel, “Einzigiger AfD-Bürgermeister in Baden-Württemberg tritt ab,” accessed July 12, 2021, <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/einzigiger-afd-buergermeister-in-baden-wuerttemberg-tritt-ab-a-71f753f8-2394-4a90-965b-998387034ceb>.

⁴²¹ Working Group on Chinese Influence Activities in the United States, *China’s Influence & American Interests: Promoting Constructive Vigilance*, (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2019): 188.

political divide. Albeit the Chinese communism appears to contradict Dugin's objective of restoring fascism, the latter praises China's BRI as an Eurasianist project which allows for the Russian-Chinese alliance to oppose the Atlanticist order.⁴²² Similarly, scholars suggest that the BRI has contributed to shifting the perception of Eurasia from exclusively being a Russian entity towards the creation of a Sino-Russian partnership.⁴²³ The newly established alliance between Dugin and China may overcome the radical right-wing parties, in particular the RN's skepticism towards China. As outlined earlier, it seems unlikely that China itself will provide ideological input to the AfD and the RN since their ideas do not seem to be aligned. However, Dugin's closeness to AfD and RN politicians may set an example of how China's philosophy may eventually find its subtle way to the parties.

More direct cooperation between China and the two parties may be established through foundations. French and German freedom of association allows for the founding of organizations, think tanks, and legal entities. China may either partner up with local associations promoting the interests of the RN or AfD or form a new foundation supporting the parties. That China has the means to intervene in Germany and France through organizations is demonstrated by various examples from the past. Initiated in 2004, the Confucius Institutes are officially devoted to promoting the Chinese language and culture. In Europe, most of the institutes are located within German, French, and Italian universities. The institutes, which are managed by an entity belonging to China's Ministry of Education, have frequently been criticized for threatening academic freedom and freedom of expression as well as for providing loyalty to the CCP.⁴²⁴ The former senior Chinese official Li Changchun confirms this assumption by stating that the Confucius Institutes represent "an important part of China's overseas propaganda set-up".⁴²⁵ Confucius Institutes are an impressive example of how China is able to found

⁴²² BRI Quarterly, "Russian Strategist Dr. Alexander DUGIN: The BRI: A Eurasian Road," accessed July 13, 2021, <https://briqjournal.com/en/russian-strategist-dr-alexander-dugin-the-belt-and-road-initiative-eurasian-road>.

⁴²³ Tom Harper, "China's Eurasia: the Belt and Road Initiative and the Creation of a New Eurasian Power," *The Chinese Journal of Global Governance* 5 (2019): 118.

⁴²⁴ Hamilton and Ohlberg, "Hidden Hand," 228 ff.

⁴²⁵ Louis Lim and Anders Furze, "Confucius Institute in NSW education department 'unacceptable' – analyst," *The Guardian*, accessed July 13, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/08/confucius-institute-in-nsw-education-department-unacceptable-analyst>.

organizations that powerfully intervene in public discourse, society, and academia. Stemming from this example, it is reasonable to argue that China could set up further organizations steering public perceptions in favor of the AfD or the RN.

Another powerful tool to influence foreign societies is partnerships with local entities. For instance, the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade partnered with the Deutsch-Chinesische Wirtschaftsvereinigung (German Chinese Business Association).⁴²⁶ The former is an investment promotion agency working on behalf of the Chinese government.⁴²⁷ In France, the same organization maintains strong contacts with the Mouvement des Entreprises de France (Movement of the Enterprises of France) and the Comité France Chine (French Chinese Committee).⁴²⁸ Thus, a potential strategy of China could incorporate to seek partnerships with local corporations or think tanks promoting pro-AfD or pro-RN views.

6.4.3 Free media

In recent years, the CCP massively pushed into the international media landscape to expand the reach of its propaganda.⁴²⁹ In 2011, Li Congjun, then president of China's state-run press outlet Xinhua News Agency, stressed the need to restructure the media world.⁴³⁰ Concerning a potential Chinese engagement in media clandestine diplomacy, three possible channels via which the CCP may distribute its viewpoints are discussed. The channels incorporate Chinese state media operating abroad, cooperation between Chinese and local media outlets, and social media.

