There is a debate going on in Russia. One school of thought sees President Vladimir Putin as a great Russian patriot defending the country from the imperialist ambitions of America. Another school of thought sees him merely as an American puppet.

Naturally, Putin’s patriotism is no more (and no less) honest than his proclaimed desire to keep Russia democratic. His claims to defend national interests can be taken seriously only by those who accept any government propaganda at face value. Despite its patriotic rhetoric, the Putin administration has made a whole series of valuable gifts to the leadership of the US. Russian military bases in Vietnam and Cuba were closed, the latter move looking like a direct invitation to the US to invade the island, while with Moscow’s agreement US military bases were established in Central Asia. The Republican administration of George W. Bush is viewed in the Kremlin as an optimal partner, unlike the Democrats with their tedious queries about human rights.

What is more important, the Russian government is helping G.W. Bush’s administration economically. As an oil-producing economy in a period of high oil prices, Russia enjoys a massive inflow of petrodollars. In May 2003, currency reserves at the nation’s Central Bank hit record levels, exceeding 60 billion US dollars, and have kept on rising rapidly. But this huge sum of money isn’t invested in the domestic economy or used to solve the country’s dramatic social problems. On the contrary, in 2004 the Moscow government was cutting social spending and launching a new attack on the remaining elements of the welfare state, claiming that there weren’t enough resources. All the extra money is withdrawn from the economy and goes into a Stabilization Fund, theoretically designed to be used when oil prices decline. In fact, much of this money is invested in US government bonds. Instead of solving Russia’s own problems the Moscow
government is busy supporting the dollar and pulling the US economy out of recession.

THE RUSSIAN ENIGMA

If attempts to present Putin as a great national leader resisting US domination can hardly withstand any encounter with the facts, this doesn’t mean that the opposite view is right. Those who see Putin merely as an American puppet are not very convincing either. Putin’s tough declarations concerning the US invasion of Iraq brought an outburst of nostalgic joy among the patriotic community; for several minutes, in fact, it seemed as if Russia was opposing the US. But strangely enough, the threatening speeches that resounded in Moscow made no impact whatever on Washington, and were not even reflected in US-Russian relations. The members of the Bush administration understood not only how weak Putin’s Russia really was, but also how dependent it was. The source of the USA’s problems was quite justifiably seen as lying in France and Germany, which might have been suspected of advancing their own ambitious project as an alternative to US hegemony. What at first glance might have seemed like a struggle between Russia and the US was in fact a struggle over Russia, waged between the US and Western Europe. For precisely this reason Washington, which reacted with extreme irritation to the position taken in Paris, displayed only condescension with regard to Moscow.

The contradictory images of Putin’s administration, which can thus be labelled ‘nationalist’ and ‘comprador’ at the same time, reflect the objective contradictions of today’s Russian political economy, and – partly as a result of this – a total lack of coherence in Moscow’s foreign policy. Not only are Russian elites divided into pro-European and pro-American currents, but also, to make things even more confusing, neither current has a clear view or a consistent political line. Both sides base their perspectives on wishful thinking, believing either in American invincibility or in the unstoppable rise of a United Europe. Both sides are wavering.

Ideology is also confused. Political liberals are protesting against the growing repressiveness of Russia’s political system and they worry about the xenophobia that is becoming fashionable among larger and larger sections of society. But they also are in love with Israel, support G.W. Bush in his war on terrorism, and see America as the ideal democracy. Many of them hate Western Europe for its ‘liberal irresponsibility’, its ‘multicultural permissiveness’ and its ‘support for Palestinian terrorists’. Some pin their hopes on the US Democrats, expecting them to fix what G.W. Bush has damaged ‘in a moment of craziness’. But never do they see any problem with American imperialism as such. To make things worse, economic liberals see no problem
in either repression or xenophobia, and remind everyone that the Russian economy never did so well in twenty years as it is doing under Putin. They are also happy with US policies because these policies, for good or bad reasons, help to keep oil expensive. And the nationalists, of course, hate America, but share President Bush’s concern with terrorism and the ‘Islamic threat’. Funnily enough, the most anti-Semitic politicians in Russia are also the greatest admirers of the ‘Israeli security model’.

