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Ukraine

“What is playing itself out in Ukraine now is the clash of two opposed imperial agendas”

- Debate - 2022 - Ukraine -
Publication date: Friday 24 April 2015

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In August 2014 Yuriy Dergunov conducted an interview with Gonzalo Pozo for the Ukrainian magazine Commons: Journal of Social Criticism. It was first published in English by LeftEast in October 2014.

In the post-Soviet space the very notion of geopolitics is associated with ultra-conservative, right-wing political discourses (Aleksandr Dugin’s example is prominent here), so in our progressive circles geopolitics is widely regarded as a pseudo-science. Your idea of Marxist geopolitics would probably seem paradoxical to majority of our readers. So, why geopolitics (and not simply IR or GPE), and how should a distinctively Marxist geopolitics look like?

I was well aware that geopolitics had a dark history when I started working on it... it drags along a heavy chain which ties it to the racism, exploitation and violence of European imperialism and later, even to Nazi expansionism (although I think this latter link has been deliberately exaggerated after WWII). Then as now, geopolitical talk comes natural to right wing, nationalistic revivals of different sorts. Dugin, who you mention, is just one case in point from Russia today, but there are many others across Europe (see for instance Oleksandr Rahr, in Germany). And, of course, with different connotations, you can’t really speak of a return of geopolitics in the US, because ironically, in the US, geopolitics never really went away even if it had a very bad name for a while. Currently it is being written about, taught and defended there as a sensible approach to global affairs by many influential intellectuals of power and their networks of think tanks (for instance, Walter Russell Mead, Robert Kaplan, who is currently a member of the American Defense Policy Board Advisory Committee – alongside Henry Kissinger or Chick Hagel – or more famously perhaps, writers such as Zbigniew Brzezinski or George Friedman). So if you were to say to me, “geopolitics is ultra-conservative mumbo-jumbo”, I think I would largely agree.

But what “geopolitics” are we talking about? By “geopolitics” here we mean a specific field of political geography which developed during the last decade of the XIXth and first decades of the XXth century, pioneered by Alfred Mahan in the US, Friedrich Ratzel in Germany, Halford Mackinder in Britain and Rudolf Kjellén in Sweden (the latter was the one who coined the term). This geopolitics – classical geopolitics – and its contemporary variations, are more or less united by their environmental determinism, their angst-ridden fixation with conflict and grand strategy, their state-centrism, their Euro-centrism and their aspiration to serve power, rather than attack it.

At the same time, geopolitics, with all its guises and connotations, goes well beyond this specific meaning. Since the 1970s it has become a widely popular term in policy circles and media discourse overlapping with pretty much everything that has anything to do with great power struggles. As a result, a lot of international affairs get cast as “geopolitical” (particularly in times of a crisis); “geopolitical rivalry” in this way is understood as a characteristic of the world system as it really is, and you will note, is always “coming back”, always “returning”, when the world takes a bellicose or particularly nasty turn. Most people think of it this way, and many policy makers do too. And crucially, our own progressive, left-wing critiques of foreign policy, imperialism, hegemony and the like, also tend to understand geopolitics in this second sense: depending on who you ask, it is seen as a more or less central characteristic of contemporary capitalism that is “out there”, that does things, that is “of the system”, and that has everything to do with war and diplomatic crises like the one Ukraine is at the center of today. So here’s the thing: “geopolitics”, the reactionary pseudo-science, can only be alien and vexing to the readers of Spilne. But after we have cursed it and distanced ourselves from it, geopolitics, the broader concept and its narrative tropes, stick around, and we might even still invoke it in criticizing Western or Russian expansionism. For this reason, my personal sense is that progressive politics needs to work on finding a critical and most of all differentiated concept of geopolitics, which is useful for our analysis of international politics, but can also conjugate it with a good grasp of capitalist relations of power and exploitation.

What I've been referring to – rather ambitiously – as “Marxist geopolitics”, is something I see essentially as a contribution to the Marxist theories on imperialism. It seeks to keep the sense that geopolitics is a central and real feature of the capitalist international system. Methodologically, working this out probably falls under something that we might call global political economy. Personally, I've stuck with “geopolitics” despite all its dirty connotations and great many vagaries, because I think our theories of imperialism need to pay more attention to the predominantly territorial arena where contemporary rivalries play themselves out – this is very important point, because states are in a way part of the infrastructure enabling (and potentially obstructing) the reproduction of capitalism.

