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Beware the destruction of the state!

An interview with Timothy Snyder

In his recent book Black Earth, the historian Timothy Snyder analyses the Holocaust in terms of the destruction of the state. This allows him to compare the roles of the Nazi and Soviet regimes in causing the Holocaust, despite their different ideologies and intentions. In interview with the Slovenian journal Razpotja, Snyder explains this argument and its implications for contemporary conflicts in Europe and beyond.

How does your latest book on the holocaust, Black Earth, *relate to your previous monograph*, Bloodlands, *in which you attempted to write a comprehensive history of those territories in eastern Europe that suffered what you call a 'double occupation', by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union?*

The point of *Bloodlands* was that we hadn't noticed a major event in European history: the fact 13 million civilians – civilians and prisoners of war, not soldiers on active duty! – were murdered for political reasons in a rather confined space over a short period of time. The question of the book was: 'How this could have happened?' We have some history of Soviet terror, of the Holocaust, of the Ukrainian famine, of the German reprisals against the civilians. But all of these crimes happened in the same places in a short time span, so why not treat them as a single event and see if they can be unified under a meaningful narrative. The point was to get over the limitations of national history which stresses some events, leaving out others entirely. Instead of focusing on single nations, I look at the *territory* where these killings took place.

The other thing that I was keen to do was to overcome what I see as an artificial separation between Nazi German and Soviet history. Of course these were different systems, but it so happens that the territory where both were most lethal was the same. There must have been some places where they interacted, and the only way to answer that question is to look at the territory, rather than the systems.

My aim was to provide a perspective which would enable us to see one single, large event that starts in 1939 and ends in 1945. I wanted to tell a story that includes the experiences of the victims, the perpetrators, all the peoples involved, and the two major systems. Having done that, it's perfectly legitimate to ask what would be an appropriate interpretation of the greatest of these crimes, the Holocaust.

Bloodlands was a horizontal project, describing the historical experiences from the territorial perspective, *Black Earth* is a vertical one: I singled one of these events, and tried to *explain* it.

Despite your innovative approach, the starting point of your explanation is surprisingly traditional: you begin with Hitler's worldview. You stress what is something of a historiographical commonplace: that Hitler was not just a radical nationalist, but an idiosyncratic racial naturalist.

The problem with explaining the Holocaust, and maybe German crimes in WWII in general, on the basis of Hitler's worldview is that it doesn't make much sense within the context of German history. Hitler's worldview had relatively little to do with Germany, centred as it was around a much larger vision for Eurasia. What I want to say is: 'yes, the ideology matters tremendously, but we don't see how it matters until we follow German power beyond the borders of Germany'. I take Hitler's ideas seriously. In this sense you're right in saying that it's a very old fashioned book. What is new is that I try to see its implications in areas where German sources can't tell us the whole story – because they're written in Russian, Yiddish, Polish and other East European languages – and see how this ideology was brought into being in the places where it really mattered.

By placing the history of the Holocaust so deeply in the context of the struggle between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, don't you fear of being accused of revisionism?

I don't want to reduce the Holocaust to a side event of the friction between two empires. The Holocaust is the result of Hitler's understanding of history as a struggle between races, and the transformation of the German state into an instrument to destroy other states and to create a world without Jews. The Soviet Union comes in the picture because, by following its own, very different aims, it also destroys states. In 1940, the Soviet Union destroys the three Baltic States – and it is no coincidence the Holocaust starts in these areas. The story is not about a grand encounter of empires, but about the micro-stories of double occupation.

State destruction, I say in the book, gets you very far. When Germany destroys Austria in 1938, things are possible in Vienna that were not possible in Germany. When Czechoslovakia is destroyed in 1939, Jews suffer a level of persecution that was not possible in Germany. When Germany invades Poland in 1939, this persecution can be taken to a level not possible elsewhere. But even at that point, the Holocaust is not yet possible. It becomes possible when German power moves into areas where the Soviet Union has recently destroyed the states, with their legal and social structures.

