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Open Letter – Who are the Friends of Political Critique (Krytyka Polityczna)?

Chto Delat

Not too long ago, we ran into some strange and worrying news from Poland. The story happened during a recent public talk of renowned philosopher and political commentator Slavoj Žižek. The discussion was moderated by Sławomir Sierakowski, the leader of the Polish journal and collective "Political Critique" (Krytyka Polityczna), which enjoys wide reputation as a leading Polish left-leaning think tank.

The talk was streamed online and then uploaded onto YouTube (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G1RJZVd_RmI&feature=youtu.be&t=1h31m).

After Žižek's talk, the discussion turned to the most pressing issues of the ongoing escalation between Russia, Ukraine and the West. At some point, Žižek noted that he has good friends in Russia, namely, the Chto Delat collective. He said that Chto Delat embodies a position different from both from the liberal-center mainstream that Sierakowski now praises and the mix of left-

patriotic and neo-rightists who support in Putin in Russia and Europe.

All of this is true. But in his comment Sierakowski was quick to say something totally hallucinatory, as if it was a known fact. We quote: “Chto Delat supports Kremlin. We have better friends for you in Russia”. This is public now. As a Russian proverb says, “a word is not a sparrow, once it flies out, you won’t catch it”. And we got the message.

Even the most vehement opponents of Chto Delat in Russia or elsewhere could not utter something like this. Such serious accusations (in the view of the ongoing policy of Putin that embodies the consequent authoritarian Right) require evidence at the very least. If there is none, apologies are in order. And it is particular painful to hear such a lie from a comrade with whom we shared a long history of debate and common goals.

Throughout all the years of activity of our collective since 2003 we have been struggling to establish a broad critical left-wing platform opposing both the liberal mainstream and the nationalist-conservative camp in the post-Soviet context and globally. This has involved a variety of practices – the production of political texts, dialogues, films, exhibitions, public discussions, learning plays, seminar-communes, summer schools, and, finally, the foundation of the School for Engaged Art, whose aim is to foster a new generation of the critical left in Russia in a more stable institutional and educational context.

In that sense, we are no longer just the Chto Delat group of 9 people but a whole network of the independent Left from several generations – artists, theorists, researchers, writers and activists. Ours is not a political party, and moreover, many of us are cultural

workers, so our opposition to nexuses of power and capital such as the Kremlin are not coordinated around a regimented program. But we regularly participated in protests against the regime both individually and collectively, and were very much involved in the run-up to anti-authoritarian protests of 2011-2012 and their aftermath. And we have never supported the Putin Administration. Instead, we have diagnosed and opposed its fundamentalist tendencies all along; you can find the latest articulation of that position in our statement of withdrawal from the Manifesta 10 exhibition at Hermitage or in our new film "The Excluded" which clearly renders moot any speculation as to which side we are on. Fortunately, living in Russia does not make you an accomplice of its odious elite: fortunately, this is a great, culturally rich, and heterogeneous society, parts of which only recently demonstrated their wide rejection of Putin's policies.

While we're at it, a few basics about the current crisis and our position.

We are very much against the "campism" familiar from the times of the Cold War. We do not want to be absorbed by either liberal-center mainstreams or conservative nationalists, and we reject the pressure for choosing between new global "blocs." We reserve the right to criticize both sides for their unacceptable militaristic expansionism, their "problems with nationalism," their social racism; all these features are present in Russia, in Ukraine, in the EU, and in the USA, and pretty much everywhere else. We clearly see not just narrow-minded politicians, but also the competing cliques of oligarchs and corrupt officials actively fanning the flames of war. We demand peace now. We are against both the ridiculous (though dangerous) neo-imperialism of Russia, and the good old imperialism of the US and the European Union.

We clearly see how both Russian and Western mainstream media attempt to clothe the ongoing economic crisis of various peripheral and global capitalisms with the garb of geopolitical phantasmagoria or "national interests.'

We have also always insisted on the continuity between the neo-liberal policies and ideas of the 1990s and the authoritarian conservatism of the 2000s, in Russia and in other similar countries of the semi-periphery.

It is also clear for us that the current crisis in Ukraine, while directly launched and provoked by inadequate and aggressive moves of the Russian leadership, had been prepared long before by a series of imperialist, militarist, and, most importantly, short-sighted, moves by the Western political elites in the 1990s-2000s, not to mention the hegemonic position of nationalism in the current Ukraine.

Any refusal to consider all of this on the part of the European or US Left, much like any refusal from the Russian Left to recognize the right-wing nature of Russia's current policy in Ukraine, immediately turns the situation into a "campist" and nationalist opposition instead of an ideological and historical global conflict.

It is very important at this difficult moment that we, the intellectuals of the left throughout the world, build our horizontal international solidarities: within our nation-states, as recent history has shown, we can do less and less.

Slanderous statements like Sierakowski's actively undermine the possibility for solidarity and lock us into a thinking that revolves around two right-wing camps. To evade them, we must look beyond the level of personal slander, which after all was made to prove a point in a larger geopolitical argument. Its crux is that the

European left is wavering insofar as Putin is concerned, while former neoliberal enemies have been far more steadfast and astute in their opposition to the Russian hybrid war in the south east of Ukraine.

