Russia - Putinism: A new form of fascism?

Tuesday 1 November 2022, by BUDRAITSKIS Ilya (Date first published: 27 October 2022).

"The invasion of Ukraine definitively established in Putin's Russia an inextricable link between foreign and domestic politics, where one is the inevitable continuation of the other. The war initiated the transformation of the Russian regime into a qualitatively new form—a dictatorship, in which any public expression that differs from official policy is a crime, and any attempt to act collectively is tantamount to betrayal of the nation state. This linking of an atmosphere of fear and subordination with chauvinism and imperialist aggression, as well as the complete identification of the will of the nation with the decisions of the authoritarian leader, has led many in recent months to compare Putin's Russia—in my view, quite rightly—to fascism."

Contents

- USING THE "F-WORD"
- DEFINING FASCISM: DOCTRINE
- TODAY'S FASCISM FROM ABOVE
- ATOMIZING AND DEPOLITICIZING
- THE FASCIST STATE AND CAPITAL
- FASCISM AND ITS FAMILIARS
- GLOBAL FINANCIAL CRISIS, (...)
- ORDER PREVAILS IN MOSCOW

After February 24, when Putin's Russia started a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine, the world faced more than a challenge to Western geopolitical hegemony. Behind the Kremlin's aggressive policy was a rationale that harkens back to classic imperialist ideology, according to which relations between countries are based solely on the rule of the strongest. While criticizing US military interventions in Iraq or Afghanistan in his keynote speeches, Vladimir Putin disagreed most with Washington's claim to exclusive rights to carry out imperial interventions, expand its sphere of influence, and condemn other powers that dare to do the same. His challenge to the West, therefore, boiled down to exposing US "hypocrisy." Why is it allowed to do what others are not allowed to do?

What was previously the preserve of US imperialism, according to Putin, must now become the only recognized law of international politics. [1] In his worldview, only some states are "organically" determined to be empires with "sovereign" agency to launch wars, while others are destined to be "colonies," objects to be controlled and conquered. The right of such "sovereign" states to exert external arbitrary power corresponds to their right to exert internal arbitrary power: if behind every right there is ultimately only naked force, then human rights or the right to democratic representation also inevitably depend on force, and thus are merely weapons wielded for external influence.

From this imperial logic inevitably follows a consistent antirevolutionary and antidemocratic stance of the Russian elite: all protests and uprisings are always controlled from the outside by hostile powers, from the Russian opposition's demonstrations in 2011 to the Arab Spring and the Russian Revolution of 1917, which Putin also considers the result of foreign intelligence activities. [2] It is

easy to observe that such an ideological schema likens states to individuals who in a market society are also engaged in a constant mutual struggle for success, dominance, and recognition.

The same natural law governs states, national communities, and individual human lives: either you assert your existential right at the expense of another, or you become the victim of other powers' assertion of that right. For Putin's Russia today, this ideology has definitively turned from rhetoric to the practice of power that rests not only on the reactionary or chauvinistic ideas among a segment of Russian society, but on the neoliberal market rationality that prevails in it. Divided into separate and opposed individuals, such a society becomes obedient material in the hands of elites and accepts its own helplessness and inability to act in solidarity, all as a consequence of a supposedly unchanging historical destiny and undeniable quasi-organic laws that govern social life.

> The war initiated the transformation of the Russian regime into a qualitatively new form—a dictatorship.

The invasion of Ukraine definitively established in Putin's Russia an inextricable link between foreign and domestic politics, where one is the inevitable continuation of the other. The war initiated the transformation of the Russian regime into a qualitatively new form—a dictatorship, in which any public expression that differs from official policy is a crime, and any attempt to act collectively is tantamount to betrayal of the nation state. This linking of an atmosphere of fear and subordination with chauvinism and imperialist aggression, as well as the complete identification of the will of the nation with the decisions of the authoritarian leader, has led many in recent months to compare Putin's Russia—in my view, quite rightly—to fascism.

USING THE "F-WORD"

However, when invoking the dangerous "F-word" in social analysis, it is necessary to clarify how to and how not to use it. First, we should not use "fascism" as a synonym for absolute evil, against which the 'free world' should unite. This moralization of fascism is nothing more than a return to the binary oppositions of the Cold War, in which Soviet communism is mechanically replaced by "Putin's fascism" as the external enemy of the West.

