

# What internationalism in the context of the Ukrainian crisis? Wide open eyes against one-eyed “campisms”

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## Abstract

Was it correct and efficient on internationalist point of view to chose one “main enemy” (and “camp”) during the Kosovo’s crisis and war (1999) – and in Ukraine, after Maidan’s upsurge, Yanukovich’s fall, Russian’s annexation of Crimea and “hybrid war” in Donbas? This article argues against “campist” approaches in both contexts, because they lead to downsizing criticisms of real relations of dominations within the chosen supported “camp”, preventing the establishment of real conditions for popular self-determination. Instead of producing concrete analysis of concrete (changing) situations, “campist” positions tend to underestimate both new international unstable and opaque relations and the relative (even if difficult) autonomy of popular upsurges not to be reduced to “pawns” manipulated by great powers.

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There was no doubt about the fact that the US took the opportunity of the Yugoslav crisis to maintain and relaunch NATO when it should have been dissolved in 1991 with the Warsaw Pact. No doubt either, that Washington was pushing forward a “euroatlantic” imperialist managing of the Balkan conflicts. Therefore, internationalists certainly had to mobilize against NATO’s “humanitarian” bombings. But at the very same time, wasn’t it necessary to denounce “Great Serbian” policies, especially about the concrete Kosovo issue, while fighting against “anti-Serbism”? Was the Albanian national question a simple “imperialist creation”? And was the fact that Milosevic’s “socialist party” had made organic alliances with far-right Great Serbian nationalist parties and militias a secondary issue?

Milosevic’s profile during his trial was not at all socialist or/and anti-imperialist: he argued that Western powers, attacking him, missed their “real enemy” – Islamism, supposed to be the real threat in Bosnia and Kosovo. There was nothing “anti-imperialist” there. And practically, we could not mobilize (in France, at least) against NATO without a threefold slogan, adding to the “neither Nato, nor Milosevic” sides a support of the right of peoples (Kosovars) to self-determination.

This third axis expressed a potential resistance to Nato’s kind of “support” to the Albanian cause which could only be a form of imperialist “protectorate”. But that formula also indicated a global

opposition to all forms of dominations (imperialist or others, without putting “symmetry” between them) [1]; and it fitted with a programmatic and political judgement: that there was a real unsolved Albanian national question. The methodological way of dealing with it, from an internationalist and socialist point of view, could only be a democratic procedure of self-determination about the “solutions” – not to be identified with “ethnically pure” nation states. Neither Great Serbian policy nor NATO could permit such a procedure. That is also why nothing has been stabilized up to now in Kosovo.

In a different context, where Putin’s regime is certainly more an “imperialist” power than Milosevic was, this approach is even more adequate, facing the Ukrainian national question and within the new world disorder. While considering it correct to put emphasis against “our own bourgeoisie” – here Western powers, there Russian – my argument is that it is not sufficient: Russia (like China) is now a strong actor within a globalized capitalist competition, not an alternative. The different campist views put light on some truths but give a global distorted view.

### **The NATO-as-main enemy arguments**

Some elements of a new cold war against Putin’s new “strong state” have existed more or less since the beginning of the 2000s. Zbigniew Brzezinski best expressed the US imperialist view and its concerns against any political autonomy of “Europe” or against the renewal of a Russian power. He described Ukraine (because of its size, historical, cultural, and material links with Russia, and as the main road for oil to EU) as a “strategic” issue against a new strong Russian state. Therefore, a combination of “significant events” consolidated Putin’s perceptions of a politics of “containment” and/or isolation – Eastward enlargements of the EU and of NATO, the so-called “coloured revolutions” [2] around 2004, in particular in Ukraine, the project of “missile defence shields”, US financial support to many NGOs up to Western explicit support to Maidan’s mobilizations.

However, as in Stalin’s “old times”, the “western conspiracy” argument has been used to consolidate in Russia repressive laws and violent attacks against social and political opponents. There is no need to support Putin’s regime to express the truths of NATO’s expansion and criticize the EU and US policies. But the “campist” logic reduces or prevents a critical approach to the “camp” you support: Putin’s “gas war” becomes a “legitimate” instrument to control Ukrainian choices against the “other camp”. The internal repressive logic of the Putin regime stands as a “legitimate” answer to imperialist pressures, or a “lesser evil”. No criticism is expressed against Putin’s Great Russian policies and speeches – from Chechnya to Ukraine, and his picturing of any opponents and social movements as imperialist “pawns”. With the criteria being not to criticize “our own camp”, you cannot shine a light on Putin’s fear of a Maidan at home against his own repressive oligarchic regime. Your “truths” turn into a conspiratorial view of the world order and a “geo-political reductionism”.