I want to be clear about this: it's not that Stalin intended the Holocaust, it's that the Soviets had very violently disrupted political institutions in certain places. When the Germans in turn destroyed the Soviet institutions, that created the local conditions that made the Holocaust possible. It was in these areas that the Germans learned, for the first time, that the total annihilation of the Jews could be carried out.

Although you quote Hannah Arendt only sporadically, many of your arguments seem to draw from her analyses of totalitarianism – especially her argument that Nazism, unlike Fascism, aimed at abolishing the state and replacing it with an unprecedented system of racial domination.

The entire book owes a lot to Hannah Arendt. Everyone who works on these subjects engages with Arendt in a way or another. I do it by taking her ideas further. The type of speculative history she writes is bound to get certain things wrong; what I try to do is to see where she was right in the light of things that we have learnt since the 1950s.

There are four ways in which I find her very important for my studies. The first is the way she treats ideology. People tend to prefer coherence over

factuality. If Hitler tells a story according to which human beings are basically in nature and Jews have disrupted nature, and if we eliminate the Jews, nature will return – that is a story which is not true, but it's coherent. Anything that happens can be made to fit into that story. This understanding of ideology as a machine that can absorb the facts is very important.

The second way is the way in which she understands totalitarianism. What Arendt means by totalitarianism is not the overpowering state: it's the complete breakdown between the public and the private. This doesn't necessarily involve administration and bureaucracy: it is primarily about the overwhelming pressure on the individual. As I pointed out in *Bloodlands*, this overwhelming pressure is most acute where the two systems encounter each other. It happens in places like Vilnius or Riga in the summer of 1941 more than anywhere else.

The third thing is her discussion of imperialism. I think she was right that at the end of the nineteenth century something very important happens with the notion of empire. This was basically an intuition of hers – her main sources were the novels of Joseph Conrad – but I think she was right in her guess that the racialization of empire has a crucial role in the genesis of totalitarianism. Hitler, and not only him, looks at what is happening in Africa, and to some extent in America, and applies to Europe, in a very crude and simplified way, the notion of racial empire. She is right in stressing that this could not have happened without the colonial experience in Africa.

The fourth, and maybe the most important point is her argument about how the Holocaust could have happened. In order to kill a person, you have to kill the juridical person first – you need to remove the law from the person you are killing. I think she is fundamentally right about that. She saw how the juridical person was being killed, step by step. The entire historiography of the holocaust, from Raul Hilberg onward, has followed this insight. Hitler comes to power in 1933, the Nuremberg laws are promulgated in 1935, followed by the Aryanization of Jewish property, which peaks in 1938. It's presented as a sort of gradual, step-by-step process within Germany itself. What I'm trying to show is that this is not the real prehistory of the Holocaust: this was not the main way in which the Holocaust took place. The main way to kill the law in the person…

…is to kill the state.

Exactly. Hannah Arendt doesn't see that, because she's German. She's a West European Jew, and so are her friends. What the Nazis learnt in the East, however, is that if you take the law away entirely, then things are possible that would not have been possible otherwise. So I'm taking Arendt's insight, which I find correct, and radicalizing it.

You present the destruction of the Soviet state structures in the summer of 1941 as the crucial step leading from persecution of Jews to their annihilation.

Here, I wanted to be careful. It's very difficult to avoid a certain ideological trap. One cliché goes: 'The Nazis and Soviets were alike'. No, they were not: their ideologies were very different. This would be the sort of things you hear from the right. From the left, on the other hand, one hears: 'You can't compare the Nazis and the Soviets at all, that's a very dangerous relativization!' That's historical nonsense. Almost everyone in Eastern Europe experienced both types of regimes, in one way or another. Slovenia in one way, Estonia in a very different way, Smolensk in its own way. But the inhabitants of all these areas had an experience that involved both the Stalinist and the Nazi regime. If you say we can't talk about these two systems together, you are saying that the historical experience shared by 150 million people has to disappear from the discussion. That's ridiculous.