Second, an analysis of contemporary fascism in Russia (as well as of fascist tendencies outside Russia) should not be based on speculative historical analogies. It should be remembered that the rise of fascism in the first half of the twentieth century was determined by a combination of unique historical circumstances, and that its doctrine was contradictory and eclectic. In this sense, one can fully agree with the statement once made by the French historian Pierre-André Taguieff:

Neither "fascism" or "racism" will do us the favor of returning in such a way that we can recognize them easily. If vigilance was only a game of recognizing something already well-known, then it would only be a question of remembering. Vigilance would be reduced to a social game using reminiscence and identification by recognition, a consoling illusion of an immobile history peopled with events which accord to our expectations or our fears. [3]

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, applying the concept of fascism to the current Russian regime should not lead to its exoticization, to the idea that the "fascistization" of post-Soviet Russia is a unique case, allegedly predetermined by the country's special history. On the contrary, characterizing Putin's regime as fascist should help us discern common features of the various currents on the far right emerging out of the crisis of the neoliberal capitalist order. I am convinced that characterizing Russia as fascist is justified only if we perceive it as an alarming sign of global

trends that may lead to the formation of similar regimes internationally, including in the Western world. All of this inevitably brings us back to both rethinking the phenomenon of fascism itself and understanding the specific evolution of Putin's regime as an integral part of the world capitalist system.

DEFINING FASCISM: DOCTRINE, MOVEMENT, OR REGIME?

In the vast body of historical and political-philosophical literature on fascism, we can distinguish three approaches, the first of which views it primarily as an ideology (or, rather, as a set of ideological characteristics), the second as a radical mass movement, and the third as a special type of domination, a fundamentally new form of political regime, and more generally, social power.

Thus, historian Roger Griffin's famous definition of fascism as a "palingenetic ultra-nationalism" seeks to define fascism normatively, to derive its "ideal type," thereby distinguishing it from other authoritarian forms. Fascism, according to Griffin, is always related to the following characteristics: reviving the lost greatness of the nation; a revolutionary rejection of previous forms of legitimacy; cultivating an organic idea of national community; and carrying out mass mobilizations to impose order at home and abroad. [4]

From recent debates on whether Putin's regime is fascist, one can clearly see the limitations of this approach. For example, in a somewhat sensationalist op-ed in the *New York Times*, Timothy Snyder attempts to discover the ideological foundations of the current Russian regime. [5] In doing so, he exaggerates the influence on Putin of books by Ivan Ilyin, the ideologist of the Whites, the counterrevolutionary émigrés of the 1920s and '30s. He also discovers a "death cult" in the militarist rhetoric of the Russian president, similar to that of the interwar Romanian fascist leader Corneliu Zelea Codreanu. Snyder's critics, in turn, draw attention to the fact that the Putinist state does not rely like "classical fascism" on ideologically motivated mass mobilization. [6]

Obviously, such a normative definition of fascism, relying on the presence or absence of a set of specific characteristics, detracts from the analysis of the regime itself and its historical evolution. There is no doubt that during the current invasion of Ukraine, Putin has laid out an elaborate ideological program in his speeches, and this has framed Russian propaganda in an extremely reactionary manner. However, when Putin came to power twenty years ago, he was clearly not an ideological man, and his practical policies were not guided by allegiance to any doctrine.

On the contrary, one could say that his views were formed as a synthesis of practical truths assimilated through the structural positions he found himself occupying during his career. His early years in the Soviet security services taught him conspiracy thinking. His guidance of the privatization process as deputy mayor of St. Petersburg in the 1990s trained him in the morality of violence and naked domination typical of semi-criminal businesses and the mafia, with which he was closely connected.

Finally, his long years in power as the unchallenged autocratic leader instilled in him a vision of his own messianic destiny as the restorer of Russia's lost geopolitical power. It was not ideology that determined Putin's practice, but rather practice that forced him to assimilate a variety of ideological "truths" that he considers self-evident. Quotes from reactionary thinkers carefully inserted into Putin's speeches only confirm the conclusions drawn by the Russian leader through life experience.

