

‘Novorossiya’s’ ‘Leftist’ Friends

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*The frenzied world-wide front is expanding
Mercy to no one, no one, no one!*

Stanza from 1989 Russian anarchists' song *Vintovka – eto prazdnik* (The Rifle is a Holiday)

By the Russian punk band *Grazhdanskaya Oborona* (Civil Defense)

The annexation of Crimea, the “Novorossiya” project, and the fight against the “Kyiv junta” are not supported in Russia alone. There are political forces around the world, both marginal and relatively respectable, which voice their support for the separatists in the Donbass. At times, activists themselves travel to the war zone as volunteers, but they mostly hold demonstrations in support of the separatist republics and pressure their governments to renounce their support for Ukraine and “stop the aggression against Russia.”

These political forces may identify as left-wing, right-wing, or deny any conventional political identity (although their “political neutrality” usually conceals one ideology or another). Novorossiya’s foreign friends who, in 99% of cases, are also friends of Russia and worshippers of Putin, may explain their views from various, sometimes incompatible positions. Novorossiya can be supported both by a white racist and a communist who talks about the fight against “Ukrainian fascism” and “Western imperialism.” But despite the apparent differences in their theoretical ideological grounding, their political practice is remarkably similar. Eventually, they arrive at the same conclusions and stand on the same side of the barricade.

Not that long ago, an “antifascist forum” took place in the Donbass, which was attended by representatives of not major, but still quite notable Stalinist organizations from Europe and the United States. Around the same time, a forum of ultra-right, nationalist, and conservative activists took place in the Donbass. The fact that these events coincided is more than revealing. We will talk about both left-wing and right-wing supporters of Novorossiya and attempt to find similarities in their modes of thinking. The first text mostly focuses on leftists, but there are certain elements which are also relevant to the right-wing camp.

Lies and Truth

European and US radicals, both left- and right-wing, do not trust the media. Leftists mistrust mainstream outlets because the latter, according to their worldview, are controlled by oligarchs or their puppets. Far-rightists do so because, in their version of reality, the media are controlled by Zionist, cultural-Marxist, and homosexual lobbies. In general, a critical approach to any kind of information is advisable, but the conspiratorial and critical approaches are seldom compatible. A conspiracy theorist judges information as follows: If the media work for oligarchs, then everything they report must be a lie serving the interests of the men behind the scenes. But they still need to get their information somewhere. While they can get news about their own country from blogs, party newsletters, and congenial news websites, learning about foreign countries is more complicated, particularly due to the language barrier. It is necessary to find an independent source, with adequate resources at its disposal, which could send its correspondents to different parts of the world; at the same time, this source must be independent from the “secret masters,” whoever these might be. And here, *Russia Today*(RT.com) comes to the rescue.

Russian propaganda is not limited to the spouting of [Kremlin propagandist Dmitry] Kiselyev, who is only needed for the domestic consumer. For the Western audience, there is *Russia Today*, an

information product unique in its nature. This TV channel often shows high-quality broadcasts of protest movements and demonstrations in Western countries; on other occasions, RT talks about events which other media ignore for one reason or another. A great deal of material is broadcast in the form of raw video footage without commentary or voice-over, which creates the effect of objectivity. RT.com actively attracts Western journalists and gives them *carte blanche* to honestly and uncompromisingly criticize their governments. All of the above definitely affords the channel a certain credit of trust. And it actively utilizes this credit when it finds it necessary to compel a Western viewer to believe in blatant lies and propaganda. For instance, in the notion that the EuroMaidan movement consisted exclusively of fascists directly controlled by the United States. While Russian propagandists need only to present their domestic audience with pure lies without any admixture, the lies shown to a foreign consumer must be craftily alternated and combined with truth.

Soviet Ressentiment

Western leftists often perceive the USSR not at all like those who would seem to be their likeminded Ukrainian counterparts. In our country, overt Soviet sympathies are only voiced by parties which are direct successors of the Soviet nomenklatura, such as the Communist Party of Ukraine. Or those who are trying to win over the pension-age electorate, filled with Soviet nostalgia. All other leftists – anarchists, Trotskyists, left-communists, social democrats – are more than critical toward the USSR; after all, it was that state which virtually eradicated these political movements in the territory under its control. In the West, particularly in the countries which never found themselves under Soviet rule, the left's attitude toward its legacy is softer. To them, the USSR was a kind of remote abstraction which did not pose a direct threat, but frightened the rulers of their countries which in turn were forced into compromises and concessions favoring domestic worker and trade union movements. The USSR's existence inspired a hope that a different, non-capitalist world was possible. Active attacks on the USSR during the Cold War would, indirectly, amount to support for one's "own" government. Thus, leftists preferred not to pay any special attention to Soviet politics, instead concentrating on critique of Western imperialism. The further away from the GULAG, the easier it is to assess the edifying results of the Soviet experiment and observe its "positive aspects." For instance, in the United States, even the anarchists considered the hammer and sickle the perfect symbol for outraging local conservatives, rather than the emblem of a totalitarian regime which completely exterminated their comrades.