I'm most interested precisely in this point about spatial configurations of capitalism, and their “place” within the capitalist system of international relations. Space, territory, comes to acquire geopolitical value for policy makers. This is a process which I like to think of, following Henri Lefebvre, as the “production” of geopolitical spaces; at different scales and times, parts of the political geography of capitalism become reconfigured and transformed by the patterns of accumulation taking place within them. Class relations of specific types, particular class constellations, take place within particular spatial configurations. Through different ideological filters and concepts, they become codified into foreign-policy priorities. In a nutshell, that is what I mean by “Marxist geopolitics”. I do not claim that this process is at the heart of all forms of international rivalry today, but I do think it is an important element in some of the contemporary manifestations of imperialism; for instance, I do think it's a big part of what lies behind Russia's annexation of a chunk of Ukrainian territory in Crimea, and it's continued interference in the East of the country.

Capitalism creates a monstrous world in its own image; this is to say it creates a geography after itself, making and remaking the spatial settings where it grows strong or breaks down. This spatial aspect is one driver (not the only one, and not always the central one) of imperialism which I want to emphasize, and which I think can help clarify the problem of foreign policy, though this takes us to your next question.

In a recent Marxist theorizing of imperialism there's the idea of co-existence of ‘two logics’ of imperialism – the economic one, and the territorial one. As I understand, you criticize this separation as an insertion of political realism into Marxist theory. What is your explanation for the apparent autonomy of capitalist states' foreign policies that are often irreducible to instrumental reasons of promotion of interests of distinctive factions of national capital?

The “two logics” approach was an explicit element in David Harvey's contribution to great revival of Marxist theories of imperialism. He distinguished a capitalist logic of competition, and separated it from a territorial logic of competition, understood generally as the interests and determinations of statecraft and diplomacy. For Harvey, the two logics were irreducible to each other. Implicitly in this approach, therefore, was the sense that the foreign policy of capitalist states could not (or should not) be read back simply as the expression of the interests of dominant classes (or dominant factions of national capitals); imperialism, here, was what you get when the two logics fuse. This was, I think, a major step forward in our understanding of imperialism, more than anything else because it showed that a Marxist critique of international relations did not have to be reductionist and economically deterministic.

For me, the problem was not so much that I think everything has to be reducible to capital. The problem for me was exactly what you call “the apparent autonomy of foreign policy”. Clearly, a lot of things foreign policy makers think or do have no relation with class at all. In this broad sense, foreign policy is autonomous. Some foreign-policy decisions might have nothing to do with economic interests; some might even be absurd, crazy, whimsical, unintelligible... this does not mean that they do not have ideological, institutional and most importantly, economic constraints which still shape them and provide them with some sort of rationale, no matter how short-sighted or capricious they might seem. To see them as either instrumental or autonomous can be misleading. I don't know anyone in the left who thinks foreign policy is simply instrumental, in the sense that businessmen come and tell people in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs what they have to do: at the same time, I don't think any of us really consider it purely autonomous, in the sense that it is completely unrelated to economic interests and political economy. The choice between straight

instrumentalism or autonomy can be quite artificial and unhelpful.

While many foreign policy decisions are not clearly (or not at all) related to class interests, I think we can't deny that many others are obviously instrumental – I find it hard, or frankly, unnecessary, to read most of the US's foreign policy towards Latin America in the XXth century, for instance, as anything else. Much of it has been overtly, unapologetically instrumental – I'm thinking in particular of its policy in Central America. Further, foreign policy will very often appear as autonomous, but in reality be obliquely or indirectly instrumental – this is how I would understand Russian foreign policy towards Ukraine today, though I say more about this below. Such a policy is often instrumental, but at best, only in a complex and vague way, often full of discursive (“Russian Great Powerness”) and institutional (hyper-presidentialism) mediations which require a lot of decoding. That said, these mediations do not mean that there is no class context influencing foreign policy. So our analyses of imperialism require a kind of decoding work to investigate whether we have policies that are really autonomous of any class interests, or whether we have weaker or stronger, more or less successful strands of instrumentality.

So again, I think we have to qualify what we mean by “instrumental” here: there are degrees of instrumentality. We might use that word to imply that capitalists control foreign policy, that they just influence it, that they will just try to influence it with more or less success, or that class interests broadly frame policy and give it a general sense. Depending on the context and situation the effect of class interests on foreign policy will obviously vary. For instance, the sanctions on Russia imposed by the EU at the end of July (and which the German Business Confederation supports despite the cost it represents especially for German business) were put in place because it was impossible for European governments to continue doing nothing about Putin when 200 EU (mostly Dutch) civilians had died in the shot-down Malaysian airliner. In this narrow sense, the decision was only politically motivated – it looks like an autonomous decision, and in itself, taken in isolation, it is (although of course, these were limited sanctions, which crucially left out gas). But do the political reasons for sanctions eliminate the economic value of Ukraine for the EU? Of course not; again, I come back to this later.