The contradictions and ruptures of such an ideology are determined by its character as "material practical activity," as Louis Althusser put it. This notion of an ideology that is determined by the practice of power is true of fascism as a historical phenomenon in general. For instance, historian Robert O. Paxton shows that the declarations of fascist movements have always been very different

from the practices of fascist leaders after they assume power. [7]

These declarations do not constitute a coherent whole, but rather consist of an arbitrary set of slogans addressed to various social groups and changed according to the conjuncture of the political struggle. Moreover, the ideological eclecticism of fascism is elevated to the level of ideological principle by the fascist leaders themselves, who never tire of repeating that they rely on pure "life" rather than on dry doctrines. Thus, for them "theory is prison," according to Benito Mussolini's famous maxim.

The real program of fascism is revealed above all in its practices as a regime, which, in turn, are never simply an extension of fascism as a movement aimed at seizing power. As Paxton argues, the fascist regimes in Germany and Italy were a complex synthesis of totalitarian parties, the old state apparatus, and the rationality of traditional ruling elites (army, bureaucracy, church, for example), forming a kind of "dual state. [8] This synthesis never acquired a monolithic character, and the crises in these fascist regimes were always triggered by their internal contradictions. For example, the 1944 plot against Hitler involved leading members of the military elite, and the removal of Mussolini from power in 1943 was carried out by King Victor Emmanuel's inner circle (as well as some factions of the fascist leadership), which previously had been an integral element of the regime.

Scholars of fascism for whom it has primarily represented a mass movement (for example, Ernst Nolte) see it as a counterforce to the revolutionary threat of an organized labor movement and socialist parties. In this way, it is as if fascism were replacing the old bourgeois state, incapable of defending itself on its own. Of course, it is impossible to deny this kind of counter-revolutionary orientation.

For example, in the case of Italian fascism of the early 1920s, it was a direct violent reaction to a massive strike movement and the spontaneous creation of workers' soviets in key industrial centers of the country. But Mussolini's and Hitler's ascensions to power would not have been possible if the traditional elite had not made a collective decision to support them. Where the ruling classes saw no need for a fascist transformation—for example, in France, Britain, or Romania—fascist movements, despite the prospects for their growth of influence in the 1930s, were eventually defeated.

> Fascism's true meaning and aims are revealed precisely as a regime of state power, while its characteristics appear to be incomplete and misleading.

Thus, we can fully agree with political scholar Alexander J. Motyl's assertion that "the key to understanding what fascism is may therefore be in understanding what fascist rule is." [9] If, as Merleau-Ponty wrote, "revolutions are true as movements and false as regimes," [10] then the opposite can be said with regard to fascism: its true meaning and aims are revealed precisely as a regime of state power while, in the form of an ideology or movement, its characteristics appear to be incomplete and misleading.

TODAY'S FASCISM FROM ABOVE

Defining fascism as a regime for which ideological characteristics or a prior mass movement are secondary and optional features makes it possible to universalize the phenomenon. For such a universal approach, fascism represents not an irrational deviation from the magisterial rational path of Western civilization (as scholars belonging to the liberal intellectual mainstream tend to believe), but a phenomenon directly derived from the very nature of market society.

This position was most clearly expressed by the sociologist Karl Polanyi, who in his masterpiece, *The Great Transformation*, saw in fascism an aspiration for the final victory of capitalist logic over any form of self-organization and solidarity in society. [11] The aim of fascism, according to Polanyi, was complete social atomization and dissolution of the individual into the machine of production.

Fascism was thus something more profound than a reaction to the danger of revolutionary anticapitalist movements from below. It was inextricably linked to the final establishment of the domination of the economy over society. Its goal was to destroy not only workers parties, but any element of democratic control from below in general.

Polanyi described fascism not as a "movement," but as a "move," a consensus among elites in response to economic crisis to constitute an alternative to socialism. But, unlike the well known Comintern thesis, this response, according to Polanyi, came not as a direct reaction to the danger of social revolution, but was deeply rooted in the very nature of industrial society, with its essential contradiction between the capitalist market and democracy. Fascism thus represented a radical resolution of this inherent contradiction (a "double movement," in Polanyi's terms) through a redefinition of "human nature" based on a fundamental negation of the unity of humanity.

In his analysis, Polanyi stressed that the "fascist situation…is similar to the revolutionary situation," and this "move" by the elites becomes possible only "in the complex crisis of the democratic institutions." Fascism thus develops at a moment of comprehensive economic and political crisis when the contradiction between the interests of society and those of the market becomes so acute that no temporary balance between the two is any longer possible. This is why, for Polanyi, the turn to fascism was a direct consequence of the Great Depression, which he saw as the end of the market "civilization of the nineteenth century."

