

Is the Polish Left militaristic?

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We see huge problems with NATO, but we cannot simply propose to leave it or get rid of it as long as we don't find a different systemic solution which would guarantee the safety of the region.

Two weeks ago, the NATO summit took place in Warsaw. Its aim was to decide about the location of NATO battalions at the alliance's eastern flank: in Poland and in the Baltic countries. Parallel to it, an anti-summit and an anti-war demonstration were held in the Polish capital. To the surprise, if not confusion of the western activists and journalists who came for the anti-summit, the Polish progressive Left was reluctant to join them in their principled and passionate protests and discussions. It was impossible not to ask: Is the Polish Left militaristic? Or maybe ill-advised, naïve and bought by right-wing war propaganda? Is it blinded by the "typically eastern" superstitious obsession with Russia? Is it left-wing at all? The troubled disappointment related in the first place to Razem, the new grassroots party modelled on Podemos, which shares most of the social postulates of the new Left in Europe.

First, just to be sure: for years, people at the core of the new Polish Left today have been standing side by side with European and American anti-war movements in their struggles. When the second Iraqi war started in 2003 and the Polish government, obsequious towards George W. Bush, decided to send Polish soldiers to battle, progressive leftists were screaming their guts out in front of the US embassy to protest this decision. For many young people in Poland this was the crucial moment of their leftist formation. Later, just like their counterparts in other countries of the coalition, diverse Polish leftists demanded that the officials responsible for engagement in the illegal war and the installation of secret CIA prisons in Poland, and hence the torture that took place there, be held liable.

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More generally, the circles forming the new Polish Left have always followed and wholeheartedly shared the critique of Anglo-American imperialism. They recognized the thoughtless, uncontrolled, and cynical destabilization of the Middle East and other regions of the world by NATO members as the primary cause of disastrous crises backfiring also on European countries. They have acknowledged the imperialistic character of numerous wars and interventions launched by governments calling themselves democratic. They have been outraged by the most powerful western democracies ruthlessly forcing foreign governments and societies to act according to their economic and political interests.

In short: the new Polish Left has been listening eagerly to its western comrades. But if we want to fight together for a better world, this communication must work both ways. Polish leftists don't live in the Middle East, they don't live in Latin America, they live – well, in Poland. And in Poland, or generally in East-Central Europe, there is one thing we know for sure: Anglo-American imperialism

is not the only imperialism in the world, and Russia is an imperialist country. The fact that Russia does not belong to NATO and was once a communist country does not make it an anti-capitalist paradise or an anti-imperialist alternative, as it is often assumed and believed in leftist circles in Western Europe.

True, there were times not so long ago when politically engaged people, also in East-Central Europe, believed that Russia was moving slowly but surely towards democracy and that predatory Russian foreign policy was over. Recently, these hopes turned out to be mirages. Today, Russia governed by Vladimir Putin is an undemocratic, intolerant, nationalistic, internally authoritarian and externally imperialist regime. Its economic policy is a deadly combination of kleptocracy and neoliberalism in the most callous form. It is economically and politically oppressive towards its own residents. And, what is essential for the East and East-Central Europe, in a well-recognized mechanism of power, Vladimir Putin masks the internal weakness of his country with nationalistic mobilization against common enemies. One of the key strategies of this mobilization is expansionism.

In the reality we live in, Putin does not recognise the sovereignty of other countries and violates international law by launching wars against Georgia and Ukraine and by lopping off pieces of their territory. This is imperialism in its purest form. No matter how you judge the state of affairs in Georgia or Ukraine, the political attitudes of the politicians in Kiev and of the militants in Donbas, no matter what your opinion of the Maidan events, invading another country is imperialism. The war in Ukraine is a war like any other and it's a war that is still on. It would be against the very core of leftist principles to ignore, or even worse, to justify it. And it would be particularly obdurate in Poland which has a land border with Ukraine, and a land border with Russia. Since 2009, Russia has repeatedly conducted huge military manoeuvres at the Polish border. Iskander missiles stationed in Kaliningrad, Russian violation of the airspace of the Baltic countries, which have practically no air forces of their own and rely on NATO protection; the violation of Swedish territorial waters, Russian bombers simulating air strikes on Stockholm – Vladimir Putin does quite a lot to disturb the sound sleep of not just Eastern and East-Central Europeans.

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From a global perspective, we may argue that the imperialism of the NATO countries does much more harm to the world than the imperialism of Russia. Or at least that it is involved in a much larger number of conflicts. However, this general rule does not apply to Eastern and East-Central Europe. From our perspective, in this precise moment of history, Russian imperialism is an immediate threat to the security of the region, while NATO is the main guarantee of its security. Not an easy situation for left-wing movements opposing all forms of imperialism like Razem, which states in the first sentence of its international programme that foreign policy should be a policy for peace.