This confusion isn’t a cultural or political phenomenon. In fact, the weakness of Russia’s elite in international affairs is just a function of its economic and social weakness, which can’t be compensated for even by the highest oil prices on the world market. Russia isn’t a global player, nor even a self-defined minor actor (like, say, Finland or Japan). It is simply a battlefield for the global conflicts which are emerging—not a subject but an object of international relations. This object is alive and has senses. It is even aware of some (though not all) of its interests. But it is unable to act consistently.

Putin proclaimed a new national idea: competitiveness. Patriotism was finally placed at the service of capitalism. This totally bourgeois view of life contrasted with the orgiastic embezzlement of the naive Yeltsin epoch, which perceived capitalism exclusively as a consumer society. The people who made up the Putin draft were denied the scope of their predecessors; pragmatic through and through, they were thus completely anonymous. The triumph of greyness and pettiness that is evident at all levels of the Russian state and business is also clear proof that the country’s elite has finally learnt the rules of bourgeois behaviour. Taking the place of the oligarchs was the bureaucratic bourgeoisie, collaborating closely with Western capital. This collaboration, moreover, has become much more fundamental and long-term, just as Russian capitalism has also become more mature. The problem, however, is that ruling elites in Russia remain deeply dependent on oil exports, and on Western financial markets. At the same time they feel much less dependent on the population of their own country, which seems to be obedient, passive and demoralized. As long as local markets and the local population are of very little interest to the rulers, the country is doomed to remain dependent, no matter what is proclaimed in official declarations.

THE GREAT FRIENDSHIP

The war on Iraq revealed hidden animosities, made contradictions visible and provoked open conflicts in Euro-American relations. However no such moment of truth occurred in Russian-American relations. After a period of cooling in their relationship, Russia and the US are experiencing an acute bout of mutual sympathy. This seems a little strange against the background of the nationalist declarations uttered by President Putin during the first
months of his rule. Journalists and political analysts are perplexed by such an abrupt change of course. What is going on? With the general situation since September 11 leaving Moscow without room for manoeuvre, is this move designed to serve the interests of the oil magnates, who are trying to cement friendships with their US colleagues in the hope of making money out of military collaboration with Washington? No explanation seems really convincing.

To the outside observer, the Kremlin’s actions might have seemed like a sharp about-face. In fact, the actions were thoroughly premeditated, and preparations for them had been made long before. All that had been lacking was a pretext, and the formation of the anti-terrorist coalition supplied this. The puzzle does not lend itself to solution for the simple reason that it is not a puzzle at all. Russian policy has been consistently pro-American. Russian rhetoric, meant for internal consumption, is something quite different.

Throughout most of the 1990s Washington had few allies more consistent or devoted than Russia under Yeltsin. In their anxiety to please Washington, the Russian authorities were not deterred even by the fact that their actions contravened all the normally accepted concepts of national interest. While the other side was expanding its weaponry, the Russian authorities single-mindedly reduced their armaments. One by one the limitations on American exporters and entrepreneurs operating in Russia were dropped, while the US retained its own protectionist measures, introduced as far back as the 1970s, when they were designed to secure permission for Soviet Jews to leave the USSR. Since then all barriers to emigration have been removed, more than a million people have left Russia, and for many years Western embassies have had to try to stem the flood of Russian citizens seeking entry. Nevertheless, the US restrictions remain in place.

In fact, the Russian leadership could hardly have done more to carry out the tasks posed in Washington if it had consisted entirely of officers of the US intelligence services. The politicians in power in Russia were not traitors, still less CIA agents; it was just that their strategies were based on clear, simple principles that they had assimilated during the years that saw the collapse of the Soviet Union. There is only one boss in the world, the USA, and this boss has to be pleased. Winning the sympathy of the boss constitutes the highest national interest.

