EK Strategic Communications Center

Russia Watch October 2025

Russia 2025: From Religious Procession to Fascist Congress

Contradictory Kremlin Narratives, Influence Operations, and Flashpoints

ekstrategies.org

EK Strategic Communications Center

EK Stratcom is a nexus of information, policy, and resilience in Eurasia and beyond. We provide expertise in strategic communications, analyze and shape key narratives, and support vulnerable societies.

Drawing on 20+ years of experience in media, GR, and PR, and over 12 years in analysis and strategic communications, EK Stratcom is built around a core team of exiled Russian professionals.

Since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, EK Stratcom has served as a key mechanism for real-time disinformation monitoring, analytical reporting, and targeted messaging — reaching millions inside Russia and advising Western governments on Kremlin FIMI operations.

ekstrategies.org

Table of contents

Executive Summary	4
League of Anti-Globalists	8
Malofeev's International Role	12
Religious Procession in Central Moscow and Contradictory Signals	15

Executive Summary

On September 22, from the publications of the "Orthodox oligarch," founder of the ultranationalist media holding Tsargrad and one of the key sponsors and organizers of conservative initiatives inside and outside Russia, Konstantin Malofeev, it became known that ten days earlier, on September 12, the congress of the "International League of Anti-Globalists 'Paladins'" took place in Mariinsky Palace in St. Petersburg.

The event itself became part of the Kremlin's strategy of building hybrid influence channels, through which Moscow, via proxy structures, seeks to consolidate European far-right movements and use them to destabilize the political situation in Western countries. According to EK Strategic Communications Center sources in Russian nationalist circles, the congress in fact discussed the creation of an analogue to an "international legion," including for coordinated violent provocations.

During the same period, another symbolic event unfolded in Russia's domestic politics: Moscow hosted the largest mass turnout since the start of the full-scale war — a religious procession, which Patriarch Kirill estimated at 400,000 people, while Moscow City Hall cited the figure of 40,000. These two simultaneous events proved significant for understanding the Kremlin's strategy: outward expansion through far-right networks, and internally, the search for controlled forms of mobilization, each carrying deep contradictions.

The "Paladins" conference was notable for its lineup: delegations from twenty far-right organizations across Europe, Africa, and Latin America came to St. Petersburg. As ideological voices, Alain de Benoist, Alain Soral, and Alexander von Bismarck addressed participants via video link. European politicians also attended, whose identities the organizers unsuccessfully tried to obscure: among them, Hamburg AfD deputy Robert Risch, known for his deportation slogans, and Olga Petersen, a former AfD deputy who returned to Russia after a scandal over election monitoring.

From France came Yvan Benedetti, a nationalist leader previously convicted for Holocaust denial; from South Africa, Francois van der Merwe of the Bittereinders movement, infamous for racist rhetoric; and from Spain, representatives of Falange and Democracia Nacional. On the Russian side, participants included Malofeev himself, philosopher and "Russian world" ideologue Alexander Dugin, United Russia deputy Konstantin Chebykin, and representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church.

The conference concluded with a declaration establishing the "International Sovereign League," pledging to fight "liberal democracy" and "globalism," and to support one another organizationally and in the media. In reality, it looked like the institutionalization of an international far-right network centered in St. Petersburg — the culmination of Malofeev's years-long efforts.

Since 2018, Malofeev, through his structures Katehon and Tsargrad, has consistently built contacts with far-right politicians and movements in Europe. He was linked with Italy's Lega Nord under Matteo Salvini — the country's largest nationalist party, known for Euroskepticism and anti-migrant rhetoric. Similarly, he engaged with Jordan Bardella, Marine Le Pen's successor in France's National Rally, viewed as a young leader with solid pro-Russian sympathies. In Germany, his partners included deputies of Alternative for Germany (AfD) — officially designated by German authorities as extremist — as well as affiliated publicist Manuel Ochsenreiter, who fled to Russia after being accused of organizing an arson attack on a Hungarian cultural center in Uzhgorod.

In France, his longtime ally was Fabrice Sorlin, founder of the Catholic movement Chrétienté Solidarité and a leader among identitarians, known for unfurling the "DPR" flag during the 2018 Yellow Vest protests. In Bulgaria, Nikolai Malinov, head of the "Russophiles" movement, played a key role; he was indicted for espionage in favor of Russia, with links to Malofeev documented in the case.

