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Russia

Why Russia's ruling class is obsessed with the West

- Features -



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Vladimir Putin and his ruling elite are obsessed with the West “which is simultaneously seen as both the main adversary and the only potential partner”, writes Ilya Budraitskis, a Russian historian previously with the Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences, now a visiting scholar at UC Berkely in the United States after fleeing his country following Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine. In this op-ed piece for Mediapart, he argues why that obsession has “its roots in the reactionary legacy of the Russian Empire”, and why the Kremlin “is prepared to sacrifice even its closest allies without regret if necessary, treating them as bargaining chips” in its relations with the United States. [1]

Since the outbreak of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russian officials have repeatedly [emphasized](#) this war's significance as “anti-colonial” for the “global majority” enslaved by the “collective West”.

According to Vladimir Putin's [statements](#), Russia has become one of the leaders of this majority of non-Western countries defending their sovereignty and national interests. Moreover, the openly proclaimed goals of annexing new territories do not contradict this global anti-imperialist mission of Putin's Russia. One of the Kremlin's leading propagandists, writer Zakhar Prilepin, recently [stated](#) that “our empire is anti-colonial. Historically, we have built our country on anti-colonial foundations”.

However, over the past four years, neither the intergovernmental organisation [BRICS](#) nor initiatives by non-Western countries have become platforms for meaningful peace talks. Moscow has consistently ignored attempts, albeit declarative, by countries such as Turkey, Brazil, and China to offer themselves as mediators. Such mediation, despite the slim chances of success, could have set a precedent for strengthening non-Western actors and creating new mechanisms for international security, while the “global majority” would have transformed from an empty rhetorical figure into a real factor in world politics.

But after Donald Trump returned to power as US president, the opposite happened. Russia enthusiastically accepted the American model of negotiations, whereby Russia and the US would decide the fate of Ukraine (including the partition of its territories). In this model, Ukraine, as a small and dependent country, cannot be a full-fledged actor in such negotiations, but only an object of pressure from major global players – a principle that can hardly be called “anti-colonial.”

The drive to keep up direct talks with Trump isn't just a tactical move, but reflects the deep worldview of the Russian elite. This vision is both imperial and colonial, as it is based on a deep resentment toward the West, which is unwilling to accept Russia as an equal – that is, a member of an exclusive club of true sovereigns who dictate their will to the rest of the world. Putin has repeatedly spoken of the need for a “new Yalta” when, as after World War II, a solid world order would be established by a meeting of superpower leaders, and Russia would regain the geopolitical position of the USSR (of course, without its universalist emancipatory ideas). The ultimate goal of this war is not to lead a slave rebellion, but to gain recognition from the masters. Ukraine and its suffering people are merely a means to that end.

In such a dialectic of slave and master, first revealed by Hegel, recognition by the “global majority” (India, China, and even more so African countries) has no symbolic meaning, since they are not considered “equal” by the Russian ruling class itself, with its racist and Western-centric mindset. All the slave's actions aim to attract the attention of the master, from whom he seeks recognition – but it is precisely this inferiority and dependence that makes his consciousness truly slave-like. The obsession with the West, which is simultaneously seen as both the main adversary and the only potential partner, has its roots in the reactionary legacy of the Russian Empire.

Since the 19th century, Russian monarchist thinkers (who today inspire Putin's ideologues) have justified the uniqueness of Russian autocracy through the radical contrast between Russian and Western moral values. While the West strives for equality and individual freedom, Russians find genuine spirituality and submission to divine will in their lawlessness. The logic of Russian imperial nationalism and its pursuit of external expansion cannot be understood without this opposition to the West. In this sense, the 1917 revolution was not only an attempt at social liberation, but also a radical overcoming of its own slave mentality through a global project of equality and self-determination for peoples oppressed by colonialism (including by the Russian Empire).

Just recently, there was a presentation in Moscow of a code of “traditional Russian values” put together by a special department of the president’s office in charge of state ideology. According to this document, the history of these “values” starts with the split of Christianity into Eastern and Western, Orthodox and Catholic (true and false, respectively). Russians are declared the true heirs of “European, Greco-Roman civilization,” while the West, with its democracy and human rights, has betrayed this great heritage.

Accordingly, all Russian “traditional values” are formulated in opposition to Western ones: “rationalism - idealism,” “individualism - collectivism,” etc. Thus, the current conflict with the Western world is for Russia not only geopolitical but also ideological: it is essential to prove that the “Russian” view of human nature is correct, while the Western view is fundamentally flawed. In order to achieve true recognition as an equal, Putin's Russia needs to see its authoritarian mirror image in the West – the Europe of Marine Le Pen and Alice Weidel.

Appeals to the “global majority” in this model are merely a means to an end. Putin's Russia is not fighting for a “multipolar” world where each country, with its own particularities (such as authoritarian, repressive regimes), will be completely sovereign in its decision-making. Moreover, Russia is prepared to sacrifice even its closest allies without regret if necessary, treating them as bargaining chips in their relations with the United States.

Over the past year, Russia has easily come to terms with the fall of the Assad regime in Syria (previously supported with enormous military and financial resources) and has shown virtually no reaction to the kidnapping of Maduro and the threat of an American attack on Iran. The “turn to the East” [declared](#) by the Kremlin following the outbreak of war in Ukraine and the introduction of anti-Russian sanctions has boiled down to the spread of Chinese goods on the Russian domestic market and the use of countries such as India for the export of Russian oil. There has been absolutely no “turn” in the country’s public sphere: Russians still have no interest in non-Western cultures, and official propaganda is filled exclusively with denunciations of a “decaying Europe”.

This Western-centric and resentment-filled mindset of the Russian ruling class is inseparably linked to the authoritarian and reactionary nature of domestic governance. Like the Russian Empire two hundred years ago, Putin's Russia is, as one great Russian poet wrote, “a country of slaves, a country of masters”. The slave mentality of its elite is reflected in this formula of absolute powerlessness of its people.

Based on colossal inequality, the social model of modern Russia will constantly need militaristic mobilisation, driven by the regime's hopeless and endless struggle for recognition by the West. These extremely dangerous complexes of the ruling class can only be overcome through radical democratic and social change within Russia. Only genuine equality within the country itself will lead to respect for the independence of other countries and the ability to treat them as equals, rather than as objects of oppression and domination.

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Source: [Mediapart](#). A French translation of this article, originally written in English, can be found [here](#).

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[1] Photo: Meeting of the Russian Pobeda (Victory) Organising Committee April 5, 2016 The Kremlin, Moscow.