Today's crisis of neoliberal 'late capitalism' is creating similar contradictions, as well as a political tendency towards fascism from above as a solution to impose order on a crisis-ridden system. Of course, this tendency is not developing uniformly or simultaneously in all parts of the world. Why? Because global capitalism's uneven and combined development and its crises do not produce homogenous temporality. For a variety of structural reasons, Russia has become the "weakest link" in this epoch of crisis, driving Putin to abandon managed democracy for fascism.

This transformation of the regime was accompanied by the destruction of all political institutions mediating the direct imposition of the ruler's will from above. In today's Russia there is no "political state" in the sense that a court, parliament, or local government possesses any kind of relative autonomy. All institutions carry out orders that come from above.

This complete subordination of all state institutions to the "will of the sovereign" was characteristic of Hitler's regime in Germany. It is well known that one of Hitler's first decrees after coming to power was the introduction of a "state of emergency"—that is, "a law which abolishes all other laws," according to Carl Schmitt's famous definition—that remained in place until the collapse of Nazism in 1945. The erosion of democratic institutions and elements of a "state of emergency" can now be seen, for example, in regimes such as those of Narendra Modi in India, Recep Erdoğan in Turkey, and Viktor Orbán in Hungary.

However, unlike Putin's Russia, these express the potential for fascism rather than a transformation that has already taken place. In all these countries there is still partial autonomy of society and political institutions. For the same reason, it is impossible to consider Donald Trump's four-year term as a fascist regime. Although fascist organizations and extreme reactionary movements have begun to emerge in this period, the US political system itself has not been fundamentally altered.

_ATOMIZING AND DEPOLITICIZING SOCIETY

To qualify as fascist, such societies even under far right governments would have to undergo qualitative transformation. Hannah Arendt sheds light on the depth of that transformation in *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* in which she came to conclusions close to Polanyi's, albeit from a different theoretical perspective. [12] She argued that fascism has no direct relation to any previous intellectual tradition and represents not a political but a social phenomenon that expresses the extreme realization of the key tendencies of modernity—the atomization of society and the destruction of all forms of publicness.

For Arendt, the essence of fascist totalitarian society is not the penetration of politics into all social life, but rather the ultimate depoliticization, the disappearance of any notion of "common interest." This demobilizing role of fascism has been captured perfectly by Walter Benjamin. In the conclusion of "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," [13] Benjamin wrote that fascism "aestheticizes politics"—that is, it turns people into fascinated viewers, alienated consumers of politics as a spectacle—while communism, by contrast, "politicizes aesthetics," turning the cultural spectacle into a place for the direct creative participation of the masses. The fascist spectacle has an exclusively hierarchical character—it is a dictatorial production in which everyone must perform his or her assigned role with the utmost discipline and obedience.

Today in Russia this condition has been symbolized by the "actions of solidarity" orchestrated by the state with the Russian army. These include events like public sector employees and students being lined up in the shape of the letter Z, the ominous emblem of Russian aggression. This spectacle of politics is the exact opposite of mobilization from below in any form, including from the far right. For example, in March of this year, the Russian authorities brutally repressed independently organized anti-Ukrainian demonstrations.

The expression of mass support for the war can and should take place only in strict forms approved from above: patriotic concerts and "flash mobs" organized by the authorities. These ornaments of the masses have the same meaning as they did a century ago, when Siegfried Kracauer wrote about them in his famous essay, "The Mass Ornament"—the disintegration of the individual into separate bodily elements that find themselves incorporated into the process of capitalist production as well as ideological reproduction. [14]

In other words, we are facing not only the results of the breakdown of society into atoms, but also the breakdown of human beings into parts, incorporated into the political and economic machine and disciplined by its rationality. Market rationality, aimed at splitting (or objectifying, according to Georg Lukács) the human personality, is taken to its logical limit, extending even to the organization of politics and society.

If it is human nature to struggle for dominance over our own kind, then the nature of the state suggests it is a unified body (that is, an "ornament" of fragments of human bodies). It is an "entity" that is in existential struggle with other "entities." Concepts such as culture and sovereignty, in such a picture of the world, are reduced only to the quality of attributes of this essence of the state.

