

'What I don't want is Western triumphalism'

Slavoj Žižek on Putin's expansionism, Western complicity, the denial of death, & preventing a global ultra-conservative turn.

The Slovenian philosopher **Slavoj Žižek** spoke about the Russia-Ukraine war, framing it as part of a global ideological conflict, in which Vladimir Putin himself is befriending other authoritarian regimes to create a new, ultra-conservative axis of global power.

A self-described pessimist, Žižek cautions the West against settling into a complacent sense of moral superiority. The Neo-Fascist ideological turn that now serves Putin's imperialist ambitions is not, he says, a specifically Russian problem. Instead, it's a case study in how things go wrong when political competition devolves into struggle among oligarchs, backtracking to the 1990's.

"I don't see any possibility of some special airplane bringing Putin, Medvedev, and the others to the Hague, without total change in Russia first. But, instead of demonizing Putin, we should look towards the roots of the situation, and ask ourselves what the West did wrong back in the 1990's, since it's not innocent of this present situation.

The paradox of Yeltsin-era Russia was this: The deal between post-Soviet Russia and the Western powers was that Russia would be recognized as one of the superpowers on the condition that it doesn't really, fully act as one. The West was proceeding with an opportunistic sense of — "Let's use the opportunity and weaken Russia." And the whole process of privatization in Russia went totally wrong. What happened was a few oligarchs went grabbing, grabbing, and grabbing all the big natural resources, arriving at a capitalism at its least productive. So I think the roots of the catastrophe, the roots of authoritarianism are, unfortunately, in the Yeltsin years (with all sympathy for Yeltsin, who was in an extremely difficult situation).

Consider Yeltsin in 1993, when he rolled out the tanks, shelled the parliament, and expanded the powers of the president: this is what the people generally want. I'm being a pessimist here, but people don't really want a full democracy. A full democracy means a lot of responsibility. What people want is a regime that isn't terrorist, where you can rely on the rule of law, but also a regime that you can trust, a regime that at least gives the impression of knowing what it wants. And that's why what's happening with Russia now is the result of the Yeltsin years. Putin didn't create that order — he merely rearranged it.

The catastrophe came about because political pluralism devolved into conflict between oligarchs. This isn't a specifically Russian process. What do we think is happening now in the United States? People like Jeff Bezos or Elon Musk are also oligarchs in a certain sense. Now, we see some close allies abandoning Putin and squabbling amidst themselves. This is an extremely dangerous moment, but I'm absolutely not against Russia as a state. This is all very sad. The nominally "political" power struggle keeps taking the form of conflict between oligarchs, and quite transparently, too. Take Evgeny Prigozhin attacking the Defense Minister Shoigu. A serious state cannot afford this kind of situation, a situation when a mercenary group claims to be the most effective group on the front, etc. This is dangerous and worries me a great deal.

The language of hostility

The second thing that worries me about Russia is what some of my friends try to tell me: "Listen, don't take too seriously all that stuff about 'corrupt Western values,' the LGBT, sodomy, Satanism, whatever. This is just ideology. It doesn't matter. What Russia really wants is a piece of Ukraine."

Well, not so fast. Don't underestimate the material force of ideology. Look at Nazism. Anti-Semitism was an ideology, and, as an ideology, it led to terrible practical consequences. The tragedy is that Germany, when already losing, went on with the Holocaust right up until the very end. Some German high politicians like Albert Speer tried to limit its reach, arguing, Why kill the Jews? All able-bodied men should be in industry, etc. But the hardliners prevailed, and I fear that I don't buy this pragmatic theory that it's all about material power or a piece of land. Of course, most people are cynics. They don't take ideology seriously. But it works all the same, regardless of whether you think it matters.

My one critical remark about Ukraine is that their big point, "We are defending the European civilization against the barbarian hordes" sounds to me a bit like Alexander Dugin when he talks about "the Russian truth" and keeping the Europeans out. Look at the United States, where the Left and the Right speak to one another in the same violent language. America is on the cusp of civil war. The majority of the Republicans don't think of Biden as a legitimate president. Trump recently said that when fighting for liberty (as he understands it) it's fine to violate the Constitution. So, precisely as a leftist, I say, don't play with fire. We have a global crisis, with global ideological conflicts that have nothing to do with "Eurasian values" or "Western decadence."

