

# Anton Shekhovtsov: Russian Political Warfare: Essays on Kremlin Propaganda in Europe and the Neighbourhood, 2020–2023 (Volume 271 Of Soviet And Post-Soviet Politics And Society Series)

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**A**nton Shekhovtsov's newest book on Russia, published in 2023 by ibidem Verlag, is a very insightful and valuable addition to the literature on the topic of Russian hybrid warfare. The author is well-established in his field, having contributed with, for instance, notable contributions on Russian and Ukrainian politics, respectively, as well as on (European and Anglo-Saxon) far-right ideas, political actors, and movements, and, finally, the relationship between the far and radical right in Europe to that in the Russian Federation. This volume takes a somewhat different turn, where- by the author focuses on the Kremlin

propaganda and hybrid warfare during the Covid-19 crisis and the immediate post-pandemic period.

Shekhovtsov's decision to produce a volume that consists of several different essays (read: case studies) dedicated to different countries has resulted in a piece that covers an array of issues within African and European political and societal contexts. To achieve this feat, the author provided a theoretical background that the case studies successfully communicate with, mainly by the author discussing the ways different concepts of power and influence are translated into practice. As the author

himself claims, much of the material provided in this volume was produced during the period of his 'cooperation with two organisations, the European Platform for Democratic Elections (EPDE) and Free Russia Foundation (FRF)' (p. 13). This indicates that the author was active (in civic terms), having cooperated with civil society organizations whose ultimate goal is, among others, democratization of the post-Soviet space, most notably Russia. This is undoubtedly a notable cause, bearing in mind the fact that it has been almost two years now since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which has since been executed by an authoritarian regime in Moscow.

The volume consists of seven chapters, is organized logically, and reads very well. Nathalie Loiseau, a Member of the European Parliament who spent two years as the Minister for European Affairs of France, produced a foreword to this volume, indicating that the author managed to connect the academic to the political (executive) spheres: 'this helped him expand his research agenda, and, in general, the field of research on "authoritarian regimes" political warfare against democracy in Europe and its neighborhood' (p. 13).

The first chapter introduces a theoretical background and state-of-the-art, providing a stimulating though relatively brief review of the theoretical concepts his volume communicates with: i.e. power and influence. I especially appreciate the author referring to a relatively new concept set, connecting the notions of sharp, mimetic, and dark power to that of malign influence.

Therefore, he is right to claim that the 'interpretations and definitions of sharp power, mimetic power and dark power suggest that these concepts are related to deception as an instrument employed by authoritarian regimes in their relations with democratic states. Hence, it seems natural that these types of power can be linked to specific forms of what the Soviet forces called *maskirovka*...' (p. 21). After having introduced these, the author continues and speaks of malign influence (concerning political warfare), skilfully listing the forms it assumes (pp. 22–23), the goals it satisfies (pp. 27–28), as well as providing a review of 'areas, tools, and operators' of the Kremlin's malign influence (pp. 30–32). The author concludes the chapter by indicating that the volume should be read as a discussion on said points of interest and the theoretical concepts introduced, obviously concerning different political and social contexts in, roughly speaking, the period of the Covid-19 pandemic and the years immediately following it (pp. 34–35).

The chapters that follow are dedicated to the case studies, the first of which is a discussion of Russian election interference operations in Africa, whereby the author successfully argues how damaging the operations of now-deceased Prigozhin were, focusing on Russian actions aimed at 'concluding and executing business contracts with state and non-state entities, providing private military contractors to secure Prigozhin's business interests; providing different types of support for African politicians and political forces seen as useful for Prigozhin's endeavors. AFRIC,

as a network of agents of influence and loyal election “observers”, belongs to the third category, as its activities aim at advancing political interests of particular African politicians and can be qualified as interference in electoral processes’ (p. 71).

The second chapter discusses the case of the Covid-19 assistance that Russia provided to Italy, showing that ‘Russia was not the only beneficiary of its influence operations in Italy: representatives of German and Italian far-right parties, known for their pro-Kremlin foreign policy attitudes, had an opportunity to showcase their allegiance to Russia by reinforcing its self-imposed image of a well-meaning global power, and, therefore, seek support from Moscow in the future’ (p. 89). This chapter successfully argues the limits of Russian assistance not only in terms of its capabilities but chiefly in terms of meeting its goals: the assistance, though it was meant to ‘dazzle the world’ and show Russian might in assisting an EU country that took one of the hardest hits from the coronavirus, also revealed its sinister, anti-democratic, and illiberal side that was to satisfy the Kremlin’s political goals rather than anything else.

In a similar vein with respect to, above all, satisfying Moscow’s aims, Shekhovtsov discusses Russian aid to Serbia, indicating that at the time, ‘Belgrade was not important for Moscow’s geopolitical game – Russia used its resources instead to woo the EU and NATO member, Italy. Yet the absence of Russian aid undermined the Kremlin’s own narrative about the EU being “feeble” and “slow” in Serbia in com-

parison to China. And as Russia finally started sending aircrafts with humanitarian aid to Serbia after the EU had promised dozens of millions of euros to the country, the Kremlin media largely abandoned its anti-EU messaging in the context of the coronavirus-related developments in the Western Balkans’ (p. 106). The author is correct to claim that China benefitted the most from a somewhat partial Russian pandemic withdrawal, as Beijing has since solidified its position and influence in Serbia.

The following three chapters, dedicated to France, Poland, and Germany, are equally interesting. The one on France speaks of ‘the Kremlin’s use of Kadyrov as an instrument of its political warfare against France’ (p. 127), manifesting how and why Moscow was ready to abuse (and did do so) the outspoken nature of one of its politicians who relentlessly attacked French democracy, questioning the position of the Muslim population in France, its rights, and, above all, indicating supposed racism at the state level. The criticism served Moscow’s interests by undermining Macron’s presidency.

The chapter on Poland turns to the case of Russian ties to far-right individuals and organizations, such as Janusz Gabriel Niedźwiecki, who ‘had transformed from an activist of a marginal and non-registered far-right party into a coordinator of pro-Kremlin activities and, ultimately, into an agent of Moscow’s influence – albeit an unimpressive one, as by the time of his arrest in May 2021 none of his projects had effectively taken off. This transformation is not unique: a significant number of far-right politicians, especially

of anti-American persuasion, engage in pro-Kremlin activities' (pp. 170–171). The cases of France and Poland both show how skilful Moscow was in abusing whatever means necessary to achieve its foreign policy goals.

The last chapter, the one on Germany, is produced in a somewhat similar manner as the previous one, treating the issue of Moscow's abuse of extremist circles in this country by zooming in on the career of now-deceased journalist and far-right activist Ochsenreiter, who 'had been active in German far-right circles since the 1990s. In 2011, he became an editor-in-chief of the German far-right magazine *Zuerst!* (*At First!*), which – in the words of its editorial staff (probably Ochsenreiter himself)' – promoted the interests of, above all, the German nation, and tried to guard the European cultural heritage that he felt was increasingly threatened (p. 174).

The book ends with a postscript that brings to the reader's attention that the

material in this volume, bar the last chapter, had been produced before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, providing an update on the case studies discussed.

This volume comes at just about the right time, discusses a highly relevant topic, is written in a language that even those who are not akin to political literature may enjoy, and underlines that we are living at a time when authoritarian states and their regimes will do whatever is in their power to humiliate, undermine, and destroy democracy, which needs to be defended and cherished, for it may be lost. Therefore, the volume should be approached as a piece occupying a spot at an intersection between academic literature in political science and the genre of nonfiction, with its essay-like structure and mode of delivery.

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