

Why Putinism is like fascism, and why it is necessary to say this today

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Ilya Budraitskis on the origins and essence of Putinism.

On 24 February, when Putin's Russia launched a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine, the world faced more than just a challenge to Western geopolitical hegemony. Behind the Kremlin's aggressive policy was a rationale that returned to the classic figures of imperialist ideology, according to which relations between countries are based solely on the right of the strongest. While criticising US military interventions in Iraq or Afghanistan in his keynote speeches, Vladimir Putin disagreed solely with their exclusive nature and defended the ability of every genuinely sovereign country to aggress and expand its sphere of influence. The claim to the West was thus reduced to the latter's "hypocrisy": why is it the only one allowed to do what others are not allowed to do? What had previously been a figure of reticence, according to Putin's Russia position, must become the only accepted law of international politics. Thus, law itself is determined solely by the power corresponding to the organic "nature" of a country, which is itself destined by history to be either an empire (i.e. a subject of politics) or a "colony", the eternal object of interest of genuinely "sovereign" world powers. The right of such a "historical" state to external arbitrariness also corresponds to its right to internal arbitrariness: if behind every right there is ultimately only naked force, human rights or the right to democratic representation also inevitably rely on force and thus constitute an instrument of external influence. From this imperial logic, the consistent anti-revolutionary and anti-democratic stance that has always been characteristic of the Russian elite follows inevitably: all protests and uprisings are always controlled from the outside, from the Russian opposition demonstrations of 2011 and the Arab Spring to the Russian Revolution of 1917 (which Putin also believes was the result of foreign intelligence activities). It is easy to see that such an ideological scheme 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 fall victim to it.

For Putin's Russia, this ideology has now definitively turned from rhetoric to practice, the power of which rests not only on the chauvinistic visions of a part of Russian society, but on the neoliberal market rationality that dominates it. Divided into separate, opposing individuals, such a society becomes obedient material in the hands of elites and accepts its own helplessness and incapacity for any solidarity-based action as a consequence of an unchangeable historical destiny. The invasion of Ukraine definitively established in Putin's Russia this inextricable link between foreign and domestic politics, where one is the inevitable continuation of the other. The war has initiated the transformation of the Russian regime into a new quality - an open dictatorship, where any public utterance that differs from the official one is a crime and any attempt at collective action is effectively equivalent to treason.

This linking of an atmosphere of fear with imperialist aggression, as well as the complete identification of the will of the nation with the decisions of an authoritarian leader, has led many in

recent months - quite rightly in my view - to think of the phenomenon of fascism. However, in returning this dangerous word to the vocabulary of topical analysis, it is worth understanding why exactly this is worth doing. Firstly, it is certainly not to use "fascism" as a synonym for an absolute evil against which the "free world" should unite. This moralisation of fascism means nothing less than a return at a new stage to the binary oppositions of the Cold War (where, as an external enemy of the West, Soviet communism is now mechanically replaced by "Putin's fascism"). Second, an analysis of contemporary fascism in Russia (as well as of fascist tendencies outside it) should not be substituted by 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 its doctrine was contradictory and eclectic. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, addressing the notion of fascism in the context of the contemporary Russian regime should not lead to its exoticisation, to the idea of the fascisation of post-Soviet Russia as a unique case allegedly predetermined by the country's special history. On the contrary, the characterisation of Putin's regime as fascist should help to discern features common to the current crisis of the neoliberal capitalist order behind its evolution. Moreover, I am convinced that a reference to the theme of fascism in Russia today is only justified if we perceive it as an alarming sign of global trends that may materialise in the form of similar regimes, including in the Western world. All this inevitably brings us back both to a rethinking of the phenomenon of fascism itself and to an understanding of the specifics of the evolution of Putin's regime as an integral part of the global capitalist system.

Defining fascism: doctrine, movement or regime?

In the vast body of historical and political-philosophical literature on fascism, three approaches can be distinguished, the first of which viewed it primarily as an ideology (or rather a set of ideological characteristics), the second as a radical mass movement, while the third saw it 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 "paligenetic ultra-nationalism" seeks to define fascism normatively, to derive its "ideal type" that allows it to be clearly separated from any other authoritarian forms.

