# An Eastern Europe mythbuster

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"Apparently, for the Western left, it is totally fine to publicly self-fellate over Kurdish, Palestinian or Irish self-determination, but just try bringing an Eastern European one to the table …"

~ Eastern European Leftist Proverb, medium: Telegram

One of the more frustrating aspects of watching the most recent Russian ~~special military operation~~ imperialist war unfolding is the number of self-appointed experts from the Western left thinking they have some particularly insightful view.

While some make it rather difficult to give them the benefit of the doubt that they aren't simply bad actors who mistakenly thought, until now, they are anti-imperialists, anti-rascists and democrats (yes, we are looking at you, Varoufakis); others, we think, just lack appropriate knowledge on the situation and fill this gap with traditional leftist takes.

In reality, most would have struggled to point to Mariupol on a map two months ago. But still, they assume the voices of those directly affected and the general reality of the situation must bend to their leftist theory. The reasons for this attitude of parts of Western left are many and would fill more than one text, but we would like to focus here on clearing out some of the more prevalent leftist myths about the Ukrainian war, and Eastern Europe in general.

We plan to continue this column online and invite comrades from beyond the West or Central and Eastern Europe to get in touch, should they want to produce similar texts: we know you have been long-suffering too.

## Myth 1: NATO "expansionism"

The myth of NATO expansion in Eastern Europe and its role triggering the Ukraine war is one of the favourite arguments of the Western left. It is also flimsy.

The relationship between NATO and Russia is complicated. All leaders of Russia have, at some point, expressed concerns about eastward expansion of the powerful Western military alliance as a security threat. However, Russia's attitude toward such expansion varied, depending on the country's strategic goals at any given time. Even Vladimir Putin himself, during a 2000 visit to London, when asked about the possibility of Russia joining NATO said: "Why not? (…) Russia is a part of European culture, and I do not consider my own country in isolation from Europe. (…) Therefore, it is with difficulty that I imagine NATO as an enemy."

Yet the Western left insists that Russia was promised no expansion eastwards following the fall of the Iron Curtain. The problem is there was never such a promise, and both former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and Russian president Boris Yeltsin have admitted this. It's easily google-able: just type in "unification of Germany" or "Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation 1997." And for the adventurous who wish to educate themselves on what Russia (and the US) did promise to Ukraine (and Belarus, and Kazakhstan) in exchange for the post-Soviet nukes present on its territory: try "the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances 1994."

From the left's perspective, the biggest problem with this claim, however, isn't that it is factually incorrect. It is the apparent image of Eastern Europe in the eyes of the Western left as naturally subordinate to Russia, incapable of independence. Instead the two great colonial powers, the West and Russia, should settle this dispute, because who would bother asking nearly 45 million Ukrainians what they think, or let them sit at the same table as equals. This kind of atti-

tude is, pretty obviously, left over from the West's own colonial past and post-colonial present, and the requirement for its left to self-improve around this issue isn't unreasonable – it is anti-colonial.

## Myth 2: "Ukrainians are basically Russians"

This sort of myth can be heard from all sides. Some Russians say it to justify Russia's right to Ukraine – in their view, Ukrainians don't deserve (or are innately unable) to think or speak for themselves. Some Russian nationalists simply treat "Ukrainian" as a slur for people who are against Russia. Some use this vicious myth to deny or justify genocide against Ukrainians; "they never existed in the first place".

Some more ardent conspiracists say the concept of Ukraine was fabricated by an outside enemy solely to disrupt the "unity" of the Russian Empire. What may sound like a productive use of words like "brotherly," "shared," and "united," when spoken by Russian nationalists this is only done as part of their historic attempts to take over.

The Western left has an urgent responsibility to resist the use of this myth. But for some observing from the outside, nostalgic Soviet fantasies can blind you into thinking Ukraine should be united with Russia at the expense of self-determination. Some see a choice between allying with The West (EU) or Russia, and may be so uncomfortable with the first that they back the latter. But superficial, tangible similarities like language, food, or superstitions should be seen as remnants of imperialist history, not the "historical unity" or "brotherly" myth that Moscow wields against Ukraine.