With these distinctions in mind, I find it useful to proceed from the assumption that foreign policy is in principle instrumental – because of the architecture of the capitalist state, the pressure of private interests, the social composition of policy-makers, the relation between bureaucracy and class, and so on. But careful, I assume this instrumentality is not direct and straightforward, constant, complete or always consistent. All this amounts to saying something quite basic: that foreign policy never happens in a class vacuum. That said, it does not follow that foreign policy is therefore just reducible to class interests.

The recent annexation of Crimea in some respect seems to be a revival of outdated pattern of inter-state competition and imperialism. Some Marxist theorists probably completely written off such a possibility in their approaches to contemporary capitalist imperialism. How does it fit your approach to capitalist geopolitics? What are the explanations for this annexation and what are the implications for our wider understanding of imperialism?

Nobody, Marxist or not, was expecting the annexation of Crimea... At the same time, I still remember John Kerry complaining that “you just don't in the XXIst century behave as in the XIXth, by invading a country on a completely trumped up pretext”? Of course this played right into Putin's hands, who only had to laugh it off and point out the obvious irony. He was absolutely right to do so too: the fact is that annexations are not that uncommon. Part of the trick is what name we decide to give land grabs when they happen: “annexation” is a term which we usually reserve for cases the West doesn't approve of (Russia calls the annexation of Sevastopol and Crimea a re-unification, which, of course, has a completely different, almost liberationist or redemptive air to it). Who perpetrates these land grabs also matters; when Turkey took Northern Cyprus in 1974, for example, it was a big deal, its effects last to this day, but it did not even result in its expulsion from NATO, who continued lavishing on it military aid and assistance. Annexations happen every so often, and well, the twentieth century has been full of them; the XXIst century began with two major military occupations, one of which, Afghanistan, is ongoing. It's like that old film (1995), *The Usual*

Suspects, directed by Bryan Singer, in which Verbal Kint, the character played by Kevin Spacey, says: “the greatest trick the devil ever pulled was to convince the world that he did not exist”. The liberal self-image in this sense is satanic; it continues to convince a lot of people that territorial aggression, annexations, imperialism, and so on, are “old” forms of international rivalry, now left behind, transcended by liberal cosmopolitanism, democracy and the market, as if the 1990s had been the norm in the contemporary history of capitalism, or as if indeed the 1990s had been all that smooth and wonderful anyway. But as Crimea has once again confirmed, every time a liberal announces the death of geopolitics, something will happen heralding its “return”. As you point out, there are Marxist versions of the death of geopolitics too, and I think part of this is due to the fact that liberal globalization became too dominant a story line in the 1990s, which, ultimately introduced some confusion about the role of nation-state in contemporary IR, and the uncontested standing of American hegemony, even within Marxism. But as we’ve moved into the XXIst century, I think such theories have lost a lot of their initial attraction: as the years roll by, I think it gets harder and harder to deny that imperialism is direct, territorial, illiberal and increasingly fractured and contested.

As for Crimea, nobody I can think of can say they saw this coming, but a few people were more prepared for some form of open clash between Russia and the West over Ukraine. When Russia hollowed out the territorial sovereignty of Georgia in the summer of 2008 (Abkhazia and North Ossetia), well, these were not annexations proper, but they were not that different – very interestingly, Medvedev at the time argued that Moscow’s decision to intervene then was an instance of humanitarian interventionism, Russian style, and made it sound like this war had been the result of Kremlin’s own version of Wilsonianism. Further, one of the key aspects of the August 2008 war on Georgia was that it involved NATO equipment and ammunition, even if no actual NATO forces fought the Russians. It was thus a war by proxy, in a similar way as the current standoff in the Donbass region is a proxy war between Ukrainian forces and their Western advisers and, beyond the separatists, Russian equipment, assistance and volunteers. Of course, Crimea is much more important in the long term, I think, and the annexation was certainly more spectacular – remember the impenitently imperial pomp at the Ekaterinsky Hall of the Great Kremlin Palace, during the ceremony, last March.

