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Geopolitics

We Asked: Geopolitics and the Left (Part I: Russia & the West)

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The latest wave of confrontation between Russia and the West—from the Skripal affair and the following diplomat expulsions and sanctions on Russia to the gassing of Douma residents most likely perpetrated by the Assad regime and the resulting US-UK-French bombing raids on Syria—rarely left the front pages of mainstream media. LeftEast has until now resisted the topic: it is not quite our fight. Not to sound nostalgic, but if the original Cold War, for all the devastation of its proxy wars and the dictatorships it bred, created conditions that sometimes favored the processes of decolonization, the victory of the Civil Rights movement in the United States, and the rise of the welfare state in the West, this New one has been an unadulterated race to the bottom that can only impoverish the public sphere and hurt ordinary people. But the level of media hysteria and ruling-elite bellicosity, both in Russia and Western countries, has reached such proportions that our silence has become increasingly untenable. It also raises the broader question of the left's relationship to geopolitics—a topic we will explore next week. To put our finger on the pulse of leftist thinking about the tensions between Russia and the West, We asked four comrades. Here are their responses:

by Rossen Djagalov

Ilya Budraitskis, a Russian publicist and historian

Today, when the threat of open military clash between US and Russian forces in Syria has become real, it is important to clarify the anti-militarist position of the international left. It seems, that much of the Western left continues to reproduce the old Cold-war patterns, with the imperialist camp on one side, and a kind of "progressive" or at least "peaceful" on the other. Of course, the military strength of NATO, or even US, and Russia is incomparable, but Putin's Russia remains an imperialist force not only in the post-Soviet space, but also in the Middle East and increases its presence in Africa. It is important to emphasize Russia's role as an important player on the international market of weapons. Unlike the USSR, contemporary Russia has no social or political strategy alternative to the Western bloc. Its main goal, starting from 2014, could be defined as a "struggle for recognition" among the club of global powers. Thus, Putin's "war of nerves" aims to force the West to make such a deal through continued escalation. From the beginning the Russian presence in Syria played such a function.

Another feature of the current model of the Russian state is the existence of different groups inside the state apparatus that act according their own logic. This could be described as a "privatization" of the some elements of the state, whether we are talking about state corporations, the secret services, or the army. The actions of these groups follow the private interests of their leaderships as they try to influence the main direction of the country's foreign policy. We can see it in some of the international scandals that involve Russia: from illegal private units fighting on the side of Assad's army in Syria, to the role of the Russian diplomats in cocaine traffic from the Argentina or Skripal's poisoning. In the last case, of course, it's hard to imagine that it was directly Putin who ordered the use of the gas, but could be possible that some groups inside the secret services tried to gain from the further escalation. This permanent "external threat" became a key element for the justification of regime's policy inside the country: from the Russian version of "austerity measures" to the repressions and even tortures of the opposition. [\[1\]](#)

For the international left in the West and in Russia today it becomes imperative to expose the fake rhetoric of the Cold war from both sides—the demonization and "othering" Russia in the West, as well as its self-presentation as a victim of imperialism and fighter for the global justice.

Ana Tomić is a Croatian social anthropologist

Speaking of Croatia's response to the tensions between Russia and the West, as a puny member of NATO, Croatia has subscribed to the military aggression of the United States and its allies towards Syria, which has earned it expressed gratitude from the US Embassy in Zagreb. Croatia's support has not been called into question in the mainstream media which stands as an exclamation of the demonization of Russia that the Western mainstream media has been serving to its audience almost daily in the last three or four years. Russia has been blamed for all the world's ills - Ukraine, Brexit, Trump, the refugee crisis, spying, poisoning, and a plethora of other unfounded accusations treated as facts and which translates a deep anti-Russian sentiment and which dismantles the springs of anti-Russian and anti-Putin rhetoric that have the effect of pushing ever further the chances of true reconciliation. There is a problem with information in the West, pretended more objective, more critical, and having a charter of deontology. But anti-communism has been instrumentalised during the cold war to wage American anti-Russian war, since it has continued way after the USSR. If you type "Putin covers" on Google images, there is a surge of magazines with covers of Putin-Stalin, Putin-autocrat, Putin-Hitler, Putin-despot, Putin-expansionist, Putin-spy ... it's absurd.

Pavel Kudiukin, ? Russian social democrat and co-chair of the labor union University Solidarity

The term "tension" seems too mild to account for this full-fledged Cold War, true, with some elements of an arranged match. The last element is a function of the embeddedness of the current Russian elite in a West-dominated world system, something absent in the original Cold War.

What is happening is an inter-imperialist rivalry and the Russian leadership's attempt to improve its position in the world-system using military blackmail. At the same time, its actions seem awkward and strategically miscalculated. The Russian leadership is pushing the country further into isolation with which it deepens its problems and reduces the possibility, already not very likely, of exiting its semi-peripheral status.

For the left it would be a serious mistake to consider this conflict as a manifestation of a "national-liberation struggle" or "a struggle against American imperialism" and this way justify the adventurous policies of Putin's team, looking upon it as an ally. The softened formula of this position says "help the weaker imperialism against the stronger one." Yet Russian imperialism is characterized by its reactionary nature, or using Lenin's old characterization, its "military-feudal" features." The position of the left should be against military hysterics among all parts of the conflict. In Russia and its neighbors that means primarily struggling against Russian imperialism and expansionism, for solidarity of laboring and democratic forces of our countries, against xenophobia in all forms.

Philippe Alcoy is member of the editorial board of the French website RevolutionPermanente.fr and of the Revolutionary Communist Current of the New Anticapitalist Party.

