

Sergey Lavrov and Vulgar Anti-Imperialism

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“Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced that Hamas must be destroyed as a whole and as a military force. It sounds like demilitarization [of Ukraine]. He also said that extremism must be eliminated in Gaza. It sounds like denazification [of Ukraine].” — Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, December 28, 2023

THERE IS A longstanding critique of Vulgar Marxism as a simplistic economic determinism that claims that the ideological and social superstructure of a society is determined by its economic infrastructure or mode of production.

Vulgar Marxists (notably Stalinists) have tended to support as societies as “socialist” simply because they had state ownership of the means of production, no matter how much that state exploited its workers and denied democratic rights to its people in violation of the socialist values of freedom, equality, and democracy.

Vulgar Marxism was not the approach of Marx who analyzed society as an interacting whole in which economic, social, and ideological conditions mutually affect each other.

We also need a critique of Vulgar Anti-Imperialism, which considers U.S.-led Western imperialism as the only imperialism in the world today, and which therefore supports any state in conflict with the United States as anti-imperialist and “objectively” progressive, no matter how oppressive that state may be toward its own people and imperialist toward other nations.

For Vulgar Anti-Imperialists, such as the “United National Antiwar Coalition,” U.S.-led imperialism is the “main enemy,” oppression and aggression by anti-U.S. states are at most “secondary contradictions,” and therefore any enemy of my enemy is my friend.

Vulgar Anti-Imperialism employs geopolitical analysis of state interests that renders people struggling against oppression invisible. This view yields some very reactionary friends like Russia, the mothership for the authoritarian bigots of the global far-right, and patrimonial police states — such as the Assads’ Syria and the Kim family dynasty’s North Korea.

A consistent anti-imperialism in contrast relies on a concrete class analysis of each conflict to see who is the oppressor and who is oppressed with view toward acting in solidarity with the oppressed.

Lavrov Spills the Beans

Ironically, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov recent highlighted the hypocrisy of Vulgar Anti-Imperialists who oppose the U.S.-backed Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories, while not opposing the Russian occupation of Ukrainian territories because the United States opposes it. But their “anti-imperialist” Russian ally recently contradicted this position.

After twice reiterating Russia’s stated goals in Ukraine of “denazification” and “demilitarization” in

an interview with the state-owned Russia-24 news channel, Lavrov equated Russia's goals in Ukraine to Israel's goals in Gaza:

"Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced that Hamas must be destroyed as a whole and as a military force. It sounds like demilitarization. He also said that extremism must be eliminated in Gaza. It sounds like denazification." [1]

Russia's state-owned domestic news agency RIA Novosti published the transcript of Lavrov's interview, which the foreign ministry published in English on its website. The state-owned international news agency RT published a story that featured Lavrov's remark on Russia's and Israel's similar military goals in their respective offensives, titled "Israel's declared goals similar to Russia's — Lavrov." [2]

Vulgar Anti-Imperialists have not tried to explain why their "anti-imperialist" ally Russia would identify its goals in Ukraine with those of U.S.-backed Israel in the Palestinian territories. I can find no comment on Lavrov's statement from the Vulgar Anti-Imperialist camp.

The Western mass media seem not to have reported on Lavrov's remarks, except in some of the pro-Israel press where Jerusalem-based Times of Israel and the Brooklyn-based Jewish Press found Lavrov's remarks newsworthy for their readers. [3]

From the camp of consistent anti-imperialists, Lavrov's remarks were condemned. Gilbert Achcar, a socialist critic of Vulgar Anti-Imperialism, or what he has called the Anti-Imperialism of Fools, tweeted that Lavrov's statement showed that "All of them, Biden, Russia and Israel resort to hypocritical justifications." [4]

Ramzy Baroud, the editor of Palestine Chronicle, has supported Ukraine's right to defend itself from Russia's invasion and condemned Western hypocrisy that condemns Russian aggression against Ukraine while not opposing Israeli aggression against the Palestinians. [5] Baroud said:

"Lavrov's position...is bizarre and greatly offensive, to say the least. Bizarre because it is entirely inconsistent with Russian foreign policy since the start of the Israeli genocide on Gaza, and objectionable because it resembles some kind of a political nod for Israel to continue with its lethal war on Palestinian civilians without worrying about a strong Russian response. Arab governments and Palestinian Resistance groups must demand clarification from Russia following these offensive statements and inquire if they represent an official change of policies regarding Israel and the Palestinian fight for freedom." [6]

I can find no reporting on whether Russia clarified its position to Arab governments and the Palestinians. But the question remains: Why did Lavrov make these remarks and why did RT choose to amplify them internationally?