_THE FASCIST STATE AND CAPITAL

Fascism thus represents a whole new form of the bourgeois state, which directly merges with capital—we might even say that, in fascism, capital finally takes the form of the state. The state apparatus no longer towers over society, balancing between different class interests and acting as an arbiter (a characteristic, for example, of classical "Bonapartism"). Under fascism, capital, to quote Leon Trotsky, "directly and immediately gathers into its hands, as in a vise of steel, all the

organs and institutions of sovereignty, the executive administrative, and educational powers of the state." The essence of fascism, Trotsky wrote, is "that the proletariat is reduced to an amorphous state; and that a system of administration is created which penetrates deeply into the masses and which serves to frustrate the independent crystallization of the proletariat." [15]

The German social democrat Franz Neumann, in his famous book, *The Behemoth*, offered a similar understanding of the fascist state. [16] For Neumann, fascism is the direct power of capital, which no longer needs the state as a mediating force. Drawing on Marxist theories of imperialism, Neumann shows that the transition to Nazism was predetermined by the place of German capitalism, deprived of external markets in an era of imperialist redivision of the world.

The main trend in the country became the monopolization of industry and the transformation of the absolute majority into proletarians who could be used both as soldiers and as workers. Neumann argued that, in its final form, capital merged with the state, no longer needing either free commerce or a free labor market. The weaker enterprises were not placed in a relationship of formal equality with the larger ones—they were deemed inefficient by the state, and their property was redistributed among the cartels (Jewish property confiscations were also included in this same logic).

Under fascist rule, property is guaranteed not by law but by administrative act. In other words, private property rights are determined not by a common norm but by a particular decision of the sovereign. Between the political (the state) and the economic (capital), thus, any distinction disappears, and the actual inequality of rights that characterizes capitalism is no longer disguised by a facade of formal legal equality guaranteed by the state.

The full employment proclaimed by Hitler, as Neumann shows, made it possible to deprive workers of any freedom of choice—they had no collective or individual rights, and were obliged to merge into the organic whole of their enterprise. This is how the Nazi formula of "politics over economics" was put into practice, in the sense that capital overcame the need for free markets and competition, turning the state into an instrument of its own expansion. Thus, fascism forges a new relationship between capital and the state.

Of course, the merger does not create homogeneity and identity between the two. Instead, they conform to each other's logic. The Holocaust, for example, cannot be said to have been in the "interest" of German capital, but it was conducted entirely in accordance with capitalist managerial rationality and represented the capitalist production machine in its extreme monstrous form (something brilliantly explained by the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman in his book *Modernity and the Holocaust*).

FASCISM AND ITS FAMILIARS

It is striking how similar Neumann's explanation of Hitlerism is to the "authoritarian capitalism" advocated by such intellectual idols of the American alt-right as Nick Land or Curtis Yarvin. [17] "Acceleration" of capitalism, according to these authors, will inevitably lead states to abandon any autonomy of law and democratic legitimacy. The democratic state, with its false formal equality of the strong and the weak, will be replaced by a "Gov-corp," a corporation hierarchically run by managers who have gained absolute power through natural selection.

Essentially, for Land, this type of state can be achieved not through political struggle and the creation of a mass movement, but rather through the "acceleration" of the capitalist economy, whose development overcomes and destroys all political forms. This authoritarian-libertarian utopia looks paradoxically like an inversion of Putin's state capitalism, with its unbreakable connection

between property rights and political power, and the deeply rooted notion of the “aristocratic” and caste-like nature of state bureaucracy (with the security service at the top of the hierarchical pyramid).

The strange similarity between the worldviews of Putin’s *siloviki* (members of the state repressive apparatus) and the fans of Land from Silicon Valley can hardly be explained by a common ideological education or reading environment. While they converge in similar conceptions of state, Land quotes Hobbes and Deleuze, while Putin quotes Ilyin or Dostoyevsky. Intellectual references are secondary here, while a form of fascist rationality, internalized from the unconscious ideological practices of neo- liberal capitalism and characteristic of the type of subjectivity it produces, is primary.

Contemporary fascism no longer needs mass reactionary movements. It does not need to use civil war methods to grind down the organized working class and reduce it to an “amorphous state” by means of violence. This work has largely been done over decades since the neoliberal turn in Western countries and “shock-therapy” market reforms in the 1990s in the post-socialist states. All that is needed is a “move” from above, which will finally bury any form of democratic participation and finally give capital a dictatorial form of state. Just like the old fascism, twenty-first century fascism is a trend that emerged during the crisis of global capitalism.

