

Interview Feature – Europe and War: A Conversation with Alain Finkielkraut

Written by Petar Popović

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PETAR POPOVIĆ, JUN 2 2023

The Russian aggression in Ukraine and its implication for Europe's future are regularly debated by political scientists, security and military experts, and economists. While the opinions of philosophers usually do not fit the category of expert-opinion, their voice is no less relevant. Thus, I decided to engage in the discussion with Alain Finkielkraut, a philosopher who has been a controversial voice in French public discourse for several decades. Associated with the intellectual movement the *Nouveaux Philosophes* (New Philosophers), Finkielkraut's views are often characterized by his critical stance toward modernity and his emphasis on the crisis of cultural identity, multiculturalism and nationalism. His main philosophical endeavor has been to overcome the antimony of universalism and particularism, which reflects his political-theoretical position of reconciling the civilizational universalism and national particularism (Rachlin, 1995). Some of his notable works include *The Imaginary Jew* ([1981] 1997); *The Crime of Being Born* (1997); *L'Imparfait du présent* (Present Imperfect)(2002); and *L'identité malheureuse* (The Unhappy Identity) (2013).

We began the discussion on the broad assumption that the liberal international order is in the process of deep transformation, and that the change would inevitably affect Europe. My premise is based on Ulrich Beck's claim that the European Union is an "American-European synthesis" (2007: 25-27), which makes it a liberal/Enlightenment project *par excellence*. The US and European nation-states can survive the collapse of liberal international order, but the EU cannot. So, the preliminary question is, can the liberal international order overcome the crisis of its legitimacy, caused by the decade long process of deglobalization which culminated with the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

"I don't think that we are witnessing the collapse or the end of the liberal order", says Finkielkraut. His simple observation is categorical: "First, the pandemic did not 'end' anything. It did slow the supply chains, and it did bring old geopolitical rivalries back. But Western countries took measures to protect their populations. In fact, we have witnessed the renaissance of the sovereign state in this postmodern era. The public health measures were not illiberal! They were common sense. Bolsonaro in Brazil was 'punished' precisely because very many people died due to his irresponsible policies. The Covid-19 is now overcome, defeated, and everything is back to normal". As for the second point, the war in Ukraine, and what it means for Europe, Finkielkraut had more complex, thought-provoking observations.

FINKIELKRAUT: When Russia invaded Ukraine, I was concerned with how Europe would react. Europe could have easily chosen the policies of appeasement, and for entirely rational reasons; namely, the energy dependencies on Russia. But most worrying was the fact that contemporary Europe is built on the idea antithetical to nationalism and national particularism. How to explain that Ukrainian people are simultaneously defending their national identity and their European identity? Recall that in 1991, when Slovenia and Croatia were seceding from Yugoslavia, Western Europe viewed these nations as primitive tribes with "backward" ideas of national independence. Europe thus fell for the propaganda narrative of Serbian leader and self-proclaimed protector of Yugoslavia Slobodan Milošević. His national-communist regime portrayed Croats as Ustashe fascists, conspiring to eradicate Serbs and destroy Yugoslavia. It is the same propaganda narrative we witness today. Putin's regime pretends to defend Ukrainian Russians from neo-Nazi regime in Kiev. But while Europe stood by as Milošević waged the war of plunder and

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carnage, destroying Croatian cities of Vukovar and Dubrovnik, Putin's propaganda fortunately failed. Europe chose to defend Ukraine. Europe came to its senses in this decisive historical moment, defined by the global division between the liberal world of democracies and the autocratic world of Russia, China and Iran. The struggle is being telescoped on the battlefields of Ukraine, which is why defending this country is so important. The fact that Europe is sacrificing its immediate economic wellbeing for higher civilizational principles is in my view reassuring and worthy of praise.

POPOVIĆ: One of the reasons why the West tacitly greenlighted Milošević's aggression in 1991 was the then still dominant Cold War mentality among political elites. It was believed that the dissolution of Yugoslavia could upset the status quo with the Soviet Union, especially in the context of the Reunification of Germany. The Bush Administration and Western Europe, especially Britain and France, did not realize that the verdict of history was already in. The ideas and principles of democracy, free trade and human rights had prevailed. Today the change in Europe's attitude towards Ukraine reflects the change of political mentality. It took three decades to create political culture devoid from traditional geopolitics, state-centrism, and states' use of organized violence as expedient means in pursuit of national interests.

