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Russia

**“We should recognize that
there are other imperialisms”:
A Marxist dissident explains
what the left gets wrong about**

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- Debate - Imperialisms today -

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Russia today is not as depicted on Russia Today, the English-language news network established by the Russian government in 2005 that paints a capitalist state led by a right-wing nationalist in pseudo-left colors: the anti-America, almost, where the poor are always fed – not just shot dead by racist police – and foreign policy is motivated not by cynical self-interest, but a dogged, one might even say principled determination to stand athwart U.S. imperialism and yell “stop!” The critiques the network airs of poverty in the United States and Washington’s bloody wars abroad are an amusing, completely fair rejoinder to the State Department’s habit of pointing out the human rights hypocrisy of everyone else, but the implication that things are any better in Moscow is no less amusing to leftists in Russia who are aware an Occupy Red Square, like Occupy Wall Street, would be crushed with all the skull-cracking efficiency a state can muster.

Russia is also not the Russia we read about in the West’s corporate tabloids, its long-time leader, Vladimir Putin, cast as an irrational psychopath bent on eliminating all who oppose him, at home and in Eastern Europe and maybe even the United States too if he wakes up cranky. The truth, as is so rarely the case, lies somewhere in the middle: The truth is Russia is a nation-state and an imperial power that may not be any better than the United States, but also isn’t really any worse. When it comes to being terrible, the competition is actually pretty close: The only country that [sells more arms](#) to repressive regimes than Russia is the United States of America, though the former has actually been [stealing some market share](#) by capitalizing on the instability caused by the latter (they also frequently arm the same people). When it comes to imprisoning the [highest percentage of its own population](#), the USA is still number one, but Russia is again number two.

The United States plays up its devotion to “liberty,” appealing to Russian liberals whose Skype conversations with Western NGOs are recorded by the NSA, while Russia appeals to Western leftists (and Eastern Ukrainians) by capitalizing on nostalgia for the Soviet Union and the idea, more propagandistic than realistic, that state capitalism is markedly superior to the liberal variety. Too often, however, this is what defines the debate: each state’s propaganda machine, with patriots believing their own country’s talking points and dissidents believing the other’s, obscuring what out to be the glaringly obvious fact that neither nation-state is motivated by any principle in domestic or global affairs more honorable than “what’s good for our oligarchs,” who even live in the [same parts](#) of Manhattan.

If there is to be a new Cold War, the left should reject the temptation of reducing evil in the world to the actions of one’s own government and recognize that imperialism, like capitalism, is a global phenomenon for which one can blame more than one villain. Are there differences between the powers? Sure, just as there are differences between Republicans and Democrats – and they are significantly less profound than the partisans of either faction would have us believe, having more to do with who has power than what one does with it. Russia sending billions of dollars worth of weapons to the Assad regime in Syria, for instance, is no less evil, nor fundamentally different, than the United States arming the brutal regimes of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. We on the left can explain why imperialists do what they do and how it’s not irrational but makes total sense according to the logic of capitalist nation-states, but we shouldn’t confuse an explanation with justification or accept that logic as our own. We should focus on the crimes of the empire we know best, perhaps, but we shouldn’t just dismiss the crimes of others or else we’ll find we lost our moral credibility and swapped mindless patriotism for useful idiocy. The left is at its best when it doesn’t allow skepticism and solidarity to stop at a national border – and just applying a cookie-cutter analysis to events abroad, it actually communicates with its comrades in other countries.

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described to me as a “Marxist, anti-establishment organization.” Founded in 2011, when Russia saw massive street protests over allegations of vote-rigging by the government – the [largest demonstrations](#) since the collapse of the Soviet Union – the group is deeply critical of both Putin and his liberal opposition, demanding the nationalization of major industry and worker control over the workplace while warning that anyone expecting serious change to come from establishment politicians through a corrupt electoral process is going to be sorely disappointed. “Now the streets must become the arena of political struggle,” the group said in [a 2011 appeal](#), arguing that if the left wants to change Russia it must not sit back in the name of unity or pragmatism and cede the political arena to “the rich bastards who have commissioned the hideous farce known as Russian politics!”

I spoke with Ilya about the opposition to Putin – who’s leading it, as well as who’s going to these demonstrations and why – the effect the conflict in Ukraine has had on Russia’s political culture, who killed Boris Nemstov, and whether Russian imperialism is a necessary evil in a world that could use a check on the ambitions of the American empire.