Because of all these political implications, one has to be very careful about how one puts the argument. I'm trying to explain the consequence of the destruction of the Soviet state structures within a larger sociological argument about state destruction, where Austria is step one, Czechoslovakia is step two, Poland is step three. But what is special about the occupied areas of the Soviet Union is that a vast portion of them were subject to a double state destruction.

In Austria, German policies were already much more radical than they were in Germany. In Poland, the Germans were able to destroy the state by force, murder its elite, eliminate the entire Polish civil code and even claim that the Polish state never existed as a legal entity, which was a very radical thing to do. This enabled the creation of entities such as the ghetto, but not quite the Holocaust, yet. Again, I'm not saying that the Soviet Union paved the way to the Holocaust on purpose. I am saying, however, that it was very good at destroying states. It was better than Germany. In Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, the Soviets were enormously efficient: the elites were eliminated,

either deported or killed, the legal code went. The Soviets also said that, legally, these states never existed, going so far as to prosecute people for having served in the state apparatus before 1940. And they got rid of property rights almost literally overnight, something that took the Germans years to accomplish.

This was crucial in the dynamics of the Holocaust, right?

Yes, but we must understand that these Soviet measures were not targeted at the Jews *as Jews*. However, they had consequences when the Germans arrived. The fact that property rights did not exist means that when the Germans entered, the Latvians and Lithuanians started saying, 'that was my shop, that was my house', and if the Jews said, 'no, it was mine', they would suffer immediate consequences. By destroying all forms of institutional protection, the Soviets had, unintentionally, made it much easier for the Germans to persecute Jews on a much larger scale than before.

And then, there is the political psychology. Whenever one occupier replaces another, people have to explain what they did under the previous occupation. This always creates dangerous dynamics, but in this case it was hyper intense, because the Soviets created a perverse system where some sort of collaboration was unavoidable. Then the Germans came and said: 'The Soviets are Jews, and the Jews are Soviets'. Suddenly, this lifted the burden of responsibility from the Lithuanian, the Ukrainian, the Belarusian or the Pole, who could say: 'Yes, of course, it was all their fault.' That means that everything you did under Soviet occupation – everything that you were forced to do – could be washed away.

The myth of Judeo-Bolshevism was very convenient.

Precisely. We could talk about the number of Jews within the Communist party, but the bottom line is that the equation between Jews and Bolshevism, despite not being true, was very convenient. There is a reason why this myth became so pervasive during German occupation, and why it has endured. Many people in the occupied zones took part in the pogroms against the Jews, who were blamed for Bolshevism. We are good at lying, and good at killing. But what we are very bad at is admitting that we killed for a lie. Once we kill, the lie that we killed for has to be true.

Sociologically, the Judeo-Bolshevik explanation becomes very effective once

the Latvians, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Estonians, and Russians can agree who is to blame for the crimes of a regime with which everyone collaborated: it was the Jews. This allowed them to cleanse themselves. Sometimes quite literally: members of the Communist Party were told by the Nazis: 'You can be freed of the stain of collaboration if you kill a Jew'.

I think this mechanism is best shown in your description the fate of the Viennese Jews after the Anschluss – nobody was expected to believe the Jews were responsible for the previous regime, but the population was given an unambiguous signal: blame the Jews and you will be fine.

This is what I find striking. It shows that middle-class Austrians behaved in the same way as illiterate Polish peasants. When you get close to the sources and you read the day-to-day accounts, you see that in the night between 10 and 11 March 1938, people who had not been Nazis before – Social Democrats or members of the Fatherland Front – joined the crowds that encircled and humiliated the Jews. The reason is that Jews are identified as the ones who bear the responsibility for the previous regime. We all know the image of the Jews forced to scrub the streets of Vienna, but we tend to forget that they were scrubbing away one single word – *Österreich*. While Austria was being destroyed, they were being identified with it. The point was explicit: Austria had disappeared and they had to disappear as well. In 1941, the same kind of scene repeats itself further east and north, but much more violently, because at that point the Nazi regime is already determined to kill the Jews.