First, similar to Russia, Chinese state media shows a strong presence in Western European countries. Chinese media outlets in France and Germany range from TV channels over radio stations to news agencies.⁴³¹ The most prominent Chinese state-owned media

⁴²⁶ Deutsch-Chinesische Wirtschaftsvereinigung e.V., "CCPIT," accessed July 13, 2021, <https://www.dcw-ev.de/de/die-dcw/partner/ccpit.html>.

⁴²⁷ China Council for the Promotion of International Trade, "About CCPIT," accessed July 13, 2021, <https://en.ccpit.org/infoById/40288117521acbb80153a75e0133021e/5>.

⁴²⁸ China Council for the Promotion of International Trade, "CCPIT Chairperson Gao Yan Meets with MEDEF Chairman Bézieux and CFC Co-chair Chaussade," accessed July 13, 2021, <https://en.ccpit.org/infoById/402881177590e27a0176b4713e570118/2>.

⁴²⁹ Hamilton and Ohlberg, "Hidden Hand," 164.

⁴³⁰ Li Congjun, "Toward a New World Media Order," Wall Street Journal, accessed July 09, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704816604576335563624853594>.

⁴³¹ Ambassade de la République Populaire de Chine en République Française, "Médias en langue chinois," accessed July 11, 2021, <http://www.amb-chine.fr/fra/zgzfg/t1067870.htm>.

available in both countries are called China Radio International, China Global Television Network, and Xinhua. Given its strong media presence, China could adopt Russia's media strategy of clearly favoring the AfD and the RN in its media coverage thereby steering the political opinion of its users. Chinese state media may further feature AfD and RN politicians, who regularly criticize German and French national television channels.⁴³² However, despite China's efforts to expand its global media influence, Chinese media outlets do not have as far of a reach as Russia's broadcasting station RT.⁴³³ Therefore, significantly influencing public discourse through Chinese state media may only present a feasible solution for the medium and long run. In order to foster the AfD and the RN in the short run, China increasingly puts efforts into establishing partnerships with Western media institutions.

In 2018 Xinhua signed an agreement with the Deutsche Presse Agentur in which the latter commits itself to regularly distribute the newsletter Xinhua Silk Road Information Service to provide information on the BRI.⁴³⁴ Already in 1957, Xinhua established cooperation with Agence France-Presse, one of the largest global news agencies.⁴³⁵ In 2018, the organizations agreed on further enhancing the long-term partnership in the areas of video and new media.⁴³⁶

In addition to signing cooperation agreements, China is spreading its views through paid media inserts, such as ChinaWatch. This eight-page supplement is produced by China Daily, China's most important and largest English language daily. After successfully distributing its insert in major US newspapers, China extended its strategy to Western

⁴³² L'Obs, "Marine Le Pen critique l'émission politique de TF1," accessed July 12, 2021, <https://www.nouvelobs.com/politique/elections-2007/20070208.OBS1402/marine-le-pen-critique-l-emission-politique-de-tf1.html>; Dietmar Neuerer, "Parteien warnen vor „Staatspropagandasender“ à la AfD," Handelsblatt, accessed July 12, 2021, <https://www.handelsblatt.com/politik/deutschland/ard-und-zdf-im-visier-der-afd-gerade-die-staatsferne-ist-garant-fuer-unabhaengigen-journalismus/13340080-2.html?ticket=ST-6293356-1Mqqrefy5fkzzytOnOX-ap1>.

⁴³³ Annika Schneider and Steffen Wurzel, "Peking investiert in Propaganda," Deutschlandfunk, accessed July 11, 2021, https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/desinformation-aus-china-pekings-investiert-in-propaganda.2907.de.html?dram:article_id=495314.

⁴³⁴ Mu Cui, "Chinas Propaganda in deutschen Medien," Deutsche Welle, accessed July 09, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/de/chinas-propaganda-in-deutschen-medien/a-45656084>; Shen Zhonghao, "Xinhua CEIS, DPA Ink Agreement to Promote Information Exchanges," Xinhua Silk Road Information Service, accessed July 09, 2021, <https://en.imsilkroad.com/p/96223.html>.

