

The Crossroads Before Us: Neoimperialism or European Unity

Article by Rui Tavares

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Since Russia invaded Ukraine on Thursday 24 February, a wave of solidarity with the Ukrainian resistance has swept Europe. The unprecedented unity reflects how the war is not only about Ukraine but the future of all of Europe. Will neoimperialism dominate the 21st century or will a free, democratic, and united Europe emerge?

Over the past decades, Vladimir Putin's propaganda has had a considerable effect on European politics and beyond. His is an opportunistic propaganda, mainly concerned with securing tactical victories and demoralising his competitors. As a result, different ideological sectors have aligned themselves with Putin's propaganda for different reasons. Some figured that American anti-imperialism was enough for them to become objective allies of Russian imperialism while continuing to call themselves "anti-imperialists". Others, at the opposite end of the ideological spectrum, saw Putin as the white knight of nationalism and global reactionary sentiment, defending traditional values against contemporary cosmopolitanism and individual freedoms. In the centre, ideological adherence was not necessary to persuade many politicians of the pragmatism of economic interest, in many cases personal – why bother convincing politicians and rulers with arguments when it is often enough to buy them off? Despite having different messages for each interest group, thus cultivating allies in different and even opposing political families, there was always something behind Putin's propaganda that could be described as a cohesive, unified ideology with clear goals.

The essential elements of this ideology are the following: the simple people, be they Russian or from other countries, are not mature enough to govern themselves and are better off living under the authority of a strongman. On the world level, countries are not all equal, and some have to live under the tutelage of others, by geographical or historical destiny. The strongmen of strong countries do not need to convey their worldview to their subjects, who would not understand it anyway – propaganda is enough. On the domestic front, the old motto autocracy-orthodoxy-nationality, from Nicholas I's minister Sergey Uvarov (1786-1855), remains sufficient to describe the core of Putin's policy. But if we dissociate the substance from the form of Putin's message, it is not difficult to define his ideology: it is a reactionary neoimperialism, seeming almost typical of the 19th century or the first half of the 20th century but adapted to the technological and communicational realities of the 21st century.

One needs to be clear about the consequences of a possible victory of neoimperialism in our time. If Putin succeeds in annexing Ukraine, the other superpowers would, sooner or later, accommodate themselves to the new reality. Each would have its sphere of influence and any "unfinished business" would be handled directly between their strongmen. In such

a world, realities like the European Union (which Trump explicitly declared to be “a foe” to his view of world and US interests) would have to be weakened and divided, because it is only through them that medium and small nations could, through the voluntary sharing of sovereignty, enforce their sovereignty and independence in the global world. This is not a world in which citizens of small and medium-sized countries in Europe would have a say or would like to live.

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But there is a counterpoint to this worldview.

In their enormous complexity, these moments in history have the virtue of presenting themselves as a clear crossroads. The fundamental choice we are facing is this: neoimperialism or European unity. There are no intermediate options. If neoimperialism wins, Europe will have no strategic autonomy to determine its future – faced with a Putin as with a Xi Jinping or any new Trump in the White House. But a united Europe would in itself be a defeat for neoimperialism.

A Europe that is in the position to take care of its collective destiny will have to have all the conversations it has been putting off for decades, about its ability to reconvert its economy to end its dependence on fossil fuels, coordinate its defence policies, or deepen its integration to prepare for possible further enlargement. Since it cannot credibly defend democracy without being a full democracy itself, Europe will have to be a democratic political union, if it is to be a union at all. For this, all its member states will have to be states governed by the rule of law, because, as the example of Viktor Orbán has shown, tyrant’s apprentices are always willing to be co-opted by the credit lines of their masters anywhere in the world. And it has to be a Europe that is a union of fundamental rights, those of each one of its hundreds of millions of citizens, regardless of which member state they are in.

Such a Europe will be able to bring shared prosperity to all its people – instead of the austerity of the “troika” memoranda that were imposed on some members during the last decade – and ecological responsibility to the planet as a whole. It will be an example to citizens of small and medium-sized countries around the world and stand as an economic, social, cultural, and political bastion against reactionary, authoritarian and warmongering neoimperialism, wherever it comes from. Such a Europe will be, above all, a Europe that is worth fighting for, that many will want to join, and that will always respect the choices that each country chooses to make about whether or not to stay in it. Because, with all its historical and cultural diversity, a united and free Europe can only be the enemy of neoimperialism. Anyone who is anti-imperialist must now oppose Putin’s strategy and counter it with another, better strategy: one that is more liberating, more respectful of the many identities of which we are made, more fertile for the future, and therefore more capable of mobilising its many millions with a positive vision worthy of the 21st century.

Neoimperialism has already shown us where it leads: to war, suffering, and death. Let us now be capable of filling the project of European unity with substance, hope, and life.



Rui Tavares is a Portuguese writer, historian, and member of the parliament for the left-green-libertarian party LIVRE. He is the author of the documentary film *Ulysses: Breaking the Spell of the Crisis to Save Europe*. He was formerly an MEP for Greens/EFA.

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