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BOOK SYMPOSIUM

What Happens When Soft Power Fails

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Is Russia Fascist? Unraveling Propaganda East and West, by Marlène Laruelle, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2021, $39.95 (hardcover), ISBN 9781501754135.

In the wake of Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, US president Barack Obama infamously called Putin's Russia "a regional power […] threatening some of its immediate neighbours, not out of strength but out of weakness. […] The fact that Russia felt it had to go in militarily and lay bare these violations of international law indicate[d] less influence, not more." Obama's words reportedly angered Putin, who had long striven to convince the West, and primarily the USA, to treat Russia as a geopolitical equal. Being considered a regional power fundamentally denied equality with superpowers such as the USA.

Ironically, it was exactly the annexation of Crimea that symbolically drove Russia closer to the USA, at least in one aspect. Every single US president since Ronald Reagan has at some point been compared to Adolf Hitler, and Putin became the first Russian president accused of leading a fascist regime by a wide variety of commentators including bloggers, pundits, and academics.

Of course, for some commentators, who for one reason or another happen to be critics of the Kremlin, attributing fascist characteristics to Putin's Russia is no more than dropping an F-bomb in the political environment. After all, fascism is commonly considered a political manifestation of ultimate evil in the Europeanized world, so calling politicians, officials, or members of law enforcement fascists is usually simply an emotional disapproval of their policies or behavior.

Nevertheless, characterizations of Putin's Russia as fascist are not confined to the domain of political invective and can be found in works produced by reputable scholars. And it is those works by established historians—or, more precisely, disagreement with their conclusions—that prompted Marlène Laruelle, a French scholar specializing in post-Soviet politics and societies, to answer the question of whether *fascist* is an appropriate term for defining the Putin regime.

Laruelle identifies and deconstructs several arguments used to claim that Putin's Russia is fascist: (1) historical analogies drawing parallels between Stalin's Soviet Union and Hitler's Third Reich, on the one hand, and Putin's Russia, on the other; (2) the application of the term *totalitarianism* to Russia today; (3) the ideological nature of Putin's regime; (4) the reference to imperialism as a framework for explaining Russia's aggressive behavior toward its neighbours; and (5) Moscow's cooperation with the Far Right, domestically and internationally.

The author addresses the latter issue in chapter 7, titled "Russia's Honeymoon with the European Far Right." Once a subject of niche specialization, cooperation between Russian actors and the European Far Right has got in the crosshairs of international media in recent years. This hardly comes as a surprise. A Russian bank closely linked to Putin's immediate circles provided a €9 million loan to the French far-right National Front party led by Marine Le Pen in 2014. Le Pen herself was invited to meet with Putin in 2017, just one month before the French presidential election, thus sending a message about who the Kremlin's preferred presidential candidate was. The far-right Freedom Party of Austria and Italy's Northern League signed almost identical cooperation

agreements with the Russian ruling party, United Russia, in 2016 and 2017, respectively. Representatives of the far-right Alternative for Germany often visited Russia and annexed Crimea calling for the lifting of the sanctions imposed by the EU on Russia for its aggression against Ukraine. European far-right politicians and activists regularly appeared in Russian state-controlled media as commentators and so-called experts and took part in politically biased election observation missions praising the conduct of the elections in Russia. Far-right Members of the European Parliament —often together with far-left colleagues—tended to vote consistently against resolutions in the European Parliament that were critical of the Kremlin's policies at home and abroad.

Laruelle highlights three main phases of mutual encounters between Russians and European far-right groups. During the first phase, starting in the late 1980s up to the early 1990s, Russian far-right ideologues, politicians, and activists would reach out to their European counterparts to establish various forms of cooperation, ranging from exchange of ideas and ideological materials through joint conferences to (largely failed) attempts to build a pan-European far-right movement. The second phase was marked by the intensification of the Russian contacts with the Far Right with the help of the far-right Motherland party and the Russian Orthodox Church. And during the third wave, "the Presidential Administration and the Russian government adopted a more overt strategy of reaching out to the European Far Right" (131).

The chapter is not entirely unproblematic. First of all, Laruelle's argument that "the Russian Orthodox Church has been the other [i.e., along with the Motherland party] driving force behind [the] second wave of contacts between Russia and the European Far Right" (128) is not sufficiently supported by evidence. All the European contacts of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) that the author mentions are European conservative or religious circles rather than the far-right circles. The only case where the ROC's foreign contacts could be characterized as ideologically placed somewhere in between conservatives and the Far Right is the US Christian Right. The latter, however—as the title of the chapter suggests—should have been outside of the scope of the inquiry, especially since the discussion of its contacts with the ROC does not contribute to the discussion of the ROC's presumed relationship with the European Far Right.