You attempt to deconstruct psychological explanations based on the notion of 'national character': German acquiescence to the Holocaust is the consequence of their 'respect for authority', Danish Jews were saved because Scandinavians are decent people, eastern Jews perished because Slavs and the Baltic peoples are bigoted peasants, and so on.

An ironic thing about the study of the Holocaust is that ethnic prejudice gets smuggled back into the historical analysis, to the point of becoming the dominant framework of the narrative. The very idea that the Danes behaved a certain way because they are Danish is extraordinary – we wouldn't make such an argument anywhere else, so why do we make it in regard to the Holocaust? I think the Holocaust is the *last* place where we should make ethnic arguments.

Venture into comparative historical sociology, and you will find there is very little correlation between the levels of pre-war anti-Semitism and the local dynamic of the Holocaust. There is, however, a very strong correlation between state destruction and the number of Jews killed. In Denmark, 99 per cent of the Jews survived and in Estonia 99 per cent of them were killed: but Denmark and Estonia were quite similar countries before the war. On the other hand, no one can say that the Soviet Union and Poland were alike in any meaningful way. And yet, in both areas, around 95 per cent of the Jews die. These two countries had very different political institutions, social structures and mentalities before the war; what they had in common was that the occupation structures during the war were essentially the same. Or take the example of the Polish Jews living in France: they were much more likely to die than French Jews, not because of any Polish anti-Semitism, but because they had no connection to a sovereign state.

Everywhere you look, you find it is not national stereotypes – which we should be very careful of applying anywhere in the public sphere, let alone in scholarship – that predict the fate of the Jews, but the institutional frameworks and types of occupation regime. Everyone would agree that pre-war Netherlands had no problem with anti-Semitism, and yet 75 per cent of Dutch Jews die – that's a higher proportion than in Romania, which had the most ostentatious, most extravagant, most radical pre-war anti-Semitism. The percentage of Jews that died in the Netherlands is roughly the same as in Croatia, which had a Fascist regime allied with Germany. Or to make an easier comparison: 75 per cent of Jews die in the Netherlands, 75 per cent survive in France, even though everyone believes – correctly, I think – that the French had a much bigger problem with anti-Semitism. The explanation is that the Dutch occupation regime was closer to an 'eastern European model'. The head of state and government were gone, the SS was put in charge, they even considered setting up a ghetto in Amsterdam – it was the only West European capital where they considered doing that.

What about the German allies that introduced their own anti-Jewish measures?

That lead to discrimination and sometimes to persecution, but was not in itself sufficient for something like a Holocaust. In general, the Holocaust affected Jews living in areas where sovereignty changed hands, or where it was dramatically compromised, or where the state was destroyed entirely. That is true even with a murderous policy like the Romanian one: almost all

of the Jews killed by Romanians were murdered in areas where sovereignty had changed hands. At the other extreme, Bulgarians like to praise themselves for having saved their Jews. They did, but not in occupied Macedonia, where sovereignty had changed, and where the Jews were handed over to the Nazis.

'When the state is gone, nasty things happen'. This is, then, the 'warning' in the subtitle of your book. Am I right to see an undertone of polemic against certain neoconservative ideas, especially in the American public debate?

In *Bloodlands*, I wanted to get the facts straight: it was an attempt at a sensible and transnational history around which we could all agree. In *Black Earth*, I go further and try to *explain* the Holocaust. My point is that ideology played a role, but state destruction was the way it happened. This, not any polemical intention, was my point of departure. I do end with a critique of what I see as misperceptions, including the neoconservative one. The problem is that everyone has the Holocaust that is convenient for them. For example, when Americans invaded Iraq (which I opposed), one of the arguments the neoconservatives made was that 'Saddam was like Hitler'. The discussion then revolved around whether he truly was Hitler or not, but no one (except me) said that the Holocaust had to do with state destruction, so we should hesitate before we destroy a state. That consideration was completely absent from the discourse. The idea that if you destroy the state, you create a beautiful *tabula rasa* from which freedom and democracy can grow, is fantastically nave. But because we have understood the Holocaust in terms of the tyrant that must be stopped...