Their loyalty has been rewarded, if not for Russia as a whole, then at any rate for its elites. Moscow’s strategic goal has been to win recognition from the Western elites for the new ruling class that arose out of the plunder of state property. The Russian president’s participation in the G7 summit of the industrially developed countries was a sign that the chosen strategy was
working. The transforming of the ‘seven’ into the ‘eight’, with equal formal status for the Russian leader, was a fundamental foreign policy success.

This approach broke down only in the late 1990s, when in a context marked by continually falling living standards and the destruction of industry, the anti-Western mood in Russia reached a critical limit. The economic crisis was developing in parallel with the disillusionment of the population with neoliberalism, the free market and ‘Western values’. The crash of the ruble in August 1998 was perceived by the public as final proof of the bankruptcy of the course Russia had followed throughout the 1990s.

PUTIN’S REGIME

When Vladimir Putin came to power in 1999, first as prime minister, later to become president, it was almost impossible for a politician looking for public support to openly proclaim neoliberal economic goals and pro-American foreign policies. However, the same oligarchic group remained in power with the same, not-so-hidden, agenda. A veteran of the state security organs, Putin was used to uttering ritual patriotic phrases whose function was not so much to mask different views as to conceal an absence of any views whatever. A petty bureaucrat from St. Petersburg, without political experience or even particular ambitions, Putin was raised in an instant to the summit of the political Olympus precisely because he had no record to be measured against. A complete dilettante in virtually all fields of state administration, Putin was the ideal partner for the oligarchy. As befitted a state security officer, the new president valued power very highly, but had absolutely no idea of what to do with it. His first two years were spent mainly in reshuffling his officials.

During the great crash of 1999 many Moscow-based banks were bankrupted, and even some oil oligarchs suffered heavy losses. Their smaller rivals in St. Petersburg, however, became stronger. A whole new team of aggressively pro-Western business people from ‘the Northern capital’ rushed to Moscow as part of Putin’s entourage to take key positions in big privatized companies, as well as public office. The president was interested solely in the personal loyalty of his appointees. Meanwhile, the oligarchic groups were restoring their lost control. Capital flight resumed, the wages of most of the population again stagnated, and Western corporations gradually began rebuilding their positions in Russia, positions that had been shaken at the time of the crash.

The War on Terrorism was proclaimed as Russia’s top priority long before September 11. It became the public justification for the increasingly authoritarian tendencies of the new administration. But it was also a message to the West. Long before September 11 Putin and his team had tried to attract
Western support and discourage criticism of human rights violations, explaining that the war they were fighting in Chechnya was not an attempt to preserve the position of Russian oil companies in the Caucasus, but a struggle to save Western civilization from the Islamic threat. In their public rhetoric Chechnya became the heart of a global Islamic conspiracy aimed not so much against Russia as against the new global order. Initially the Western powers listened to this sceptically, and kept reminding the Kremlin that the massive atrocities of the military in Chechnya didn’t look like entirely civilized behaviour. After September 11, however, the mood changed and Moscow was recognized as a partner in anti-terrorist coalitions, alongside other great defenders of human rights such as the governments of Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Georgia.

Another major political accomplishment was the Law on Extremism passed by the Russian Duma as its contribution to the international anti-terrorist effort. This law follows the same lines as similar legislation passed in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan and other allies of G.W. Bush’s new crusade. Defining ‘extremism’ in the broadest sense, this law gives the police the right to attack legal rallies and demonstrations if they spot ‘one single extremist present in the crowd’. The law also gives authorities the right to ‘de-register’ (i.e. ban) political parties and non-governmental organizations suspected of being involved in extremism. That the theory of class struggle is included in the list of extremist ideas which should be prevented from spreading speaks volumes about the ideological transformation of the Russian state from Soviet times.

