Interview – Marlene Laruelle

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Marlene Laruelle, PhD, is Research Professor of International Affairs and Political Science at the George Washington University, Director of the Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies as well as of the Illiberalism Studies Program. She works on conservatism, illiberalism and nationalism and has studied Russia's ideological landscape for three decades. Her recent publications include *Is Russia Fascist? Unraveling Propaganda East and West* (Cornell, 2021) and *Entangled Far Rights: A Russian-European Intellectual Romance in the 20th century* (Pittsburgh, 2018).

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I see a lot of exciting debates happening in the fields of both Russian Studies and Illiberalism. In the field of Russian Studies, there are mixed feelings, obviously, because of Russia's full-scale war on Ukraine: a lot of pessimism regarding the future of conducting research in Russia and difficult discussions about our collective responsibility and need for introspection, but also fascinating – and welcome – transformations thanks to new epistemological interrogations, with the most polarising of these likely the idea of 'decolonising' the field. In the other area I cover, illiberalism, I think there is growing agreement among scholars that the concept is meaningful, especially as its main competitor, populism, has faded due to inflation and overstretch. I see many research directions emerging around the concept itself, its situational relationship to liberalism, its ambivalences towards neoliberalism, its grassroots aspect, its multiple reconceptualisations in different cultural contexts, etc.

As a leading scholar on the development of conservative thought, national identity and illiberalism in Russia, past and present, and as someone who initially trained as a historian, what is the utility of history in interpreting current events?

I believe we cannot understand today's world without knowing history. Not because history repeats itself or because historical parallels make sense – they often do not and 'trap' us in paradigms that do not fit, such as seeing Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a repetition of the Second World War or interpreting the tensions between the West and Russia as a new Cold War. But because I believe in the *longue durée*, in the existence of long-term political, economic and cultural features that shape, constrain and inspire both elite and public opinion. Of course, there is always room for transformations, innovations, revolutions and breaks from the past, but there are heavy legacies to deal with, especially in the realm of geography, politics, identity and ideology. I think the social sciences – especially English-speaking political science, due to its obsession with statistical demonstration – do not sufficiently enter into dialogue with history.

Russia is a test case for introducing history into our analysis of the present: continuities with the Soviet past, as well as with the imperial past, help us capture some evolutions, even if we should not allow ourselves to become imprisoned by them (as with the trope that 'Russia will never democratise because it was never a democracy'). Reintegrating the history of state repressions, family memory traumas and forced transformations of the social fabric into our discussions of the current situation can, for instance, stimulate better interpretations of what we see as the passivity of Russian society towards the war.

Your 2018 volume *Entangled Far Rights* shows that the ideas that have gained predominance under

Putin's regime were shaped by European exchanges in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. How much do illiberal movements across the West today owe to Russian influence?

They owe a lot – but not in the way that the Western media might suggest. I have always criticised what I have described as the hysteria of media and think tanks regarding Russia's role in supporting US illiberal and far-right movements and figures. The US has a long tradition of such figures and does not need any help from Russia to foster them; Trumpism has deep roots in American political culture. Russia has had a more significant influence on European conservative/illiberal/far-right movements, but again, these movements are primarily grassroots and organic; Russia serves only as an echo chamber for them.

Yet Russia has been contributing substantially to another side of the history of European conservative, far-right, illiberal movements: many Russian thinkers/ideologists/propagandists (one may describe them in different ways!) have inspired their European counterparts. This influence dates back to the deep admiration of Russia prevalent in French monarchist culture, runs through the role of White Russian émigrés in supporting and stimulating the interwar fascist regimes, and is felt in the contemporary period of mutual emulation.

You have also written extensively on neo-Eurasianism and its leading proponent, Aleksandr Dugin. In regard to Russia and the Western world, do Russia's leaders see themselves as imperialists or anti-imperialists?

Russian leaders see themselves only as anti-imperialists. They do not have a grammar for seeing Russia as an imperial or colonial power: imperialism can only come from the West, embodied by different figures: the Romano-Germanic peoples, the Anglo-Saxons, the Americans, the capitalists… With the full-scale war on Ukraine, this anti-imperialist stance has been upgraded to the status of one of Russia's main international brands for reaching out to the Global South.

Domestically, the notion of being an empire is rarely operationalised positively: Russia's historical expansion and multiculturalism are presented as the product of a 'civilisational choice,' a shared common historical destiny voluntarily decided by the non-Russian people, never under the label of colonization. Only in small circles, mostly among non-Russian ethnic republics, is there the (negative) idea of Russia as an empire. Some radical figures – such as Alexander Dugin, Alexander Prokhanov and their patron, Konstantin Malofeev – do see the empire as a (positive, in that case) reference, and they are working hard to groom it to express Russia's messianism, the autocratic nature of its regime and its right to territorial expansion. Notice the paradox of valorizing the empire in the historical sense of the Russian Empire, such as Putin when he refers to Peter the Great, and the impossibility of talk of imperialism except for the others… Semantic matters!

You have stated that unchecked NATO expansion contributed to tensions over Ukraine, but that ultimately Putin – and his conception of Russian/Ukrainian nationhood – holds responsibility for the 2022 invasion. Is it possible to separate the geopolitical from the ideological causes of the war?