It is not useful, according to such campist logic, concretely to analyse how far Maidan in 2013/2014 was *different* from similar movements during the “Orange revolution”: what did occur in between? A deep popular disillusion about so-called “democratic” pro-western candidates and parties as much corrupted as others. The campist thesis is that an anti-Russian “fascist coup” supported by the West occurred in Kiev against an elected president. Such a position does not care about the reality of the social movement, as it ignores popular perception of Yanukovich since his election: the discredit of a family oligarchic regime and the president’s centralist and personal rule. Maidan became a massive popular upsurge not on the European issue, but after the first killings among demonstrators in December and again after the repressive laws voted in January which broadened the popular concern against the regime in the whole country. The far-right militias could become popular not

because of their programme, but against the Berkuts' violence which increased the President's loss of legitimacy, even in his "own regions". In comparison to the "Orange revolution" in 2005, Maidan was more anti-party: Yulia Tymochenko and her supporters lost heavily in the Ukrainian elections in 2014, like all other parties of Yanukovich's parliament, be they pro or anti-Maidan - including the far right which was supposed to have controlled a "fascist coup" according to Putin's propaganda.

### **But let us look at the "Putin-as main-enemy" arguments**

There again, we can begin with some truths. The concrete and real military intervention in Ukraine since the beginning of the crisis came from Russia - which broke all agreements signed with Ukraine in the 1990s. Crimea and Sebastopol had autonomous status, recognizing their specificity after Ukrainian independence. Putin mobilized two kinds of arguments to "legitimize" the annexation: the supposed "threat" against Russian or russophone populations - which did not exist (even the law on official languages used to "illustrate" that threat, was withdrawn) and an old ideology about the past or present Russian World including "NovoRusya". Putin consolidated his own popularity after a period of increasing social and political contests, with an aggressive propaganda, fitting with far-right ideological mixtures praising the Great Russian tsarist or Stalinist past. And even if the majority of the Crimean population is Russian and was happy to be back in Russia, the so-called referendum in Crimea - even more later on in Donetsk and Lugansk - was not done through any kind of democratic procedure. Pro-Ukrainian choices and mobilizations were identified with "fascism" as under the worst phase of Stalinization. And globally, Putin's speeches questioned the historical legitimacy of the independent Ukraine in its borders. All that couldn't but be perceived as an "imperialist threat" in Ukraine - and in some other former Soviet Republics with Russian minorities, like the Baltic states.

All that is true and needs to be criticized. But with "campist" glasses again, you omit other "facts" and give a distorted presentation of the global picture: nothing is said about the use of that crisis to extend Nato's forces in the region, and the reality of Western responsibility for the recent crisis is downsized and converted into a vague socio-economic environment when one should denounce the kind of "choices" proposed to Yanukovich in November 2013 by the EU: while the country was facing a huge debt crisis, he was offered an "Association" which was in practice a radical free trade agreement, without membership and in contradiction with trade relations with Russia; IMF "aid" was conditioned by well-known drastic "reforms" imposing further privatisations, decrease of pensions and public wages, price increases for energy. That was not better than the "gas war" imposed by Russia.

If "pro-Putin" campism discredits Maidan because of its far-right supporters, the anti-Putin version minimizes far-right influence, and pictures Maidan as a "pro-European democratic revolution" - as if clear and democratic choices had been expressed. A similar polarized response identifies the conflicts in South-East Ukraine purely as "Russian aggression" versus the thesis of a "civil war" according to Moscow's propaganda - when the local population is trapped between bombings from both sides of an "hybrid war". [3]] For anti-Putin campism, Kiev's "Anti-terrorist Operation" and all its "Battalions" of volunteers are considered as a patriotic and "legitimate" resistance against the "Russian imperialist" project of annexation of the country - without any critical approach to the specific far-right components which Kiev has some difficulty in controlling. The thesis of an exclusively external war denies any local popular support to the self-proclaimed "Popular republic" in the Donbas and refuses negotiations with the rebels; it omits to criticize Kiev's use of anti-Russian war propaganda (similar to its equivalent in Moscow) to prevent social unrest; nor would you find any remarks about the repression or political censorship (if not the banning of) supporters of "the other side" in the war.

## **Great power games within a multipolar globalized capitalism**

Taking side against one single enemy cannot permit the analysis of real conflicting common interests and links between the different powers. Putin has never been a critical alternative to the US's wars or to the EU's "model". He offered his services against "Islamic terrorism" after 11/9/2001 as today in Syria. And he wanted Russia to be involved in a global "European construction": the EU's functioning being a "model" for the Eurasian project with the aim of negotiating with the EU's main powers a kind of "bi-polar" European project.