Under Yeltsin the authorities had spoken openly of what they were doing, and even taken pride in it. Under Putin they preferred to remain silent, or to lie. This was the new political element which the state security veterans who filled the corridors of the Kremlin had introduced. The state pursued an even harsher line with regard to housing subsidies and education, preparing to dismantle the last remnants of the Soviet ‘safety net’, but at the same time talked unceasingly of its ‘concern for the poor’. The income tax for the rich was drastically cut, with the explanation that this was better for social justice. Now Russia has a 13 per cent flat income tax, which the authorities proudly advertise as the lowest income tax in Europe. For the poor, however, the tax, rose by 1 per cent. A New Labor Code was introduced in 2001 limiting the right to strike and form trade unions. Oligarchs looked at this with increasing satisfaction while ‘patriotic’ intellectuals who had initially welcomed Putin’s arrival in the Kremlin became increasingly confused.

While expounding on the greatness of Russia and promising new technological breakthroughs, the country’s leadership took the decision to
abandon the unique Mir space station. In principle, it would have been thoroughly advantageous to use the station jointly with the Chinese, who promised to pay for everything. But such a turn of events would not have been to the liking of the US, and Mir was allowed to crash into the ocean.

Russian business entrepreneurs who were close to the government sought to win contracts within the framework of the American anti-missile defence programme, which the Kremlin at the same time was publicly condemning. Unfortunately for Russian arms-makers, very little was offered from the American side. In spite of all declarations of friendship, the Russian arms industry sells much more to China than to the West. More successful are the oil oligarchs. During his visit to Moscow President Bush promised that America would buy oil from Russian companies, and some had already been delivered. But this hardly looked like a great commercial success capable of inspiring the citizenry.

Not only has Russia received nothing in return for its services, but it has also fallen victim to the restrictions imposed by the US on imports of steel. These restrictions were aimed primarily at Germany, but they hit Russian steelmakers hard. It was at this point that the Russian government, for the first time in years, decided to show toughness, and limited imports of American chicken products ‘on medical grounds’. To everyone’s surprise, this was enough to induce Washington to make matching concessions. Finally, the long-awaited understanding was reached between the Putin administration and George Bush. The Americans recognized Russia as having a market economy, and provided slightly enhanced access for Russian goods to US markets. Moscow ceased to regard American chickens as harmful to health. The government is preparing to join the World Trade Organization.

NATIONALISM AND THE CHECHEN WAR

Within the Kremlin, people thought they had found a magical device for ‘selling’ the population anything whatever. This device was nationalism. With the help of patriotic rhetoric, lightly spiced with racist demagoguery and clericalism, any political course could be rendered ‘truly national’, regardless of its content. At first the declarations by the authorities aroused hysteria in the liberal-minded intelligentsia of Moscow and St Petersburg, but after a certain time, when it became clear there was nothing behind the demagoguery, the public started to calm down.

In practice, the sole manifestation of the ‘national course’ was the repression in Chechnya, which did not let up for a single day. The war in Chechnya, which had been launched as part of Putin’s election campaign in 1999, continued through sheer inertia. Russian society had grown used to
the deaths each week of dozens of soldiers, and had ceased to react to reports of reprisals against peaceful civilians. Since racism had to some degree become part of official consciousness, the accounts of murder, rape and plunder in the Caucasus republic were perceived rather as good news, as proof that the authorities were taking an honest and serious attitude to the Chechen problem.

When certain Western commentators after 11 September 2001 predicted a ‘toughening of Russian policy in Chechnya’, they showed appalling naivety. To ‘toughen’ this policy was by then simply impossible. Everything that could be done to a peaceful population had already been done, beginning with the setting up of ‘filtration’ camps, and ending in the disappearance of people without trace. The only thing that had not been tried was the extermination of the entire population down to the last individual, or total deportation. But such things did not enter into the plans of the Russian specialists on ‘solving the Chechen problem’. If the Chechens had all been swiftly wiped out, there would have been no one to rob and humiliate. In any case, constant warfare was needed as proof of the ‘national orientation’ of the regime, which did not show such concern for national interests in any other field.

The ideological question, however, remained unresolved. It is very hard to depict unilateral concessions to a foreign power as a supreme manifestation of patriotism. The events of 11 September helped solve the problem. In the immediate aftermath of these events, Moscow declared its solidarity with the US in the struggle against international terrorism, set about closing down its last military installations in Vietnam and Cuba, backed the stationing of US troops in the former republics of Central Asia and, later, supported the sending of American units to Georgia, right on the Russian border. Even before this, Moscow’s opposition to the expansion of NATO to the east and to the anti-missile defence program had been merely rhetorical. General statements had not been followed by any serious diplomatic initiatives. Now, even the statements were discarded.