In this respect, it is striking how much Putinism, born out of the conditions of the post-Soviet transformation of Russia, corresponds to these global trends. It is not driven by some particularly national dynamic. In terms of rhetoric, it is difficult to find anything that differs from what is familiar to every voter of Marine Le Pen, supporter of Viktor Orbán, or fan of the Tucker Carlson show on Fox: it is the same aggressive anti-universalism, scaremongering about “minorities,” defenses of the “traditional family” and “spiritual values” against liberalism and cultural Marxism, and exploitation of hatred for abstract “elites.”

Putinism’s only fundamental difference seems to be that it has already transformed the state into a twenty-first century fascist regime. In this sense it serves not as a reminder of the past, but as a warning for the future. But why exactly did post-Soviet Russia suffer this fate and become this frightening example?

Putinism: the Shortest History of “Fascistization”

In the mid-2000s, when Vladimir Putin had just been triumphantly reelected to his second presidential term, the author of this article was already an active participant in the leftist political scene in Moscow. One of the most popular slogans at the numerous demonstrations, which in those long-gone days the authorities still tolerated in the very center of the Russian capital, was “United Russia is a fascist country!” [18] The young socialists and anarchists who repeated this slogan considered this characterization a necessary exaggeration. In the early years of Putin’s rule there were still civil liberties, independent media, opposition candidates in elections, and trade unions with the right to strike.

Nevertheless, a dangerous combination of consolidating personal power, mass depoliticization, and widespread chauvinist and racist views was already quite evident. Putin’s political career and the nature of his popularity have been connected to war from their very beginning. At the end of 1999, when Boris Yeltsin declared Putin his successor, Russian troops were already engaged in a full-scale “counter-terrorist operation” in Chechnya.

Putin’s crushing victory in the presidential election of March 2000 marked the appearance for the first time of what some pro-Kremlin political analysts called the “Putin majority.” The common sentiments of this electoral majority were frustration, fatigue, and fear: frustration with democracy,

which was associated with political and social volatility; fatigue over poverty and economic insecurity; and media-fueled fear of the terrorist threat posed by “Islamic radicals,” mixed with hostility toward those “others” from the Caucasus who “fill our cities.”

It is remarkable that this “rally-around-the-flag” mentality, which marked an evolution of Putinism, was not at all targeted at the West. On the contrary, Putin consistently portrayed the military operation in Chechnya as part of the crusade against “international terrorism” launched after 9/11 by George W. Bush. Putin’s domestic policy was amazingly similar to the Western neoconservative project in its basic features: aggressive privatization of the public sector and neoliberal reform of legislation, combined with the strengthening of police control and patriotic rhetoric of “national unity” in the face of external challenges. For example, the first years of Putin’s rule saw the adoption of a new labor code that significantly limited workers’ rights, a new housing code that enabled the privatization of urban space, and a flat tax of 13 percent, which turned Russia into a paradise for big business.

At the same time, skyrocketing oil prices made it possible to increase wages and pensions while maintaining a balanced budget. This is when the foundations were laid for the paradoxical combination of neoliberalism and state capitalism that is characteristic of the whole Putin project. [19] The regime gradually placed profitable companies invested in natural resources under direct or indirect state control, while it subjected the public sector (primarily education and medicine) to endless neoliberal austerity.

Under Putin, the so-called “oligarchs”—that is, the owners of huge enterprises bought on the cheap amidst the privatization of state industry after the end of the Soviet era—have lost the direct political influence they had while Yeltsin was in power. But they have gained enormous opportunities to buy more companies through ongoing privatization and to secure lucrative contracts with the state. The regime buoyed by its phantom “Putin majority” granted these oligarchs a legitimacy they had lost in the 1990s.

During Yeltsin’s rule, the dominant perception among Russians was that the privatization of Soviet enterprises was unfair and criminal. Amidst the country’s economic recovery under Putin, his regime was able to present this plunder as a “turned page,” and warn that any attempt to revise it would inevitably lead to social chaos and the country’s disintegration.