FINKIELKRAUT: Change in mentality certainly played an important role, and for sure there are many contributing factors. However, Putin's act of aggression is so obvious and so obnoxious that no one can close their eyes to it. We are not talking about a conflict between two states, but of an unprovoked and unjustified onslaught of an empire against a relatively small nation, which was not even prepared to defend itself from the invasion of such a size and magnitude. The EU has no illusions about Putin's regime. We know about his enormous wealth; we know how his kleptocracy works; we know what he did to journalists and opposition leaders. Putin is cruel, brutal and no political or geopolitical rationale can justify his actions.

Communist hope disappeared. But Putin is now trying to substitute Russia's failed mission to salvage the international proletariat with a new kind of mission. Now Russia is "defending" the Western civilization from liberal decadence. Yet, this propaganda is very simplistic. The idea that Russia's regime is saving the West is underlined by nebulous conspiracies, which for instance conflate the LGBTQ movement with neo-Nazism. It is astonishing how successful this nonsense is in Russia, where over 80% of the population supports Putin's war and sees the aggression on Ukraine as part of the global civilizational struggle between the forces of good and the forces of evil. Europe is immune to this propaganda, albeit there are some fringed far-right circles that identify the Russian invasion with culture wars fought against wokeism. Indeed, saving the soul of our democracy from the dangers of cancel culture is in my opinion necessary. But seeing Putin as a saver of the decaying Western world is not just wrong. It is downright stupid.

POPOVIĆ: You mention a world divided between democracies and autocracies, which is in fact the doctrinal world-view of US president Joe Biden. His foreign policy objectives principally rest on consolidating democracies against illiberal powers China and Russia. Yet, this struggle is very specific. The liberal West must protect democratic institutions from kleptocratic regimes' "export" of their robust corruption and nepotism. Thus, Biden did emphasize in one of his speeches that there is nothing ideological about this struggle. No parallels should be drawn with Cold War ideological bipolarity. Now, it is interesting that in the early 1990s both Samuel Huntington and Francis Fukuyama heralded the idea of a post-ideological era. If the existing division is indeed non-ideological, how are we to understand the struggle with China and Russia in general, and the war in Ukraine in particular? Is the struggle between democracies and autocracies underlined by a "clash of civilizations"? That is after all the crux of Russian argumentation. Geopolitical "thinkers" like Alexander Dugin constantly remind us that Russia is a unique Orthodox Christian civilization-state, beyond our comprehension. On the other hand, and in line with Fukuyama's argument, is the current crisis merely a post-historical competition for power? Slavoj Žižek actually thinks Fukuyama was right. The West's issue with communist countries like China or Vietnam is not their ideology, but that they are better at managing the capitalist system.

FINKIELKRAUT: Huntington's main thesis is more accurate than Fukuyama's optimism (see Finkelkraut's interview in *Politique Internationale* [1992], in which he claims that the teleological notion of the Hegelian-Marxist "the end of history" survived communism and was resuscitated in liberal scheme that now repudiates the reality of cultural

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history and one's natural sense of belonging to a national community).

Yes, we are indeed talking about civilizational conflict. However, I would not refer to Huntington. Before Huntington, Milan Kundera wrote *The Tragedy of Central Europe*, and in this small text he changed our understanding of what is going on in Europe. We Europeans were already aware of the illusions of communism. We were also ready to oppose totalitarianism with democracy. But Kundera says that it's not enough. We had to understand our recent history beyond Yalta geography which separated Western and Eastern Europe. Kundera reminded us that Central Europe existed before its kidnapping in 1945. All the rebellions and all the struggles in Central Europe were to defend both the national identity and the Western identity against not only a political regime, i.e., the Soviet regime, but against Russia! For Russia is, according to Kundera, an entirely different civilization.

Kundera claims that Russia has a different understanding of space and time. The space swallows everything, including entire nations. The sense of time is slow and patient, shaping a distinct way of living. Thus, when the fate of Central and Eastern Europe was sealed in Yalta, it was not only a political catastrophe. It was an attack on civilizational identity. Kundera (1984: 33) writes:

Central Europe longed to be a condensed version of Europe itself in all its cultural variety, a small arch-European Europe, a reduced model of Europe made up of nations conceived according to one rule: the greatest variety within the smallest space. How could Central Europe not be horrified facing a Russia founded on the opposite principle: the smallest variety within the greatest space? Indeed, nothing could be more foreign to Central Europe and its passion for variety than Russia: uniform, standardizing, centralizing, determined to transform every nation of its empire (the Ukrainians, the Belorussians, the Armenians, the Latvians, the Lithuanians, and others) into a single Russian people (or, as is more commonly expressed in this age of generalized verbal mystification, into a 'single Soviet people').