One clue is that in his interview Lavrov specifically praised Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for his position on the war in Ukraine, noting that "Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has not criticized Russia despite the numerous critical statements [about his actions] made around the world." The RT story pointedly added that Netanyahu "has refused to send military aid to Ukraine."

Cynical Geopolitics

It seems Lavrov was signaling to Israeli leaders that Russia wants to maintain their positive relations that have been tested since the October 7 attack on Israel by Hamas, and Israel's subsequent devastation of Gaza.

Since coming to power in 2000, Vladimir Putin has pursued close relations with Israel for political and strategic reasons. Politically, Putin has to account for nearly 600,000 people living in the Russian Federation who are considered Jewish under Israel's Law of Return, as well as the 1.5 million Russian-speaking Jews in Israel, who are nearly 20% of all Israeli Jews and have roots and family in Russia and Ukraine.

An estimated 100,000 Israeli Jews live in Russia, with about 80% of them living in Moscow. Hundreds of thousands of Russian-speaking Jews have dual Israeli-Russian or Israeli-Ukrainian citizenship. [7] For his part, Benjamin Netanyahu, with the sizable Russian-speaking Israeli voting bloc in mind, campaigned for office in 2019 with a multi-story banner on the Likud party headquarters showing him shaking hands with Putin.

In terms of geopolitical strategy, Lavrov seems to be signaling that Russia wants to renew its partnerships with Israel despite the Gaza war. At end of 2019, Putin and Netanyahu reached an agreement that Israel would not sell arms to Ukraine and Georgia, both partially under military occupation by Russia, in return for Russia not selling arms to Iran. [8]

Russia wants Israel to continue its policies of denying Ukrainian requests for military aid, particularly Israel's vaunted and much-needed air-defense systems, as well as not participating in economic sanctions against Russia.

Russia and Israel have other military relationships. They are allies in the Libyan civil war where they support the insurgent Libyan National Army against the UN-recognized Government of National Accord that is supported by Turkey. In the Syrian civil war, Israel has quietly supported Russian intervention in Syria in opposition to Turkey and in competition with Iran. In return, Russia has quietly allowed Israeli airstrikes on Iranian military assets in Syria through airspace that Russian controls. [9]

Russian-Israeli trade and investment have been significant for both countries. Russia has particularly valued the high-tech contributions of Israelis who work and invest in Moscow, but many Israeli high-tech firms left Russia voluntarily after its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. [10]

The Greek socialist and anti-debt activist Yorgos Mitralias has suggested that Lavrov was also speaking to the American and European establishments, seeking rapprochement around their common interest in the stability of the capitalist system. [11]

The stability needed for business-as-usual has certainly been disrupted by the wars in Ukraine and Gaza. Lavrov may have been signaling as one big power to the Western powers that they should work together on deals to stop both wars and restore global big-power stability.

Courting the Far Right

I would suggest also that Lavrov's message was particularly aimed at the rising far-right in America and Europe, whose top mobilizing issue of anti-immigrant nativism has been extended into Islamophobic rants against Palestinians and claims that budget-draining aid to Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees is shortchanging unmet needs at home.

With the far-right positioned potentially to make gains in both American and European elections in 2024, Russia is hoping for governments that will push Ukraine to settle for a peace deal that concedes occupied Ukrainian territories to Russia.

Meanwhile, the aid that Ukraine has received in the last two years has been threatened in both Europe and America. Although the \$54 billion European aid package finally passed at the beginning

of February over objections from the far right, it is a four-year package of mostly economic aid in the form of loans. The amount is far below Ukraine's budget needs and deepens the debt trap in which Ukraine is caught.

Meanwhile in the United States as of early February, the far-right Republicans in the House remain committed to blocking a proposed \$60 billion Ukraine aid package which includes \$48 billion in military aid.

