

Europeans and Russians should remember what bound them together: anti-fascism

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Russian media pours scorn on Europe, but the only progressive way forward for our common continent is together

In the early 1990s Russia used to have a strong sense of belonging in [Europe](#). This began to change: the post-Soviet shock therapy reforms were a punishing transition to a free-market society, when a kilogram of sausage cost about the same as a monthly pension and many families experienced malnutrition and hunger. The sudden shift to a more “westernised” way of running the economy left many impoverished, which was eventually capitalised on – after the oligarchic power wars – by a new political leader who embraced a conservative, nationalist rhetoric: Vladimir Putin.

Today, Russian television presenters feed us stories about a European continent in decay, where “aggressive migrants” run amok, where social services take children away from their parents for being “slapped”, where “sexual minorities” destroy traditional families.

Conversely, Russia’s liberal opposition talks up the European – as opposed to “Asian” or “Soviet-esque” – path for Russia. It condemns radicals on the left and right who undermine the story of a supposedly pure and bright European Union; it does not want to hear about the EU’s abysmal response to refugees or the way its economic orthodoxies impoverish the southern member states while enriching northern banks. These liberals sympathise with a narrative that’s taken hold in Europe in recent years that equates Russia’s own Soviet-era history with the Nazi Third Reich, as [equally abominable](#) and totalitarian states, regardless of their declared goals and their deadly feud with each other. They believe all of Russia’s Soviet past is shameful, and that Russians should look forward only to unquestioning integration with the west.

But this conflict between liberals with a rose-tinted view of the west and Russian reactionaries who decry all things European obscures what once bound Russia and Europe together. In 1945, the west and the Soviet Union together defeated nazism and concluded that fascism was an absolute evil, beyond the realm of acceptable politics. As we commemorate the [75th anniversary](#) of the end of the second world war in Europe, with fascist and far-right politicians gaining power once again across the continent, we would do well to remember this common bond.

From the Sweden Democrats to the neo-fascist Italian CasaPound movement, the modern-day far-right’s rhetoric does not just involve stoking anti-immigrant sentiment but painting themselves as victims of the “left-liberal” European system that has been in place since the end of the war, one that believes in welfare and supranational solidarity. And look at how, in Hungary, the ruling party has [rehabilitated Miklós Horthy](#), a wartime leader and ally of Hitler.

European liberals have also seen fit to rewrite the past with the resolution, “on the importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe”, which was passed in the European parliament in

September 2019. The resolution, introduced by a liberal grouping in the parliament, was [criticised](#) for effectively equating the Soviet and Nazi regimes, at the same time airbrushing out the contribution made to the defeat of nazism by communist resistance groups and the Soviet Union.

In modern-day [Russia](#), meanwhile, the legacy of the second world war has been co-opted by the country's leadership in pursuit of its own interests. Take the war in eastern Ukraine, which started in 2014. This was sold to the Russian people on the basis of the (genuine) presence of far-right elements among the anti-Russian Maidan supporters. In other words, the Kremlin justified its petty expansionism into a neighbouring country under the guise of carrying out a modern-day anti-fascist mission. This was all the more offensive given the mutual sympathies and contacts between the Putinist establishment and European far-right parties such as France's Front National or Italy's La Lega.

So is there a more hopeful image of the past and present, one that binds Russians and Europeans together, that progressives across Europe can draw on? When I hear of "European values" I don't think of false historical equivalences or Putinist propaganda about European moral decline. I see the Europe of mass trade unions and workers' rights; the Europe of the [February strike](#) in the German-occupied Netherlands in defence of persecuted Dutch Jews in 1941; the "Refugees Welcome" Europe; the Europe struggling to take its progressive integration project back from the free-market-obsessed bureaucracy in the EU, ready to challenge the ultra-right; the Europe as seen in the Labour movement in the UK and Scandinavian social democracy via the *gilets jaunes* (yellow vests) in France.

And if concepts such as "European values" have been made to sound foreign to the ears of many in Russia, then we should be aware of the danger of importing off-the-rack models of progress and instead build a universalism with reference to emancipatory episodes in our own history. For example, the Soviet Union pioneered "affirmative action", with quotas for descendants from indigenous people, ethnic minorities and women in universities. In fact, Soviet Russia, thanks in part to feminist revolutionaries such as Alexandra Kollontai, had given women electoral rights and decriminalised homosexuality at a time when most European countries could not even dream about doing anything of the kind.

When the Russian state today appeals to our heroic past, this progressive history is certainly not what it has in mind. But it is what I will keep at the forefront of my mind during the Victory Day celebrations broadcast on official media, a ceremony that will reek of false patriotism. (Although the main parade has been postponed, there will still be a military airshow and fireworks.) Amid this show of Putinist nationalism, I will recall the sincere songs of Italian, Yugoslav and Belarusian guerrilla fighters, anti-fascist workers, and the Jewish resistance. A love for our respective home countries and an upgraded anti-fascist consensus is the only progressive foundation on which our continent can rest.

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