...or in terms of an expansive, Leviathan-like state that shatters individual freedoms in its path to absolute power...

Exactly: if we understand the Holocaust in terms of an authoritarian and very efficient German state, then you come to the conclusion that we should destroy authoritarianism. But if you understand the German state under the Nazis as a special kind of racial regime which by ideology and practice destroys other states, then you might learn a different set of lessons. It might cross your mind that 'if we destroy states, we are in some sense imitating what the Nazis did'. I wouldn't like to stretch the analogy too far, the American interventions were not motivated by any racial ideology, but the problem is that since no one saw the connection between state destruction and the Holocaust, the dangers implicit in such policies were not

present in the public discourse.

The Russians did something similar in 2014, arguably with more bad faith, when they said they were 'saving Ukraine from Fascists' – although there is no sign that anyone that matters ever believed that, this is just propaganda for domestic and western use – and that the only way to rescue Russian speakers is by declaring the failure of the Ukrainian state and then to destroy its authority in the territories where they live.

This creates empty spaces, as we saw during the Yugoslav Wars or nowadays in the Donbas: systems that don't function through institutions, but through fear, violence, charismatic leadership, and the image of the enemy. Are these spaces of lawlessness the real danger?

I think the best way to approach the problem is through numbers. Let's assume that Russia is an oppressive authoritarian state. How many people has it actually killed on within its own borders? Relatively few. The moment, however, when Russian power goes beyond Russia, with the mission of destroying a neighbouring state – and it succeeds to some measure, if you think of the Donbas as a zone of anarchy – then all of a sudden you have deaths on the scale of around 20,000 people, and dislocation on the scale of one to two million. State destruction in a small territory does more harm than authoritarianism in a much larger country.

The other issue that you stress in your reinterpretation of the lessons of the Holocaust is what you call 'ecological panic'. Can you explain what you mean by that?

We usually treat the Holocaust in purely ideological terms. If it's just about bad ideology, then we can say, 'I am not Hitler' or 'that regime is not Nazi', and we are fine. It is also true the other way around. You can point the finger saying: 'these are Fascist ideas, we have to stop them'. The moment you understand that Nazism was an ideology that by the logic of its own structure required the destruction of states by generating a certain a sort of ecological panic, then you are forced to think a different way about the analogies. Then you can start asking relevant questions: 'Am I in favour of strong institutions? Am I acting in a way that helps to dispel the idea that we are in a desperate battle for limited resources?' Those are much higher standards to hold oneself to, it's much easier to say, 'I'm not Hitler'.

Regarding the environment, what Hitler says is 'we are all the time in a life and death struggle for resources. That is the main reality, everything that prevents you from seeing that is Jewish propaganda. If you're anxious – because you fear other people taking away what you have – you are right. And if you are covetous – if you want what other people have – you are also right. Anything that makes you feel guilty about these natural feelings is a Jewish illusion. Therefore you should ride your anxiety and you should ride your greed as far as they will take you – that is exactly how *you should* behave'.

That has implications. For one, it means that Hitler's understanding of consumer economics is a little too close for comfort. It means that his demagoguery is also too close for comfort. These were his ideas, encapsulated in the notion of *Lebensraum*. Another thing is the way he implemented his ideology into mass politics. When we look around us, we see that these transitions are not as far from us as we would like to think.

Why do you insist on the analogies between Hitler's worldview and our current predicament regarding climate change?

Hitler says that any exit from the sense of imminent conflict is illegitimate. We have to face that life is endless conflict. Law is an illusion, we can't accept its constraints. Science exists as an important instrument but it cannot change the future; it can't fundamentally alter the reality that life is a struggle of all against all. This is very important for the current American discussion. If you say that the science of climate change isn't true, what you are doing is inviting a future which is a struggle of all against all. If you say it is true, you are not making a resource crisis a less pressing issue, but it makes a big psychological difference. If you keep saying, 'there is no science' or 'science is only a political means', then when the crisis comes, no one can think of doing anything but securing his own resources. If we say, on the other hand, that science can save us, then that changes the picture completely: it means that the Chinese and the Americans should collaborate in fusion reactors, we should see how to reduce CO_2 emissions with the Europeans. This type of thinking creates a future. What Hitler did was to say: 'There is no future. There is only the present, extended in time. Therefore, you have to act immediately and take what you can'. What law and morality do is to create a future. They rest on the implication of reciprocity: if you act according to the rules, I will too; if you treat me with regard, I will do the same. This opens a horizon of security and reasonable expectations. Science

does something similar: it strengthens the notion that in ten or fifteen years, the coordinates of our reality will be significantly different, with more instruments at our disposal. Without science you are collapsing the future down to the present.

At the beginning of your book, you present Hitler as an heir of the 'Balkan Model'. Can you explain what do you mean by that, and why do you refer to Hitler as a 'Balkan-style militarist'?

For two reasons. First, Hitler himself had a sneaky admiration for the Balkans, particularly for Serbia. In spite of himself – because of course he didn't like Slavs and considered that part of the world to be backward – he praised the Serbs for having shown how, by way of militarism and sheer will, you can undo a political order. From that anecdote I try to extract a larger and more systematic point, which has to do with nation states and their limitations. What I mean by the 'Balkan Model' is the disruption of old-style empires by nation states. My point is that the politics of the European nation state doesn't emerge from France, which is a very confusing legacy because it's universal, liberal and enlightened, as well as national. I think the legacy of state nationalism really comes from the Balkans where, unlike in the French Revolution, the uprisings were launched not in the name of universal principles, but in the name of the nation alone. The notion of nation states as we understand it emerges from these struggles against the Ottoman Empire from the early nineteenth century onward. Greece, Serbia, and later Romania and Bulgaria are much more important precursors of European history than France is. We don't like to think in this way, because almost everybody prefers Paris to Belgrade.

You have used the notion of the 'Balkan Model' as a starting point for an alternative historical narrative of European integration. Can you say something about that?

If you follow the myth, the story that Europeans like to tell about themselves, then the EU seems an important achievement. But if you tell the history, then the EU seems even more important. The myth goes something like this. There was the Second World War, after which Europeans finally understood that war is bad and united to promote peaceful cooperation. I think this is false. The French did not learn from WWII that war was a bad thing: they kept fighting them for decades. The British did not learn that war is bad, they kept fighting them up to the 1980s. The Dutch did

not learn that war is bad, they kept fighting to keep their overseas territories. Even if you look at the people that suffered most during the war: the Jews. Did Israel learn that war is a bad thing? Did the Soviet Union, which suffered the highest casualties in WWII, stop fighting wars? On the contrary. Did the Yugoslavs learn the lesson? What western Europeans did learn, however, is that when you lose colonial wars, you need to turn to an entirely new project.

This became unequivocal to the Germans. They understood earlier than others that colonial wars don't work. Think of their war in eastern Europe as a colonial war, which it certainly was: they lost catastrophically. Their empire lasted only a couple of years, they extracted very little from it, lost millions of lives as a result, and ended by losing the war in the most humiliating way. They had a compressed lesson in colonial history. Things that it took other European nations centuries to learn, they learned in three years. It was because they learned the lesson that they initiated the project of integration with Benelux and France. Italy had a somewhat similar experience, which is why the European idea took root so quickly there. The French, the Dutch, the British, the Portuguese, the Spanish became engaged in the European project later, but they came on board for basically the same reasons: not because of what they learned from WWII, but because they lost colonial wars. If we think of it this way, then the European Union is where you go when you lose your empire. This is not the story Europeans like to tell themselves, because it's not a nice or popular story – it just happens to be true.

However, looking from the perspective of the European Union itself, we have to put it from another perspective. What the EU does is that it peacefully solves the basic, enduring problem of European polities: the issue of scale. The Central European states of the interwar period fail not only because they are too weak to defend themselves from neighbours and imperial powers, but because they have small economies, poorly integrated into a wider regional framework. Overseas empires solve this problem of scale, but only temporarily and in ways that we now regard as morally problematic, since they presuppose fixed economic and racial hierarchies. The EU solved the problem of scale for everyone.

What this means is that the EU is handling the legacy of decolonization for both the former imperial powers and nations that used to be part of larger imperial frameworks. Europeans don't like to look at history this way: being

a failed colonial power or a former imperial periphery is not very attractive. But at the level of Europe, these problems disappear. Both Portugal and Lithuania are small countries; the former had a huge empire, the latter was part of the Soviet and Russian Empires. But in the measure to which both are European, they can disengage from their unsettling imperial legacies and enter a new set of institutional and discursive relationships in which both are 'European'.

Europe as the happy end to imperial dreams and nightmares?

You could put it that way. However, there is darker side to it. If you get rid of the European Union, you are left with nothing. Empires are no longer possible and nation states are no longer viable. The end of the EU doesn't mean that the member states can retreat to the model as it existed before World War Two. That model was a disaster, and populist nationalism is ignoring this central fact. If the EU goes, the nation state is next.

You became famous to the wider public for your interventions in favour of the Maidan Revolution. How has what you have just explained shape your understanding of what was happening in Ukraine?

What I had to say about Ukraine had nothing to do with me being 'pro-Ukrainian' or 'anti-Russian'. It had to do with my conviction that the Ukrainians on the Maidan and the Kremlin had both in some way understood the nature of the European Union better than the Europeans themselves. In order to have a functioning, prosperous state with the rule of law, you have to have Europe. That's what the Ukrainians thought – and they were right, in my view. For Spain and Portugal in the 1970s, Europe was the answer, just as for Ukraine in the 2010s. You need some larger entity with which to trade, but you also need something that is going to export its norms to your system. The people on the Maidan were there because they believed that the only hope they had in fighting political corruption in Ukraine was if someone exported their norms into the country. I believe they were correct. The Kremlin realized the same thing. The threat to the Kremlin is that Russians will understand that the way to prosperity is the rule of law. And the way to the rule of law is through Europe. They wanted exactly the opposite as the people on the Maidan, but their historical understanding of Europe was exactly the same.

Nowadays even Germany, which had been in denial regarding the nature of

Russian interests, is starting to realize that there is an alternative model to European integration – call it the Eurasian alternative. Its clients within EU are for one reason or another dissatisfied with the liberal consensus on which Europe rests.

You are absolutely right. There is another model, it is organized by intelligent people who are fundamentally correct about what the EU is – it's just that they oppose it from a totally different value set. From Putin's point of view, it is entirely rational to say: if the success of Europe depends on scale, let's break it up. For me, Russia is just another European country. It is, however, the first European country so far (if we forget Belarus) that has decided not to move towards Europe, but to move against it. However, if you don't move towards Europe, where do you go? You go to China, but that's not what they are telling themselves.

The Kremlin is undermining the appeal of the European project by saying: 'We are no worse than Europe'. And then they make that true. They invest in subverting Europe, so they can say: 'We have Putin, but look at the mess in Europe. And geopolitically, we are bigger than them. Europe is an illusion, we want to deal with Germany as a state, with Italy as a state. We don't want any of this EU nonsense'. This is totally self-destructive, because in the long run, for Russia to be a strong, prosperous state, it needs a strong, prosperous Europe. But if you think in terms of the Russian elite, the main question becomes: 'How do I preserve myself?' The only answer is: 'by destroying the European Union'. The mere existence of the EU demonstrates that something else is possible, and this is a danger.

We can't understand Russian policy towards Ukraine without this. The assault on Ukraine was never just about Ukraine – it is about making Europe seem impossible. Everything Russia does, from waging a war in eastern Ukraine to supporting the far-Right in France or British separatism, is aimed at making the European project go away. But of course, part of the pleasure of the struggle against the 'decadent' West is forgetting where Russia's real problems are.