

## «A fascist regime looms in Russia»

Monday 4 April 2022, by [DOELL David Ernesto García](#), [YUDIN Grigory](#) (Date first published: 1 April 2022).

### **Moscow sociologist Greg Yudin on Putin's unleashed power apparatus and the political motives behind the attack on Ukraine**

Greg Yudin is a philosopher and sociologist at the Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences. Two days before the Russian invasion of Ukraine began, he anticipated quite exactly what would happen, [in an article for Open Democracy](#). Greg Yudin is still in Moscow; he was hospitalized by security forces during a protest in the days after the war began. Yudin has long warned against Putin's aggressive claim to power, which makes a military confrontation with NATO increasingly likely. In the interview, he describes the power mechanisms by which Putin's system is based, the rapid transformation of Russian society into a pre-fascist order and the prospects for the anti-war movement.

**Two days before the official war started you were one of the few intellectuals to warn of a war of this scale. While a lot of leftists still thought it is about the annexion of the Donbas, you predicted a war that would be centred on Kiev, Kharkiv and Odessa. How did you come to this assessment?**

**Greg Yudin:** I have been warning about this war for two years. But I was certainly not alone to see it approaching - initially there were people who study Russian politics and later on the experts in Russian military were ringing the bells, too. But many experts were dismissing or even ridiculing the real chance of a major war, and the reason was not that they are somehow incompetent but that they proceeded from the wrong assumptions. Unfortunately, it doesn't look like they are learning the lesson, for today they are loudly ruling out nuclear escalation, working from the same erroneous premises.

The main mistake was the assumption that Putin would definitely be worse off after invading Ukraine than he was before, and that this must influence his calculations. However, Putin weighed the cost of war against the cost of inaction. It was pretty clear to him that he would very soon find himself in a hopeless situation if he did not start this military operation now.

Present-day Russia is a Bonapartist regime, very similar to the French regime of 1848-1870 famously described by Marx, but also to the inter war Germany. It relies on plebiscites by benefiting from a sudden introduction of universal suffrage and aggressively boosts resentment and revanchism in society after a major defeat (in Russia's case, after the Cold War). Ruled by a leader with almost unlimited power, such regimes tend to degenerate into electoral monarchies that repress all internal divisions and are hostile to their neighbors. They are economically stable, which helps them depoliticise the masses, trading absolute civic disengagement for relative well-being and supporting escapism into private life. All this leads them to become militarily aggressive, externalising internal conflicts, overestimating threats from the outside and ending up bolstering strong military alliances against them. They are driven by suicidal tendencies and are heading inevitably towards defeat - but that comes at a high price for everyone, especially now, in the nuclear age.

No price is too high for Putin to gain control of Ukraine, for he believes to be existentially endangered by what he calls an »anti-Russia« at his borders.

After Putin turned Russia into a virtual monarchy with his constitutional referendum in 2020 and attempted to kill his only political opponent, Alexei Navalny, it was clear to me that he was nurturing a plan for a major war. Since the very existence of a large and culturally close state nearby with a political regime that is backed militarily by the United States is seen by Putin as existentially threatening, it became obvious he would start a war to conquer Ukraine if he fails to subdue it peacefully. No price is too high for Putin to gain control of Ukraine, for he believes to be existentially endangered by what he calls an »anti-Russia« at his borders. In addition, Putin was facing declining popularity at home, particularly amongst young people, and would likely have faced a resistance movement very soon. He needs to be sure he can suppress it at any cost.

### **What can you say about the repression and the prospects of the anti-war movement?**

The anti-war movement was successful in showing a split in Russian society. People who have protested in the streets or made public statements against the war made it obvious that there is a significant part of Russian society that rejects this war and considers it to be not only a crime against Ukraine but also a betrayal of Russia's interests. In the early days when opinion polls still made some sense (they no longer do when one faces up to 20 years in prison for simply calling this »special military operation« a war), they suggested that up to 25 percent of Russians opposed this military action. This, I think, is a considerable success.

But the protests have stalled. It is not even the repression that is preventing them but rather the lack of organisation. Putin was smart enough to destroy all political or civil organizations and networks before he started the war. It is incredibly difficult to organise here; you are immediately arrested by the police or beaten up by the state-sponsored thugs. The lack of organisation is demoralising. People are willing to risk their lives, despite the new laws and increased police violence. But it's hard to do that when one sees no way to achieve something. Putin always wins by spreading helplessness.

**In an [interview with Robin Celikates for taz](#) you compared today's situation with 1938, when Germany annexed Sudetenland. This comparison is highly controversial since it feeds into the narrative that puts Putin in line with Hitler, while George Bush was never described in the same way when he invaded Iraq and killed hundreds of thousands people.**

The Hitler comparison was unfortunate for many years and I never supported it. It was meant to scare the audience by identifying Putin with radical evil. Putin was much closer to Napoleon III or perhaps to Franco, if one wanted to emphasise his ruthlessness. This doesn't mean that he was »not bad enough«, but rather that it was a different kind of repressive authoritarian regime.

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But now the situation in Russia has changed, and I am not sure everyone outside Russia understands that. There is an ongoing shift here from authoritarianism to totalitarianism. It is a question of how society is politically structured and what power relies on. In other words, it is not a question of quantity, but of quality. And in this regard, yes, just very recently there are clearly more similarities which what is classically described as fascism.

