



The *Last Supper* by Vladimir Putin

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The self-advertised theocratic credentials of Putin's regime are no secret. The Kremlin never misses an opportunity to showcase to the rest of the world that its legitimacy is shored up by divine providence—probably the only break from the Soviet era's state-sponsored atheism. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the table used for French President Macron's and German Chancellor Scholz's tête-à-têtes with Putin was so gigantic that it could have been used for the *Last Supper* (Claus 2022). An Italian craftsman's claim to having manufactured the grotesque piece lends even more support to the speculation it was intended to seat Jesus and all his apostles—da Vinci style (France24 2022). For those who do not know what I'm referring to, it is 'a gargantuan oval table, roughly five metres long and held up by three thick pillars' (Holmes 2022). Little wonder, then, that it has broken the Internet, with netizens unleashing their mockery of the table via gratifying memes and humorous comments that call out Putin's absurdity.

In a scene that could easily have been taken out of *Game of Thrones*, Putin and Macron sit facing each other like two medieval warlords. The only thing missing is a map of Europe carved up along the fault lines with miniature soldiers and tanks strategically placed opposite each other. For anyone who was in any doubt, the Westphalian order is alive and well, like an annoying pimple that simply will not go away. The image Russia has painted for itself is personified in its leader's position in the scene: alone at the head of table, isolated from his interlocutor (officially, because of Putin's Covid-19 paranoia), facing a changing world where old 'friends' have turned into perceived foes.

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This paper was written before Russia's decision to launch an unprovoked war against Ukraine on 24 February 2022.



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The table has metastasised, assuming a life of its own with even art critics joining this online Cluedo game of deciphering the symbolism behind this piece of wood. One went as far as to interpret the online mockery and memeification as ‘a way of facing power, a small comfort and a smile’ (Gat 2022). But then again, Putin’s visual power game is not without precedent. It was only last year that another autocratic ruler, Turkey’s Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, reigning on the opposite shore of the Black Sea, employed similar tactics in the now infamous ‘Sofagate’ affair. The weapon of choice was again a piece of furniture (or lack of) as Commission President von der Leyen was left without a chair whilst European Council President Michel took a seat next to the Turkish president during a photo op (Eder 2021).

The recent Kremlin shenanigans showcase that this was not an unfortunate, isolated incident but akin to a secret agreement between authoritarian strongmen to pervert the customary use of state furniture. Therefore, I can only conclude with the remark that if a manual on how to spot dictatorships is ever drafted, it should include ‘degenerate use of furniture for power signalling purposes’.

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