How to escape this vicious choice between two imperialisms? A permanent and efficient change to the current situation can be only achieved by radical political change in Russia itself, which would move the country towards democracy, solidarity, and economic justice. This should be the ultimate goal of everyone interested in improving the lives of people in Russia and at the same time in doing away with the main cause of military tensions and conflicts in Eastern Europe. The Polish Left has and will always have this perspective in mind, welcoming and supporting all initiatives which could lead to this goal. However, for the moment the prospects of a truly democratic and solidary change in Russia are tiny, not to say non-existent. As a result, we must treat Russian imperialism as an objective political circumstance and deal with it in one way or another.

Western politicians from the Left very often have the same advice for Central and Eastern

Europeans: don't provoke Putin and everything will be fine. For some reason many devoted leftists don't see how grotesque, not to say hypocritical it is to talk about "provoking" the bully by the bullied, the oppressor by the oppressed. It is blatant victim-blaming. What is more, the rhetoric of "provocation" means accepting the logic of "zones of influence" in the world. The Left vehemently opposes this logic in the case of the western imperialism: it protests against the US meddling in South America, against France claiming the right to decide about North Africa, etc. Consequently, it should protest equally fervently against people and societies in East and East-Central Europe being deprived of the right to decide for themselves by an arbitrary decision of the Russian government. Just to name a recent example: if the people of Ukraine express their wish to join the European Union, what they are doing is not "provoking Russia", it is realizing their sovereign right to decide about the future of their country.

The Left in the West quite often reacts to Eastern European quandaries with calls for pacifism. It is an understandable reaction for activists living in countries which have an imperialist and colonialist past or lead an imperialist policy right now. Yes, if your country's foreign policy is a threat to others, the appropriate response is to demand disarmament and demilitarization. But, with all due respect, such postulates, especially in their radical form, are the privilege of the powerful. Disarmament and demilitarization should start from the strongest parties, and if we want to apply this solution to Eastern Europe, we must start with Russia.

As long as this is not possible, all we can do is to adjust our defence potential and international strategies to the threat. Razem is not militaristic. It intensely opposes the militarization of society recently proposed by the Polish right-wing government: the wide-spread ownership of guns by civilians is not an appropriate answer to the current international situation. We don't need to prepare for a partisan war. The new Polish Left will never support, say, installing missile systems aimed at St Petersburg. But it does understand the need to buy anti-air-missile systems or to replace the 40-year-old armoured vehicles of the Polish army with new ones.

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Crucially, Razem sees a need to rethink the system of alliances in Europe and elsewhere. We see huge problems with NATO, but we cannot simply propose to leave it or get rid of it as long as we don't find a different systemic solution which would guarantee the safety of the region. Ideally, the new system should not only protect its members but, at the same time, should be able to constrain its own imperialistic tendencies which sooner or later appear in every military organization and alliance. For us, two strategic solutions could meet such criteria. The first one is regional: a close military collaboration between East-Central European and Scandinavian countries, which also identify Russia as the main threat to their safety.

The second path is the creation of European defence forces. This is a distant goal, difficult to push through, and for now there is necessarily only a sketchy vision of how such services would be organized and used, and what their relation to NATO could be. It is beyond doubt that their offensive activity should be extremely restricted, if not forbidden, and their main activity should be an organized reaction to natural disasters and humanitarian crises. To be sure: building European defence forces does not equal a militarization of the borders. Thus, we could freely imagine that such forces with their structures, logistics, and means of supply, transport, and accommodation could be very appropriate to deal with immediate help and assistance to refugees. They could also significantly build a European sense of unity: soldiers from Estonia providing aid during a flood in Italy could radically increase Europeans' feelings of responsibility in case there was an immediate military threat on Tallinn.

From the strategic point of view, such forces would make Europe more independent from the US and would allow Europe to react to diverse crises and threats on the continent and elsewhere, according to European needs and goals. They would also help to optimize and spread more evenly expenditures on the army, and reverse the current situation in which the poorest countries spend relatively more on defence than richer ones. Crucially, while creating such services, we could think of a more appropriate approach to new forms and aspects of conflicts and crises, which are not at all taken into account by NATO: mass migrations, epidemic diseases, the lack of water, ecological damage, hunger, etc. All this would allow all Europeans, including the Europeans from the East, to feel safer at home, and would hopefully also reduce the burden of imperialism in other corners of the world. Utopian as it is, we want to make it to our long-term goal.

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