Unfortunately for some leftist hopes, Putin is closer to Merkel than to Syriza (both on the socio-economic and geo-political point of view). Russia provides almost a third of the European Union's natural gas needs and is Europe's third-largest trading partner - particularly important for Germany, France, and Italy. Which is a twofold issue: Russia's major dependence upon its trade and financial relations with the EU (much more than is the case with other countries of the BRICS) is a key feature of its economy. Besides the facts that sanctions are not insignificant, Putin's effort to reduce his dependence on European links through increasing ones with China cannot have short-term effects.

Russia and China are not offering alternatives to imperialist domination, they want to be integrated in the courtyard of super powers - and there are certainly divisions within the US administration between those who favour a new cold or "cool war", and partisans of organic alliances. But there can be much doubt about NATO's willingness to fight for its newest members in East Europe against Russia. On the other side, Putin's military interventions in that region, even if more threatening, are confronted to three main limits: first, they could contradict the dominant ties he wants to consolidate with Western powers. Second, Putin's aggressive policy in Ukraine was not appreciated by the new independent former Soviet Republics with which Moscow would like to build its Eurasian project. Third, the Crimean context is very specific: other annexations need local popular support which, even in the Donbas, is not obvious. Furthermore, they would cost much: even in Crimea, besides conflicts with the Tatar and other Ukrainian citizens who wanted to stay in Ukraine, tensions occurred between the Russian Federation's services and the new local authorities about "mismanagement" of funds. Putin would certainly prefer to use the "Popular republics" in Donbas as a lever to influence Ukraine's policy than to have to pay for their integration within Russia.

Globally, one can guess that the secret negotiations involving Putin, Hollande, and Merkel about the implementation of the Minsk agreements deal with other stakes - for instance, the gas price and Syria? Progressive forces in Ukraine (and the rest of Europe) have no influence on "peace agreements" like Minsk. But they do need a real ceasefire to break on all sides - from Kiev to Moscow - the war propaganda, its lies, and efforts to prevent social and democratic mobilizations, here and there. They do need it, also, to overcome "campist" positions which divide the anti-imperialist left, unable to establish links with real and similar democratic and social popular aspirations of pro- or anti-Maidan currents or movements.

The left internationalist currents don't need to agree on the "qualification" of what Maidan was, or on what "imperialism" is to oppose all internal and external relationships of domination - from Russia or Western powers - and all rightists and reactionary positions.

It is Putin's aggressive speech and policy that have consolidated pro-NATO expectations among the Ukrainian population: you cannot fight efficiently against Western imperialists (and against Kiev's "anti-terrorist operation"/ATO) without a concrete criticism of "Great Russian" politics and without a demand for a ceasefire and withdrawal of Russian military forces.

Similarly, you cannot mobilize efficiently against Great Russian militarism without criticizing the

very existence and expansion of NATO; and you cannot defeat the self-proclaimed leaders and militias of the “Popular Republics” of Donetsk and Lugansk without a ceasefire putting an end to Kiev’s ATO and attitude towards the populations in those areas.

There will be no peaceful stabilization without a real democratic procedure of self-determination for all parts of Ukraine: any kind of “Dayton constitution” elaborated without a democratic procedure involving the Ukrainian people themselves will remain very fragile.

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**P.S.**

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<http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/6mgqyJ88szwMbtXiFdE6/full>

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## **Footnotes**

[1] The use of the same concept – “imperialist” – for different forms and content of domination is not helpful. There are continuities but also sharp discontinuities between “imperial” tsarism, Great Russian Stalinism and since the capitalist restoration, the emerging new kind of imperialist powers in Russia and China, to be analysed precisely. There was no need to qualify a relationship of domination as “imperialist” (or “capitalist”) to reject it. Whatever was the precise “phase” of the Serbian transformation into a capitalist society at the time of Milosevic’s rule, it would be stupid to consider it as “imperialist”: the “neither, nor” criteria did not mean a “symmetry”: for the destruction and discredit of the Yugoslav socialist project, Milosevic’s policy was much more disastrous than Nato.

[2] See Vicken Cheterian (ed.) From Perestroika to Rainbow Revolutions, (Hurst publication, 2013).

[3] This formula is generally used to describe the different forms of a non-declared war, as used by Putin. But it can also picture here the combination of civil war and of real Russian external intervention. The mothers of Russian soldiers have denounced the killing of their sons in Ukraine; and Russia could not, politically, permit a defeat of “pro-Russian” rebels: in August 2014, there was increased external military aid combined with political changes both aimed at a better control over self-proclaimed leaders, but also to give them a more “Ukrainian” profile – before international negotiations.