There are also writers and intellectuals in Russia that insist on civilizational difference, like for instance Vasiliy Grossman. In his novel *Forever Flows* Grossman says that Western Europe could be defined as an alliance of "progress and freedom", whereas Russia is an alliance of "progress and serfdom". Bolsheviks had a historical opportunity to change Russia. But not only did they not succeed, they actually aggravated the latter. Under Putin, the conditions are the same. There is a continuity in spite of all the revolutions and conventions of Russian history; a terrible and tragic continuity that divides the story of Russia and the story of Europe, and its heritage of Catholicism, Renaissance, Enlightenment, Romanticism, etc. These trends are foreign to Russia. But of course, we must be careful with this differentiation. There is also another aspect of Russian history; the Occidentalism movement, the great literary heritage, etc. Of course, it is Russia's tremendous cultural contribution to civilization. A heritage defeated by Putin, Dugin and Slavophilism.

POPOVIĆ: On this point, I would like to refer to Vladimir Kantor (1997) and his book *Russia Is a European Country*. Every civilization develops in a bottom-up process. In Russia, however, civilization has always been top-down state project. Civilization was imposed on society via reforms engineered by the political center, from Peter the Great to Stolypin. That is why the Eurasianist opposition sees civilization as Westernization, considered to be antithetical to Russian national spirit. But what is the basic principle of this opposition? As Kantor suggest, it is the principle of the Golden Horde, defined by an ahistorical catastrophic discourse and the reality of tribalistic "barbarously destructive and predatory" way of living. Thus, there is no unique Russian civilization opposed to Westernization, but an essentially savage anti-civilizational ideology. Bolshevism was indeed its most extreme manifestation. The Euroasianism of Putin and Dugin is the same. They are not the exponents of the idea of the Third Rome, because that idea is embedded in Christianity. They are the exponents of the Golden Horde, and their supposed Orthodox Christianity is a secularized version of expansionist ideology. What makes this state religion especially dangerous is precisely the fact that it is not interpreted by theologians, but by KGB officers and ex-Stalinists. So, when we say that Russia is a unique civilization, we are buying into Dugin's manipulation. For, it is precisely the Russian civilization that is being attacked. And I believe that we are making a great service to Putin's "khanate" by canceling Russian literature, music and art in general...

FINKIELKRAUT: I agree, what we are doing is ludicrous! We canceled Dostoyevsky, Tchaikovsky, Mussorgsky, Pushkin, etc. Russian literature should be read. It will nurture us, if indeed we are still interested in literature (but that

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is another problem). We should actually now, more than ever, promote Russian culture. Putin's propaganda has no interest whatsoever in Russian literature. Instead, its message to the world is clear – “we are not ashamed”! It is terrible because the sense of shame is foundational to ethics. One cannot do whatever one wants because there are other people that exist too. Russia says NO! We do what we want and we are not ashamed. That is what is happening in Russia today and it has nothing to do with Puskin, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy and, of course, Chekov. Putin really betrays Chekov.

POPOVIĆ: And yet, Russia's aggressiveness is only part of Europe's problems. There are tensions within the Trans-Atlantic community as well. American neo-isolationism is becoming a dominant force despite the professed liberal internationalism of the Biden Administration. Emmanuel Macron calls for Europe's “strategic autonomy” as a sign of distancing. The European Union internally suffers from multifaceted divisions. Brexit has already happened. There are contradicting interests between Brussels and member states, Poland and Hungary in particular. Ideologically, Europe is divided between liberal technocracy and nationalist populism. Finally, the EU itself is considered by some to be an empire. Although its structure significantly differs from historical empire, certain aspects such as expansionism (enlargement), power influence (imposing norms), and undefined borders (the EU's borders are not clear), do resemble many elements of an empire. If indeed Russia loses this war, what would that mean, if anything, for a continent immersed in so many unresolvable contradictions?

FINKIELKRAUT: Europe has a future if it does not forget that it is not only an institutional construction but also a civilization. In other words, Europe has a future if Europe remembers that it has a past. The first sign that the EU completely forgot its heritage was when it invited Turkey to become a member. Eventually that did not happen, but it should have never been envisaged in the first place. Turkey's position in international relations and its behavior now is reminder of what the definition of Europe is. Also, the situation in Ukraine reminds us that we are a civilization. We should seriously consider this notion, for it can truly inspire our common policies. The reality of an empire, and the empire in reality is Russia. Russia does not want to be nation, but wants to remain and again become a *great* empire. Europe's history is different. Indeed, there have been empires before, but Europe invented the nation-state. After World War II we wanted to get rid of nations because of nationalism. Yet, at its very core the EU is an association of nations, and should remain so against the idea and practice of an empire. That is something we have to keep in mind when supporting Ukraine's struggle for national freedom.

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