Obviously the biggest story in Russia and here in the United State is the recent assassination of Boris Nemstov. Here in the West, Russia right now is portrayed as sort of a police state – people are afraid to express dissent. Is there any truth to that? Can you describe what the climate is like in the wake of this assassination? Is there fear among the opposition or is that overstated in the corporate media?

I will say that the fear in the opposition came much earlier. It came after we faced repression after the rise of the protest movement in 2011-2012. Maybe you hear about this [6th of May affair](#)– it was a huge police provocation at the anti-Putin demonstration in 2012, just the day before his inauguration as president. So you can say this atmosphere of fear and the atmosphere of repression towards the opposition they were growing during these years. Of course, last year was very difficult and very crucial in this sense because it was the year when the war with Ukraine was started and the confrontation that had existed before in this society became much more harder.

You can say that from the beginning of last year the main fear in the internal politics for power, for the government, became the shadow of Maidan [Square, the Kiev center where protesters helped topple the Russian-backed Ukrainian government]; that something that happened in Ukraine could also be possible in Russia. So even if there is no real reasons exactly for the moment to have something... in Russia this shadow of Maidan became a paranoid idea for the government and also it became a very good instrument for criminalization of any kind of protest. So even now if you have some local protest or some strike or some kind of action which is not exactly political – it can be immediately identified as a kind of Maidan attempt.

So there is an atmosphere of paranoia which is very much distributed and of course which is very much in the interest of not only the president, but every local power on any level. So during all this era, from the beginning of the Ukrainian conflict, [we have been subjected to] extreme media propaganda. This propaganda was very much focused on the idea of the internal enemy: that we have this “fifth column.” And even the term, fifth column, came from a Vladimir Putin speech a year ago, [a very famous speech](#), when he announced the annexation of Crimea, and he also [claimed] that we have a group of national traitors inside the country and we have a fifth column. So if you look at Boris Nemstov, he was one of the figures who were presented as this fifth column during the last year mostly. So you can see the logic that stands behind this murder.

I do not totally agree with people who blame Putin for this murder. I’m not sure he has an interest in it. I will say that he probably has no interest in this kind of murder. When it happened it was clear that the media or government, they were very much confused.

So you don’t think Putin would have ordered this himself because, obviously, this politician wasn’t really a threat to his power. But would you agree with the argument that this atmosphere, this talk of “fifth columns” and “traitors,” contributed to this murder? Or is this too much speculation at this point?

It was not in the clear interest of Putin because the picture of Russian life and Russian politics that he wants to create and his media wants to create is a picture of national unity and stability. And his fight against a possible Russian Mайдan is a fight in the name of stability. When you have this kind of murder very openly, just a few hundred meters from the Kremlin, it totally contradicts the idea of stability. It's a break with stability. And this break comes not from the opposition, but it seems like from their opposite – from people who call themselves ‘specialists.’ It's quite clear that those who tried to destabilize the internal situation, they're not part of the opposition, but they're like enemies of the opposition. And that completely destroys this propaganda [that it's the opposition destabilizing the country].

Second thing, of course it's an open challenge to the Russian police and security service, because it clearly shows that they don't control the situation; they even don't control the most central, important part of the city and they're also probably not interested in this kind of events for even the bureaucratic reaction [i.e., taking the blame for letting it happen].

The third thing is that all these . . . these organizers of the anti-Mайдan movement [in Russia], all these ‘patriotic groups’ around the government, who are probably feted by the government, they are now very much discredited because what kind of reaction [their rhetoric] now should produce.

All the levels of this official Putin political machine, you have problems with this murder. To say that he wants to frighten opposition, well it's real effect was the opposite: Because the demonstration which [followed], my impression was that it was one of the most massive demonstrations that you have in the last year and it was clear that this murder touched a lot of people who before were not politically active. You had a lot of very new people at this demonstration.

What kind of people are showing up to these demonstrations? And how would you describe the opposition in Russia? Is it mostly neoliberals like Nemstov or is it more diverse than that?

I can't say that it's just middle class because you have a lot of middle class who are totally loyal and you have a lot of people who do not belong to belong to the middle class who are on the side of the opposition. But it's mostly cultural, educational markers – you can say that it's some people who connect with the Soviet intelligentsia tradition. Maybe some of them are teachers or professors, some of them are small businessmen, but they have the same background, the same more or less level of education, and the same tradition of disagreement. And disagreement, more ethical than political disagreement. So these people, of course they're very politicized, but at the same time their level of political consciousness is [rather] primitive.