Now, the USSR's place has been taken by Russia, which continues to be regarded as the antipode to "Western capitalism," even though the Russian Federation has long exhibited much fewer characteristics of a welfare state than the countries of Western Europe. Those leftists which fell into the trap of geopolitical thinking ended up in the same camp as the right-wingers. In this respect, the coalition which the Greek Syriza party was forced to join, having previously won a majority in the latest parliamentary election, is telling – the "socialists" were forced to cooperate with overt right-wing populists. The only things that the two have in common are sympathy toward the Russian Federation and criticism of the European Union.

This illustration clearly demonstrates how the supporters of Novorossiia present the conflict between Ukraine and Russia. Ukraine is simply a virgin territory encroached upon by Western imperialists. The latter are opposed by the Russian bear. Not man, mind you, but bear. We are

dealing with a kind of “positive dehumanization.” The Russian is presented as a creature belonging to another species, to whom human ethical norms need not apply; therefore, Russia is easily pardoned for the actions which, if conducted by the West, are harshly criticized.

Information “Struggle”

As a rule, left-wing organizations eagerly lend an ear to their counterparts in other countries. It is always more simple and agreeable to listen to those who say things close to one’s heart in a familiar language. During the Maidan protests and immediately thereafter, the Borotba [Struggle] organization, which initially supported the Anti-Maidan movement and subsequently the “People’s Republics,” successfully imitated before the Western audience, completely ignorant of Ukraine, a “mass left-wing party,” which waged a “relentless antifascist struggle in the underground.” Their success is easily explained: Borotba had a budget that covered the services of translators who rebroadcast their materials in different languages. Furthermore, they use the language of the left more aptly than the Communist Party of Ukraine does. However, the Communist Party has also made its contribution – the magical word “communist” in its name has won the ears of many a naive Western leftist, who sincerely believe that “communists are being persecuted and suppressed in Ukraine,” and who see in communists the continuers of the ideas of Marx and Engels, not a party bureaucracy which has sold out many times over.

What we get is a simple, convenient, and completely unambiguous picture, which perfectly matches the line of official Russian propaganda: a fascist putsch and an antifascist underground. What questions are there left to ask when one group is toppling monuments to Lenin and the other is defending them with their lives? Especially given that independent media, not controlled by “Western governments” and “transnational corporations,” such as *Russia Today*, are saying more or less the same thing using almost exactly the same words.

Other Ukrainian leftists produced fewer articles (because there were no staffers to write them), and these texts are more difficult to understand, because they do not always paint such a simple, unambiguous, and heroic picture. Propaganda and simple clichés will inevitably be more successful than analysis. And while Ukrainian anarchists more or less managed to align the sentiments among many of their Western counterparts, most adherents of the Bolshevik tradition remained at the level of “the people of the Donbass are waging a national liberation struggle against the junta which seized power through a fascist putsch.”

The Myth of the Odessa Khatyn

An important element in the mythology of “leftist” supporters of Novorossiia was the fire in the Odesa Trade Unions Building. It was a very powerful image: “the fascists burned people alive.” And not just anywhere, but in the Trade Unions Building! Across the world, trade unions are directly associated with left-wing movements, which means that people who died there would automatically be perceived as left-wing activists, especially given that Borotba and the Communist Party of Ukraine lost a few of their supporters there and took the trouble to paint them as heroes. And it is secondary that the backbone of the Odessa Anti-Maidan consisted of people professing right-wing, even far-right pro-Russian views, and that it included those of the Black-Hundred and imperialist persuasions. For a Western leftist, imperialism is by no means

such an obvious right-wing symbol as, for instance, a Wolfsangel or the Azov Battalion's "black sun." All the more so because the Anti-Maidan members sported St. George's ribbons which, not without the help of official Russian propaganda, were actively exported as an "antifascist symbol," including to the West.