Neither the aims of the US and its allies, nor the methods they employed, were ever called into question by the Kremlin. Or rather, Putin criticized the West for being too soft on terrorism. During his visit to Brussels immediately after the American bombing of Afghanistan he explained to Western leaders that the concept of collateral damage must be extended to any civilian casualties. According to Putin, terrorists must be seen as responsible for any civilian deaths, no matter how these deaths happened and who actually killed people. It is impossible to fight terrorism without attacking civilians, and we must blame the terrorists for everything. If there were no need to fight terrorism, the war wouldn’t have started at all, and these deaths wouldn’t happen.
Russian diplomats and politicians speaking at international forums became very close to their Israeli colleagues when defending the actions of their respective armed forces in the occupied territories. The irony of the situation, however, is that the ‘Israeli model’ was most praised by some hard-line Russian nationalists. A good example is Dmitry Rogozin, the leader of the ‘Rodina’ faction in the State Duma, who was never before heard saying anything positive about Jews.

As before, Moscow’s main concern was to have its status formally recognized by its partners. Desperate pleas were made to Washington to have it officially call the Chechen fighters ‘terrorists’, and to equate them with the evil-doers who had blown up the World Trade Center in New York. This could not have any effect on the real development of the Chechnya campaign, but Moscow’s concerns lay elsewhere. What the Kremlin needed was not a resolution of the Chechen problem, but moral vindication. The Russian bureaucrats wanted to feel comfortable at international forums; they were tired of having to justify themselves with regard to murdered women and children.

The attitude adopted by the Russian elite is not hard to understand. After all, Western politicians and military leaders often do the same, without having to accept criminal or even moral responsibility. While Washington claims the right to bomb anyone it likes, regional rulers who kill a few thousand of their subjects have hanging over them the spectre of the Hague international tribunal. Moscow has therefore demanded equal rights, in the sense of being freed from all moral responsibility. But Washington, in its arrogance, has not conceded even this. For Putin, the lack of even minimal benefits from his military-political collaboration with the US has begun turning into a domestic political problem. Dissatisfied military officers, and nationalists who honestly believed the official rhetoric, feel themselves betrayed.

The nationalist media are getting angry. Open letters are sent to Putin by retired officers who call him a traitor for surrendering Russian military bases in Central Asia to the Americans, and for abandoning Russian positions in Vietnam and Cuba. Whole police battalions refuse to serve in Chechnya because they see no meaning in continuing this war. Vlad Shurygin, a ‘patriotic’ journalist known to be very close to the military, recently called Putin ‘a new Gorbachev’. Contrary to what people might think in the West, in Russia this is the worst accusation one can make. With 80 per cent of the population considering the last Soviet president to be a ‘traitor’, personally responsible for the disasters that followed the disintegration of the Union, the comparison doesn’t look very attractive. For a military man and a nationalist like Shurygin to compare Putin with Gorbachev is the most extreme expression of hatred.
Anti-American feelings not only remain strong in Russia, but have become even more visible since US troops entered Central Asia. Opinion polls show that about 60 per cent of Russian population see the US as a hostile government. And the more Putin does to please Bush, the less support he has at home. Sooner or later, the growing dissatisfaction will become a serious problem for the Kremlin. The political police veterans who are running the country will react in their accustomed fashion, seeking to ‘tighten the screws’. In doing this, Moscow will find support from the West essential, and there is no doubt that the Bush administration will supply it. For compared to Kazakhstan, Georgia or Uzbekistan, Russia is a bastion of human rights. If Washington has no problems with the openly dictatorial regimes in these other republics, it means that the way is open for the Kremlin.