You ask how this fits my approach to capitalist geopolitics, and, as the joke goes, I’m really happy you ask me this question. A few years back my friend Alex Colás and I published a very short piece called ‘The Value of Territory’, and there we talked about a Marxist geopolitics. I am immodestly referring to this because in it we used a very brief case study; Ukraine. We argued that by the end of the 2000s, after several rounds of the “gas wars”, the geopolitical fractures between Russia and the West there had become temporarily internalized within Ukrainian politics (we wrote this in 2010), but that this subdued state of affairs was hard to sustain. This short piece had a number of respondents, almost unanimously critical of what we were saying. One of these critics, who otherwise made very incisive comments, took issue with our treatment of Ukraine. As he pointed out, a number of geopolitical texts of the previous decade had been anticipating conflict over Ukraine since the 1990s (see for instance, Brzezinski’s *The Grand Chessboard*), but such predictions had never come to pass. In 2010, and despite the grimmest warnings, war had not visited Ukraine, and therefore, what was the point of resurrecting a geopolitical agenda? What a difference a few months make: now we can see all too clearly just how frail and contested Ukrainian stability and integrity has been since independence.

Like everyone else, I never thought Russia would just take Crimea, but I did think an open clash was possible, particularly after 2008. I fear we are again in unpredictable territory. The legacy of the annexation will be very long and heavy: it is now one of the key security conundrums in Europe, and will remain so for decades to come. Meantime, the aftermath of the Euromaidan protests have resulted in a largely underreported civil conflict in your country, with well over a thousand civilian casualties and tens, perhaps hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people; much of this is the result of Russian imperial meddling, of course, but a lot of this is the direct result of “Anti-Terrorist Operations” by the Ukrainian army, guided and aided by the US and its Western allies. I am writing this from Southern Poland, where, perhaps unsurprisingly, the Ukrainian/Western responsibility is, shamefully, hardly ever shown or mentioned.

The longer-term consequences of this violence will also haunt Europe for decades. This is the real relevance of capitalist geopolitics today. More broadly, and in terms of our wider understanding of imperialism, the crisis speaks to its actuality: imperialism is an (intra)capitalist form of organized interstate rivalry and which sometimes takes a territorial, direct form. A little more concretely, the crisis also strips bare the geopolitical limits of the European Union, not just in its potential for enlargement, but also in terms of its own self-understanding as post-modern, post-territorial and post-geopolitical space: like it or not, Brussels is now one of the sides in a dangerous confrontation with Russia. It can no longer disavow the fact that it must defend its post-geopolitical aspirations through geopolitical means. At a time of broader economic and political fractures within, this is a real blow for Europe, forced to look once more into the mirror of its own contradictions.

As for the actual explanation for the annexation, in the very immediate term, I think that Russia understood that it could get away with it, and moved in – its involvement in the Donbass has been far more cautious and oblique. Following from the previous discussion, the reasons behind the annexation are not the immediate or direct economic benefits, since, with the partial exception of Sevastopol, Crimea will cost Russia more than it will profit it – in this sense, the situation is not totally dissimilar to South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the economies of which all but totally depend on Moscow’s subsidies. There are some obvious political benefits for Russia in the annexation: the Black Sea fleet, of course, the momentary high derived from Russian national euphoria, the illusion of Russia’s global pride restored, etc. But these are lateral advantages. I think Crimea is best seen as a step in a Russian strategy which seeks to “hollow out” Ukrainian territorial sovereignty on the manipulation of ethnic divisions and economic grievances. The line is, in a sense, simple enough: if Ukraine cannot be controlled more or less directly from Moscow, then it will not be controllable from Kyiv. However, the chances of reproducing the Crimean moment in other parts of the country along the Black Sea proved unworkable quite early on. Incidentally, the freak come-back of the geographical term “Novorossiia” should be corrective enough to anyone doubting the importance of geopolitical analysis. This inability to repeat the Crimean step became clear also in the Donbass, where the duplicate independence referendum worked very partially and differently. Events there have taken their own dangerous direction. In any case, I think Crimea was not a key goal in and of itself – although it settles the status of the Black Sea Fleet and, I am sure, is likely to become a magnet of very interesting and megalomaniacal neoliberal developmental utopias from Russia – in conjunction with foreign, mainly, Chinese capital. After the annexation, my bet is that Crimea will attract a lot of economic attention, and be, to put it simply, “reloaded” as a geopolitical space, as a result. Beyond this, Crimea has been tactical from the point of view of Russian strategic goals in Ukraine, and I will return to these further down.

What are the strategic goals of Russian state with respect to Ukraine? Is it interested in the further partition of Ukraine’s territory?

In the longer term, Russia never accepted, and to a certain extent, cannot accept a fully independent Ukraine which might gravitate away from Moscow’s influence. Ostensibly, the official reasons for this are historical as much as strategic: NATO’s Eastern expansion, the idea that Ukraine is somehow a “part” of Russia, and the Russian population left behind after the collapse of the Soviet Union among other factors.