⁴³⁵ Xiang Bo, "Xinhua, AFP presidents agree on further cooperation," Xinhuanet, accessed July 09, 2021, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-09/12/c_136604001.htm; Agence France-Presse, "AFP in the world," accessed July 09, 2021, <https://www.afp.com/en/agency/about/afp-world>.

⁴³⁶ Mu Xuequan, "Xinhua, AFP agree to further enhance cooperation," Xinhuanet, accessed July 09, 2021, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-12/13/c_137672092.htm.

European countries.⁴³⁷ At present, Le Figaro publishes a French version of ChinaWatch and in Germany Handelsblatt includes the supplement.⁴³⁸ Until 2018, the Süddeutsche Zeitung, which further allowed for an insert of Xinhua about the Olympics, also regularly published ChinaWatch.⁴³⁹ In their study “Authoritarian Advance” the Mercator Institute for China Studies and the Global Public Policy Institute express concern over the lack of awareness of China's growing influence on Western public media.⁴⁴⁰ By cooperating with established and trusted French and German media institutions, China enhances its credibility with local audiences and significantly increases its reach. Besides seeking cooperation with established media, China may theoretically provide financial support to niche press organizations supporting far-right views.

The cooperation agreements and media supplements show that China has existing channels through which they can spread official Chinese viewpoints without fearing censorship. German and French freedom of press may potentially allow China to use its media collaboration to engage in clandestine diplomacy. For instance, China may use the supplements for subtle advertising of the radical right-wing parties. The fact that the inserts are paid to run creates dependencies and negotiating power regarding their content.

In this context, it is crucial to underline that cooperation between Chinese state media and French or German press outlets do not automatically threaten the journalistic standards of the latter. Articles or newsletters written by foreign media companies are marked as such and are unrelated to general reporting. Media outlets in Germany and France face high competition limiting their willingness to be connected to political parties, even if a party is solely promoted through supplements. However, the potential reluctance of established media concerning discreet AfD, or RN advertising does not stand in the way of more indirect cooperation between China and the political parties.

The International Federation of Journalists found that coverage of China in European countries had become more positive in the wake of the COVID pandemic. Moreover, the

⁴³⁷ Benner et al., “Authoritarian Advance,” 22 f.

⁴³⁸ China Watch, “About us,” accessed July 09, 2021, http://www.chinawatch.cn/static_e/aboutus/; Vanessa Steinmetz, “Anmerkung: Dieser Ausgabe kann Propaganda beiliegen,” Der Spiegel, accessed July 09, 2021, <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/china-verbreitet-propaganda-in-zeitungsbeilagen-im-westen-a-1109205.html>.

⁴³⁹ Benner et al., “Authoritarian Advance,” 23.

⁴⁴⁰ Id. at 2 ff.

study revealed an increase in Chinese content in the European news landscape. For instance, the authors claim that roughly fifty Xinhua articles are carried on the wires of Italian's leading news agency ANSA.⁴⁴¹ During Xi Jinping's state visit to Italy in 2019, ANSA and Xinhua signed a collaboration accord in which they agreed on ANSA distributing an Italian-language Xinhua news service.⁴⁴² Thus, it is plausible that similar collaboration agreements, which can be found in France and Germany, may eventually impact the amount of China-related news. The rise in positive reporting accompanied by the increased frequency of content may eventually shape and steer public opinion towards a more China-friendly course. In the short run, this development seems particularly beneficial for the AfD since it may raise the party's popularity. News coverage may be increasingly aligned with the party's official foreign policy program, in which it openly promotes the expansion of economic, political, and cultural contacts with China.⁴⁴³ Thus, by signing agreements with German established media corporations, China may shape public opinion indirectly favoring the interests of the AfD and therefore subtly engaging in clandestine diplomacy.