In 2023, Malofeev and Russian world ideologue Alexander Dugin launched the International Russophile Movement (IRM)

to formalize these scattered ties into an institutional network. The IRM included not only longtime European partners but also new allies, such as Nkosi Zwelivelile Mandela — Nelson Mandela's grandson, increasingly involved in pro-Russian initiatives in Africa. Thus, the September 12, 2025 forum in St. Petersburg was not an isolated event but the logical continuation of years of work to form an "alternative international," positioning Russia as the center of far-right and anti-liberal consolidation.

Yet despite close cooperation with security structures and the foreign policy bloc, Konstantin Malofeev is not integrated into the state's vertical of power. The Kremlin deliberately keeps him in the role of a "proxy" — an operator through whom it can run toxic projects while retaining plausible deniability. This duality was evident with the forum: unlike the procession, it was not publicly advertised, Malofeev himself wrote about it only ten days later, and St. Petersburg's legislative speaker Alexander Belsky claimed ignorance of the participants, though he had sent a greeting to them.

The national propaganda outlet Moskovsky Komsomolets even published a sharp piece titled "Fascists Enter Leningrad", stressing that attendees included people who glorify Hitler and the "Blue Division." Unlike the unanimous propaganda support of the procession, this criticism underscored the contradiction between the Kremlin's "export" line and its domestic narrative, where the war in Ukraine is legitimized as a continuation of the "fight against fascism." In the anniversary year of WWII's end, visible sympathy for European far-right figures was especially dissonant. The Kremlin therefore opted to conceal direct involvement, shifting risk onto Malofeev and his network.

In domestic politics, the key event was the Moscow-wide religious procession on September 7. For the capital, it became the largest demonstration since the invasion — comparable in size to the January 2021 protests against Alexei Navalny's arrest and his funeral in 2024, which drew 16,500 people. Formally, it appeared as a religious ritual, but its political coloring was unmistakable: activists of the nationalistic "Russian Community" (backed by Malofeev) and "Sorok Sorokov" marched,

and nationalist slogans such as “We are Russians — God is with us” sounded alongside prayers.

Insider channel VChK-OGPU wrote that “the procession caused serious panic in the power vertical. What seemed like a neutral event led by Patriarch Kirill to display unity between believers and the state actually brought together up to 120,000 participants, many of them well-organized young people — soccer ultras, veterans, members of the Russian Community, and other nationalist groups. They came to show themselves as a force, frightening both Moscow and federal authorities.”

Another insider channel, Nezygar, took the opposite line, framing it as “the legalization of managed nationalism” and a turn toward traditionalism. These divergent interpretations reflect real splits within the elite: for some in the administration and security services, any ideologization is dangerous because it fragments society and threatens systemic balance, while others view it as a resource for mobilization.

In practice, the numbers demonstrate limited mobilization potential: even with nationalists and “bussed-in participants,” turnout looked modest for a city of 15 million and was comparable to opposition actions from a decade ago. For the Kremlin, this means mobilization rests on only a narrow segment of loyalists willing to appear in the streets, and overreliance on ideology risks backfiring. That is why central propaganda narratives remain maximally non-ideological — “economic stability,” contrasts with the “chaotic 1990s,” the fight against “fascism.”

Anything beyond that, as September’s events showed, is outsourced to intermediaries like Malofeev or becomes the subject of disputes within the elite, equally fearful of both street apathy and over-energized radical mobilization.

League of Anti-Globalists

On September 12, 2025, the founding conference of the "International League of Anti-Globalists 'Paladins'" took place in Mariinsky Palace in St. Petersburg. The organizers were businessman Konstantin Malofeev, often referred to as the "Orthodox oligarch," and pro-Kremlin philosopher Alexander Dugin. Despite official statements, the format and lineup of participants show that the event's main goal was not so much propaganda as the establishment and deepening of contacts with foreign far-right movements. This is also indicated by the fact that information about the event was delayed: Malofeev published his first post about it only on September 22 — ten days after the conference ended.

The delegations were international yet ideologically homogeneous. Representatives of twenty far-right organizations from Europe, Latin America, and Africa came to St. Petersburg. The forum concluded with the signing of a declaration establishing the "International Sovereign League." Participants pledged to fight "liberal democracy," "satanic propaganda," and "globalism," as well as to provide each other with media platforms, safe havens, and organizational support for pressuring governments. Shortly after the event, social media featured joint photos of delegates with flags and slogans like "Resistance is united. The struggle has begun."