It's a great question, and indeed it's probably impossible to separate, in a systematic way, the geopolitical causes of the war from the ideological ones. Yet I do not believe the war was written in the DNA of the Putin regime; it gradually became the last option remaining to Russia – at least in Mr Putin's view – as many other alternatives failed and alternative futures closed.

I see the interaction between the geopolitical and the ideological causes as a gradual sedimentation. That Putin and a large segment of the Russian foreign policy elite have always believed that the other post-Soviet nations were only partly legitimate – in the sense that their sovereignty was de facto limited, even if it was de jure equal to Russia's – seems quite evident. But this does not necessarily mean that you plan to invade them, just that you despise them, do not believe in their agency and request from them geopolitical loyalty. Russia's failure to secure this geopolitical loyalty from some post-Soviet states, and especially from Ukraine, coupled with the idea that the West was responsible for this lack of loyalty (and, not without good reason, for instabilities in other regions of the world: Yugoslavia, Iraq, Libya, etc.) contributed to the crystallisation of the idea that Ukraine was illegitimate to such a point

that invading it would be easy.

What began as a claim of geopolitical illegitimacy (arguments along the lines of "Kyiv can't decide its future alone, it needs a patron: Moscow or Washington") gradually evolved into a more global argument that Ukraine's very identity was illegitimate. Once the logical connection was made between a lack of geopolitical loyalty and illegitimacy, there ensued an ideological 'sublimation' as history was rewritten in an attempt to demonstrate the supposed unity of the Russian and Ukrainian nations. And it was pretty easy to do, as Russian historiography has a long tradition of claiming the existence of an East-Slavic triune (Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians). And once a country is seen are illegitimate in its own essence, conquering it should be easy – and here we are, with Russia's massive miscalculation.

Late last year you warned against triumphalist calls for the 'decolonisation' of Russia. Why is the breakup of the Russian Federation unlikely, and what does this reveal about Western attitudes towards Russia?

If 'decolonisation' is taken as an epistemological quest to conceptualise the transformations of the field, I think it adds a lot, as I have already said. If it is used to discuss grassroots grievances, by ethnic minorities but also provincial Russia against the hypercentralization, I am all for it. But if it is used as a euphemism for the 'collapse' and 'fragmentation' of Russia and the birth of several new republics, I have difficulty imagining how it might present a solution, because the odds of this happening peacefully seem slim.

It is difficult to imagine that the central state apparatus, from the military to the security services, will let it happen; rather, I think the state would react with mass repression, inaugurating a long cycle of violence. It is difficult to imagine that the majority of Russian citizens would approve, especially if this fragmentation were framed as a repetition of the collapse of the Soviet Union and therefore as heralding a return to the chaos of the 1990s. It is also difficult to imagine a 'one-size-fits-all' solution: independentist movements may be strong in some republics and in the minority in others, some may gain power locally by peaceful means while others may become violent, some may enter into conflict with others for territory or symbolic titular status, some may advance an Islamist agenda that will not contribute to grassroots democratisation, etc.

I do believe that the risk of civil war would be non-negligible, and that it would have negative consequences for the country, its neighbours and the West. I am not saying it won't happen, even if I think it is not the most likely scenario, but I don't see it as a positive solution to hope for.

Regarding Western views of Russia, I think the narrative of decolonisation as collapse tells us both of an old tradition of seeing Russia as a permanent 'evil empire' that has to be destroyed and of a vision of Russia as so problematic that the only way to solve the current deadlock is to make the 'spoiler' disappear. A similar 'evaporation of the problem' can be seen in the recurring discussion in the media over the past few years about Putin being close to death.

Just before the anniversary of the 2022 Ukraine invasion, President Biden made a speech in Warsaw in defence of the West's values-led mission and its continued strength. Conversely, you recently wrote a paper on Russia's relationship with the Islamic world, describing how the Global South is asserting its autonomy amid a great power crisis. How will Biden's vision fare in an increasingly multipolar system?

I take a critical vision of the US foreign policy language on values and the 'defence of the free world,' and share the criticisms coming from many Global South countries. I think the US foreign policy culture tends to be very backward-looking and has difficulties operationalising the de-Westernisation of the world.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has created a form of euphoria regarding transatlantic and EU unity, which has been found to be stronger than many feared, and the unexpected re-legitimation of NATO. But this is a Western-centric view: the rest of the planet considers that the war is sending us back in time, making a European conflict once again the centre of geopolitical attention and strategic commitments.

Seen from the Global South, the war postpones the necessary renegotiation of global power equilibriums, discussions about social justice, redistribution, action to tackle climate change, energy transformations, etc. The fact that Russia's *anti-Western* stance is now seen as criminal does not mean that the Global South's call for a*non-Western* world isn't legitimate and shouldn't be taken more seriously.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

I am not an IR scholar by training, so I can't say I know the field deeply, even if I interact with it. I think succeeding at mastering the main conceptual questions and articulating that with area studies knowledge is critical, and one cannot work without the other. Students and young scholars must work hard on that articulation, as academic fragmentation and the 'credibility revolution' tend to discourage a deep dive into area studies. Beyond this, as in other fields, intellectual curiosity and a pinch of a 'contrarian' mindset that allows one to maintain a critical stance and not give in to media and think tank newspeak are always a plus!