In regard to social media, China's diplomatic community is increasingly leveraging Western platforms. This development is particularly evident when considering the steep rise of Twitter accounts maintained by Chinese embassies, ambassadors, or consulates in the last two years. Since the beginning of the anti-government protests in Hong Kong in March 2019, said accounts have increased by approximately 250%.⁴⁴⁴ The greater presence on social media was accompanied by several countries accusing China of consciously spreading disinformation. Particularly during the COVID 19 pandemic, China put efforts into shaping the perceptions of the crisis via manipulated information. For instance, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian released a tweet on his

⁴⁴¹ International Federation of Journalists, *The COVID-19 Story: Unmasking China's Global Strategy*, (Brussels: International Federation of Journalists, 2021) accessed July 20, 2021, https://www.ifj.org/fileadmin/user_upload/IFJ_The_COVID_Story_Report.pdf.

⁴⁴² ANSA, "ANSA-Xinhua collaboration accord signed," accessed July 10, 2021, https://www.ansa.it/english/news/general_news/2019/03/22/ansa-xinhua-collaboration-accord-signed_aeba934e-af01-43a2-b5a3-cb90b4852fc4.html.

⁴⁴³ Alternative für Deutschland, "Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik," accessed July 10, 2021, <https://www.afd.de/aussen-sicherheitspolitik-aussenhandel-entwicklungshilfe/>.

⁴⁴⁴ Jessica Brandt and Bret Schafer, "Five Things to Know About Beijing's Disinformation Approach," Alliance for Securing Democracy, accessed July 11, 2021, <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/five-things-to-know-about-beijings-disinformation-approach/>.

Twitter account stating that the coronavirus originates from the US military.⁴⁴⁵ In his tweet, he refers to an article published by Global Research Canada, which is known for spreading pro-Kremlin views.⁴⁴⁶ Interestingly, there seems to be a strong alignment between pro-Kremlin and Chinese state media outlets. RT and Sputnik represent two of the top five most-retweeted foreign news outlets by China's state-funded media.⁴⁴⁷

Apart from spreading disinformation, the CCP utilizes social media platforms as a means to distribute its ideological viewpoints. By mobilizing paid web commentators, known as the "50 Cent Army", the CCP promotes its activities and decisions thereby influencing public discussion. This content manipulation extends past Chinese borders since it includes platforms like Twitter, which is officially blocked in China.⁴⁴⁸ The fact that the CCP is using social media platforms abroad while banning them in China particularly underlines how China is exploiting the openness and low internet censorship of democracies.⁴⁴⁹ In order to spread pro-Chinese views, China's state media has also leveraged paid advertisements on Facebook and Instagram.⁴⁵⁰

It seems reasonable to argue that China may apply and extend its social media strategy to foster the AfD as well as the RN. For instance, China could roll out paid advertisements for the parties. By purchasing a significant share of advertisement auctions on networks like Facebook, China could secure a frequent and prominent presence of advertisements favoring the AfD or the RN and could target specific demographics that may be sympathetic to their far-right policies. Similarly Chinese platforms such as Tic Toc or WeChat enjoy increasing popularity within the Western hemisphere. The CCP could exert pressure on those platforms to treat AfD or RN content favorably.

⁴⁴⁵ Lijian Zhao (@zlj517), "This article is very much important to each and every one of us. Please read and retweet it. COVID-19: Further Evidence that the Virus Originated in the US," Twitter, accessed July 11, 2021, <https://twitter.com/zlj517/status/1238269193427906560>.

⁴⁴⁶ Brandt and Schafer, "Five Things to Know."

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁸ Gillian Bolsover and Philip Howard, "Chinese Computational Propaganda: Automation, Algorithms and the Manipulation of Information about Chinese Politics on Twitter and Weibo," *Information, Communication & Society* 22, no. 14 (2019).

⁴⁴⁹ Hamilton and Ohlberg, "Hidden Hand," 173.

⁴⁵⁰ Insikt Group, *Beyond Hybrid War: How China Exploits Social Media to Sway American Opinion*, (Somerville: Recorded Future, 2019), accessed July 20, 2021, <https://go.recordedfuture.com/hubfs/reports/cta-2019-0306.pdf>: 2.

Moreover, China could deploy its paid moderators, who so far have only been used as a propaganda instrument on behalf of the CCP, to engage in German and French public discourse. Joining forces with Russian trolls, the 50 Cent Army could present a powerful tool within the strategy of shifting the perception of public opinion in social media. Likewise, as Russian interference is increasingly becoming part of the political agenda of Western democracies, Chinese trolls could fill the gap if Russian trolls were to be successfully combated.