The deaths in the Trade Unions Building finally convinced many Western leftists of the "fascist" essence of the Maidan and the new Ukrainian authorities. This entire situation (from the location of the tragedy to the death by fire) fits perfectly into the existing set of clichés. It is revealing that most people who now recall the "burned martyrs of Odessa" do not know about, or prefer not to mention, the deaths in the Kyiv Trade Unions Building, where many Maidan protesters lost their lives, including the wounded. That's because it would not fit into the general picture — the "antifascist [now defunct riot] Berkut police force" could not have possibly burned wounded people alive.

Even moderate forces, such as the German Die Linke party, which reject direct support or solidarity with the self-proclaimed republics, are inclined to sympathize with the victims of the May 2 fire, while completely ignoring the violence which the Odessa Anti-Maidan had regularly carried out from the moment of its formation up to and during the events of May 2.

The Prizrak Brigade and Its Communists

There is no point in enumerating all the organizations which support Novorossiia in one form or another. The reader need not decipher the multitude of names and abbreviations; it is far more important to understand the general pattern of thought which caused hundreds of people from different countries of the world to travel in March to Alchevsk in search of the phantom of communism in [now deceased separatist militant Aleksei] Mozgovoy's Prizrak Brigade.

Most European volunteers travel to the Donbass from Spain and other South European countries. A great contribution to that was made by Banda Bassotti, a prominent Italian punk group. The mobilizing potential of musicians can sometimes be greater than that of parties and civic movements. European communists fighting in the ranks of Mozgovoy and other field commanders fell into Novorossiia's trap largely due to the unsophisticated propaganda ventilated by these "punks" professing Stalinist views. They actively channel all aforementioned clichés while diluting them with their own stupidity. They mix "leftist" rhetoric with national-chauvinist propaganda — Lenin and Trotsky might not have executed them, but they would have definitely expelled them from the party. For instance, during interviews, members of Banda Bassotti say without a hint of doubt that Ukraine was created artificially, in defiance of Russia, citing "a book they read recently."

It is important to understand that until 2014, most Western leftists supporting Novorossiia did not have the slightest idea of the political situation in Ukraine, let alone its history, ethnic and cultural groups populating its territory, the history of Ukraine-Russia relations, and so forth. In 2014, they quickly acquired that "knowledge," thoughtfully offered to them by Russian propaganda. The language barrier allowed for all types of suggestions. Even the most anti-scientific source gains legitimacy if it is translated from a foreign outlet. That is precisely why the Spanish volunteers subsequently arrested in their homes explained during an interview their desire to fight on the side of the separatists with the fact that "they were helping defend Russia against Ukrainian aggression."

Indeed, for some Spanish Stalinists who have a vague idea of Ukraine's geographical location, the words "Ukrainian" and "fascist" have become synonymous. Last fall, a telling episode took place: a 56-year-old Ukrainian was attacked by a group of Catalan nationalists and slipped into a coma. This episode caused very strong indignation, including in left-wing circles, but was condemned mostly by anarchists; there was no reaction whatsoever on the part of major leftist parties.

The German Antiimperialistische Aktion group cooperates with ANNA News, a popular propagandist channel.

Their cooperation likely dates as far back as the Syrian war. Both the pro-Russian TV channel and the "anti-imperialists" actively supported Assad in this war. The ideology of the "anti-imps," as they are called in Germany, can be briefly summarized as follows: radical anti-Americanism, a partiality to conspiracy theories, covert (and sometimes overt) anti-semitism, and thoroughly uncritical support for all regimes opposed to the United States and Israel. The official flag of Antiimperialistische Aktion resembles the antifascist flag, but instead of a red-and-black banner in a circle, it depicts the flag of the USSR and the "anti-imperialist" regime which they currently love most. There are variations depicting the flags of Libya, Syria, and Palestine. There has recently appeared an "anti-imperialist" flag on which the Soviet flag is accompanied by the two-headed Novorossiia eagle, and the pantheon of antifascist and anti-imperialist heroes was supplemented not only by Strelkov and Mozgovoy, but also by Ramzan Kadyrov. It sometimes feels like the anti-imps are a kind of parody of the left-wing supporters of Novorossiia (their performance at an anti-NATO meeting with dogs sporting Berkut uniforms was more amusing than any parody). Regrettably, however, they are absolutely real.

Not only are they absolutely real, but they also have supporters both in different cities of Germany and beyond the country's borders – in Sweden, for instance. They do not only actively accept the Kremlin propaganda, but also rebroadcast it to European audiences with great enthusiasm. This propaganda video, which tells the "truth about Euromaidan," is one example of that.