This is in line with Sierakowski's general policy to realign Krytyka Polityczna in a cordial if not friendly dialogue with former foes. These include the likes of former Polish President Aleksander Kwaśniewski, notorious for his involvement in the establishing of a CIA-prison in Poland, or Jeffrey Sachs, who sold Eastern Europe on neoliberal privatization and "shock therapy" in the 1990s. In some ways, this makes sense for Krytyka Politycza, who have evolved from a group of truly critical intellectuals organizing translations, publications, and events into a corporate NGO which is driven by falsely understood "Realpolitik".

In terms of rhetoric, Krytyka Politychna has gone from the more standard positions of a broader albeit divided, neo-Marxist European Left to a pseudo-progressivist European reformism. But this rhetoric barely masks a far more virulent kind of expansionist geopolitical thinking more reminiscent of the Right. For example, we might recall an editorial by Sierakowski in the Guardian some years ago, in which Russia already figured as a hopeless case in need of enlightened colonization. We quote:

"The Russian writer Dmitry Merezhkovsky once told a Polish interviewer that 'Russia is feminine, but she's never had a husband. She's only been raped – by the Tatars, the tsars and the Bolsheviks. Only Poland could have been Russia's husband, but Poland was too weak.' Merezhkovsky's sober reflection remains relevant today as it was at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century: Russia has never stopped being raped (the oligarchs have taken over from the Bolsheviks), and Poland is still too weak to be her husband. [...]

Merezhkovsky's vision of the 'endlessly raped Russians' may prove prescient. And – oh, the irony! – so too might Dostoevsky's double warning in The Possessed about the nihilist (communist) threat and the "Asiatic cholera". Dostoevsky was apt to be spiteful about the Poles. Let us spite him, then, by finding a husband for Russia in a strong and united Europe." (Guardian, April 4, 2011).

Sierakowski's gendered representation of Russia is classically colonial, and in that sense manages to embody the hostile projections that the Russian conservatives make onto the European attitude to Russia. But at the same time, his 19th century language, geopolitical mindset and imagery bear an uncanny resemblance to those found among the Russian right, in "geopolitical thinkers" like Dugin and Putin, down to the quote from the orthodox fundamentalist Merezhkowski whom the Polish critic endorses as "sober" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/dmitry_merezhkovsky). Just change the sign, but the substance is the same. Here, sexual geopolitics are interwoven with trivial ruminations in the spirit of US liberal political science, something about the need for "Western democracies" to unite against the "dictatorships": a heady mix of liberal banalities and geopolitical grandeur that indeed makes the reactionary author Merezhkovsky seem sober.

Revealingly, this editorial by Sierakowski accompanied Krytyka Politychnka's attempt to disseminate its ideas to the Russian left through workshops and joint projects. The dialogue seemed important to Chto Delat at the time, making the current development all the more unfortunate. And now, a few years later, Sierakowski makes another classically chauvinist move: he casually calls one of his former "brides" the Kremlin's whore, without even providing a shred of evidence.

All of this is very sad, especially since Krytyka Politychna has made considerable contributions to the international spread of new leftist thinking by translating and publishing books, organizing discussions, and inviting radical thinkers to Poland. But all of that is undermined in such episodes of petty slander. Unfortunately this comes in tune with widespread splits in many leftist organizations and networks, as they prove unable to withstand the pressure of the current historical moment and hysterically fuss to rescue their marginal position, to the point of taking sides with this corrupted power or that.

We are sure that this statement will be heard by whom this may concern even on holidays.

And we wish to all of you to make many good and politically better friends in the New Year!

Yours,

CHTO DELAT

P.S. Here are some links to the publications covering the current analysis of political events in Russia and globally from 2011 to 2014 by members of Chto Delat and our friends:

Artemy Magun (2014) Russia's Hysterical Machiavellianism http://chtodelat.org/b9-texts-2/magun/russias-hysterical-machiavellianism-by-artemy-magun/#_ftn3

Oxana Timofeeva (2014) "And not even the dead will be safe..." On the Undeclared War in Ukraine http://www.academycologne.org/de/article/271_oxana_timofeeva_on_the_undeclared_war_in_ukraine

Video film “The Excluded. At a moment of Danger” see here
https://vimeo.com/channels/chtodelat/109670074

THE BULLETIN OF THE SCHOOL OF ENGAGED ART #2
On the platform of communication between Ukrainian and Russian Cultural workers
read here:
http://issuu.com/dmitryvilensky/docs/rosa2_english_full

Alexei Penzin et all (2014) “Democracy Has Become Unmanageable!” The Russian Protests in a Global Context / South Atlantic Quarterly, Against the Day section http://saq.dukejournals.org/content/113/1.toc

Stasis Journal (2014) Revolutions and Protest Movements
http://www.stasisjournal.net/all-issues/24-1-2014-revolutions-and-protest-movements

http://chtodelat.org/b5-announcements/a-7/open-letter-who-are-the-friends-of-political-critique-krytyka-polityczna/