Later in the text, Laruelle also mentions disparate, irregular, and generally fruitless contacts between Russians and the American Far Right, but while the latter, again, should be outside of the geographical scope of the chapter, its mention is justified by the insightful comparison: "Russia's leverage over the U.S. Far Right has been minimal compared to its leverage over Europe's" (132). At the same time, this comparison would have benefitted from at least a brief explanation as to the reasons of this disbalance. The national self-fixation lying at the core of the American Far Right and anti-Americanism of the Putin regime could potentially be the basis of such an explanation.

Second, while the identification of different phases, or waves, in the relations between Russia and the European Far Right is legitimate and appropriate—these relations, indeed, evolved in time—some phenomena and developments placed in one phase clearly belong to a different phase. For example, Laruelle establishes a timeframe for the third wave, 2012–2018, but then includes in this wave the launch of Kremlin-inspired fake election missions staffed by far-right activists that had taken place not later than 2007. Or the activities of Russian businessmen Vladimir Yakunin and Konstantin Malofeev aimed at building and deepening contacts with European right-wing forces are discussed within the frameworks of the second and third waves, while both cases belong to the latter phase only, as the malign operations carried out by the two political entrepreneurs were always underpinned by seeking reward from the Kremlin.

Third, Laruelle seems to consider Russia's contacts with European far-right groups (in contrast to "the Soviet tradition of leftist fronts") as part of Moscow's "multifaceted game of consolidating its soft power on the European stage" (121). This seems to be a conceptual misunderstanding. Soft power is the ability to influence through affinity and attraction with resources such as a nation's political values, culture, and foreign policies. Cooperation with the European Far Right cannot be considered in the terms of soft power, because far-right ideology generally collides with the weakened yet still dominant liberal-democratic consensus in Europe, and it is mainstream

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politicians upholding that consensus whose attention and support the Kremlin seeks. As Laruelle herself correctly states, Moscow "logically prefer[s] to target mainstream parties that may one day become part of the government" rather than "groups that are too radical in their ideology or too marginalized in their own society" (136). Referring back to Obama's 2014 quote, one may say that the fact that Moscow has to cooperate with the European Far Right indicates the utter failure of Russia's soft power, not its triumph. It takes (and costs) very little to win over the European Far Right; wooing or corrupting mainstream politicians and officials is a much more demanding endeavor. And Laruelle is, again, correct in her observation that "given Russia's difficulties in finding enough allies in mainstream conservative European circles, it *had no choice* but to consolidate ties with the only groups that were ready for a tactical alliance: far-right groups" (136; my italics).

While it seems viable to suggest that, for Moscow, the distinction between the mainstream center right and mainstream center left is largely irrelevant as long as they are mainstream and close to, or already in, power, Laruelle's point cannot be stressed strongly enough. As long as the Kremlin has good relations with the mainstream in a particular country and as long as they remain significant players on the domestic political arena, Moscow is disinterested in high-level communication with the Far Right. This explains why the Kremlin would sometimes completely ignore European far-right parties openly willing to cooperate with the Putin regime. When the Hungarian party Jobbik could still be considered Far Right (it has moved closer to the center right in the recent years), it strove to develop closer relations with Russia, but the Kremlin would not reciprocate as it had good relations with Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party that was already in power and to which Jobbik was opposed. The Freedom Party of Austria expressed its pro-Kremlin positions as early as 2008, but Moscow decided to sign the cooperation agreement with the party only eight years later when the Kremlin experts thought—misguidedly—that the political domination of the Moscow's preferred partners, Austrian People's Party and Social-Democratic Party of Austria, was dented.

But Russia's relations with the European Far Right are, as Laruelle argues, "too fundamental to be purely tactical" (136). The Kremlin and the European Far Right share many convictions and have common enemies: globalization, "multilateral and transatlantic institutions," "the world liberal order, parliamentary democracy, [and] the EU supranational construction" (136). And while Russia does not give rise to the homegrown dynamic of the Far Right, Moscow, as Laruelle insightfully concludes, "takes advantage of these new voices, consorts with them, and tries to amplify them," thus becoming "a key actor in the rise of illiberalism in today's world" (137).

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