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EUROPE FACED WITH THE SEDUCTION OF PUTINISM

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Russia occupies a central place in questions of international and regional security and is, perhaps, together with the Middle East, one of the parts of the world that most polarises political actors and international public opinion. The usual split doesn't apply here. In the West, far right and far left converge in the defence of Putin's Russia. Unlike most other problem areas where, together with its underlying values, this dividing line is almost always manifested according to a pattern that is recognised by everyone, in the case of Russia the present polarisation and politicisation come hand in hand and in a totally transversal way, ranging from a certain left, and not only the radical left, to a certain right, and not only the radical right.

Since his return to the presidency in 2012, Vladimir Putin has become an icon of ultraconservative thinking and politicians around the world. The state ideology he has promoted recalls Marshall Pétain's slogan in occupied France, "Family, Work, Fatherland". The Kremlin's ties with extreme right-wing groups have been growing closer and are strengthening across the European Union. Putin's Russia is now a reference in the global wave of illiberalism. An *avant la lettre* Trump, he has raised Russia up from its knees and has supposedly made it great again.

In the legal domain he has brought in the law of 2012 on "foreign agents", the law of 2013 on "gay propaganda", the law of 2017 defining permissible levels of domestic violence, his decree of 2015 bringing in the "Russian Schoolchildren's Movement" guaranteeing parents that their offspring will receive a "patriotic education" in accordance with the "system of Russian values", the creation in 2016 of its militarised branch, the military-patriotic youth movement Yunarmiya (Young Army), and the **Information Security Doctrine of the Russian Federation** in 2016, according to which "there is growing information pressure on the population of Russia, and primarily Russian youth, aiming to undermine traditional Russian moral and spiritual values".

The logic of these legal measures has been explained by the well-known Russian senator and jurist, Yelena Mizulina, deputy chair of the Federation Council Committee on Constitutional Legislation and State Building. On 22 April, speaking at an Internet security forum discussing the system of banning websites in Russia, Mizulina **declared** that, "It is precisely prohibition that makes a person free because it is saying, 'this is banned but with everything else you can do what you want.' [...] I can tell you, the more rights we have, the less free we will be." Marshall Pétain himself would recognise an echo of the ideas he **expressed** in 1940: "We shall tell [young people] that it is beautiful to be free, but that real "Liberty" can only be exercised under the shelter of a guiding authority, which they must respect, and which they must obey".

The clear paradox here is, how can it be that this Russia—obscurantist, imperialist, and militarist—is supported and justified by the radical left which, at home and abroad, upholds the opposite values? There are certainly several explanations but two ideas unquestionably make up the base of this convergence: anti-imperialism and sovereignty, understood as a struggle against the “Europe of capital”.

The sympathies of the left that systematically defends Russia in general, and Putin’s Russia in particular, revolve around the axis of anti-imperialism. And being anti-imperialist is the same as being anti-American and always being suspicious of the United States, whatever the circumstances. According to this contrarian reasoning, Moscow must be supported against critics, who can only be serving their own interests, because Russia is the only power that always stands up to Washington.

But this sector of the left doesn’t seem bothered by the Kremlin’s neocolonial policies vis-à-vis its former Soviet neighbours and—with the same uncritical thinking as that displayed by the mid-nineteenth-century philosophers who were scolded by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*—is more comfortable swallowing what Putin’s Russia has to say about itself and others. Hence, Euromaidan is turned into a coup d’état led by fascists and remote-controlled by western powers. As for Crimea, the most extensive argument to justify the annexation of the peninsula is that it has been Russian for so long... But how long is this? One century or two? What, for example, would Algerians think if that reasoning was applied to their country?

Since Russia is now capitalist, no mention is made these days of the wonders of its social system but, rather, of the relevance of its international role in saving the world from falling into the Washington-led trap of unipolarism. Hence, critics of Russia—those who set out to “**demonise Russia**”—have a “strategy against Russia’s participation in regional and global affairs”. This opinion is totally shared by Putin who, in 2018, when referring to criticism about the poisoning of the former Russian double agent Sergei Skripal, said, “This is a Russophobic point of view. [...] Their only aim is to contain Russia and stop it from becoming a potential competitor. [...] This is all about Russia’s growing power and greater competitiveness. A powerful actor is rising, and it will have to be taken into account, even if some people prefer not to.”

Sovereignty is another concept that feeds into the heart of Putin’s pro-Russia pitch and wins over sympathisers on both right and left. In this case, it’s called “sovereign democracy”, a notion coined in 2006 by Vladislav Surkov, who has been the ideologist of Putinism for many years. The reasoning is simple. Russia is a democratic sovereign state and, as such, its democracy is genuinely Russian and it has no need to look like a western one. Criticising it is interfering in its sovereignty. A supranational project like that of Europe could only raise the deepest suspicion in Moscow and any internal division would not only be welcomed but also encouraged.

People on the left—whether extreme or not—who support Putin’s Russia make the mistake of confusing criticism of a certain regime with criticism of a country and its people in general. The far-reaching contradiction they seem unaware of is that, in so doing, they are denying almost three hundred million people—citizens of Russia (Russian and non-Russian) and of the other countries of the former Soviet Union—the same rights they consider to be the basic acceptable minimum in their part of the world.