Journalists discovered that among the so-called "hidden" delegates — those whose faces were pixelated on official photos to complicate identification — was Hamburg parliament deputy Robert Risch from AfD. His political program is built around slogans of "defending German culture," restricting migration, and deporting "criminal foreigners." Risch's participation in the conference, despite obvious reputational risks, reflects the faction of AfD pursuing closer ties with Russian political circles and using Russian venues to legitimize its own ideas. Alongside him was Olga Petersen, a former Hamburg AfD deputy originally from Omsk. In 2024 she returned to Russia after a scandal involving her role in Russian elections,

which prompted scrutiny in Germany. Petersen has actively promoted pro-Russian narratives, took part in Russian elections as an "observer," and recorded campaign videos from the Ukrainian front. Her expulsion from AfD only strengthened her ties with Russian structures.

Among foreign guests, French politician Yvan Benedetti stood out — leader of the French Nationalist Party, expelled by Marine Le Pen from the National Front for extremism. He has been repeatedly convicted for Holocaust denial, including a €10,000 fine for publicly "contesting crimes against humanity." In 2022, Benedetti traveled to annexed Crimea as an "international observer" at the "referendum," directly legitimizing Russian aggression.

From South Africa came Francois van der Merwe, a representative of the radical Boer movement Bittereinders. The organization presents itself as a defender of "white South Africans" and is notorious for racist rhetoric. In 2024, van der Merwe was fined for incitement to violence during protests. His presence in St. Petersburg underlined Russia's intent to unite far-right forces not only in Europe but also globally, exploiting anti-liberal and anti-migrant sentiments.

Three figures provided the ideological reinforcement for the "Paladins" via video link. French philosopher Alain de Benoist — founder of the "New Right" concept, whose ideas on "cultural identity" inspire conservative movements worldwide, including in Russia. Alain Soral — French-Swiss polemicist and conspiracy theorist, notorious for antisemitism and Holocaust denial, openly supports the Kremlin and justifies the war against Ukraine as a "fight against globalism." Alexander von Bismarck — descendant of German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, sympathetic to German right-wing forces and advocating closer ties between Europe and Russia. Their involvement underscored that the St. Petersburg forum was a platform for institutionalizing an international far-right network with Moscow aspiring to be its center.

The forum became the largest international far-right gathering in Russia in recent years. Whereas the Moscow "Dialogue

of Nations" conferences of 2015–2016, organized by Alexander Ionov, mostly drew separatists and fringe activists, the 2025 event involved openly fascist organizations. Equally significant was its venue — Mariinsky Palace, the regional parliament of St. Petersburg, with support from United Russia deputies and the Russian Orthodox Church. This points to the gradual legalization of radical nationalism and the expansion of the far-right in Russia against the backdrop of war and hardline anti-migrant policy.

The Kremlin did not openly promote the "Paladins" conference, wary of the subject's toxicity: the dissonance with the official campaign portraying the war as a "fight against fascism" was too stark. For the general public, focus was placed on the "facade" — a religious procession down Nevsky Prospekt led by Patriarch Kirill, featuring soldiers and the nationalist "Russian Community" movement. The congress itself took place in the legislative assembly hall: attendees included Malofeev, Dugin, and United Russia deputy Konstantin Chebykin, with assembly speaker Alexander Belsky sending greetings. After media reports about the radicalism of some delegates, Belsky publicly backpedaled: "We did not know who would be invited… the event was not ours."

The major national propaganda outlet Moskovsky Komsomolets ran a front-page article titled: "Fascists Enter Leningrad: Warm Welcome in St. Petersburg's Legislative Assembly." The paper noted that "among the participants were those who glorify Hitler's 'crusade' and its fighters" and recalled the delegation from Spain's Falange, heirs of the "Blue Division" that took part in the blockade of Leningrad. Journalists concluded: "Do the city's fathers not realize that such guests should never have been allowed anywhere near Mariinsky Palace — or the city itself?"

This situation highlighted Malofeev's special role. The Kremlin uses him as a proxy — a convenient intermediary for radical projects, while publicly distancing itself. On one hand, his structures provide platforms for far-right mobilization; on the other, he himself often becomes a target of criticism, even when acting in the state's interests.

Notably, the September 12, 2025 conference opened with a minute of silence for slain American right-wing activist Charlie Kirk, a supporter of Donald Trump. This gesture fit neatly into Malofeev's strategy of cultivating ties with the U.S. MAGA movement. He had earlier promoted the slogan "MAGA in Russia," invited conspiracy theorist Alex Jones and Errol Musk (Elon Musk's father) to Moscow, and presented his "One-Story Russia" project in the spirit of Trumpist "traditional America."