Until the early 2010s, Putinism was based on mass depoliticization, associated with increased consumption, enjoyment of “stability,” and a focus on private life. During this period, it presented itself less as conservative than as “post-political” (in the terminology of Jacques Rancière), as pure management, the effective work of which is contrary to the intrusions of political passions and the slogans of street demagogues. In this atmosphere, in 2008, after Putin’s first two terms ended, the faceless Dmitry Medvedev was elected president at Putin’s suggestion by the same “Putin majority.” What difference does it make what the president’s name is if the management style remains the same?

GLOBAL FINANCIAL CRISIS, RESISTANCE, AND THE FASCIST TURN

Everything changed at the end of 2011, when Putin announced his desire to return to the presidency. This marked the regime’s turn toward an explicitly personalized power. In late 2011 and early 2012, Moscow and other major cities of the country were shaken by many thousands of protesters demonstrating against the apparent falsification of parliamentary elections in favor of Putin’s United Russia party. They denounced the regime as authoritarian. These protests challenged the “post-political,” technocratic model of the regime. [20]

In reaction, Putin began the process of "fascistization." His electoral campaign in early 2012 was a marked departure from previous ones. The opposition demonstrations were presented as machinations of external and internal enemies seeking to undermine the country's unity and impose false values on it. Putin presented himself as a defender of the "traditional family," while homophobia and patriarchy were elevated to the rank of state ideology. "Putin's majority" was reconstructed as a "silent conservative majority," bound together by a common Christian faith and loyalty to the Russian nation.

Despite securing reelection and crushing the protests, Putin continued to lose mass support. The democratic demands for equal participation in elections and basic civil liberties put forward by the liberal opposition had the potential to merge with the experience of growing poverty and social inequality. By the early 2010s, Russian economic growth, undermined by the 2008 global crisis, had given way to stagnation and a steady decline in living standards.

In these conditions, Putin saw the Euromaidan uprising in Kyiv, Ukraine, in 2014 as a threat. In his view, the change of power in Ukraine through street protests set a dangerous precedent, especially because it attracted an enormous amount of attention from Russian society, due to the two countries' proximity and shared history. Putin responded to all this aggressively, to ensure Russian dominion in its near-abroad and impose order at home. Thus, the external and internal goals became inseparable.

> Putinism's shattered legitimacy was restored by the war and a gradual transition to a 'besieged fortress' policy.

The annexation of Crimea and military intervention in eastern Ukraine was a turning point in the transformation of the regime. Putinism's shattered legitimacy was restored by the war and a gradual transition to a "besieged fortress" policy. The place of the "silent conservative majority" in the ideological construct of Putinism was superseded by the so-called "Crimean consensus"—a general passive agreement with the regime's geopolitical adventures. Anyone who dissented from the regime's imperialism was labeled a "national traitor." [21] Domestic policy was replaced by foreign policy, where only the national leader and commander-in-chief could be an acting subject, while the civic duty of all others was reduced to passive support of him.

However, the "Crimean consensus" did not last long. As early as 2017, a new wave of politicization emerged in Russia, manifesting itself in various forms: street protests against corruption initiated by the liberal populist Alexei Navalny; mass discontent with neoliberal pension reform; vivid movements for environmental rights; and struggles in defense of local self-government in the country's regions. In all their diversity, these protests raised the issue of social inequality to a much greater extent than in 2011. Repression and geopolitical rhetoric were no longer enough for the regime to achieve full control over society—it needed a real war.

It can be seen that by relying on a phantom depoliticized majority (whose ideological construct has been constantly redefined from above), Putinism has responded with an increasing tendency towards fascism in an attempt to resolve its own structural crisis, as well as repress challenges from below and abroad. The more serious the challenge, the more potential it has had to expose the contradictions between the capitalist elite and the impoverished working class. To maintain its rule, the regime has been driven to ever more radical and fascist measures.

ORDER PREVAILS IN MOSCOW

If the early "technocratic" form of Putinism had a passive electoral base in the state bureaucracy, small business, and parts of the atomized working class, its final form has boasted a naked rule through the state over brutal class inequality. In the present situation, the middle class widely supports the chauvinist anti-Ukrainian rhetoric, but it does not send their children into the army to fight in Ukraine. Most of the Russian military forces in Ukraine are recruited from the poorest provincial workers and unemployed, for whom enlistment is nearly the only opportunity to get a good paying job.