## Myth 3: Azov and "Ukraine's Nazi problem"

So, here is the thing: yes, there are neo-nazis in Ukraine. Are they a problem? Hell yes. Are some armed and in militias? Shamefully, they are. Are they a problem warranting the left making excuses for an imperial military offensive and genocide? Are they powerful enough to describe the entire country as nazis? Hell no.

Ukraine has a population of nearly 45 million. In the 2019 parliamentary elections the far right got 2.15% and failed to enter parliament. This would put Ukrainians at the bottom of the list of the countries where people are inclined to vote far right, let alone nazi. Only recently, Marine Le Pen in France succeeded in getting to the second round of presidential elections with a little over 23% of the vote. In the same elections, another far-right politician, Éric Zemmour, got 7%. In the US a fascist politician, Donald Trump, scored nearly 47% in 2020 and only narrowly failed to play the US electoral system well enough to win.

Does this mean Ukraine is a blessed land without nazis? Of course not, no country is. But claiming that it has a particularly serious nazi problem is a dishonest peddling of Russian propaganda and, frankly, racist. Eastern Europeans are often subjected to higher standards regarding racism than Westerners.

As someone who has direct experience, the founder of Operation Solidarity, put it in an interview published by *Freedom* earlier this year:

"I can only properly talk about the context just before Putin's escalation – this new reality needs a much deeper analysis to say something objective. Their [nazi] influence on Ukrainian

youth was at its height in 2014-16, but from about 2017 their movement was co-opted by the Ukraine Security Service maybe and the cops. The most rebellious (radical, anti-government) groups were destroyed. Their leaders and members were forced to co-operate, pushed out to other countries or civilian life, were sent to prison or even killed (sometimes by their own comrades).

"To sum up, yes here we had a lot of nazis and problem was big. But after 2017 they started to decay. Just before the war started they still had many youth in their structures, but those people were new and politically weak, their beliefs were vague and shaky, and their personalities absolutely ridiculous.

"For now, what I can see, it's absolutely different from 2014. It's a domination of popular and patriotic narratives, rather than their sort of nationalism. But every new day of war can grow their popularity."

## Myth 4: De-escalation is the only position the left should take

We don't want to name the think tanks, publications, or "analysts" who are the backbone of this argument, so here's a summary of their general mythology. For them, the worst thing that could happen in Ukraine is intervention by The West, because preventing Western imperialism is their sole priority. In light of this, some have literally called Ukraine's defence "self-righteous posturing" while others clamour for Ukraine to stop fighting back.

The more pro-Russian factions claim to support Russian people protesting against Putin, but they do not extend the same support for Ukrainians fighting against the same thing. This is not the sort of solidarity we need.

This view also has roots in Myth 1, that NATO or The West are the primary aggressors. This proselytising language carefully avoids ever applying "imperialism" to Russia's actions, like they find it hard to believe Russian expansionism is a thing. There can only be one imperialist expansionism! Behold, the believers in mono-expansionism.

The endgame to this myth is that if Ukraine doesn't lie down and surrender, this war will spread further, we'll all run out of gas and oil, fall into a recession, and somehow this will be Ukraine's fault. It's a complex kind of victim-blaming which you'd expect nobody would dare to say while Russia drops missiles on civilians. But these mythologisers blame the victims for fighting back, as if accepting a Russian invasion would ever bring peace. They want Ukraine to fall, to bring this to an end, for the sake of everybody else, apparently.

## Myth 5: Russian speaking = pro-Russia

It doesn't, and you can't trust polling done by Russian-backed researchers.

This is quite simple. But it might also be worth remembering why huge swathes of non-Russians only learned Russian at school because this is a remnant of recent colonial histories, which gets used to justify contemporary versions of it.

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