In the same vein, in March 2023, the International Russophile Movement (IRM) was established under Malofeev and Dugin's guidance. According to internal documents, its goal was to form a global ally network to legitimize Russian policy and pressure the West. The "American line" found its symbol in blogger Jackson Hinkle, leader of the marginal "MAGA-Communism" current, banned from platforms for disinformation but made into a public figure in Russia. He met with Lavrov, traveled to occupied territories, and even spoke at the UN as part of the Russian delegation. Thus, the minute of silence for Kirk was part of a broader trend: Malofeev's structures seek allies among U.S. right-wing populists and turn them into media mouthpieces, packaging it all into an "alternative international" where Russia is cast as an "Orthodox America of the future" and MAGA's ally against "liberal globalism."

Malofeev's International Role

Konstantin Malofeev remains a convenient proxy force for the Kremlin — a figure it can use where the state needs to project radicalism while maintaining plausible distance. His projects — from the "Safe Internet League" to Tsargrad and the "Brotherhood of Academists" — reproduce a hardline version of the official ideology, allowing the Kremlin to test conservative and nationalist narratives without direct state endorsement. Domestically, he builds platforms for anti-migrant and far-right mobilization, while abroad he acts as intermediary and network operator in dealings with radicals.

Documents and leaks show that it was Malofeev's structures that oversaw contacts with Italian and German far-right figures. In 2018, a meeting was held at Moscow's Metropol Hotel with Gianluca Savoini, confidant of League leader Matteo Salvini. The League (formerly "Northern League") is Italy's largest nationalist party, known for its anti-migrant and Euroskeptic rhetoric. The meeting discussed financing the party through oil schemes; the transcript was published by L'Espresso. In 2019, leaked correspondence revealed that intermediaries linked to Malofeev coordinated even the postponement of Putin's visit to Italy. The move was designed to dispel accusations that Salvini was a "Kremlin puppet": otherwise, the visit would have coincided with the European Parliament elections and appeared as direct support for his campaign.

The ties extended further. In the same year, Malofeev's associates met in Rome with Jordan Bardella, then leader of Marine Le Pen's National Rally youth wing. According to an internal election brief prepared by Malofeev's circle, Bardella was described as "an excellent politician with pro-Russian views." That year, Mediapart published a photograph taken at the office of the Italian trade union General Labor Union, where Bardella and Gianluigi Ferretti were pictured alongside Malofeev's son Kirill, Tsargrad host Andrei Afanasyev, and Katehon director Mikhail Yakushev.

Yakushev, according to OFAC's 2022 sanctions list, oversaw Malofeev's international contacts, including the channels to Salvini and Savoini.

French politician Fabrice Sorlin had been connected with Malofeev since at least 2012, as confirmed by Katehon correspondence and documents. In 2018, Sorlin publicly unfurled a DPR flag during the "Yellow Vest" protests — a fact recorded in French court documents. Another French ally, Yvan Benedetti, leader of the Nationalists, was listed as an "international observer" at the sham 2018 Crimean referendum.

In Germany, the work ran through deputies of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party. Correspondence published by Correctiv described plans for joint forums, and in 2019 the executive director of the People's Diplomacy Foundation, Vladimir Titov, wrote to political strategist Oleg Matveychev that AfD deputy Waldemar Herdt was "a ready-made mouthpiece for Europe" and that his initiative to create a "European Christian Coalition" was set to receive financing from "Kostya M." (Malofeev).

The Orthodox oligarch's role also surfaced in darker episodes. German far-right publicist Manuel Ochsenreiter, accused of organizing the arson of a Hungarian cultural center in Uzhgorod, fled to Russia in 2019. Between 2019 and 2021, he was under the protection of Malofeev's structures. This was confirmed by visa documents and correspondence with his aides, published by the Dossier Center.

In 2023, Malofeev became one of the initiators of the International Russophile Movement (IRM). Internal documents explicitly stated that the initiative was backed by him and Alexander Dugin. The IRM included his long-time partners — Fabrice Sorlin, Bulgarian politician Nikolai Malinov (earlier indicted by Bulgaria's Prosecutor's Office for espionage in favor of Russia and for ties with Malofeev) — as well as new allies such as Nkosi Zwelivelile Mandela, grandson of Nelson Mandela, whose participation was recorded in the official program of the March 2023 congress.