I mean that, for example, with the poor, they don't analyze their exact social interest or they don't connect their social interest with their political expression. So that's why for them, people like Nemstov, who as you said was openly neoliberal, as are a lot of people in the top of this opposition, who – despite the very just critiques of Vladimir Putin's politics in Ukraine or lack of freedom of speech – openly say that hospitals should be privatized, that we should be more aggressive in austerity in Russia, and should privatize the state property and things like this. Their position is somehow not so much discussed among their supporters, because for them it's something secondary, something not in their core of their nature of support, because the most important thing with them is ethical support – they see these people as the good people, the educated people, the people who talk to them using their language, but not people who have some exact social and economic program which confronts their own interest.

Right, so they're motivated more by issues like freedom of speech than free markets – that's the position of the elites, but not what gets these people out to demonstrations.

Yes, you can say that.

What do they not like about the Putin government? Is it a sense that there’s a crackdown on civil liberties? The state of the Russian economy, which makes people unhappy with the leader?

Right now the main issue for people is they feel [there are] so much lies from the government. They are so angry about the propaganda over what has happened in Ukraine. Because what you have now in Russian media, it’s unbelievable. It’s never ever happened, even in Soviet times, I mean this level of aggression and in a very crazy kind of style. If you even look at the Russian TV you understand that the third world war has already started and you are a soldier in this war. And what has happened in Ukraine is already a third world war war against, I don’t know, Barack Obama . . . on one side acting against Russia. And so I think that it’s mostly a reaction to these lies, but not a reaction to some real, economic or social problems that we now face in Russia. But those problems, they are really serious and they touch a much broader part of the population than this strata that are politically active and visit these kind of demonstrations.

The main question for this opposition is if they are satisfied with this ethical position and in fact isolation from the majority of the population . . . or if they want somehow to break with these constructions, and if they want to break they should also change their social agenda, radically change it, because right now you have an ongoing economic crisis in Russia, you have huge inflation, and you have the very clear answer of the government and this answer is extremely anti-social, it is extremely neoliberal. Putin’s answer is the increase of the pension age, a lack of indexation [increasing pension payments to match price increases] in a situation where inflation is going on – in reality, 15 percent or even more – and you have no opportunities for people who are losing their workplaces

They’re [the opposition] not able to attract a real big number of people from that part of society which is not already involved in the opposition. So I mean the situation is kind of a dead end. You have 50,000 or even more people in Moscow in commemoration of Boris Nemstov, this is the kind of force that is able to mobilize – this number of people again and again, but there is no chance to build a kind of more broad movement based on the interests of the majority.

Why do you think given Russia’s history there isn’t more of a class consciousness among the working class in Russia today?

Now you don’t have the same working class as you did in the Soviet Union because of the total destruction of Soviet industry . . . and Boris Nemstov was a part of that process. And what was the real price of it? It was the lumpenization of a big part of the working class on one side, and on the other side it was the feeling of hopelessness on [the part of] working class people that any kind of collective struggle can work effectively. And you have very, very tiny independent unions in Russia and these independent unions, they became even weaker from the start of the economic crisis. And also, of course . . . their [the working class] main fear is still instability . . . and that’s why they’re still ready to basically support the current government who [they believe can] somehow prevent the situation which happened in the 90s.

Alexander Dugin has written that the annexation of Crimea marks [“Russia’s return to history.”](#) Do you think that “return to history” and this idea of restoring Russia’s greatness on the world scene – that that’s what’s appealing to a lot of Russians? And that this current war climate is basically co-opting people who would otherwise be critics of Putin’s economic policies?

Yes, of course. These kind of ideas always work, everywhere. If you make a promise to people to bring them back to history, whatever it means, it always works as rhetoric. But I think, for most people, for them it’s unclear what is the real picture of the situation in Ukraine. The majority still believe there is a just struggle between . . . our brothers and a fascist Ukrainian army.

You say a lot of people buy into the Russian government’s propaganda on Ukraine. Here in the United States some parts of the left seem to have bought into this too. They think Maidan was basically a Nazi coup backed by Europe and the United States and they kind of ridicule the idea that Russia has inflamed the conflict by supporting the separatists in the East. Can you comment on that?

