

Retrieved from:

The European Journal of Psychoanalysis

Sep 28, 2022

<https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/riposte-to-belokoskai-mikhaylova/>

Sergio Benvenuto

Riposte to Belokoskaia-Mikhaylova

This essay is a response to a prior version of Ekaterina Belokoskova's text that was published in Italian. As such, it does not attend to several new items that are present in this expanded English version.

Dear Ekaterina.

Thank you for writing your account. I realize that you must be experiencing a very acute moral conflict, as you seem to me inclined to criticize certain political choices made by your government on the one hand, but on the other also need to sympathize with your compatriots who consider themselves under attack. I know how difficult it is to reconcile these divergent needs.

I shall limit myself here to commenting on some of your observations with which I disagree or find somewhat biased.

– Ekaterina wrote: *“The economic sanctions against Russia are a form of economic terrorism, in which damage is inflicted on the civilian population”*

Sanctions are certainly a form of terrorism. But they are in response to another terrorism, not economic but military, that of Putin's army invading a good part of an independent country recognized by the UN. It is true that Putin and his circle pay very little in economic terms, since their wealth is abroad (in the West!), and that it's the population of Russia that is paying the price. But the same applies to Ukraine: the civilian population is paying an extremely high price, even though it never wanted a war.

In both cases, the population suffers the effects of the war.

The point is: who started the terrorism? Can we put a “starting point” of a conflict?

“For the other Western invasions you are talking about, I think there are more subtle [I said: nuanced] reasons”. From my point of view this phrase speaks of double standards.

No, I'm not pro-West at all costs! I am willing to condemn a Western country when I believe it is doing something wrong. For example, the late colonial wars by France (in Vietnam and Algeria) and Portugal (in Angola and Mozambique) were absolutely wrong.

In 1990 Saddam Hussein did something very similar to what Putin is now doing in Ukraine: he occupied an independent, UN-member country, Kuwait. I condemned that invasion and supported the First Gulf War to liberate Kuwait (at the time even the Soviet Union agreed to liberate it).

It's worth noting that most Italian intellectuals at that time were against the war: the fact that Iraq had annexed Kuwait through force had to be accepted. Something that seemed cynical to me at the time. In that

period, I found myself attending a dinner in Naples in the company of some of the most important philosophers of the time, among whom the most well-known today are Paul Feyerabend and Roberto Esposito. Well, I was the *only one* there who supported the rightfulness of the war against Saddam. Everyone else wanted to accept Saddam's aggression in order to "save the peace". As you can see, Western intellectuals tend to be anti-West, because this attitude appears "sophisticated". Today, if you want to be appreciated in many intellectual circles that we call *radical chic*, you should say "I can understand Putin". My position – "sometimes the West is right" – is unconventional in our countries where the rule, for a proper intellectual, is to criticize the West in any case, whatever it does.

In 2003, however, it was Bush Jr. and Blair who undertook an aggression quite similar to Saddam's of 13 years earlier. It was after September 11, 2001, and Bush had to show Americans that he was fighting terrorism, even though Saddam had nothing to do with Islamist terrorism. The parts between aggressor and aggressed had been reversed this time. I condemned the aggression against Iraq. I was not alone; in that case Europe was divided, with France, Germany and the Italians coming out against the war in Iraq in 2003 and the UK and Spain taking part instead.

Today, 2022, I oppose Putin's aggression against Ukraine, a country that I know well and that had no desire to attack Russia! In short, I believe I am using only one standard, which I will explain further down.

The Russian colleagues in the conversation I reported evoked Western interventions such as the Kosovo War (1999), the occupation of Afghanistan (2002-2021) and the attack on Libya (2011). All these cases are much more complex. Indeed. In *King Lear* Kent says "I'll teach you differences" (act I, scene IV). You cannot consider everything in black and white, the good guys always on one side and the baddies always on the other. Each case is unique.

The Kosovo War

In 1999 NATO intervened in the Kosovo conflict after eight years of wars that had torn apart former Yugoslavia. European public opinion had accumulated a massive sense of guilt because for years it had witnessed terrible massacres taking place at the very gates of the EU as mere spectator. The wars between Serbs and Croats, and especially between Muslim and Christian Bosnians, caused between 130,000 and 140,000 deaths over ten years, mostly among civilians. European public opinion became convinced that most of the massacres were the work of Yugoslav (effectively Serbian) troops or militias, not because there was a hostile prejudice against Serbs (many were unaware that Serbia was supported by Russia), but simply because Serbs had been the perpetrators of the most shocking massacres, that of Vukovar (1991, hundreds of Croatian civilians were killed by the Serbs, the Croats of this city were expelled), of Srebrenica by the ultra-nationalist Radovan Karadžić (1995, 8,000 unarmed Muslim males killed), and the long siege of Sarajevo (1992-1996) by Bosnian Serbs. This siege resulted in 11,000, mostly civilian, casualties. Rightly or wrongly, Western Europe was convinced that the "baddies" were the Serbs, and in particular Prime Minister Slobodan Milošević (president of Yugoslavia, de facto Serbia, from 1997 to 2000). Milošević's crimes were not just imaginary propaganda, since the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague [\[1\]](#) tried and imprisoned him for war crimes, and he would surely have been convicted had he not died (mysteriously) in prison in 2006. It is against this background that NATO's intervention in Kosovo must be seen.