I'll say something awful now. With all that I've written against Putin, he once said something that nearly made me feel some sympathy for him. He said, apropos of a Jewish holiday, that Russia wants to build a multicultural society where Jews, Muslims, and Buddhists could all have their place. This framed Russia as a multicultural state instead of your "normal" nation-

state, and I think it's along these lines that Russia should actually construct its identity. It should be an eastern version of the European Union. It could be more centralized than the EU, but I have to say I almost like this, too, because to be effective, the EU itself needs more cooperative centralization — not just to deal with the war, but to confront ecological crises, immigration problems, the healthcare situation, and so on.

So, I'm not saying that Russia should simply become a Western-style nation-state. I even think that maybe it was a mistake to let the Soviet Union fall apart. Let's be clear: there was too much cultural difference with countries like Latvia and Estonia. Okay, so let them go. But other parts could have been accommodated within a pluralist model. It's here that I see a missed opportunity. Instead, look who Russia's main allies are today. China (conditionally), and then Iran and North Korea. This is very concerning.

If a country relies too much on its natural resources, oil exports, food, or grain, this reliance makes it inert, and can pave the way to new forms of colonization. Here we have Ukraine and its struggle for freedom. We support it. Perfect, but is the West purely disinterested here? Let's see what's happening in Ukraine, politically and economically. I read that one-third of the best land is either in private hands or owned by a Western company. This is economic colonization by the West.

I have found a video clip of Volodymyr Zelensky hosting a televised Russian New Year's party. It was 2013, he was still a comedian. That video, I thought, showed a near-ideal situation, with Ukraine a separate state, but people speaking in Russian without resentment, and everyone getting along. The tragedy of the invasion is that it obliterated that relationship. But again, in spite of everything, Russia is not a unique island of evil in the world. That evil is spread everywhere.

Russian ideology in search of allies

When the war broke out, many of my acquaintances secretly wished for a quick Russian victory. "We'll protest for some time," they thought, "but it'll all be over soon." The Ukrainian resistance came to many in the West as a surprise. Second, there is an old leftist prejudice that whenever the European Union or the U.S. or NATO get involved, we must take the other side. This, unfortunately, is wrong. Look at World War II, when Stalinist Russia and the West were on the same side. And finally, I was surprised by how many leftists, especially in Germany, would speak with a vulgar, pragmatic arrogance about the war and how it might affect their living standard.

I think that there is scope for some negotiation, and what created that scope was precisely Western support of Ukraine. Without that support, Ukraine would have fallen a long time ago. But this stabilization is slowly making the war more and more meaningless, and now we have a paradox: this successful Ukrainian resistance has created the space for possible compromise, negotiation, and peace. Western leftists constantly attack me, as the "court jester of capitalism" and so on, but here it is: relatively successful Ukrainian resistance to date can now open up a space for possible negotiations.

Perhaps Russia doesn't just want a piece of land, but wants instead ongoing, gradual expansion. This expansionism will not end well. Russia is a big enough country to be able to take a step back. Otherwise, it'll open the door to new populists. Who is the most popular non-Ukrainian politician in Ukraine? It's the prime minister of Poland — but that is precisely the face of the new conservatism, the tendency that's getting stronger thanks to the incredible stupidity of the left.

I could go on in detail about where the Ukrainians are making mistakes. But in spite of all this, they were attacked, and it's a kind of miracle how sincerely they believe in their freedom, and how they fight for it. By resisting Putin, they're doing even Russia a long-term favor. But the Russians are not the enemy. Russia is a deeply traumatized, divided nation, whose official discourse is now becoming deeply orthodox. It says, There is no death, but only immortality. There is no pain, only duty. Meanwhile, the majority of people are afraid, and their assent cannot be taken at face value.

The ideology of people around Putin, and Putin himself, seems quite clear-cut. It's Neo-Fascism. They don't use this term, but

the entire framework of Russian imperialist views — with the right to aggressively expand the state borders, the internal politics with regard to oligarchs, etc. — this mindset is the core of what we would call Neo-Fascism. Russia has a history of claiming to be an anti-imperialist force, but even this has Fascist precedents, in the German propaganda used when occupying Europe and justifying the occupation as resistance to British and French imperialism. Japan used the same rhetoric in the Pacific region, around 1939.