Of course, both the pictures of what is happening there are very simplified. So firstly, it’s not true that it was a fascist coup in Ukraine because a “coup” is an action of a small, organized, armed group of people. [In Ukraine] the “coup” . . . had the clear support of hundreds of thousands of people. Even if you don’t like it you should recognize that it was a real huge movement with the big support of the population of Ukraine. I have no sympathy with the Ukrainian government that you have now, but for me it’s quite clear it can’t be reduced just to a Western plot. There were some deep social contradictions in Ukrainian society that led to this moment.

Of course, in any situation like this you have the interests: American interests, European interests, Russian interests, and so on. But these interests can work effectively only if you already have some problems within the country. And that is true also for Crimea and the East of Ukraine; you also can’t say that it’s just the result of Russian military intervention. I knew very well even a few years ago what kind of feelings most people in Crimea had toward Russia. So for me it was clear that a total majority of them want to be part of Russia. It was clear for everyone 10 years ago, even 15 years ago, that you have some serious cultural split in Ukraine between the West and East.

And of course what happened after Maidan with this [language law](#) from the new government, it was a kind of provocation. But at the same time you can’t imagine that this kind of terrible military confrontation that you have in Eastern Ukraine was possible without Russian participation. For those on the American Left who believe that there is some “anti-fascist” partisans operating in the East of Ukraine, I really recommend reading some books about other guerrilla movements, like Che Guevara or whatever they like. It’s the first [anti-fascist] partisan movement in the history, in Eastern Ukraine, which has more arms and more modern arms than the army who they confront.

Is it a common belief in Russia that these arms are coming from the Russian state?

There is a lot of evidence . . . that there are thousands of soldiers or weapons and so on sent to the East Ukraine. I think that the reason why it’s still not recognized officially by the West, it’s not because the West has no evidence, but because the West is trying to find a compromise. If they recognize it, if they say openly that Russia is in fact in a state of war in Ukraine, it means it will be much more difficult to somehow find a diplomatic solution. So I think that’s the only explanation.

What do you think motivates the separatists in Ukraine? Is it just the language issue and identifying as Russian or is there something else? “Luhansk People’s Republic” – “people’s republic” sounds to my ears as if there’s some socialist motivation. Is economics and socialism at all a part of this or is it all identity?

These slogans are not just socialist, but mostly Soviet slogans, which refer to a kind of Soviet nostalgia – and they mix openly with Russian chauvinism. A lot of people are fighting not for the Soviet Union, but for Russian empire, and deny even the existence of Ukraine as a nation. And these people are at the top of the movement. They act like the ideologists of this movement, like [Igor Strelkov](#), who was one of the first leaders of this kind of uprising in the East of Ukraine who was a Russian from Moscow who came there with clear identification, historical reference to the White Army during the Civil War, the White Army who fought against the Red Army and who fought against the Ukrainian nationalists for the Great Russia. So I mean if you look at many, many [news] sources of the separatists, you find a lot of Russian chauvinist propaganda, the ideas of Russian empire and so on, which is very much mixed with Stalinism – but Stalinism mostly understood as the idea of the great state, but not as a kind of socialist order of things.

They're not motivated necessarily by a workers' state, but the idea of a strong, powerful state that the rest of the world respects.

And which can confront the West. And also another very important idea is anti-Semitism. For this movement in the East Ukraine, the idea that Maidan was a Jewish plot and all this kind of thing, they are very distributed. You can find it in thousands of publications. I don't want to say all people who participate in this movement are a bunch of anti-Semites, fascists and Stalinists, because on the side of Ukraine you also have open Nazis and anti-Semites as well as . . . just normal people who just want to save the independence of the country. And I also can understand their way of thinking, their feelings, and their fears – it's understandable. In Ukraine, you really have a lot of people for whom the question of the existence of Ukraine is very important. And they really feel that there is a fear for the independence of the country itself; it's not just the question of East Ukraine, but the right of the state to exist.

What do you think motivates the Russian government? Is Putin also interested in restoring this Russian empire? Because we also hear that Russia is afraid of NATO expansion and that NATO expansion is what is motivating it to take on a greater role in Ukraine. Is that just an excuse?