Fascism, according to Griffin, is always linked to the idea of reviving the lost grandeur of the nation, a revolutionary rejection of previous forms of legitimacy, mass mobilisation and an organic vision of national community. [1]

The limitations of this approach can clearly be seen from recent debates on whether Putin's regime is fascist or not. Timothy Snyder [2], for example, attempts to discover the ideological foundations of Putin's regime by exaggerating the influence on Putin of the books of Ivan Ilyin, the ideologist of the White Emigration of the 1920s and 30s, or by reconstructing from the militaristic rhetoric of the Russian president a "death cult" similar to the teaching of the Romanian fascist leader of the interwar period. Snyder's critics, for their part, point out that Putin's state does not rely, like "classical fascism", on ideologically motivated mass mobilization [3].

Obviously, such a normative definition of fascism, relying on the presence or absence of a set of specific features, detracts from the actual analysis of the regime and its historical evolution. To be sure, the current invasion of Ukraine was accompanied by a number of Putin's programmatic speeches, and received a highly reactionary framing in Russian propaganda. However, at the time Putin came to power twenty years ago he was clearly not a "man of ideas" and his practical policies were not guided by allegiance to any doctrine. On the contrary, it could be said that his views were shaped as a synthesis of practical truths assimilated through the structural positions he has taken throughout his career. For example, his early years in the Soviet security services accustomed him to conspiracy thinking; his management of privatisation in the St Petersburg mayoralty in the 1990s

instilled in him a morality of violence and naked domination characteristic of the semi-criminal business and mafia with which he was closely associated. Finally, his long years in power as a perpetual authoritarian leader instilled in him a vision of his own messianic destiny as restorer of Russia's lost geopolitical power.

It was not ideology that defined Putin's practice, but rather practice that forced him to internalise a set of various ideological "truths" that he assumes to be self-evident.

Quotations from reactionary thinkers, which were carefully inserted into Putin's speeches by his referents, only confirmed the conclusions assimilated by the Russian leader as if by "experience". The contradictions and discontinuities of such an ideology are defined by its character as, in the words of Louis Althusser, "a material practical activity". This notion of an ideology which is determined only by the practice of power is also true of fascism as a historical phenomenon in general.

For example, historian Robert Paxton [4] shows that the declarations of fascist movements have always differed greatly from the practices of fascist leaders after they came to power. These declarations did not form a coherent whole, but rather consisted of an arbitrary set of slogans addressed to different social groups and changed according to the conditions of the political struggle. Moreover, the ideological eclecticism of fascism was elevated to the level of an ideological principle by the fascist leaders themselves, who never tired of reiterating that they rely on "life itself" and not on dry doctrines ("theory is prison", according to Mussolini's famous maxim). The actual programme of Fascism is revealed above all in its practices as a regime, which in turn was 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 the traditional ruling elites (army, bureaucracy, church, etc.), forming a kind of dual states. This synthesis never acquired a monolithic character, and the crisis of the fascist regimes activated its internal contradictions: for example, the 1944 plot against Hitler involved leading members of the military elite, while the removal of Mussolini from power in 1943 was carried out by the entourage of King Victor Emmanuel, who had previously been a principled element of the fascist regime.

Researchers of fascism, for whom it was primarily a mass movement (Ernst Nolte, for example), saw it as a force to counter the revolutionary threat in the form of an organised labour movement and socialist parties. In this way they seemed to be replacing the old bourgeois state which was incapable of defending itself. Of course, it is difficult to deny this kind of counter-revolutionary orientation, for example in the case of Italian fascism in the early 1920s, when it represented a direct violent reaction to the large-scale strike movement and the spontaneous creation of workers' councils. However, Mussolini and Hitler's rise to power would not have been possible if the traditional elite had not made a collective decision to do so. Where the ruling classes saw no need for a fascist transformation - for example in France, Britain or Romania - fascist movements, despite the clear prospects of their growing influence in the 1930s, were ultimately defeated.

If, as Merleau-Ponty wrote, "revolution is always true as a movement and false as a regime", 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 attributes prove incomplete and deceptive.

Fascism from above?

The definition of fascism as a regime for which ideological characteristics or a prior mass movement are secondary and optional features makes it possible to universalise the phenomenon. For such a

universal approach, fascism does not represent an irrational deviation from the mainstream rational path of Western civilisation (as researchers 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 Karl Polanyi, who, in his *The Great Transformation*, saw fascism as an expression of the victory of market logic over any form of self-organization and solidarity in society. The task of fascism, according to Polanyi, was to complete social atomization and dissolve the human personality into the machine of capitalist production. Fascism was thus more than a reaction to the rise of revolutionary movements in the 1920s, and it sought to destroy not only workers' parties but also any element of democratic participation. Polanyi characterised fascism not as a movement but as a move - that is, a consensus of the elites in their response to the challenge of economic crisis and anti-capitalist alternatives. Fascism thus represented a radical resolution of the inherent contradiction between democracy and market logic (a 'double movement', according to Polanyi) through a redefinition of 'human nature' based on a principled denial of humanity as a universal commonality.