Early in the spring of 2022, it took the regime only weeks to establish a new political order after the invasion of Ukraine, and it did so with the utmost ferocity. Poorly organized antiwar demonstrations were suppressed with unprecedented brutality. More than sixteen thousand people were detained and punished for their participation during the spring. And military censorship was introduced, with prison sentences of up to fifteen years for violations. Any public disagreement with the invasion of Ukraine became a crime, and not just public protests, but any statement on social media or comment in conversation with coworkers. Although the repression is still selective, it is intensifying, and it has already had an intimidating effect on society as a whole.

Mass support for the war, which is shown in public opinion surveys conducted mainly by Kremlin-controlled companies, has a performative and obligatory character. People see their answers to questions about the war mainly as a way of demonstrating loyalty to the authorities and maintaining the security of their private lives. It is difficult to say how stable this situation is for the regime. The drop in living standards as a result of sanctions and huge military expenditures, as well as the enormous scale of military casualties so far covered up by the authorities, will clearly be factors in stoking discontent in the future. That is why war, in one form or another, will be the form of this regime's existence and, probably, the eventual cause of its collapse.

Nevertheless, it can already be said with certainty that Putin's regime has experienced a gradual evolution over twenty years from depoliticized neoliberal authoritarianism into a brutal dictatorship. It is a grotesque development out of the "normality" of capitalist society when it is subject to economic crisis, massive social inequality, and order maintained through repression at home and imperial war abroad.

This is the "normality" and familiarity of Putin's regime: it oversees the passivity and atomization of society, the reactionary anti-universalism of its rhetoric, multiplied by the utmost cynical rationality of its elites. And it is worth explicitly calling it fascist, not only because it fits that definition, but also so that the emancipatory movements of the present can understand the scale of the global threat to our common future.

The invasion of Ukraine definitively initiated the transformation of Putin's Russia into a qualitatively new form—a dictatorship.

ILYA BUDRAITSKIS

P.S.

• Spectre. October 27, 2022:

https://spectrejournal.com/putinism/

• Ilya Budraitskis is a Russian political researcher and socialist activist. He teaches at the Moscow School for the Social and Economic Sciences, and regularly writes on politics and culture. His book, Dissidents Among Dissidents: Ideology, Politics, and the Left in Post-Soviet Russia, was recently published by Verso.

Footnotes

[1] Vladimir Putin, "Speech at St. Petersburg Economic Forum," June 6, 2022, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68669.

[2] Vladimir Putin, "Russian Victory in the First World War Was Stolen," Kommersant, January 1, 2014.

[3] Pierre-André Taguieff, "Discussion or Inquisition: The Case of Alain de Benoist," Telos 98–99 (1993/1994): 54.

[4] Roger Griffin, "Studying Fascism in a Postfascist Age. From New Consensus to New Wave?" Fascism 1 (2012).

[5] Timothy Snyder, "We Should Say It. Russia is Fascist." New York Times, May 17, 2022.

[6] Grigory Golosov, "Fascist Russia?" Riddle, May 30, 2022.

[7] Robert O. Paxton, The Anatomy of Fascism (New York: Knopf, 2004).

[8] Ibid.

[9] Alexander J. Motyl, "Putin's Russia as a Fascist Political System," Communist and Post-Communist Studies 49, no. 1 (2016): 28.

[10] The Merleau-Ponty Reader (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 296.

[11] Karl Polanyi, The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001).

[12] Hannah Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973).

[13] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Illuminations (London: Fontana, 1968), 214–18.

[14] Siegfried Kracauer, The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

[15] Leon Trotsky, "How Mussolini Triumphed," What Next? Vital Questions for the German Proletariat [1932], https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/works/1944/1944-fas.htm#p2.

[16] Franz Neumann, Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism 1933–1944, Reprint (New York: Octagon Books, 1983).

[17] Nick Land, “The Dark Enlightenment,” https://www.thedarkenlightenment.com/the-dark-enlightenment-by-nick-land/.

[18] “United Russia” is a main party of Putin’s supporters that was formed in 2001.

[19] Ilya Matveev, “Russia Inc.,” Open Democracy, March 16, 2016.

[20] Ilya Budraitskis, “The Weakest Link of Managed Democracy: How the Parliament Gave Birth to Non-Parliamentary Politics,” South Atlantic Quarterly 113, no. 1 (2014): 169–85.

[21] Vladimir Putin, “Address by the President,” March 18, 2014, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603.