Such reasons are important in themselves, but let’s not forget that they graft on very well to the role which Ukraine plays economically in the Russian political economy. It is, of course, the key transit country for Russian gas exports to Europe, and a major market of raw materials, industrial and agricultural goods, as well as a pool of migrant workers. In this sense, the weight of history, identity, strategy, and so on, map on very well to the survival of Russian capitalism. Russia must therefore try and keep itself in Ukraine, by eroding Kiev’s territorial control, to further destabilize and polarize the Ukrainian political system, and at least boycott any initiative which might further integrate it with the EU or NATO. Notice that many of the policies pursued by Moscow in Ukraine since the start of the year are likely to be counterproductive in the long run; but the Kremlin, and the Russian ruling class, prefer Ukraine to stay in its political and economic gravitational field, and would rather push a civil conflict than see your country falling under NATO’s influence, EU tutelage, and Western economic domination. Part of this means containing any possibility of a

Russian Euromaidan in Moscow: particularly after the rise of a diverse opposition movement making a very real impact in Russian politics in 2011-12.

Another aspect of this agenda is to try and build a political and economic alternative to the EU, which can work predominantly in the interests of Russian capitalism and its ruling elite: this counter-project is the Eurasian Economic Union. One of the reasons behind Moscow's decision to annex Crimea and mount a direct opposition to the West in Ukraine has to do precisely with the defense of such a counter-project. Putin has already said he is not interested in further partitions or annexations; if you believe him, then that should be enough of an answer.

At any rate, Russian capitalism and the Russian state seek, in the longer term, to keep the Ukrainian economy closely bound to Russia. Even if it does not pursue further partitions, it nevertheless needs to continue destabilising the country and undermining the rule from Kiev: this last objective has now been achieved to a great degree. But all this has landed Putin in an extremely difficult position. Particularly after the shooting down of the Malaysian airplane, the initial surge in popularity received after annexing Crimea is under threat; it is quite important in terms of propaganda and credibility not to be seen as directly involved or partly responsible for it.

So on the one hand, Putin will have to play down his support of separatists in Donetsk and Luhansk. But if he backs down completely, this will be seen as a defeat. Further, at home Putin will have to start contending with the effects of the targeted sanctions against the Russian economy, maybe not immediately, but certainly in the mid term. The Russian economy is at best expected to stay flat this year; capital flight and FDI net outflows were almost as high in the first four months of the year as over the entire 2013. We do not know how much the sanctions will end up costing Russia; the estimates I've seen are all very tentative second guesses, and vary wildly (the lowest I have seen in less than \$ 100 billion, the highest, by the Economist almost up to \$ 1 trillion).

When the slump begins to hit Russians more directly over the next few months, the imperial euphoria will start to fade, and Putin will be likely be put under even more pressure. But in such a situation, it is impossible for him to back down in any of the red lines he has maintained so far without handing over a resounding victory to Obama, Merkel and the rest. As a result of all this, we have a contradiction: while Putin has stated that he wants no further partitions in Ukraine, it might well be that he cannot come out of this clean without venturing into Ukraine again. As I am writing these lines, I'm reading reports which suggest that Russia might be creating excuses (on humanitarian grounds) to mobilise the military forces he has amassed on the Russian side of the border and provoke a new intervention. A direct military intervention from Russia can therefore not be completely ruled out yet. We are likely to see several diplomatic attempts in the interim, which come a little too late, too timidly; we might also see a reshuffling of Russian support for the separatists in Donetsk.

I fear that Russia and the West have unleashed events in Ukraine which now have run with their best initial predictions. From here on, there is no master plan, as far as I can see, and we have moved further into the realm of unpredictable risks and violence. This is also partly because the EU and the US also face a difficult path ahead. Tougher sanctions from here on will have marginally greater impacts on the European economy than on the Russian economy, which is a risk the EU cannot afford. A chain of blind decisions on both sides have set a very confusing dynamic in motion; in it, the commitment to de-escalate is unsure.

How do you explain Russia's foreign policy? Who are its main beneficiaries? Is it driven by the interests of some factions of Russian capital, or by the state bureaucracy?

Firstly I think it's important to recognize that while some factions of Russian capital and state bureaucracy are distinct in their origins, beliefs and conduct, the political economy of the country is dominated by a highly concentrated amalgam of financial, industrial and bureaucratic interests. Functionally, these work together as a ruling elite, or if you like, class, in the sense that political power and economic profit are not always clearly separated and are often

instrumental in terms of each other. These two groups, bureaucrats and businessmen, work in a close symbiosis, with the bureaucracy relying on business when it comes to implementing policy, and business relying on close ties to the state to secure and grow their profits, and all of them closely knit around the state in order to get rich at the expense of ordinary Russians, and structured around an enormous revolving door between private activity and public office, all under a thick cloud of corrupt exchanges.