Of course one of the reasons for even the start of this conflict was that Russia was concerned about the expansion of NATO, which happened during the last decade. Also it was the question, you could say, of the “domestic” area of Russian imperialism, which is the post-Soviet space – the idea that the post-Soviet space, maybe including the Baltic states, should be space where nothing can be decided politically without the participation of Russia. So you can't change the government without agreement from Russian society. That is something that led to the conflict with Georgia in 2008 and that is something that led to the conflict with Ukraine, because it's just simply a question of the master or owner of this space, who is the main person who should be asked about everything. Of course after what happened in Ukraine, for Putin it was another clear evidence that Russia somehow was out of the decision-making process. And I think there was also a third reason . . . the internal situation. What kind of political example could Maidan give to Russian society?

As in Putin was fearful of the same thing happening in Russia?

Yes. What has happened in Ukraine, there was a foreign policy element in it, but it was also a big challenge for the internal policy.

Russia in its English-language media, such as Russia Today, portrays Russia's actions as basically just a response to U.S. imperialism, as if Russia itself is not imperialist but rather an anti-imperialist power; supporting the Assad government in Syria, for instance. And that's portrayed as a check on U.S. hegemony. Do you share that view? Do you think, whatever your view of Putin domestically, that overall Russia does serve as a necessary check on the U.S.'s agenda or does it serve as a negative influence in the world?

Russian foreign policy is not a policy based on any kind of view of how the world should look. There's no kind of our own “Pax Americana” or something like this. In this sense, Russia is not the Soviet Union because the Soviet Union had a kind of project for the world; a clear alternative to the values and ideas [of the West]. There is nothing like this in Russian foreign policy. Russian foreign policy is a realistic policy. As Obama has pointed out a couple times, there are no ideological problems with Russia. . . . Russia as a realist, cynical world force, wants to discuss its place in the world: the size of their piece of the cake. That's the explanation you always hear from Putin . . . that everyone has their interests in this world, everyone wants to benefit from everything, so we want to understand the rules of the game.

I mean, if the left are ready to support this kind of logic, even if this kind of logic in some ways confronts American

imperialism, I probably don't agree with this left in a very fundamental way. I think that one of the main mistakes of a very big part of the left for years was the idea that imperialism can only be American; that if you talk about imperialism, we mean the United States, because there are not any other imperialist powers. But if we look back at the Marxist definition of imperialism we will find that imperialism, it's always a conflict. It's a conflict between states, between capitalist interests, and it always leads to a kind of military confrontation with the blocs of interests, like it was in the first world war. . . . So you should simply recognize that yes, even if we have no justification for American imperialism, we should recognize that there are other imperialisms. And you can't find among these imperialisms something that is more progressive or objectively progressive than the other. That should be a kind of rule, like in the conflicts you have in Ukraine: You have no good side; no progressive side. Of course, you have fascists on both sides. Of course, you have imperialist interests on both sides. And any kind of support of one or another side from the left simply strengthens one of the sides, but weakens the left.

I read your piece, “[Intellectuals and “The New Cold War.”](#)” and you talk of the appeal of this kind of black-and-white worldview – of the “imposed choice between two ‘camps,’ the West and Russia” – has to many intellectuals, not just in Russia but here in the United States. What do you think is the problem with that view and also what do you think is so attractive about it?

It's attractive because it touches some structures of consciousness which were developed during the decades in the time of the Cold War, so it acts like a kind of reflex for many on the left to find some good, “progressive” side. And also of course it represents a lack of general picture of the world from the left. Even a hundred years ago one of the most important and strong points of the left was that they have the explanation of not just some basic laws of capitalism, but also the understanding of what is going on now in the world. They had a kind of complex picture of it. And now the left today they have no picture. They are very fragmented. They are very localized in their own countries, in their own situations. And it's kind of a paradox because the world became more global and the left became more provincial.

For the American left, of course for them only American imperialism exists, yes? I can't understand it. . . . In Russia, there are a lot of leftists who also believe that Russia is the main evil in the world, it's a reactionary empire, and it should be destroyed. Or, at the same time, you have a lot of leftists who believe somehow Russia is resisting American imperialism [and] who support these “republics” in the East of Ukraine.

But you have a huge provincialization of the left as a whole because they can't even understand each other and every leftist community, they believe in their own national reality. And that's why they can be so easily manipulated. By whom? By Russia Today? I think it's a very pitiable situation because the Russian propagand machine, which is not the most clever, not so smart . . . it can so easily manipulate such a big sector of the Western left. It points to the problem of the Western left itself, but not the strength of Russia Today.

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