The relations between Russia and the West are at the lowest level since the end of the Cold War. Today we have an international context very different from that of the 90s, when the capitalist restoration in Central and Eastern Europe and in USSR allowed imperialist countries to affirm that it was the "final victory" of capitalism over communism (and even over any other alternative to capitalism), and the USA to be the uncontested imperialist hegemon.

With the international economic crisis of 2007-2008, this situation started to change. The failure of the US-led invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan marked a relative but real decline in the world hegemony of the north-American imperialist, even if today there is no new imperialist power to challenge the USA.

It is in this context that we must understand this new offensive of Western powers against Russia. Not that Russia is

challenging USA hegemony (it is really far from that). We are not in a "new Cold War". In the end, the conflict is not even between Russia and "the West". It is a move from the USA to prevent any international power, or international alliance from challenging its hegemony as the main imperialist power.

Today it is not only the US-Russia relationship that is at a very low level but also the US-Germany links that are in trouble. Germany is a bigger potential threat for USA domination than Russia. What the USA is trying to do is prevent any future alliance between Germany, Russia and by extension China. This could be a real challenge for the North American imperialist hegemony.

In this sense, the Skripal affair was an important victory for Trump and the USA. It allowed to recreate, at least temporarily, a "Western bloc" against Russia and to weaken even more the relations between the EU (Germany) and Putin.

Russia is not really an imperialist power but a regional power able to influence some international affairs. Its military power and its positions in international organisations (inherited mainly from the Soviet period) create the "illusion of world super power". But since the end of the Cold War, the Russian economy has become almost completely dependent on production and export of gas and oil (which technology is largely imported from imperialist countries); its main area of influence is the former Soviet space; the central role it plays in Syria today is mostly the result of the huge blow it received in Ukraine in 2014. Moreover, with the Western offensive Russia is becoming a "pariah state".

Does this all mean that the working-class movement and the revolutionary left must see in Putin a kind of "anti imperialist"? No. Putin is on the top of a reactionary regime; he is the face of contemporary Russian capitalism. And, as we can see, to defend the interest of Russian capitalists he is able to produce humanitarian disasters, massacres, and support murderous dictators as Assad in Syria.

But it will be impossible to fight Putin's influence among the Russia working and popular classes if the revolutionary left doesn't has a clear anti-imperialist stance. Putin is a result of the imperialist offensive in Russia in the 1990s, representing Russian capitalism's reactionary answer to that offensive.

The revolutionary left must condemn and denounce the Western offensive against Russia, including the economic sanctions, which hurt not so much oligarchs but the Russian working class and the large majority of ordinary people. Of course, this should never mean expressing political support for Putin. A class stance against imperialist aggression is the better way to fight Putin, too.

The policy of the revolutionary left must be a class policy, independent from either imperialists and local ruling classes. In the current imperialist offensive the main point to note and denounce is that if, without any evidence, they are able to create a "united front" of the most powerful imperialist countries against Russia, what could they do against countries like Bolivia, Philippines, Moldova or Zimbabwe? This kind of imperialist offensive in the end helps Putin strength his power at home and his influence among the working and popular classes.

Pinar Donmez, a researcher interested in learning more about theories of state, crisis and restructuring, critical theory and dynamics of (de-)politicisation.

This is a very difficult and complex question the answers to which have serious repercussions so it should not be approached in simplified, schematic and binary manner. I think any plausible answer should start with unpacking our understanding of the state and how it should be conceived in relation to global capitalism and its crisis today. Our (mis-) conceptions and (under-) analysis of a neatly demarcated West vs. East rooted in Eurocentric frameworks also need critical interrogation. The mainstream media and political analysis, not only on the recent tensions but more

broadly, often configure the state as a demarcated and monolithic unit and the so-called 'inter-state' system and relations as a mere sum of these stand-alone units in rivalry with each other. This produces a very simplistic and misleading narration of the actual dynamics and relations of domination not only between but within these seemingly separate spatialities of capitalism. There is already a lot of commentary on the misinformation politics from all sides as to which state did what and allied with who on the basis of which particular national interest. But more fundamentally, it is this understanding of power and its spatiality which serves as a tool of mystification and disguise in so far as the tensions are treated and analysed in the allegedly revived Cold War terms and metaphors. This happens in the leftist analyses of this particular conflict as well and on how 'the international' is understood more broadly [2].

So it seems more plausible to me to take the global class relations as the starting point of a sober analysis of the capitalist restructuring that have been taking place since 1989. This requires the consideration of states as part of a single system where power is allocated between the territorial forms of global social relations [3]

The focus on social relations therefore allows us to see beyond the statist geopolitical analyses to account for the global as well as the domestic dynamics of crisis, struggle and organisation. So my short answer would be to assess the ongoing crisis and bottlenecks of the global capital accumulation and circuit dynamics comprehensively and explore why this particular content assumes the form of appearance of the escalation of military conflict at regional and global scales in the current political juncture [4]. This is important in order not to lose sight of the class character of these tensions and concentrate on forming alliances and solidarities with peoples and communities who will decisively be on the receiving end of the consequences of war politics in all the authoritarian capitalist countries that are party to this conflict.

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[LeftEast](#)

[1] <https://therussianreader.com/tag/russian-anarchists/>

[2] Saleh Y. A. (2017) 'The Syrian Cause and Anti-Imperialism', <https://www.aljumphuriya.net/en/content/syrian-cause-and-anti-imperialism>
<https://www.aljumphuriya.net/en/cont...>

[3] Picciotto S. (1991) 'The Internationalisation of Capital and the International State System', in *The State Debate*, ed. S. Clarke, London: Macmillan.

[4] Pashukanis E. B. (2002) *The general theory of law & Marxism*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers.