

## BOOK REVIEWS

### WRITING UNDER EURASIA?

Review of Alexander Dugin. 2014. *Putin Vs Putin: Vladimir Putin Viewed from the Right*. London: Arktos.

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Ostensibly, this book is about Putin. The title and blurb juxtapose two Putins: one a liberal Atlanticist and the other a patriotic Eurasianist. In reality, a larger proportion of the book compares two other Putins: the real Putin and the potential Putin. This latter Putin is still the patriotic Eurasianist, but the real Putin is taken to be an ideology-free political realist – a stance the author argues is untenable.

*Putin Vs Putin: Vladimir Putin Viewed from the Right* is one of four works by Russian Eurasianist thinker Alexander Dugin now available in English (the others being *The Fourth Political Theory*, *Martin Heidegger: The Philosophy of Another Beginning*, and *Eurasian Mission: An Introduction to Neo-Eurasianism*). The Ukraine crisis has served to increase the attention paid to Dugin in the West, particularly focussing on the influence his textbook *Foundations of Geopolitics* (which has yet to be translated into English) has upon much of Russia's military and foreign policy elite through its use at Moscow's General Staff Academy.

Prior to recent attempts to read in Dugin's works a sign of Putin's next move, interest in Dugin in the West had tended to be connected to interest in 'radical traditionalism'. This strand of conservative romanticism is perhaps best represented by the European New Right,

whose key thinkers include Alain de Benoist and Guillaume Faye.<sup>1</sup> Both publishers of Dugin's works in English have tended to focus on the European New Right and wider radical traditionalist topics. There are however numerous differences between Dugin and the European New Right, which unfortunately cannot be discussed here due to limitations of space.<sup>2</sup> Given the surge of interest in Dugin, a review of this book must answer two questions: whether it is useful for gaining a greater understanding of Dugin and the neo-Eurasianist worldview, and whether it is useful to gain a greater understanding of Putin. On the former count, the book is a success. After spending just over three-hundred pages with Dugin, the reader will have a clear view of both his ideology and his personality. This is no dry academic text. Instead the book flows with character and idiosyncrasies, more akin to a conversation than a systematic exposition – a style that is no doubt deliberate in order to create a distance from Western rationalism. As far as the second criterion is concerned, the answer must be a more cautious 'perhaps'.

*Putin Vs Putin* was published in English in late 2014. The Russian version emerged in 2012, and the articles which have been collated to form the chapters were written during Putin's first period as President, during the Medvedev era and shortly after Putin's return to the presidency. The two appendices are from the first half of 2014. Because of this, readers looking for direct analysis of the Ukraine crisis will be disappointed (Appendix I discusses the earliest stages of the crisis). Unfortunately the texts that make up the book are undated and are arranged thematically and then sequentially within the topic, rather than sequentially within the book. This occasionally leads to confusion about precisely when in Putin's career Dugin is writing. Before moving onto the book's key

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<sup>1</sup> Both de Benoist and Faye were members of the French think-tank GRECE (Research and Study Group for European Civilisation). Faye left the group in the mid-1980s to retire from politics before returning to the subject in the late-1990s. For an overview of the ideas and personalities of the European New Right, see Michael O'Meara, 2013a and Sunic 2011 – both authors are sympathetic to the New Right but this does not affect the utility of the overviews.

<sup>2</sup>Michael O'Meara's criticisms of Dugin's reading of fascism and National Socialism highlight some of these differences, see O'Meara 2013b.

arguments, it is worth mentioning here the usefulness of the book's ample footnotes. These footnotes, added by the English edition's editor, John B. Morgan IV, will be invaluable for readers unfamiliar with the vast array of political, philosophical and business figures, amongst others, cited in Dugin's text.

The first section of the book, 'The Making of Putin', centres on Dugin's first impressions of Putin. These impressions are generally positive. Dugin cites attacks on Putin by 'democratic schizos' (9) for being a red-brown, or national-Bolshevik, as being a sign that Putin was 'our man... a patriot and a decent man to boot' (9). Yet Putin is no national-Bolshevik. Throughout the book Dugin attempts to pin down Putin's political ideology, but this is a task akin to that of Sisyphus. Early in the book Dugin identifies what he describes as Putin's between-electoral-cycle liberalism. Come election time, Putin's actions reflect '71% patriotism and 13% liberalism (strictly in accordance with the Russian Public Opinion Research Centre's results' (35). However, come Putin's second term as President, Dugin 'observed a reverse situation, where 71% of the state policy was oriented towards the West and 13% leaned towards patriotism' (35). It should be noted at this point that 'liberalism' and 'the West' are considered to be largely synonymous throughout Dugin's work. It is this discussion of the ratio of liberalism and patriotism (synonymous with Eurasianism for Dugin) which is the source of the book's title.

Towards the end of the book, Dugin argues that by the time of Putin's return to the presidency in 2012, the liberal/patriotic mixture no longer works and wonders if Putin realises that this is the case (224). It is around this point in the book that Dugin addresses Putin's ideology, or lack thereof, in greater detail. The lack of a central Idea for Russian society is seen as Putin's greatest weakness – 'this is why politics in Russia was given away to spin doctors and PR specialists' (231). Putin also lacks a vision for how Russia is to be in the future as well as having 'only a limited understanding of the contemporary world' (231). The Putin Dugin is painting here is a pragmatist who devises technocratic solutions to problems as they arise. This is confirmed when, several pages later, Dugin announces that 'today I can say who Putin is. This is

no longer a mystery to me' (235).<sup>3</sup> Putin is, according to Dugin, 'a classical realist politician' (235). A more cynical reader might highlight that this is hardly a revelation to even the most casual observer of Putin's foreign policy. Yet Dugin argues that realism has been overlooked in Russian social institutions (242). This is even more troubling as classical realism also accounts for Putin's domestic policies (246). This failure to study and hone understanding of the driving ideological force in Russia for the last fifteen years may well be the reason why the Russian political elite beyond Putin himself are, in Dugin's view, so underwhelming. Dugin likens Putin's realism to the work of a snowplough. This managerial approach to politics remains indifferent to opposition from both left and right so long as 'the snowplough' is able to keep clearing the snow unimpeded. If the work *is* impeded, 'then the President loses his patience and removes the people along with the snow' (246). Depending on how this is read (is 'removing' sacking, jailing, exiling, executing, or something else), it may be rather chilling. No doubt Dugin is aware of this dramatic effect. Whether Putin's political worldview is liberal/patriotic or classical realist, Dugin insists it 'no longer meets the needs of our time, and fails in addressing the critical and meaningful moments of our history and our existence' (248). The political worldview which *does* meet today's needs and addresses these critical and meaningful, historic existential moments is, perhaps unsurprisingly, Dugin's brand of Eurasianism.

Dugin's Eurasianism entails a complete rethinking of the current global system, with the current unipolar American-centric system being replaced with a multipolar world. This would result in 'building a fair world order which favours the interests and wishes of all countries and civilisations' (131). At face value this sounds both inoffensive and sensible, as it is neither uncommon nor controversial to believe that international politics could be made healthier with an injection of plurality. Later in the book, Dugin explains more precisely what he

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<sup>3</sup> This is one of numerous points with the aforementioned issue with the dating of passages. Dugin explicitly states here that he is writing during Putin's third presidency, but it would be interesting to know more precisely when it was he came to this conclusion.

means by countries and civilisations whilst outlining the key aspects of his multipolar world theory:

The multipolar world does not seriously consider the sovereignty of existing national states. Such sovereignty is confined to legal terminology and is not confirmed by sufficient enforcement, strategic, economic and political potential. In order to be a sovereign subject in the twenty-first century, a nation state is no longer enough. Real sovereignty can only be possessed by an aggregate, a coalition of states (175).

For the Eurasian Union, Dugin believes Russia ‘needs Kazakhstan, Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia, and possibly Azerbaijan. It needs access to the depths of central Asia represented by Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and possibly Uzbekistan, and even Turkmenistan’ (169). This union would allow for uniting ‘energy, economic, military and strategic potentials, as well as the territorial zones where natural resources are extracted and their delivery routes’ (169). Through this unification, the Eurasian Union would be undeniable as a major world power. It is through this lens that the remarks on the unimportance of existing national state sovereignty should be read. Dugin suggests that the Eurasian Union would not be self-sufficient, and would require partnership with Europe, China and other potential ‘poles’ in the new multipolar world. He insists that ‘together, on the basis of a dialogue of civilisations, we can build a balanced and fair world order’ (179-180). Dugin is not utopian, and does not see the multipolar world as being without conflict, but suggests that conflicts should be avoided where possible and replaced by peaceful dialogue as ‘the clash of civilisations is not fatal in itself’ (180). It is notable that the individual citizens of the nation states amalgamated into the civilizational poles of the multipolar world have little role but to acquiesce to the greater civilisation into which their nation falls.

Dugin’s talk of dividing the world into various great civilisations is connected to the theme of Russian destiny which runs throughout the book. This is similar in many ways to the idea of American

exceptionalism<sup>4</sup> which Dugin argues is often mistaken for an expression of US materialism when it is instead related to the ongoing existence of a concept of Manifest Destiny (255-256). Where the original concept was applied to the divinely sanctioned territorial expansion of the United States within the American continent, Dugin is suggesting that this is the impulse behind the spread of US interests and interference throughout the globe. Dugin's Russian equivalent of American exceptionalism/Manifest Destiny is based upon the idea of Russian civilisation as an expression of Orthodox Christianity. Early in the book Dugin declares that his 'political philosophy is based on the assumption that the Russian people are the most important historical, spiritual and religious category... These people are deeply suffused with the light of the Orthodox culture and have been chosen by Divine Providence for a special mission' (61). Dugin does not distinguish between strictly observant Orthodox Christians (like himself) and those merely associated with Orthodox Christianity, believing both to be Orthodox Christians by having been immersed in Orthodox culture (61).<sup>5</sup> It is difficult to argue against such a position because it is not supported by a step-by-step argument, but rather consists of solely making assertions. In this way his work, perhaps ironically, resembles that of a fellow Russian, but one whose main influence has been on numerous modern day proponents of American exceptionalism – Ayn Rand.<sup>6</sup> Dugin shares with Rand the tendency to equate difference in political opinion to moral failure. *Putin Vs Putin* is littered with insults aimed at anyone who

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<sup>4</sup> American exceptionalism is the theory that the US has a unique place and role in history on account of its founding as a relatively new state focussed on the promotion of freedom both at home and abroad. American exceptionalism does not necessarily imply that the US is 'better' than other nations, but US political rhetoric, particularly internal rhetoric, has tended to lean towards this conclusion.

<sup>5</sup> It is perhaps interesting that Søren Kierkegaard who is a great influence on the works on one of Dugin's major philosophical influences, Martin Heidegger, saw such a view of Christendom – where one is a Christian purely by the accident of being born in a Christian country/culture – as being the greatest barrier to true Christian faith.

<sup>6</sup> The United States was for Rand the only nation to have come close to the hyper-capitalist, individualistic form of freedom she felt was morally supportable. In the US entrepreneurial spirit she saw a connection to her view of mankind which is best illustrated in her novel *Atlas Shrugged*.

disagrees with what Dugin stridently believes is the inevitability of Eurasianism (24). Examples include equating the sale of oil companies to foreign owners to politicians selling children's organs (246), calling insufficiently patriotic politicians 'ultra-marginal scum' (160), declaring the early Wittgenstein to be 'totally inept and mentally deficient' (162),<sup>7</sup> and comparing the 'dead-pan, puffed-up, wicked and emotionless' (210) faces of Yeltsin and Yushchenko (he also refers to the latter as a 'sinister shadow' (208)). Few people draw Dugin's ire as regularly in *Putin Vs Putin* as Dmitry Medvedev, who is taken as representative of the liberal-Atlanticist trend in the Russian political elite. A subheading refers to Medvedev's presidency 'an unsuccessful theatrical interlude' (208). Dugin suggests that efforts by liberals to split Russia became unnecessary under Medvedev's presidency because his actions ensured that the country would 'disintegrate on its own' (211). One particularly blunt section is worth quoting in full:

Medvedev generally showed himself to be a man inexperienced in foreign policy, and he is not a quick learner either. His video addresses and the innocent joy he displays at the cheap technological gadgets presented to him by the Americans, who quickly identified his weaknesses, deserve a special mention here. Sometimes his steps in international politics were implemented so clumsily that they were met with laughter and contempt. When Bush did similar things it was not disgraceful for America because Bush was backed by a massive intellectual apparatus. Medvedev, however, was not 'backed' by anyone except the enemies of Russia (215).

Medvedev's failings are not a difference of opinion or of approach for Dugin, but rather are seen as signs of a deficient character. This sort of approach certainly makes *Putin Vs Putin* a more interesting read than a calm analysis of policy line-by-line would be, but it is this characteristic which leaves the book in the realm of polemic rather than analytic.

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<sup>7</sup> Dugin is here rallying against the positivist belief in atomic facts.

The common view of Dugin as a fascist or neo-fascist<sup>8</sup> is challenged by the evident glee he expresses about the marginality of ‘ultra-patriots, skinheads and everyday racists’ (40). In Dugin’s view, ‘this sector is colourful and brutal, but totally disjointed politically, its leaders being petty maniacs with atrophied muscles’ (40). Whilst Dugin sees the utility in deploying such groups for PR purposes against the pro-Western liberals who contest Russia’s position as a superpower, who they vote for is ultimately unimportant because they make up a small percentage of the population and ‘most likely, on the night prior to the election they will drink one too many and not make it to the ballot-boxes’ (40). Dugin’s anti-racism has tended to be a barrier to a sympathetic reading by the white nationalist and Identarian wings of the New Right.<sup>9</sup> Although Dugin’s relative multiculturalism is undoubtedly informed by the political reality of the various ethnic groups residing within Russian territory, it is backed with a clear and open disdain for ‘any kind of nationalism, chauvinism, Eurocentrism, universalism, racism or xenophobic attitude’ (310). He argues that the radical traditionalists in Europe too should adopt a similar attitude, as ‘Europe should stand for geopolitical unity, coupled with preservation of the ethnic and cultural diversity of the various European ethnoses’ (311). It is however important to note that this conception of ethnic and cultural equality can also be interpreted as ‘equal but separate’, which is not the same as the brand of multiculturalism supported by European liberalism.

*Putin Vs Putin* is unlikely to radically change the reader’s opinion about Putin, particularly as he is not a figure many feel indifferent about. What *Putin Vs Putin* will do is to provide a different lens through which to view Putin’s actions and pronouncements. A brief appendix from April 2014 on the situation in Ukraine applies some of the previously discussed conceptions, but is unlikely to add a great deal to understanding of the crisis, if only because events have continued to progress rapidly in the time that has since passed. Dugin’s idea of a fourth political theory

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<sup>8</sup> For example: Shekhovtsov 2014.

<sup>9</sup> For example, see Malvicini, 2014.



(4PT)<sup>10</sup> is discussed briefly in relation to criticism of Putin's lack of a guiding Idea and also, in the second appendix, in relation to European politics. Whilst the discussion of 4PT here will provide a general overview of the theory which owes an acknowledged debt to Heidegger, the reader wishing to gain a greater understanding of 4PT would be better turning to Dugin's *The Fourth Political Theory. Putin Vs Putin* is an often fascinating and equally infuriating read which serves as an excellent overview of Dugin's political and philosophical positions. English language readers interested in gaining a greater understanding of the Eurasianist strand and its connection to modern Russian politics are likely to gain much from this. Probably more so than from Dugin's other books, at least until *Foundations of Geopolitics* finally receives an English edition.

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<sup>10</sup> Dugin argues that as communism and fascism were defeated, and liberalism is flawed, a fourth political theory combining the strengths (and avoiding the weaknesses) of these is necessary.

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