Status of the War

The Kremlin narrative, which Vulgar Anti-Imperialists tend to amplify, is that Ukraine is now losing the war and therefore the United States and the West should use their leverage over Ukraine to force it into a land-for-peace deal that accepts what Putin recently called Russia's "conquests" in Ukraine. [\[12\]](#) But Ukraine is not losing the war.

In 2022, Ukraine defeated the world's third largest military that expected to take Kyiv in few days and install a puppet government. Over the remainder of 2022, Ukraine took back half of the Ukrainian land that Russia initially occupied. Ukraine's limited air defense systems were enough to stop Russian military aircraft from conducting bombing raids beyond the frontlines.

In 2023, the frontlines hardly moved despite offensives by both sides. But over the course of 2023, Ukraine's expanded air defense systems became very effective at intercepting Russian missiles and drones aimed at civilian infrastructure and neighborhoods far from the frontlines.

In recent months and weeks, Ukraine has made significant strategic gains with strikes in Russia's rear. Russia's Black Sea Fleet has been so crippled by Ukrainian drone boats that it cannot operate safely in the western Black Sea, can no longer block Ukrainian grain exports, and can no longer harbor its ships safely in Crimean ports.

Russia's Su-34 fighter jet fleet has had so many losses in early 2024 from Patriot air defense missiles at Ukraine's disposal that the fighter jets can no longer safely fly close enough to the front lines to launch their glide bombs at Ukrainian targets.

Russia's oil refineries from the Baltic Sea in the North to the Black Sea in the South have been so stricken by Ukrainian drones that the Russian energy ministry was forced to announce at the end of January that it is reducing oil exports by over a third due to reduced refining capacity, a big blow to Russia's income to finance its war machine.

It is true that Ukraine has not succeeded in its goal of pushing Russia out of all Ukrainian territories. It is also true that Ukraine is holding the frontlines against continued Russian offensives. However, that may change if U.S. military aid to Ukraine remains blocked by the Republican far-right.

Ukraine is running low on artillery rounds, essential for pushing back Russian offensives on the frontlines. The capacity to produce artillery shells in both European and U.S. facilities is limited, and the United States has diverted rounds to Israel for the war on Gaza.

Ukraine is also running low on air defense missiles, which are essential to protecting Ukrainian cities from becoming the next victims of Russian carpet bombing like Grozny, Aleppo and Mariupol.

The Vulgar Anti-Imperialists don't care what a disarmed Ukraine would mean for its people under Russian bombardment and occupation. In their cynical geopolitical calculations, a Russian recolonization of Ukraine is positive because it is seen as a defeat for U.S.-led Western imperialism.

A victory for Russian imperialism in Ukraine would certainly be a defeat for the Ukrainian people, but less so for U.S. power.

U.S. imperialism has had many military defeats in recent decades, from Vietnam to Afghanistan, but its global military deployment and economic exploitation of poorer nations remain strong. A defeat for Ukraine would have little impact on this global structure.

U.S. imperialism will have to be defeated by an anti-imperialist movement at home. The hypocritical selective anti-imperialism of the Vulgar Anti-Imperialists does not have the moral consistency to inspire a mass anti-imperialist movement. The movement we need should oppose all imperialism,

Howie Hawkins

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P.S.

Against the Current

<https://againstthecurrent.org/atc229/sergey-lavrov-and-vulgar-anti-imperialism/>

Footnotes

[1] The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview with RIA Novosti and Rossiya 24 TV on current foreign policy issues, Moscow, December 28, 2023," https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1923676/.

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[3] *Times of Israel*, "Lavrov appears to liken Israel's war on Hamas in Gaza to Russia's invasion of Ukraine," December 28, 2023, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/lavrov-appears-to-liken-israels-war-on-hamas-in-gaza-to-russias-invasion-of-ukraine/>; David Israel, "FM Lavrov: Russia's Goals in Ukraine Identical to Israel's Goals in Gaza," *The Jewish Press*, December 28, 2023, <https://www.jewishpress.com/news/global/russia/fm-lavrov-russias-goals-in-ukraine-identical-to-israels-goals-in-gaza/2023/12/28/>.

[4] Gilbert Achcar, "How to Avoid the Anti-Imperialism of Fools," *The Nation*, April 6, 2021, <https://www.thenation.com/article/politics/anti-imperialism-syria-progressive/>. See also <https://twitter.com/gilbertachcar/status/1740753345902518525>.

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