In the academic field of Russian foreign policy, the rise of Putin to power is seen as a big game changer, marking the departure from a decade of complete disarray and volatile decisions under El'tsin. And this obvious, newly-found international assertiveness is usually explained in terms of three factors. The first of these would be the role of international oil prices, which grew consistently after 2000 and allowed the Russian economy – which of course specializes in the production of hydrocarbons – to recover from the most destructive effects of the Western-inspired transition there (repaying its international debt, accumulating huge levels of foreign reserves, bringing inflation under control, registering relatively healthy GDP growth rates at least until 2008, etc...). A second element is usually invoked: charismatic leadership. Putin, the great bear-chested, unflinching, patriotic leader, bent on guiding Russia back towards domestic and international restoration. Putin, the wolf-eyed “great orderer”. In short, Putin, the anti-El'tsin. Notice that the Putin mystique had begun to wear off after 2009, but since March this year, his ratings have soared to new heights. The annexation of Crimea has been beneficial for him in the short and mid term. Finally, many authors emphasize a third element: the role played by a more assertive, statist and nationalist ideology, which centers on the idea of Russian great-powerness [“*derzhavnost'*?”]. This new sense of national identity also combines elements from neo- Eurasianism and classical geopolitical tropes. These elements are very important, and they have very real effects, but cannot, of themselves, explain the evolution of Russian foreign policy, because like any other foreign policy, it is not only or fundamentally a discursive practice. Like any other key activity of the state, and wherever it is formulated or deployed, foreign policy is a complex process. Shaped by the international environment, the economic context, the institutional frame, and many other actors and power relations. Ultimately, Russian foreign policy, I think, has to be seen as a highly mediated social product; the discursive and institutional elements are as important as the economic ones, and yet, most of the field of Russian foreign policy does not really consider the latter.

I have written about this elsewhere, but there is an example I like very much about the way in which Putin's reputation as the “great orderer”, the man of Russia's great-power restoration, is underscored but the support and acceptance of the key economic sector: energy. Here's what Alekperov, then Chairman of the private oil company LUKoil, had to say about Putin in 2001: “We, in the company Lukoil consider ourselves a national Russian company, and we do not accept the ideology of the division into state, private and other companies. We without any false pathos affirm that every step we have made in the last ten years in the history of our company has gone in the struggle for the new Russia, striving to take into account the national interest of our country”. I can never stop my laughter when I read this passage, precisely because it's so full of it (false pathos). Alekperov and Co. were part of a predatory elite who have been leeching off the Russian economy since 1992. Because they are primarily interested in getting money quick, they have an interest and a tendency to expand into the control of the energy infrastructure in other companies and economies, rather than invest in the long-term reform and modernisation of its own sector; within the post-Soviet space, and of course Ukraine is a prime examples of this, such infrastructure still criss-crosses the new borders which arose from the collapse of the USSR, and here's a Russian president, Putin, who has identified energy as the key to Russian restoration and has made the clearest moves so far for a process of Russian-centric regional integration.

At the same time, the ideology of Putinism, has for the most part been pragmatic; it spouses authoritarian political values (Surkov's infamous “sovereign democracy”, for instance) with an open commitment to capitalism on amphetamines; Putin's crack down on dissidence and “dictatorship of the law”, his punishment of figures like Khodorkovskii, his establishment's completely Neanderthal backlash on social rights (particularly homosexuality), and many more, have all been entirely compatible with flat rate tax, monstrous levels of corruption, the entry into WTO and the growth in the density of millionaires per square foot in Moscow. Business understands that Putin is just about the only man who can conjugate all these extremes in a way that, give or take, gives space to all provided they do

not try to unseat him. So Russian foreign policy in this sense is a continuation of Putinism at home, with its frail balance between unbridled business interests and zero tolerance for opposition. In essence, Russian politics and foreign policy, is dominated by a handful of powerful players who have established their economic and political rule and cannot allow for a modicum of contestation, precisely because their economic privileges are so closely bound up with their political status.

What is the wider picture of inter-imperialist rivalry over Ukraine? To what extent Russian state’s actions were a response on US and EU imperialisms’ pressure as for example Gregor Gysi pointed out? What are in your opinion the interests of US and EU ruling classes in regard to Ukraine and Russia?