If you look at Lenin and then Trotsky, they were fanatically opposed to Russian dominance over Ukraine. Putin himself knows this. The last text written by Trotsky was about Ukraine. It's a beautiful text, which takes off from the question, Does Ukraine have the right to secede from a Russia-dominated Soviet Union? Trotsky's answer is yes, absolutely. Ukraine should have more autonomy, and if Ukraine secedes, so what? That's why we have what we call "proletarian internationalism." National borders simply don't matter! Now, while Ukraine is taking down the Lenin statues, Putin says that Russia will show the world "real decolonization."

This points to a real danger. Putin and the people around him are doing something pretty shrewd, and pretty dangerous. They don't just rely on orthodox conservative thinkers like Alexander Dugin and Ivan Ilyin. They also use anti-colonial leftist language, telling the world that they represent all of its oppressed people in their struggle against colonial imperialist domination. And, unfortunately, this has some appeal to some third-world nations. I see it as a very ominous sign. Putin's promise of pluralism, of countries letting each other do as they please at home, is the basis of Putin's deal with the Taliban in Afghanistan. China's deal is to be able to have its way with its Muslims. But this isn't anti-imperial emancipation: it's really a proposal for a new Neo-Fascist unity. My nightmare is that this will get connected with the New Right in the U.S. and Western Europe, and we'll wind up with an anti-liberal axis. This I think is the greatest danger.

Who are the emergent members of this new axis? It's countries like Iran and North Korea. Again, this isn't just Russia, but Russia is offering the rest of the world a new model: a Neo-Fascist model of false mutual tolerance among authoritarian regimes. At first, I didn't take this model seriously. Dugin often speaks about the "Russian truth" and how it's incompatible with "Western truth." But now he says the Russian truth is absolute, divine, and globally valid. This is very dangerous, given that countries like Brazil, India, and South Africa are playing a double game (even though I like Lula better than Bolsonaro). They're all playing at neutrality, like China. But there are conflicts when saying that you are neutral means that you're actually taking a particular side. That's exactly what happens if you say that you're neutral in the Ukraine war. And by taking the Russian side, I don't mean taking the side of the Russian people.

Preventing a turn for the worse

There are two main types of fascism. The first, and I call it ironically "benevolent fascism," can perpetuate itself indefinitely, being essentially self-contained. This was Mussolini's regime until the late 1930s — and the West, with Churchill and others, was happy to celebrate Mussolini (or Franco, or Salazar). This wasn't yet expansionist fascism. But then came the German brand of fascism, with its logic of imminent war and expansionism.

Between these two kinds of fascism, Russia is closer to a certain type of Nazism, because of this need to expand and to create permanent tension. Why this need? Because fascism is not simply a form of totalitarianism. Fascism is, for me, a way to escape inner antagonisms by proposing a false notion of people's solidarity. Russia is an extremely divided, severely unequal nation torn between poverty and oligarchy. But if you play the fascist card of national solidarity, you can mask this heterogeneity and mobilize the people as one. This use of national emergency is specifically Neo-Fascist, in its reliance on enemies in consolidating society. I still have some problems with the term "fascism," thanks to the laziness that makes the left talk of fascism anytime they see something they dislike. But Putin's emphasis on patriotism and unity is very much a fascist temptation.

Still, with all the crazy statements you hear in the Putin propaganda — that there's no death but only immortality, and so on — every now and then, they change their discourse to a more pragmatic key. But this is no cause for particular optimism, the question of who might replace Putin being another major problem. I can imagine a regime that would be even harsher, so, sad as it is to say, what we must all do is be very patient, very careful, and strive to prevent a turn for what would be even worse.

What I don't want is the language of Western triumphalism: "Destroy Russia, destroy Putin." What this should be about is Ukraine's survival as an autonomous sovereign state. It would be a good thing for Russia too, in the long term, and I mean this sincerely. So, first: Ukraine must survive. And second, with regard to the West, let's not play on this imagined moral superiority. We in the West are also in a crisis — in a state of permanent but fruitless self-critique. Unless it becomes real and productive, we are lost."

~ This is a condensed version of the philosopher's interview first published in Russian.

By **meduza.io**



World peace in Ukraine! by Yuri Hasenko, 1919.

This propaganda poster created for the 1919 Paris Peace Conference depicts Ukrainians at the center of Ukraine fending off the attacks of a Bolshevik from the north, a Russian White Army soldier from the east, a Polish soldier in the northwest, a Hungarian soldier from the west, and two Romanian soldiers from the southwest.