How far can the clamp-down in Russia go without risk of an outcry from ‘Big Brother’? Experience from the 1990s shows that neither the shelling of the parliament, nor ‘temporary censorship’, nor the banning of ‘extremist political parties’ is considered a violation of freedom where ‘friends of America’ are concerned. Consequently, the Kremlin needs to make friends with the US simply for reasons of domestic politics. Putin and his associates have no other way out.

THE STRUGGLE OVER IRAQ

Russia’s role in the diplomatic struggle over Iraq was very important. No longer a superpower, Russia inherited a permanent membership on the United Nations Security Council and a right to veto its decisions, but also a huge debt which Iraq owed the Soviet Union. This is why the diplomatic struggle around the war in Iraq was very much a struggle between Washington and Berlin for Russia’s vote at the UN. The global crisis that came to a head over the weekend of 14-15 February 2003 resulted in defeat and unprecedented humiliation for the administration of President Bush. Washington had been sure that France would not veto its proposed UN resolution on launching military action against Iraq. But it finally became clear that the US proposal was dead in the water even without a French veto. The weapons inspectors did not follow the script that Washington had expected, and Security Council members took the floor one after the other to state their opposition to war.

An even bigger humiliation for Bush followed in the form of huge anti-war marches around the world, including the United States. The few West European governments that still supported Washington came in for massive street pressure. A consensus was and is building around the world that Bush is a dangerous man. The leadership in Washington kept stubbornly repeating
that Saddam Hussein posed a threat to humanity, but their exhortations had
the opposite effect. Hussein clearly posed a threat to his own people, but
millions of people around the world reached the conclusion that Bush, not
Hussein, poses a threat to the planet.

While the US leadership came under attack, Russia once more demon-
strated its impotence and insignificance. Over the past decade Russia has
been politically dependent on the United States, and economically depen-
dent on Germany. The United States dictated Russia’s political agenda, while
Germany gradually became its most important business partner and source of
foreign investment. This system worked quite well so long as Germany kept
a low profile in international affairs and at least made a show of solidarity with
the United States. When disagreements between the United States and
Germany came to the surface, however, the Russian leadership was at a loss.

Moscow behaved like one of Ivan Pavlov’s dogs. So long as the signals
come one at a time, the dog’s conditioned reflexes respond properly – it sali-
vates at the sound of the bell. Then the scientist gives it two contradictory
signals. The poor beast goes into a panic, spinning around in its cage.
Something similar happened with the Russian leadership during the winter
of 2003. Only when it became clear that France and Germany would secure
a majority in the Security Council, and that no veto would be required, did
Russian President Vladimir Putin demonstratively side with the victors. For
ten years Kremlin ideologues have led the public to believe that Russia must
support the United States or risk condemnation from the ‘entire civilized
world’. The events of February 2003 revealed, however, that Washington is
now isolated. Russian policymakers drew the right conclusion in the end. As
was immediately obvious, however, their actions were driven not by firm
principles or concern for the national interest, but sheer opportunism. The
sight of Russian leaders mouthing words dictated in Berlin while never
taking their eyes off of Washington was nothing short of embarrassing.
During the war in Iraq the Russian government-controlled television
resembled the TV of Soviet times, using every opportunity to condemn
American aggression. However, when the military operation finished and US
troops successfully took over most of Iraqi territory, the Russian elite started
panicking again. The tone of propaganda changed and reconciliation with
Washington was seen as an absolute necessity.

Unfortunately for Putin and his team, Russia’s ‘euro-core’ patrons saw
things very differently. Contrary to most expectations, full-scale reconcilia-
tion between the ‘euro-core’ countries and the US-led ‘coalition of the
willing’ didn’t happen very quickly. In this kind of situation Russia’s impor-
tance in the global struggle is enhanced. The US acquired not only control
of Iraqi oil but also the possibility of influencing OPEC, on which the Iraqi
puppet administration has a seat. In the ‘euro-core’ countries only France has its own oil companies and these are much smaller than their American or even British counterparts. This means that it becomes strategically important for the ‘euro-core’ countries to secure Russian resources for themselves. On the other hand, Washington doesn’t really need Russian resources. But the logic of competition means that the US-led fraction of transnational capital has no interest in seeing Russian oil and gas secured by the ‘euro-core’ economies. This turns Russia into a real battlefield. The ‘euro-core’ is interested in stabilizing Russia. In fact, that becomes a necessary condition of the success of the ‘euro-core’ project as such. While relations within the EU become less predictable, stable and tolerant, it becomes a matter of strategic importance for the ‘euro-core’ to keep Russia on its side. And this is not just for its oil and other resources. Whilst America can play Eastern Europe against the ‘euro-core’, Germany in its turn can play Russia against the Poles, Czechs and Ukrainians.