In general I agree with Gysi’s position on Ukraine: while clearly condemning Russia’s actions, he has nevertheless articulated a critique of the West’s own hypocrisy and blunders. At the same time, I still think there is a certain temptation in the anti-imperialist left to be too tolerant of something we could call “Russian defensiveness”, or Russia’s “geopolitical right of self defense” against Western unilateralism. Anybody on the left needs to be clear that the Russian state has absolutely no claim on Ukraine, no right to intervene there and no good reason in contributing to the humanitarian catastrophe unfolding in the East of the country. Now, of course the US and its European allies have been stunningly short-sighted and callous. Everyone knows Ukraine is a particularly sensitive issue for Moscow, and Brussels and Washington’s actions were going to provoke a Russian response and a division in Ukraine.

Although Ukraine’s membership of the EU was actually never seriously entertained in Brussels, the EU nevertheless assumed the deal on offer last winter was a foregone conclusion. The treaty itself contained a number of measures, particularly on the issue of financial investment, which unmasked it for what it really was: more neoliberal poison under the promise of democracy, modernization and closer integration with the West, so, in reality, no obvious advantages for Ukrainians who’ve already had to endure twenty years of economic mismanagement, corruption and neoliberal reforms. Anybody hoping to see economic prosperity for Ukrainian citizens off the back of closer ties to the EU is deluding themselves. Conversely, of course, many people in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine expect to improve their living standards from closer ties to Moscow. Once again, this is, in the long term, a dangerous fantasy. The economic role awaiting Ukraine if either the European or Russian visions were to be fulfilled, is peripheral and subaltern, as a market to benefit from and a source of cheap labor to exploit.

Since March, European chancelleries have been good on the rhetorical front, but pathetic in actually pulling together any kind of effective response against Russia. Not even Obama’s relatively stronger determination (the US president himself under pressure from more assertive political forces at home) managed to rally the Europeans to move decisively against Moscow. Only the shooting down of a the Malaysian airliner in July – a tragedy which ended the lives of 200 EU citizens – made it politically impossible for London, Paris, Rome or Berlin to continue dithering. While the West continues debating the effects of fresh anti-Russian sanctions or new Russian counter sanctions, the East of Ukraine is further engulfed in a humanitarian disaster.

Now, what Gysi is arguing is in part something that the Russian political elite, and its media chorus have been complaining about since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and especially after the 2000s and in the “color revolutions”: Western meddling in the post-Soviet space, creeping US unilateralism of the US, the marginalization of other important voices (Russia’s, obviously) in global governance, the erosion of an imaginary Cold War settlement with NATO enlargement, the abandonment of the ABM treaty by Bush II, and the mess and volatility this and Iraq and Afghanistan have brought on the world (from global terror to the instability of the Middle East after the “Arab Spring”). There is also a long strand in Russian foreign policy thinking which has attacked the West for constantly offering cynical assurances that NATO and EU enlargements were not aimed against Russia, and not seeking to establish a Western sphere of influence in Post-Soviet Europe. A good example of this train of thought is Sergei Karaganov. As he has recently put it: “Western officials dismissed the very concept of spheres of influence as obsolete while steadily expanding their own “non-existent” sphere of influence. I know that many in the West believed or wanted to believe their words. But in Russia and the rest of the world, which lived by another set of rules, this glaring contradiction was

met with nothing but derision and mistrust”. A lot of this has been borne out by the current crisis.

In fact, Western political meddling continued nakedly into the first months of 2014, despite the obvious risk of inflaming the situation further, and even as it was becoming increasingly clear that the Euromaidan comprised dangerously right-wing (let’s not mince words – fascist) elements. Neither Obama nor Merkel nor certainly Tusk and his foreign minister, Sikorski seemed to have much trouble directly dealing with ultra-nationalists, while making passionate condemnations of the democratic faults in the Crimean referendum. The “Anti-Terrorist” operations currently afoot in Eastern Ukraine are, once again, closely monitored and assisted by American and European operators. They also have a responsibility to the innocent civilians who are perishing.

So, yes, the US and EU do meddle and interfere, and they do threaten Russia and behave in completely hypocritical and irresponsible ways. Ok, but what many in Russia are proposing as a remedy to this Western wrong is just as revolting: reasserting Russia’s own “legitimate” spheres of interest, and a rebuilding a “concert of empires” (or great powers) that might return global affairs to some order and stability. In other words, who cares about the Ukrainians, East or West? The Russian ruling elite is acting here with exactly the same intolerable degree of imperial arrogance it criticizes in the West – although, granted, at least it doesn’t try to claim that its national interests are universal. Of course Russia is threatened by the West: the US and European allies have consistently tried to dominate the political and economic vacuum left after the Cold War and are responsible for a lot of the things that went so wrong in Russia’s own transition. But any notion that Moscow has, as a result, a right to use other peoples as a buffer, or to reassert a “legitimate” sphere of influence in what it contemptuously calls its “near abroad” is just an insult to basic human decency and intelligence, let alone a deeply conservative intellectual reaction and a disastrous stance to take if it comes from a progressive platform.