Moreover, China may also adopt Russia's strategy concerning fake profiles, hackers, bots as well as biased coverage. In 2017, the German Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution revealed that China's spy agency created several fake LinkedIn profiles targeting German citizens for recruiting them as informants.⁴⁵¹ Roughly three years after, the US claimed that during the 2020 election campaign Chinese hackers launched attacks on email accounts of people connected to Joe Biden.⁴⁵² Looking at these examples that demonstrate China's efforts to subvert democratic regimes, it seems plausible to argue that the country could extend its tools to promote the AfD or RN in electoral campaigns. By hacking e-mails or obtaining and publicizing unfavorable material about competitors, China may interfere in the democratic electoral process resembling Russia's tools of clandestine diplomacy.

Lastly, China devotes substantial resources to AI, which could enable the country to use deep fake technologies. By doing so China could discredit public officials, who are opposing Chinese interests indirectly giving an edge to AfD and RN politicians. Deep fakes provide an adequate tool because they provide uncertainty and take time to be detected.⁴⁵³

6.4.4 Open economy

Open market economies provide fertile ground for China to engage in clandestine diplomacy. Although less prevalent for Russia, an open economy may enable China to

⁴⁵¹ Deutsche Welle, "China denies using social media to infiltrate German politics and business circles," accessed July 11, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/china-denies-using-social-media-to-infiltrate-german-politics-and-business-circles/a-41733287>.

⁴⁵² BBC, "Russia, China and Iran hackers target Trump and Biden, Microsoft says," accessed July 11, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-54110457>.

⁴⁵³ Dimitrios Linardatos, "Das Ende der Verlässigkeit?," Legal Tribune Online, accessed July 29, 2021, <https://www.lto.de/recht/hintergruende/h/deepfakes-regulierung-europa-eu-schaden-demokratie-manipulation/>.

interfere in foreign political landscapes due to the country's greater economic leverage. In particular, Germany's social market economy could allow China to implement its innovation policy via cross-border strategic mergers and acquisitions.

With regards to clandestine diplomacy, two conceivable scenarios can be derived. First, according to Article 19 (3) in conjunction with Article 11 German Basic Law corporate entities with legal personality can relocate freely within German territory as long as they were founded in Germany. Consequently, German enterprises that are dominated by Chinese shareholders enjoy freedom of movement. This legal framework allows for a strategic positioning of companies. For instance, China could relocate acquired German companies to AfD popular destinations to increase wealth and prosperity in these regions. By enhancing economic success and providing employment opportunities in AfD dominated cities, China presents the party in a favorable light. The fact that such economic upturn may be regarded as a political achievement of the AfD may further boost the party's electoral success. Similarly, the threat of local corporations relocating due to a non-China-friendly policy by the ruling governments could present a sword of Damocles driving citizens to give their votes to the China-friendly AfD in order to avert such a scenario. Within the EU, the possibility of carrying out such strategic relocations is not limited to German companies but also applies to European businesses. According to Article 49 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, China may freely move corporations acquired in one EU member state to France or Germany. Whereas said relocations may increase the AfD's popularity among voters, China may benefit from cooperation with the party by getting access to new investment possibilities on more favorable terms.

Moreover, from 2014 to 2019 Chinese investors have bought shares in more than 175 German companies.⁴⁵⁴ According to Article 7 German Codetermination Act, supervisory boards of German capital companies need to consist of 50% shareholders as well as 50% employees and trade union members.⁴⁵⁵ In stock companies the tasks and responsibilities of supervisory boards include supervising the management board and giving consent for

⁴⁵⁴ Focus Online, "Scharf auf deutsches Know-how: Wie China sich an die Weltspitze kauft," accessed July 13, 2021, https://www.focus.de/finanzen/boerse/schon-fast-200-beteiligungen-scharf-auf-deutschen-know-how-wie-china-sich-an-die-weltspitze-kauft_id_10530272.html.

