

MASTER THESIS

“Antebellum”

Sophie Harper

Elite Graduate Program “East European Studies”

Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich, 2023

Globalising Illiberalism?

Sophie Harper has studied the Elite Graduate Program “East European Studies” at the Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich. In her master’s thesis she explored the Russian Illiberalism and its interaction with the West. As a qualitative base for her work, she conducted two expert interviews with Dr. Tobias Bunde and the second one with Dr. Bobo Lo.

Breaching Liberal International Order

She came to the conclusion that Putin’s Russia breaches international order to internally legitimise and stabilise its oligarchy and autocracy. However, Russia does not seek to globalise its own specific branch of illiberalism. Instead, the Kremlin supports illiberal tendencies in Western countries, to destabilise the liberal democratic order. A divided and illiberal West enhances the internal narrative, that the West is weak and hypocritical.

The roots of Russian illiberalism and its Evolution

The roots lie in the continuity and rebirth of autocracy after the collapse of the Soviet Union. On the one hand, Soviet and imperial notions and narratives of Russian greatness are reproduced in state propaganda. The USSR continues to be seen as positive by the majority of the Russian population, not least because the remembrance culture surrounding World War II is heavily polished.

On the other hand, Russia reestablished a new form of illiberalism, by establishing a one-person autocracy supported by a powerful oligarchy. Unlike the Soviet rulers, Vladimir Putin has no party corpus watching over him. A specific ideology was less important for Putin’s path to power, leaving him room for populist policies – using narratives from the USSR as well as Pan-Slavic and Eurasianism if deemed useful.

Transgressing Political Conflict Lines

Nevertheless, the ideological landscape of contemporary Russia could develop different branches in the post-Soviet era. Socialist and left-leaning ideologies – even apparent liberal ones such as multiculturalism – can be used to stress imperial talking points, for instance, when calling upon the multi-ethnic character of the USSR. This helps Russia to further push its illiberal agenda in Western countries. Thus, among the political left as well as the political right, *Russlandverstehers* are found in the West and sometimes lead to curious ideological intersections.

Hybrid Warfare in the West

Russian illiberalism however holds the predominant goal of internally securing its autocracy. The Putin regime uses propaganda through official press statements, for example in the German press, as well as disinformation on social media in hybrid warfare. Certain media outlets and blogs are not officially or instantly visibly linked to the Kremlin but promote solely the Kremlin’s narrative and often hold links to Russian intelligence. Hence, in times of social media, hybrid warfare shifts away from traditional propaganda towards more diverse and discreet forms of disinformation.

Challenge of universal values

However, both interviewees, Dr Tobias Bunde and Dr Bobo Lo, concluded that the largest threat to liberal international order is not rooted in Russia, but in Western democracy itself. To stop autocracies breaching liberal order, democracies ought to provide prosperity and freedom to all its inhabitants. Every autocracy is aware of this fact. It is now for liberal democracies to prove them right.

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