What is playing itself out in Ukraine now is the clash of two opposed imperial agendas: they are therefore elite projects which cynically manipulate nationalist sensitivities to their short term advantage. This analysis is important in that it has a clear corollary: the anti-imperialist stance is, as ever, to emphasize the capitalist nature of this rivalry, to understand that this is their rivalry, to avoid taking sides, and to try to forge civic and working-class solidarity across the geopolitical fracture. It’s up to the progressive forces in the West, in Russia, and most of all in Ukraine to do this, amid what I can only imagine are impossibly difficult and hostile conditions. It is a testimony to the courage and clarity of ideas of Ukrainian activists that this is precisely what many there are devoted to now, along anti-War platforms across the country.

What are the possible sources of geopolitical conflict in the world-capitalist system? Is the idea of the fall of US hegemony and/or the rise of ‘the Rest’ reasonable? Is a military escalation of inter-imperialist rivalries possible?

Well, as far as I’m concerned, one of the obvious differences between a Marxist geopolitics (and more broadly our theories of imperialism) and classical geopolitics is that our analyses are deeply rooted in historical and social explanations, rather than on geographical determinism. What this means is that we do not have (or aspire to have) predictive theories. I say this because one of the main contemporary proponents of classical geopolitics, George Friedman, from the think-tank Stratfor, boasts he can gauge, give or take, what the major international flash-points are likely to be over The Next Hundred Years. I think there are some things we can more or less claim about the coming state of international affairs, but I think this is all tentative, dynamic, very uncertain, and I definitely want to be clear that these are not predictions.

There has been a historical tendency from the early 2000s: a reversal, or a gradual weakening of the US’s ability to rally unquestioning support and collaboration behind its foreign policy. From this perspective, I think there is a first specific element which contributed to this erosion of US hegemony: Iraq and Afghanistan, and the whole business of the War on Terror. These policies have been an unmitigated disaster from an American perspective; the US has,

“What is playing itself out in Ukraine now is the clash of two opposed imperial agendas”

since 9/11 squandered an incredible amount of international credibility and support, and continued to beckon increasing opposition in the world. Moreover, it has laid bare its own contradictions and hypocrisy for everyone to see. Secondly, global capitalism is still limping through its 7th year of economic crisis. One of the most obvious effects of the slump was to further weaken the US and European economies, and this has had a very visible impact on foreign policy and military capacity, leaving aside the diminished political appetite for more foreign interventions. Thirdly, the economic effects of the global economic crisis have been uneven; much of the damage has taken place in the West, which has allowed at least the perception of a closer economic competition and relative rise of the BRICS; critically, the crisis has clearly increased the weight of other non-Western states in global governance around the G20.

Now don't get me wrong, I'm not claiming that China for instance is emerging as the next hegemon in the XXIst century; similarly, Russia's economy is mired in deep contradictions and forms of dependence on the global market, and so, in different ways, are Brazil, India and beyond. But the particular form of neoliberalism which was the basis of the US-led Western ideological hegemony after the collapse of the Soviet Union is, after the crisis, in pieces, no longer the idol to follow, and the lines of contestation of this Western supremacy are becoming increasingly clear. If we think back to the mid-1990s, what we are seeing is a discernible tendency of increasing economic, political and ideological competition against the West. What is important to note, and this is in a way entirely in keeping with the Marxist theory of imperialism, is that none of the contending poles to US power embodies an alternative to neoliberal capitalism. In other words, imperialist rivalry today is about the intensification of competition between different capitalist states, some of whom are more authoritarian and assertive. It is therefore a very unstable international system, and particularly at a time when liberal cosmopolitanism is discredited (the political mainstream in Europe for instance is more and more squeezed) there is of course a big risk of military escalations.

Crimea and Ukraine in 2014 are a really clear signal that the potential for open conflict is currently being played in crescendo. There is a broader systemic context in which some of the traditional parameters of international politics are shifting. Territorial disputes and clashes that have a more directly spatial nature, are I think, likely to become more prominent in the next decade than they ever were in the 2000s and 1990s – whether we are talking about the opening Arctic, sovereign disputes in the East China Sea or more trouble ahead in the post-Soviet space. Without dramatizing too much, globalized capitalism, uneven, fractured and oppressive as it is, never offered any guarantees for peace and stability. We've just been remembering the Great War of 1914. It was this conflict that generated the Marxist theory of imperialism; please don't get me wrong, I'm not saying we're heading for World War III, but I do believe that continuing to develop the critique of capitalist imperialism is as urgent now as it was then.

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October 22 2014