RUSSIA AND THE NEW IMPERIALIST GAME

Summing up, the ‘euro-core’ project needs Russia to be stable and secure, and needs Iraq, occupied by the Anglo-American forces, to remain an unstable and insecure place. The success of the US global project, on the contrary, depends on the ability to keep Iraq stable and destabilize Russia. This is a classical imperialist game, not very different from that of the early twentieth century. The difference, however, is that imperialist blocs today can’t be seen as simply national capitalist elites, but rather as supra-national formations, using nation-states in the absence of any better instrument. All the supra-national political instruments designed after the Second World War failed to perform in the new situation and, ironically, instead of being strengthened by market-driven globalization, were undermined by it. Not only are the UN in a shambles and the EU seriously weakened, but even the WTO and the IMF face problems because of the USA’s gradual disengagement.

This disengagement is more than just a result of the neoconservative unilateralist approach of the Bush administration. Contrary to liberal theory, market integration doesn’t lead to economic homogenization, and if this is true for the European region, it is even truer for the global economy. After twenty years of globalization, global contradictions have increased. Inequality between states and regions is increasing exactly the same way as social polarization. These are just two sides of the same phenomenon. Market polarization globally is accompanied by combined and uneven development and increasing competition. Transnational corporations in their rivalry simply can’t avoid forming alliances with states, which remain strategic instruments of capitalist expansion and domination.
The struggle between imperialist powers was always much more than a rivalry of states for territory or even markets. Capitalism is a system which subordinates all human activities to the accumulation of capital. Oppressing people, gaining profits, market competition and even the exploitation of free labour were practised by human societies long before the bourgeois revolutions. But only the bourgeois system organized all these activities for the single purpose of capital accumulation. So the highest form of capitalist competition is the struggle between different centers of accumulation. This was exactly what predetermined so many wars, from the Anglo-Dutch conflicts of the 17th century to the First World War. And this conflict is very much at work now.

In the struggle for influence over official Russia, the conservative leadership of the US had one big advantage over the liberal Europeans. American public opinion showed far less interest in the subtleties of the country’s foreign policy than was the case in Western Europe. Support for dictators abroad never became an internal political issue in the US, so long as it did not lead to the death of American citizens. In European countries, by contrast, governments were forced by the post-imperial syndrome to recognize that public opinion is conscious of the human rights position in friendly states. The greater the problems with human rights in Russia, the more freedom of speech was restricted, and the more crude was the rigging of elections, the more the Putin administration created difficulties for itself in Europe, and ended up a hostage to Washington.

What is the meaning of this new situation? EU leaders are not ready for a direct battle with the US, but Eastern Europe and the Middle East will be the areas of greatest contention in the near future. Domestic contradictions will be increased by outside interference. And since it is clearly easier to destabilize than to achieve stability, it is not difficult to predict that in both regions destabilization strategies will be more prevalent than attempts to bring order to these regions. The same may be true for Russia where the Russian elite is already visibly divided into pro-American and pro-German factions, and where we will likely see an escalation of related tensions. But is this necessarily bad news? Although the contradictions between ‘core Europe’ and the US are nothing like as intense as inter-imperialist contradictions were in the first decades of the last century (and mechanical comparison with the First World War don’t work in any case), it is not irrelevant to recall that the contradictions at that time opened up new opportunities for the Left because ruling elites were disunited and confused. Once again, the Left in Russia will have to learn how to develop a revolutionary politics that can make its way through such contradictions.