Hannah Arendt came to similar conclusions, albeit from a different theoretical perspective, in her *Origins of Totalitarianism*. Arendt argued that fascism has no direct connection to any intellectual tradition and represents not a political but a social phenomenon that expresses the extreme realization of the key tendencies of the New Age - the atomization of society and the destruction of any form of publicity. For Arendt, the essence of totalitarian fascist society is not the penetration of politics on all levels of social life, but rather the extreme depoliticization and the disappearance of any notion of "common interest."

This passive and demobilising significance of fascism was captured very precisely by Walter Benjamin. In the finale of his *The Production of Art in an Age of Technical Reproducibility*, Benjamin wrote that fascism "aestheticizes politics" - that is, it turns people into captivated spectators, alienated consumers of politics as a spectacle, while communism, on the contrary, "politicizes aesthetics," turning the cultural spectacle into a place for the direct creative participation of the masses. Obviously, this fascist spectacle is exclusively hierarchical - it is a stage play in which everyone must perform his or her assigned role without fail.

This spectacle of politics is the direct opposite of mobilisation from below in any form. For example, it is telling that attempts by far-right groups in March this year to hold independent anti-Ukrainian demonstrations were brutally suppressed in the bud by the Russian authorities. Expressions of mass support for the war can and should only take place in strict forms approved from above: patriotic concerts and "flash mobs" organised by the authorities. These "ornaments of the masses" carry the same meaning as Siegfried Krakauer described them a century ago in his famous essay [5]: the disintegration of the individual into corporeal fragments, each of which is embedded in a process of production (as well as ideological reproduction). Market rationality, which splits (or reification, according to Georg Lukacs' definition) the human person into fragments, reaches its most radical expression under fascism.

Fascism thus represents a 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 class interests and acting as an arbiter (which is typical, for example, of classical "Bonapartism"). Under fascism, capital, to quote Leon Trotsky, "directly and directly seizes all the organs and institutions of domination, administration and education". The essence of fascism, Trotsky continued, consists in "bringing the proletariat into an amorphous state, creating a system of organs deeply penetrating the masses, which must prevent the independent crystallisation of the proletariat".

A partly close understanding of the fascist state was offered by the German social democrat Franz Neumann in his famous book *The Hippo*. 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 redistribution of the world. The main trend within the country was becoming the monopolisation of industry and the transformation of the absolute majority into proletarians who could be used both as soldiers and as labourers. Neumann argued that in its ultimate expression capital, which has merged with the state, no longer needs either free competition or a free labour market. Weak enterprises were no longer in a relationship of formal equality with large ones - they were judicially declared inefficient and their property redistributed among the cartels (Jewish property confiscations were also included in this logic). Property is now guaranteed not by law but by an administrative act - in other words, private property rights are not determined by a general rule but by a specific sovereign decision. Any distinction between political (state) and economic (capital) powers thus disappears, and the de facto inequality of rights characteristic of capitalism is no longer disguised by a facade of formal legal equality guaranteed by the state. Full employment as proclaimed by Hitler, as Neumann shows, made it possible to deprive the worker of any freedom of choice - he has no collective or individual rights, and is obliged to merge into an organic whole with his enterprise. This is how the Nazi slogan about the supremacy of 'politics over economics' is put into practice - in the sense that capital overcomes any need for a free market and competition, turning the state into an instrument of its expansionism.

It is striking how similar this description is to the construct of "authoritarian capitalism" proposed by such intellectual idols of the American *alt-right* as Nick Land [\[6\]](#) or Yarvin. "Accelerating" capitalism, according to such authors, will inevitably lead to states abandoning 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 the *Gov-corp*, a corporation hierarchically run by managers who have gained absolute power through natural selection. Fundamentally, for Land, this state of the state is achieved not through political struggle and the creation of a chieftaincy 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 inextricable connection between property rights and political power, as well as the deeply rooted notion of the "aristocratic" and class-based nature of state bureaucratic domination (with the special services at the top of the hierarchical pyramid). The strange similarity between the worldviews of Putin's *siloviki* and the adherents of the Silicon Valley Land can hardly be explained by a common ideological upbringing or reading circle. To arrive at similar models, Land uses Hobbes and Deleuze, while Putin uses Ilyin or Gumilev. The intellectual references here are secondary, whereas what is primary is the rationality internalized from the unconscious ideological practices of neoliberal capitalism, and characteristic of the type of subjectivity it produces.

