

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Nationalism versus Globalism: Vladimir Putin as Hero?

Last week in *Issues in Perspective* (21 January 2017), I argued that the new ideological struggle in the world is between the forces of nationalism and the forces of globalism. This struggle explains Brexit and the rise of Donald Trump among other developments. This week I want to address the curious role that Vladimir Putin plays in this ongoing struggle between nationalism and globalism. Throughout the administrations of George W. Bush and Barack Obama, Putin was viewed as the arch enemy of the global order centered in NATO, the IMF, the World Bank, and the European Union. From the perspective of the United States, Putin was doing everything he could to undermine this world order to advance the nationalism of Russia. The sanctions the West imposed on Russia because of Putin's annexation of Crimea and his shenanigans in Ukraine, illustrate this antagonism. But, for many in the West, Putin is not the enemy; globalism is. This new and surprising embrace of Putin seems to be the view of Donald Trump and some in his administration. How has this amazing transformation in how to view Vladimir Putin occurred?

Stephen Bannon, former head of Breitbart News and now key adviser to President Trump, exemplifies this peculiar thinking about Vladimir Putin. Columnist David Brooks reports on a speech Bannon gave at a Vatican conference in 2014. What follows is a summary of his remarks:

- Historically, there has always been a collection of Judeo-Christian nation states that practiced a humane form of biblical capitalism, which fostered culturally coherent communities. But, more recently, globalism, relativism, pluralism and diversity have undermined the moral foundations of the Judeo-Christian way of life and produced a savage capitalism that brought about the current financial crisis.
- Further results include: "National democracy has been replaced by a crony-capitalist network of global elites; traditional virtue has been replaced by abortion and gay marriage; sovereign nation-states are being replaced by hapless multilateral organizations like the EU." As a result the West now lies vulnerable to Islamofascism.
- Because of all this, Putin is now regarded as a valuable ally because he seeks to replace the multiracial, multilingual global order with strong nation-states. Putin defends traditional values and knows how to fight Islam, it is argued. Brooks quotes Putin's ideologist, Alexander Dugin: "We must create strategic alliances to overthrow the present order of things, of which the core could be described as human rights, anti-

hierarchy and political correctness, everything that is the face of the Beast, the Antichrist.” Bannon concludes that “We, the Judeo-Christian West, really have to look at what [Putin] is talking about as far as traditionalism goes, particularly the sense of where it supports the underpinnings of nationalism.”

In addition to Bannon’s strange take on Putin, other “Alt-Right” thinkers in Europe as well as the US are taking up Putin’s banner. Matthew Heimbach of the Traditionalist Worker Party, an Alt-Right group seeking to preserve the “whiteness” of Western civilization and to fight “anti-Christian degeneracy,” argues that “Russia is our biggest inspiration. I see President Putin as the leader of the free world.” For many such Alt-Right groups, Putin is widely revered as a kind of “white knight:” a symbol of strength, racial purity and traditional Christian values in a world under threat from Islam, immigrants and rootless cosmopolitan elites. Indeed, Sam Dickson, white supremacist and former Ku Klux Klan lawyer, writes that “I’ve always seen Russia as the guardian at the gate, as the easternmost outpost of our people. They are our barrier to the Oriental invasion of our homeland and the great protector of Christendom. I admire the Russian people. They’re the strongest white people on earth.”

Such thinking about Putin is fueled by the propaganda machine of Russia itself. Putin uses Russian-funded think tanks, the Orthodox Church and state-controlled news media (e.g., RT and Sputnik) to reinforce the message that he stands with them against gay rights and other forces of moral decay. Putin has therefore provided financial and logistical support to Alt-Right forces in the West (e.g., the National Front in France has received loans worth more than \$11 million from Russian banks). Putin makes it clear that he supports the Alt-Right penchant to depose traditional elites for their support of globalism and transnational institutions like NATO and the EU. Indeed, Heimbach argues that “Globalism is the poison, nationalism is the cure.”

Jared Taylor, the founder of the white supremacist think tank American Renaissance, writes that “There is a worldwide awakening of nationalism among European countries—and I include the United States in that. All across Europe we are seeing the rise of parties expressing the idea that Europe, in order to remain Europe, must remain European. I have a feeling of intense kinship from those that wish to preserve their nation and their culture.” Thus, Putin’s Russia is now the home of a new global alliance of Alt-Right groups called the World National-Conservative Movement. Heimbach: “Russia has already taken its place on the global stage by organizing national movements as counterparts to Atlanticist elites. Intellectually, they’ve shown us how it works.” Russia is now “the civilizational model” that can rally all those in Russia and beyond who are fed up with the erosion of traditional values.

How should we think about all of this as Christians? Many Christians I know would consider themselves part of the Alt-Right, which in itself I find distressing. But to see Putin as a white-knight, a kind of messianic figure, is silly and also dangerous. Vladimir Putin is theological, cynical, disciplined, calculating, experienced and knowledgeable. He is not a fostering redemptive “civilizational model” for the embattled West to follow. He has shown his true colors in his foreign policy when he coldly annexes Crimea, and when he sends his troops into eastern Ukraine. What he has done in Syria by any reasonable definition are monstrous war

crimes. Vladimir Putin is one of the most dangerous autocrats on planet earth today. He is not a role model and he is not a worthy leader to emulate. He is a dangerous demagogue who poses a real and potentially existential threat to the United States. Christians must remember that we have been down this road before in history. Each generation has nationalistic heroes who promise a return to the better days of the past, when their real agenda is conquest, power and self-aggrandizement (e.g., Julius Caesar, Alexander the Great, Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, etc.).

The hope of the West (and of the world) is Jesus, not Vladimir Putin or Donald Trump.

See David Brooks in the *New York Times* (10 January 2017) and Alan Feuer and Andrew Higgins, "Extremists Turn to a Leader to Protect Western Values: Vladimir Putin," in the *New York Times* (3 December 2016).