⁴⁵⁵ Mitbestimmungsgesetz [German Codetermination Act], May 04, 1976, *BGBI I*: 1153. Depending on the corporation size the supervisory board needs to consist of 12, 16, or 20 members.

certain types of business transactions, without which these transactions cannot be implemented.⁴⁵⁶ As outlined earlier AfD supporters are increasingly gaining momentum on the works councils of German automotive concerns. A potential collaboration of Chinese stakeholders and right-wing unions on the supervisory board via a joint vote may steer corporate decision-making towards the interests of China potentially facilitating and accomplishing hostile Chinese strategic acquisitions.

⁴⁵⁶ Aktiengesetz [German Stock Corporation Act], September 06, 1965, *BGBI I*: 1089.

7 Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to provide insights into a potential Chinese clandestine diplomacy strategy targeting Germany and France. More precisely, the present research examined whether the Russian model of clandestine diplomacy could plausibly be adopted by China.

Based on the ideas of the hybrid interference theory put forth by Mikael Wigell, it was argued that not only Russia but also China has an incentive to foster the AfD and the RN. The findings of this study did not confirm any existing structural cooperation between China and the radical parties. However, the thesis developed a theoretical framework addressing the reasons for, and nature of, a potential collaboration.

According to the concept of hybrid interference, non-military means increasingly become a tempting strategy for authoritarian states to interfere in foreign countries. In this regard, democracies are particularly vulnerable to hybrid interference due to their liberal values which include state restraint, pluralism, free media, and open economy. The means deployed in hybrid interference fall into three categories of which one is clandestine diplomacy. The latter refers to covertly cultivating subversive movements and organizations.

Russia is engaging in clandestine diplomacy by supporting the AfD and the RN, two radical right-wing parties that contribute to the growing political as well as societal polarization in France and Germany. This study investigated the various motives of each actor driving them to seek a close alliance and compiled the five areas in which the cooperation predominantly takes place. Apart from drawing a comprehensive picture of Russia's clandestine diplomacy policy, the thesis provided an in-depth analysis of how Russia exploits democratic values. The findings suggest that demarcating legitimate enjoyment of constitutionally guaranteed liberal freedoms from the abuse of rights in exploiting these guarantees is problematic.

Based on the research carried out on Russia, the thesis argues that China may be equally incentivized to employ tools of clandestine diplomacy. Like Russia, China is currently facing strained relationships with the French and German governments impeding the country's possibilities to pursue its strategic interests. In order to avert this threat, China

may similar to Russia look for alternative cooperation partners within Germany and France. The AfD and the RN seem particularly attractive due to the parties' alignment with Chinese policies. All actors devote less attention to environmental protection, share anti-Islamic views, and either have an interest in weakening the EU or hold nationalist and thus Euro-sceptic views. On the other hand, the AfD and the RN may benefit from the cooperation by gaining a foreign policy stage and attracting voters. When comparing the AfD and the RN it is argued that there is a greater alignment between the strategic interests of the AfD and China. This argumentation is derived from the AfD's willingness to participate in the BRI as well as the party's increasing prominence on the works councils of influential German companies.

Following these theoretical explanations, the study confirms that China has more ties with the AfD than with the RN. To be precise, no actual cooperation between the Chinese leadership and the RN could be found. Concerning the AfD, collaboration has been shown on an individual basis and thus cannot be compared to Russia's structural cooperation. However, this does not exclude future cooperation. On the contrary, the thesis has shown that China could adopt some of Russia's clandestine diplomacy tools and may further utilize new and more subtle forms of hostile interference. Potential new Chinese strategies include a strong focus on the establishment of municipal cooperation as well as the foundation and support of pro-AfD or pro-RN associations. Lastly, its greater economic leverage may allow China to undermine Germany's and France's open economy through strategic relocations of acquired companies.

The findings of the present study require further consideration not only in future research but also in the political environment. Evidence of Russian clandestine diplomacy paired with well-founded and plausible arguments for China to follow Russia's example necessitate strong resilience by the targeted countries. For the future of German and French democracy, the question of how to counteract such interference is of urgent importance. Considering China's potential subtle approach of interfering in the political landscapes, the measures taken against Russian clandestine diplomacy may not be applicable to China. Thus, for safeguarding liberal values as well as protecting the unity of the EU, preventive and innovative policy responses need to be found.

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