

Ilya Matveev: A Word to the Wise (On Putin's "Leftism" and Solidarity with Russians)

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I have been banned on Facebook by [Mark Sleboda](#), and for the most innocuous of comments. For those of you who don't know this guy, he is an American who voluntarily came to Russia to work with Alexander Dugin, the conservative "Eurasianist" imperialist/traditionalist circus clown who went from hanging out, in the nineties, with the likes of politically dicey counter-culturalists like musician Sergei Kuryokhin and writer Eduard Limonov (with whom he co-founded the National Bolshevik party) to being a "respected" media commentator, "academic," and Putin loyalist, in the noughties.

I'm writing in English in order to warn my Anglophone friends. There is a whole network of expats in Russia working on the "ideological front" defending Putin, frequently portraying him as an anti-Atlanticist battling NATO and EU hegemony. Many of these people pose as "leftists." Basically, they are bought-and-paid petty ideologists, no better than our own homegrown Russian journalists and Kremlin think tankers. However, many of them, like Sleboda, sincerely believe Dugin's "theories" and willingly support the Kremlin propaganda machine. What they offer is propaganda pure and simple: that is why I was banned for modestly questioning Sleboda's position on Euromaidan. Different views are not tolerated, because the purpose of propaganda is to overwhelm a person with a stream of repeated buzzwords, not to discover the truth.

However, I am writing not just to warn you about the work of guys like Sleboda. Some political considerations are in order.

Apparently, the Putin regime's "external" propaganda makes Putin out to be a "leftist" somehow. There are three key points in this portrayal. First, geopolitically, Russia is presented as an alternative to NATO and the EU. Second, politically, Russia is said to be against the neoliberalism imposed by the Atlanticist bloc. Third, culturally, Russia is combating "decadent perversions" such as the LGBT movement (which, again, has been imposed by the west).

In some respects, this is different from what we get here in Russia. Our "internal" propaganda does not focus on Putin's alleged anti-neoliberalism, since very few people here are receptive to such "leftist" claims. Not so in the west: many people there sincerely believe that Putin is an anti-neoliberal.

What I want to do here is to refute all three points of the Kremlin's "external" propaganda.

First, geopolitically, Russia is weak and only masquerades as an enemy of the west. It constitutes no regional bloc against western imperialism, as Latin America does. To be a genuine counter-power, you need to have an alternative set of values and an alternative model of the future. Putin's Russia is far from possessing any real ideological commitments. It engages only in pure opportunism.

Second, politically, Russia is neoliberal through and through. There are neoliberal reforms in the

public sector underway, Prime Minister Medvedev's "technocratic" government is planning more privatizations (!), and not a single person within the government's financial/economic bloc is an anti-neoliberal, even a moderate one. They are all neoliberal experts trained in the Chicago school of economics.

Third, culturally, Russia might be against "decadent perversions," but such "perversions" are not what defines the west culturally. LGBT rights are the result of a brave struggle over many generations, not an organic part of western culture. However, if we can speak of "western culture" at all (which is very doubtful), we might very cautiously say that consumerism, a private sphere inhabited by atomized individuals, and the degradation of public virtues (in short, Guy Debord's "spectacle") are what define western capitalism. All these things are prevalent here in Russia, even more than in the west itself. Russia is more immersed in private life, and more consumerist than many western countries, and Putin fully supports that. So culturally speaking, he offers no opposition to capital's creeping influence, and that is the most important thing.

Okay, now that this has been said, should a western observer be a Russophobe, like the notorious blogger [La Russophobe](#), who frequently writes for conservative US media outlets? No. The point is not to attack Russia as such, not to express solidarity with the Russian "people" against the Russia "government." That is an empty formula used by the likes of John McCain. The point is to educate yourself about alternative political and social forces here in Russia—social movements, independent unions, leftist groups, and the opposition movement as a whole (in all its complexity, with its neoliberal and anti-neoliberal currents). As a leftist, I feel responsible for refuting the crazy idea that Putin is somehow a leftist. However, I also feel responsible for fighting against one-sided Russophobia, which essentially supports the US and EU agendas. Solidarity is very much needed here in Russia, but it should be solidarity coupled with political awareness. It should be against Putin, against neoliberalism and imperialism, but for genuine solidarity with the international left and with social movements across the globe. That is what I was wanted to explain here.

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