In fact, when in 1998 the ethnic Albanian majority of Kosovo rose up for its autonomy from Serbia, further fierce massacres like those in Srebrenica and Sarajevo were feared. European public opinion was pro-Albanian only because many Serbs had committed crimes in the previous years. Hence the decision by Clinton and NATO to intervene to force the Serbs to retreat from Kosovo. It should be noted that Kosovo has no particular strategic value: it is a poor landlocked region with no raw materials, so the intervention had an essentially humanitarian meaning; preventing any feared massacres. There was no perception of a "West

versus East” conflict because the Albanians were seen as “Eastern” no less than the Serbs. It was Milošević who was feared. I was afraid of him too, that’s why I was in favour of the NATO mission. After the election of Koštunica in 2000, any problems with Serbia ceased; in Italy at least there is no anti-Serbian feeling. It’s also worth noting that the Serbs are Christians, while most Albanians are Muslim, therefore, at least theoretically, more “distant” from Europe.

I have learnt, however, that the Serbs are the only Balkan people sympathizing with Putin against Ukraine. Why this continuum?

The Elimination of Gaddafi

As for Libya, the Anglo-French, and then American, intervention in 2011 was wrong not because of the end in itself (taking down a bloody tyrant like Gaddafi) but for failing to develop a plan to manage the country post Gaddafi.

In this case too, pressure from public opinion was intense, because, even if Gaddafi was an ally of the West for years, no one had forgotten his massacres of fellow Libyans and his terror campaign in Europe. When there was an uprising against Gaddafi in Benghazi, public opinion called for intervention to protect the Cyrenaicans. Western intervention served to tip the scales in the war in favour of the anti-Gaddafi movement. In fact, the West intervened in a civil war between Tripolitans and Cyrenaicans, which would continue after the fall of Gaddafi and is ongoing today. The evolution of Libya towards a multi-ethnic democracy, which the West hoped for, has not occurred. Moreover, the various Western countries lean towards Benghazi or Tripoli depending on the situation and their own interests... The civil war continues. And today Western presence has been replaced by that of the Russians, who support general Haftar in Bengasi. Libya, unlike the irrelevant Kosovo, is a major oil producer.

The Occupation of Afghanistan

As for the war against the Taliban in Afghanistan, it needs to be seen against the background of 9/11: The Americans had asked the Taliban to hand over Osama bin Laden, considered the mastermind behind the spectacular attacks. War ensued upon the Taliban’s refusal to hand over bin Laden. Over 20 years, a coalition of various countries (not only Western ones) has tried to establish a modern government, of the democratic type, against Muslim fundamentalism – a strategy Russia itself approves of, insofar as it too is fighting Islamic terrorism, in particular of the Chechen kind. As we know, this project in Afghanistan has completely failed.

But if Russia had found itself in a similar position to the U.S., if bin Laden had destroyed the Kremlin with planes instead of the Twin Towers, I’m certain that the Russian government would have acted in exactly the same way: it could not have let bin Laden go unpunished. I would have supported Russian intervention in Afghanistan – unlike the 1979 campaign, which I considered a USSR’s dreadful mistake. *Wanting to stay for a long period of time* in Afghanistan is always a mistake, as history teaches us.

It must be said that the mistakes by the West – the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the mismanagement of Afghanistan over 20 years – are all episodes of a broader war, which in fact began in 1979 with the revolution in Iran: a part of Islam declared war on the Jewish-Christian world. Hence on Russia too, insofar as it belongs to this world. A part of Islam holds the Judeo-Christian world responsible for its problems, so it has attacked in various ways both the West and Russia.

In short, it is not a question of double standards, but of viewing certain actions – even erroneous ones – within a more general geopolitical framework.

But certain actions – the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq, the current invasion of Ukraine – are authentic political crimes, comparable to the invasion of Poland by Germany and the USSR (1939), to the invasion of Finland by Stalin (the Winter War, 1939-1940) and to the Italian invasion of Albania and Greece during the 2nd World War. Italy too, under fascism, carried out a criminal foreign policy, attacking Ethiopia, Albania and Greece... Now the criminal is Putin. Every era has its criminal, somewhere in the world.