Many admirers of Russia in the West like to set up accounts on the VKontakte social network (which they also consider anti-imperialist and a counterweight to the corporate Facebook). With the use of automatic translation services, they try to communicate with Russian-language audiences, and even receive occasional feedback.

Active support for Novorossiia is also expressed by numerous Greek left-wing organizations. The ruling Syriza party has already stuck in people's memory with its pro-Russian stance and, consequently, with its loyalty to Russia-controlled regimes. However, many of Syriza's opponents (today we are talking about their opponents "on the left," the ultra-rightists from the Golden Dawn party will be discussed in another article) have gloated over the puppet regimes of the LPR and DPR even more strongly.

Not only overt worshippers of Stalin and the Soviet legacy, but also many forces identifying themselves as followers of the Maoist tradition have supported the LPR and DPR. They are driven by the same anti-imperialist (read "anti-American") logic. Everything that is opposed to the West with all its corporations and capitalist expansion is perceived as an absolute good, "anti-imperialist" regimes are easily forgiven what is considered a taboo in leftist circles: from racism to homophobia. Furthermore, Maoists are inclined to romanticize rebellion and armed struggle and, in this context, they certainly find the image of Novorossiia quite attractive.

Certain Trotskyists have also taken a liking to the myth of the left-wing Donbass. Notable in this respect are the International Marxist Tendency (an international group known for its overt and completely uncritical support of the Venezuelan model of state socialism) and the International Committee of the Fourth International. If they consider the USSR a “deformed workers’ state,” then the post-Soviet space consists of “workers’ states” which are even more deformed are still preferable to the capitalist, neo-liberal West. Therefore, the thought of reunifying the USSR is no less attractive to them than to Stalinists, except that the former seek to re-establish the USSR without the cult of the moustached leader, and believe that this can be done without forming a new party establishment and bureaucracy. It is important to note that there are a great number of Trotskyist organizations and internationals around the world, their names are often similar, and behind familiar abbreviations there often lie unappeasable enemies with diametrically opposite stances on Ukraine. Whenever you throw a stone at a Stalinist, you will almost definitely hit a supporter of Novorossiia; before throwing one at a Trotskyist, it is worthwhile asking him a few leading questions.

Living in a special, completely parallel universe are leftists from the United States, who prefer to fight the evil empire directly from within. In their view, the war in the Donbass started at the instigation of the United States and, obviously, because of oil. After all, every global conflict is waged by the United States and always because of oil. And yes, the “Odessa carnage” was also planned by the United States, in case you had any doubts on that score.

This video footage (recorded, by the way, by the aforementioned *Russia Today* channel) can be understood without any knowledge of English, and has already been commented on a thousand times.

Putin’s Cautious Friends

Many political forces feel they are too respectable to stoop to cheap clownery. They do not fling up wild slogans about the “junta” and “conspiracy.” However, they say essentially the same things using more civilized, diplomatic language. And, in a way, they are even more dangerous, given that such parties as Die Linke and Syriza are members of the European Parliament. And though they do not send volunteers to the Donbass, they do contribute to blocking aid to Ukraine (as do their right-wing twins).

Deputy Andrej Hunko (who on account of his surname is considered a foremost expert on Ukraine within the party), together with his colleague Wolfgang Gerke, became notorious in the Ukrainian media owing to a photo in which he is seen posing with Zakharchenko.

Earlier, however, both he and his associates made a lot of effort to indirectly support the separatists. Through their efforts, Borotba party leader Sergey Kirichuk was granted political asylum in Germany; they helped him broadcast propaganda about the “workers’ rebellion in the Donbass,” including at the level of the European Parliamentary. And despite the fact that Die Linke publicly dissociated itself from Borotba, cooperation with its leader continues.

The rhetoric of “peace” and “intolerance for inciters of war” is very popular among such politicians. Except that when saying “peace,” they mean exclusively “peace with Russia,” and they agree to only see inciters of war in the West. At the same time, they deny Ukraine any kind of subjecthood, and its population is allotted the unenviable roles of Western puppets, blood-thirsty fascists, or their victims. And once again it turns out that the “leftists” are speaking the

same “geopolitical” language as the “rightists” whom they criticize. But even the formal difference between them is getting smaller – Sara Wagenknecht of Die Linke has already publicly called for a dialogue with the ultra-right anti-immigration Pegida organization, appealing, first and foremost, given the proximity of their position on the Ukrainian and Russian question. One can assume that this rapprochement will continue; European countries have yet to see in action the “red-brown” synthesis, which is so popular in the post-Soviet space.

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