Today's fascism no longer needs mass reactionary movements. It doesn't need to use civil war methods to grind down the organised working class and reduce it to an "amorphous state" by means of violence - this work has largely already been done over decades of neoliberal turnaround in Western countries (and market reforms in the 1990s in the spirit of "shock therapy" in post-socialist countries). All that is needed is a move from above, which will finally bury any form of democratic participation and finally give capital the form of the 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 Russia's post-Soviet transformation, corresponds ideologically to these global trends, and how little its national

specificity is. In terms of rhetoric, it is difficult to find anything at all different from what is familiar to every Le Pen voter, Viktor Orban supporter or Tucker Carlson fan on Fox: it is still the same aggressive anti-universalism, threats from “minorities”, defending the “traditional family” and “values” against liberalism and cultural Marxism, exploiting hatred of abstract “elites”. Its only fundamental difference seems to be that Putinism has already acquired the quality of a twenty-first century fascist regime, and in this sense serves not as a reminder of the past, but as a warning for the future. But why did post-Soviet Russia have the fate to become this frightening example?

Putinism: the briefest history of fascism

In the mid-2000s, when Vladimir Putin was just triumphantly re-elected to his second presidential term, the author of these lines was already an active participant in the leftist political scene in Moscow. At the numerous demonstrations which, in those distant days, the authorities still allowed in the heart of the Russian capital, one of the most popular slogans was “United Russia is a fascist country!” The young socialists and anarchists who repeated this slogan certainly considered such a characterisation a necessary exaggeration. In the early years of Putin’s rule, there were still relative civil liberties and independent media, opposition candidates could contest elections, and trade unions could strike, albeit rarely. Nevertheless, the dangerous combination of consolidating personal power, mass depoliticisation and widespread chauvinist and racist attitudes was quite evident. Putin’s political career and the nature of his popularity were linked to the war from the outset. In late 1999, when Boris Yeltsin announced Putin as his successor, Russian troops were already engaged in a full-scale “counter-terrorist operation” in Chechnya.

Putin’s crushing victory in the presidential elections of March 2000 marked the first time that political analysts close to the government called the “Putin majority”. The unifying emotions of this electoral majority were disappointment, weariness and fear: disillusionment with democracy, which was associated with political and social instability, weariness with poverty and economic unpredictability, and media-fueled fear of a terrorist threat from “Islamic radicals”, densely mixed with dislike of the “Caucasians” who “fill our cities”. Tellingly, this “rally-around-the-flag”, characteristic of the entire subsequent evolution of Putinism, was not at all directed against the West. On the contrary, Putin consistently portrayed the punitive operation in Chechnya as part of the crusade against “international terrorism” launched after 9/11 by George W. Bush. Domestic policy has had a character remarkably similar in its basic features to the Western neoconservative project: active privatisation of the public sector and neoliberal legal reforms have been accompanied by a strengthening of police control and patriotic rhetoric of “national unity” in the face of external challenges. Thus, already in the early years of Putin’s rule, a new Labour Code was adopted, severely restricting workers’ rights; a new Housing Code, enabling the privatisation of urban space; and a flat tax scale of 13%, which turned Russia into a real paradise for big business. At the same time, skyrocketing oil prices made it possible to increase wages and pensions while maintaining a deficit-free budget. This is when the foundations were laid for the paradoxical combination of neoliberalism and state capitalism that characterised the whole Putin project: profitable natural resource-related campaigns were gradually placed under direct or indirect state control, while the public sector (especially education and medicine) was subject to constant “optimisation” and the introduction of the “self-sufficiency” principle.

Under Putin, the so-called “oligarchs” - i.e. owners of huge enterprises built in the Soviet era - have lost the direct political influence they had under Yeltsin, but have been given enormous opportunities to participate in further privatisation and unlimited enrichment (including through the distribution of state contracts). Just as importantly, the regime, with its reliance on the phantom “Putin majority”, effectively shared its legitimacy with big business, born of the initial accumulation of the 1990s. If in Yeltsin’s time the dominant perception among Russians was that the privatisation of Soviet enterprises was unfair and criminal, Putin was able to present it as a “page-turner”, any

attempt to revise it would inevitably lead to social chaos and the collapse of the country.