Malofeev's structures systematically build far-right and conservative networks in Europe and beyond. His initiatives

have become part of the Kremlin's hybrid policy: through him pass negotiations, funding, and media support for Moscow's key allies. At the same time, his role is convenient in that the Kremlin can, at least in theory, always disavow his initiatives — though in practice they are deeply embedded in the architecture of Russian state power and intelligence.

Religious Procession in Central Moscow and Contradictory Signals

On September 7, 2025, Moscow hosted the All-Moscow religious procession, timed to the feast day of the Assembly of Moscow Saints. According to official city hall data, about 40,000 people took part, walking six kilometers from the Cathedral of Christ the Savior to the Novodevichy Convent. Participants included activists from ultranationalist pro-war movements such as the "Russian Community," "Sorok Sorokov," and others — roughly two thousand people, according to the SOVA Center.

In his address, Patriarch Kirill told the crowd that he was "glad to see so many people, a large number of young people, representatives of Orthodox civic organizations," and even cited a figure of "400,000 participants." According to the ROC, this was the largest religious procession since 1918. In the crowd, people chanted religious slogans like "Christ is Risen — Truly He is Risen" and "Glory to God for Everything," but also nationalist ones such as "We are Russians — God is with us" and "Moscow — Katechon." State and propaganda media covered the event extensively in a positive light (1),(2),(3) — in contrast to the closed conference of the far-right "League of Anti-Globalists 'Paladins,'" organized by Konstantin Malofeev in St. Petersburg on September 12. Thus, the procession became the largest public demonstration in Moscow since the funeral of Alexei Navalny in March 2024 (no fewer than 16,500 participants, according to the "White Counter") and the January 2021 protests against his arrest (up to 40,000 people).

Reactions in insider Telegram channels were contradictory. According to VChK-OGPU, a channel specializing in leaks from the security services, "the procession caused serious panic in the corridors of power. What seemed like a neutral event, organized by Patriarch Kirill to demonstrate unity between believers and the state, in reality gathered up to 120,000

people. A significant portion were well-organized young men — football fans, veterans, members of the 'Russian Community' and other nationalist groups. They came to present themselves as a serious force, thereby frightening Moscow and federal authorities."

At the same time, the "Nezygar" channel, which claims insider sources in the presidential administration, argued that the event instead demonstrated a "course toward traditionalism and managed nationalism" and effectively legalized the nationalist segment as a pillar of the regime. At first glance, these assessments seem contradictory, but in reality, they reflect different positions within the elite: for some in the administration and security bloc, ideological mobilization is dangerous, while for others it is a resource that can be directed to serve state needs.

The actual numbers point to a limited mobilization potential. Despite active campaigning in parishes, broad coverage in state media, and Patriarch Kirill's inflated estimates, the real number of participants was between 20,000 and 40,000. For a city of 15 million, this looks modest. For comparison: regional religious processions in Yekaterinburg and St. Petersburg in 2018 drew 110,000–150,000 believers (according to diocesan data). Even factoring in nationalist organizations and "busloads of participants from the Moscow suburbs," as reported by Kommersant, the final figure shows weak engagement of urban residents in religious and nationalist agendas.

In practice, turnout was comparable to opposition rallies from a decade ago. This indicates that a significant part of society remains apathetic and inert, and the Kremlin can rely only on a limited segment of loyalists willing to take to the streets.

More from EK Stratcom

Explore more insights and analysis

Analytical reports on disinformation trends in Russia and Kremlin FIMI campaigns across Europe

ekstrategies.org/insights-and-analysis

Explore our projects

We create strategies to address geopolitical challenges, reach wide audiences, and support resilient communities

ekstrategies.org/projects

Contact us to explore collaboration

We support international organizations and national governments in navigating complex geopolitical realities, analyzing disinformation, developing and implementing communication strategies

partners@ekstrategies.org

Media enquiries

One address for all press requests: comment, interviews, background briefings and data questions

press@ekstrategies.org

Get our analysis by email

A weekly digest of EK Stratcom research: in-depth reports, Kremlin FIMI Weekly, Russia Watch, Kremlin Ratings Tracker, and more

ekstrategies.org/subscribe

Follow us on social media

x.com/EKStratcom
linkedin.com/company/ek-strategic-communications-center

EK Strategic Communications Center

ekstrategies.org