I promised to tell you what my single standard is. It is something utopian: *the establishment of an international rule of law*. Something that does not actually exist, and I wonder if it ever will. There is no international law because a norm only becomes *law* when there is a power, a state, capable of enforcing it. Otherwise, it is nothing but an ethical norm, which can also be merely individual. “You shall not kill” is an ethical norm, but only if there is a state capable of punishing murderers can we speak of a legal norm. Now, there is no supra-state capable of punishing the criminal acts of individual states. If there were, Putin’s invasion of Ukraine would be considered a crime. But I think the dream of establishing a supra-state that judges individual states, and hence an international law, could be a good cause for which to fight for generations to come.

«...the country entered the war and faced unprecedented persecution of Russians on a national basis»

Not only in Italy, anyone who speaks out publicly says “we’re not against Russians, we’re against Putin”. Any form of anti-Russian racism is firmly condemned (and by racism I also mean hatred for a particular nationality). However, this does not detract from the fact that the racist drive is present in many, those who identify the enemy-state with an enemy-people. You yourself brought the scandalous example of that course on Dostoevsky that was suspended in Italy: EVERYONE in Italy condemned that censorship, which was promptly withdrawn.

All my Ukrainian friends now write “russia” and “russian” with lowercase ‘R’. I never could do that.

In Italy and in other European countries after the end of the Second War, a strong anti-German sentiment developed. We all knew that there had been anti-Nazi Germans, but in fact for decades evil jokes against Germans as a people flourished. Even my father, a philosopher who’d been nourished by German philosophy and literature, strongly distrusted the Germans and wished that the division between the two Germanies, East and West, would continue forever. Today the Second World War is remote from us and the new generations of Italians are no longer anti-German, indeed, Berlin is the in city for many young people.

However... We cannot ignore the fact that Hitler was democratically elected, in 1933 one German out of two chose him. And we also cannot ignore that so many Russians voted for Putin (not you) and still support him. So, the temptation to blame an entire people for the misdeeds of their leaders is always strong. This is not my case.

«The famous Russian poet and actor Vladimir Vysotsky said many years ago during the Soviet period: I have many complaints against my government, but I will not discuss them with Western journalists»

I gather that you would have done what Vysotsky did. If that is the case, then there is on this point a complete divide between you and me. Here, on the contrary, we believe that if we’re discontented with our country’s policies, *it is our duty to speak ill of it, especially to foreigners*.

For example, I was very discontented with Berlusconi when he was our Prime Minister (and, significantly, he declared himself a great friend of Putin and admired him). I feared that Berlusconi could become just like Putin, a charismatic leader who takes advantage of his popularity to kill democracy. Well, I’ve attacked Berlusconi in various publications abroad. If I had kept silent about Berlusconi because I’m Italian, I would have been guilty of *nationalism*. In the intellectual environments of Italy (and not only) nationalism is despised. One can be a patriot, but not a nationalist. Exposing the abuses of power in one’s own country abroad is no less essential than exposing them inside it.

I know, however, that not all Russians share your thoughts. Many openly criticize Putin (and thousands of these protesters were arrested). If I had the power to do so, I would recommend for the Nobel Peace Prize Pussy Riot and Marina Ovsyannikova. All women. In the West everyone is now convinced that women are better than men.

Addendum

A sometimes-fair accusation against the West is that of wanting to impose, sometimes with weapons, its form of democracy. The West believes that liberal democracy is the best form of government and has sometimes tried to impose it on others, just as Christians felt obliged to convert “pagans” to the Christian faith in order to save them (even primitive Russians were converted to Christianity by missionaries). But the West is not always “missionary”. Proof of this is its alliance relations with countries that are anything but democratic, such as Saudi Arabia, the Arab Emirates, or Singapore. A few months ago, the West abandoned Afghanistan to the Taliban because it is clear that the Afghans do not want democracy. The Afghan army had the military potential to resist the Taliban, but they didn’t use it, they surrendered without a fight. They preferred the Taliban to democracy.

But this argument cannot be made for Ukraine. The country swung between pro-Russia and pro-West governments for a couple of decades, then, after “Maidan Square” and annexing Crimea in 2014, it decidedly opted for a Western-style democracy. It was the Ukrainians’ choice, not a forced export from the West (Zelenskij was elected by 73% of voters). And Putin wishes to crush this free choice the Ukrainians made. In the European Union we deeply identify with Ukrainians, and this is why we will support their fight.

Note:

[1] I have to say that neither US and Russia don’t recognize this Court, which is mainly European.