Until the early 2010s, Putinism was based on mass depoliticisation, 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 Jacques Rancière’s terminology) - that is, as pure management, whose effective work is countered by the intrusions of political passions and slogans of street demagogues. It was in this atmosphere that, in 2008, after Putin’s first two terms, the unassuming Dmitry Medvedev was elected president at the suggestion of the same “Putin majority”. Who cares what the president’s name is as long as the management style remains the same?

Everything changed at the end of 2011, when Putin announced his desire to return to the presidency, thus marking the regime’s turn towards outright personalist power. In late 2011 and early 2012, Moscow and other major cities of the country were rocked by thousands of protesters against the rigging of parliamentary elections in favour of Putin’s United Russia party, and in fact against the authoritarian regime as a whole. These protests signalled a challenge to politicisation that left no room for the reproduction of a ‘post-political’ and technocratic model of the regime. Putin’s election campaign in early 2012 was coloured very differently: 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 was presented as a defender of the “traditional family” and homophobia and patriarchy were elevated as state ideology. “Putin’s majority” has been reconstructed as a “silent conservative majority” bound together by a common Christian faith and allegiance to Russia’s historical path.

Nevertheless, having secured his re-election and crushed 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 connect 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. Under these conditions, Putin’s aggressive Russian response to the Kiev Maidan was not only for external purposes, but also for internal ones. The change of power in Ukraine through street protests set a dangerous precedent which, due to the proximity of the countries, attracted the close attention of a large part of Russian society.

The annexation of Crimea and military intervention in eastern Ukraine marked a turning point in the regime’s transformation. Putinism’s shattered legitimacy was restored through war and a gradual shift to a “besieged fortress” policy.

The place of the “silent conservative majority” in the ideological construct of Putinism was taken by the so-called “Crimean consensus” - a general passive acceptance of the regime’s geopolitical adventures, any deviation from which was characterised as “national betrayal”.

Domestic policy was replaced by foreign policy, in which only the national leader and commander-in-chief could be the sole actor, while the civic duty of all others was reduced to passive support.

However, the “Crimean consensus” did not last long either: as early as 2017, a new wave of politicisation began in Russia, manifesting itself in various forms: street protests against corruption initiated by Navalny, mass discontent with neoliberal pension reform, vivid movements for environmental rights and in defence of local self-government in Russian regions. The agenda of these forms of politicisation, for all their diversity, now addressed 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 took the regime only weeks to establish a new political order after the invasion of Ukraine: poorly organised anti-war demonstrations were suppressed with unprecedented brutality (over 16,000 people were detained and punished for their participation during the spring) and military censorship was introduced, with prison sentences of up to 12 years for violations. Any public disagreement with the invasion of Ukraine became a crime - not only in the form of open protest, but also as a simple statement on social media or a careless conversation with colleagues in the workplace. Now, after the start of the so-called "partial mobilisation", repression and the disposal of citizens' "bodies" as a wordless, manageable resource will obviously reach a new level.

The Putin regime, which over a period of twenty years has experienced a gradual evolution from a depoliticising neoliberal authoritarianism to the quality of a brutal dictatorship for which imperial takeovers and destructive war aimed at destroying an entire country have become the only possible mode of existence, is not a terrible deviation from the "normality" of capitalist society. Moreover, it is precisely the "normality" and recognisability of all its elements that are most striking in its transformation: the passivity and atomisation of society, the reactionary anti-universalism of its rhetoric, multiplied by the utmost cynical rationality of its elites. And it is worth explicitly naming this regime as fascist, not only because it fits that definition, but also so that the emancipatory movements of the present can grasp the scale of the global threat to the future.

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Footnotes

[1] Roger Griffin. Studying Fascism in a Postfascist Age. From New Consensus to New Wave? Fascism 1 (2012), p.6

[2] Timothy Snyder. We should say it. Russia is fascist. NYT, 17.05.2022.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/19/opinion/russia-fascism-ukraine-putin.html>

[3] Grigory Golosov. Fascist Russia? 30.05.2022

[4] <https://ridl.io/fascist-russia/>

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

[6] Siegfried Kracauer. The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays. Harvard University Press, 2005