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Fascistic Myths of Empire: *The Far Right Philosophy Driving Putin*

Sian Norris
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In the second of her two-part series looking at Russian oligarch funding and far-right disinformation, Sian Norris examines the warped worldview inspiring Putin's aggression



Peter the Great Statue in St Petersburg. Photo: Aleksei Andreev/Alamy

Vienna, 2014. European far-right political leaders like Marion Maréchal Le Pen and Aymeric Chauprade of the French Front National, and Hans-Christian Strache of Austria's FPÖ, mingle with the old aristocracy – Fiat heiress Margherita Agnelli de Pahlen and her husband Count Serge de Pahlen are here, as are Prince Zurab Chavchavadze, and Prince Sixtus Henry of Bourbon-Parma.

They have gathered in the city to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the ‘Holy Alliance’ between the Tsar of Russia and the Austrian and Prussian Emperors. The alliance was formed to remake Europe after Napoleon’s defeat in 1815. Organising the meeting is Russian oligarch Konstantin Malofeev – known to US Intelligence as “Putin’s right arm for operations of political interference in Europe” and a prominent funder of anti-gender causes across the region.

Through his employee Alexey Komov, who runs international operations at Malofeev’s St Basil the Great Charitable Foundation, the bearded millionaire is linked to the US World Congress of Families, Spain’s CitizenGO, and Agenda Europe – allegedly providing funding to the latter two.

Star speaker at the Vienna event was Aleksandr Dugin – a far-right ideologue who advocates for the idea of Eurasianism, where “Russia should unite the peoples of the Eurasian continent into a new empire directed against the West and liberalism”.

The people at this gathering wanted to reverse history – to return to the Empirical vision of post-Napoleonic Europe, where the world was a cake to be sliced up between white supremacist powers.

To understand Putin’s actions in Europe today, it helps to know who Dugin is and why he was so welcome in Vienna that day.

The Eurasian Empire

Perhaps it’s the beard. But more likely it’s the influence that has led to Dugin being dubbed “Putin’s Rasputin”.

Dugin advocates for the creation of the Eurasian Empire – bringing the countries that were in the Soviet Union back under Russian control. But crucially, this is not about recreating the former-USSR; it is about recreating the Tsarist Empire. In Dugin’s and therefore Putin’s vision, the former Soviet nations are not their own countries with their own histories and peoples. The Soviet Union instead, they believe, just took over the boundaries of a historical union of people and ethnicities that was there from the Russian Empire.

The nationalism that drives Dugin’s worldview positions Russia as a country with a unique culture and destiny. That destiny is to create a centre of power that straddles Europe and Asia, with Russia ruling all.

Put simply, Dugin doesn’t believe countries like Ukraine – or Azerbaijan or Kazakhstan – exist, or ever existed. Therefore, in this warped worldview, invasion is justified. The fascist thinker has been sanctioned by the US since 2014’s annexation of Crimea for advocating for the murder of Ukrainians.

But it’s not just the land itself – it’s what the vision of that land signifies. In Dugin’s philosophy, the landlocked Eurasian Empire represents conservatism, traditionalism and a repudiation of the West’s liberalism and ‘decadence’.

He writes: “We need to return to ...the New Middle Ages – and thus to the Empire, religion, and the institutions of traditional society. All content of Modernity – is Satanism and degeneration. Nothing is worth, everything is to be cleansed off. The Modernity is absolutely wrong – science, values, philosophy, art, society, modes, patterns, “truths”, understanding of Being, time and space. All is dead with Modernity. So it should end. We are going to end it”.

The Fascist Mythic Past

Dugin's creed is ultimately anti-modern. But this is more than a wonky nostalgia: this is the concept of the fascist mythic past. Dugin and his followers want to reverse progress to a 'before' time – with Russia reversing out of the predicted historical sequence and going from communism back to capitalism, before reversing even further to the Tsarist feudal society, even arguably to hunter-gatherer times.

The ultimate goal is to roll back 250 years of progress and then freeze history at a point where the Enlightenment – and with it belief in human rights, society, rationalism and science – could not emerge. This was the aim of Nazi Germany too: Goebbels famously said that the day the Nazis came to power was the moment 1789 (the year of the French Revolution) was “eradicated from history”.

Since Russian forces invaded Ukraine, there have been multiple comparisons of Putin with Hitler – from protest banners putting a moustache on the Russian President's face, to articles analysing his neo-Imperial assault on Eastern Europe.

Like Hitler, Putin wants to create a version of the Third Reich, using Dugin's Eurasian ideal as the model. It's a world order where there are superior humans (Russians) and subhumans, and where the countries neighbouring his borders are vassal states. He wants to create a modern empire that is directed against the West and against progress or liberal ideas. He believes he can achieve that through military aggression and imperial ambition.

Make no mistake, Putin's war is a fascist war. He believes that the West – i.e. Europe – is decadent and in decline. That decline is signalled because of its general acceptance of human rights and democracy. But while modernity pulls Europe down, the anxiety is it's pulling Russia down with it. Putin needs a war, then, for a fight between the diminishing West and Mother Russia.

In this framing, Russia's own decline since the end of the Cold War is the fault of the decadent West, which has been attempting to impose democracy, LGBTIQ rights and migrant rights on the country in violation of its “natural law”. Putin sees this as his opportunity to strike back and “make Russia great again”.

This links back to Dugin, who preaches that liberalism has been a dead end, not least because of its acceptance of the LGBTIQ community.

According to Putin's own speeches, the Russian people have not yet “attained their highest point”. They will do that via war, because Russians “possess an infinite genetic code”. This is magical thinking, a belief in a mystical Russian force that means the country has a right to superiority. This was Hitler's own attitude towards the Aryan race.

What is crucial to understand about Putin's approach and the influence of Dugin is that he sees Russia's place in the world as above the decadent West, with its neighbouring states subordinate to his empire. And because he wants to roll back progress to pre-1789 and, crucially, to pre-1917, that empire reverses history beyond the USSR, all the way back to feudalism.

We know this because of that meeting in Vienna – organised by his oligarch ally Malofeev who allegedly funded and armed the rebels and militias of eastern Ukraine the same year. This was a meeting that brought together those who want to rebuild a fascistic model of Eurasia: one that is

white, one that is bound by a strict class hierarchy, and one where pesky things such as human rights – including women’s, black and global majority people’s, and LGTIQ people’s – as well as democracy, freedom of speech, and freedom of assembly, can be disposed of.

Disinformation Wars

Dugin’s warped philosophy – which has fed into the far-right conspiracies of QAnon and Great Replacement – is not hard to find.

In fact, his rantings are still on Facebook, where his posts promote a new book by the Vienna organiser Konstantin Malofeev, condemns pacifism as violence, and shares posts from the Katehon think-tank, which is understood to have been established by Malofeev.

His posts claim that the “modern West is totally wrong. We are witnesses of greatest defeat of globalism. The world should liberate itself from the modern West” – statements which further his Eurasian Empire philosophy that has been so influential on Putin.

But Dugin’s presence on Facebook also raises questions about big tech’s role in stemming the flow of conspiracist disinformation as opposed to fuelling far-right conspiracy.

In a joint statement from Poland’s ‘NEVER AGAIN’ Association, and the Global Project Against Hate and Extremism, the organisations urged: “tech companies must decide immediately which side of history they are on. They can fulfil their responsibilities as global corporations, on which billions depend, and do all they can to avoid more death and destruction, or they can remain complicit in an illegal act of war that has already led to hundreds of deaths, half a million refugees, and massive destruction of cities and towns”.

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