**In Germany we have a very strict conceptualisation of fascism and nazism, the latter always linked to an eliminatory antisemitism. Intellectuals in Germany like Felix Jaitner rather**

## **analyse Putin's regime with Marx's and Poulanzas's framework of »Bonapartism«, something between military dictatorship and fascism.**

The obsession with the essence of the Ukrainian nation and its equivalence to the Russian nation is what stands out as a particularly Nazi element rather than just a fascist one. As anecdotal evidence, I should add that it was long known that there are a lot of admirers of Mussolini among the Russian elites. I would also recommend to read [Putin's article in the National Interest of 2020](#) in which he explains the causes of the Second World War. Try to find how many times he blames Germany for this war in this article, compared to Poland. As for antisemitism, there is no explicit antisemitic element in the regime right now. But there is a lot of tacit antisemitism in Russia, and it is mostly concentrated in the secret services, which now have the upper hand.

## **Do you see the Z Movement as an indicator of the qualitative shift towards fascism?**

The Z sign was adopted from the Russian military vehicles in Ukraine (vehicles belonging to the Western military district have Z signs because of the Russian word for the West - »Zapad«), it was promoted by state propagandists who certainly know that it looks like a half swastika. Some older people were utterly terrified by this sign, which immediately reminded them of their childhood. Now the Z signs are found on the doors of anti-war activists, along with threats, which indicates that there is a group of Nazis among the *siloviki* (members of secret police and security forces; note ak), and they now have the backing to do such things.

Even more chilling are the Z shaped installations that people all over Russia are forming with their bodies. Not only civil servants, but also children in schools and kindergartens are told to assemble in a Z shape and hail Putin. At the sight of such a »Z«, formed by terminally ill children or by kneeling toddlers, it is hard not to think of Nazi Germany.

Another troubling dynamic is the introduction of the outright propaganda in educational institutions, from universities to kindergartens. Putin's view of Ukrainian history is now being hammered into children's heads. This was never the case before: despite some worrying developments in history teaching, it was never required to share the official judgment of history, let alone Putin's delirious theories.

## **The fascist mobilisation of society takes place primarily at the level of political symbolism?**

One must add the unleashed violence to this picture. Since the beginning of the anti-war protests, there is already numerous evidence of beatings, torture and sexual assaults at police stations. While police violence is certainly not new to Russia, these developments indicate a possible shift to a new level. There is also a total crackdown on independent media now - just on Monday the last independent journal Novaya Gazeta, whose editor received the Nobel prize last year, closed, so there are virtually no independent media anymore. Those that remain are inaccessible from Russia and officially labeled either »foreign agents« or »extremist organizations«.

Finally, the most alarming element of this new potentially totalitarian setup is the ideological turn Putin has taken since the first days of war: his new narrative of the »denazification« of Ukraine. The accusation that the Ukrainian authorities are supporting the extreme right has been pervasive in Russian official discourse for some time - and not entirely unfounded. In February, however, it turned into purely essentialist rhetoric, implying that Ukrainian essence, which is allegedly Russian by nature, has been contaminated by some Nazi element. Therefore, it is the task of the Russian army to purge Ukraine from this Nazi element. The Russian Ministry of Defense is already talking about setting up »filtration« procedures in the occupied territories. And since Ukrainians are resisting stubbornly, the only possible explanation is that they were even more »nazified« than

expected, which could easily lead to the conclusion that they deserve to be wiped out. The same »purity« narrative was used by Putin just a few days ago when he spoke of the »enemy within«, the so-called »nation-traitors« who should be »spit out like a moth« by the Russian society in order to preserve its health.

### **Is it possible to quantify the Z movement?**

It depends on how you define it. The number of people who have participated in the public body installations, who wear the Z sign, put it on their cars or use it on social media is huge. My educated guess is that it could be close to 30 to 40 percent throughout all sectors of society. However, to call them all one movement is not correct. Many of them have been forced to show the sign by their - often state - employers. Many are not happy about it, but I have heard people say: »I will do whatever they want me to do if it saves my job.« People who do it voluntarily are far less numerous. However, some of them are truly aggressive.

To be clear, this is exactly where the line lies between the good old Putin authoritarianism and a new kind of totalitarian state. As long as this movement is mostly staged against the will of the people, the line remains uncrossed. However, the passivity of the masses is truly limitless, they can be easily turned into an aggressive mob.

### **We have seen the stock market plunge by 40 percent in two weeks but the rouble has already recovered since mid-March. How long can a war economy work out in Russia? Won't the social consequences of the economic downfall lead to great discontent?**

Putin will not remain idle and wait until the crisis hits hard enough for Russians to turn against him. He is well aware of the risk and will therefore most likely try to blame the crisis on the »traitors« who are acting in concert with the West to harm Russia. However, if for some reason Putin fails to set the terror in motion and loses momentum, the parts of society that are now most severely hurt by the crisis are likely to team up with the elites against him. This could happen relatively soon.

### **What does Putin's power base look like in economic terms? Is there a split within the economic elites into pro/contra war?**

Putin was able to build a strong and robust neoliberal economy by sticking to the 1990s model of the unchained market. In fact, the neoliberals who were in power under Yeltsin are still in charge of the economy under Putin, the key figure being Elvira Nabiullina, the head of the Russian Central Bank. This neoliberal setup has some peculiarities, such as, for instance, the blending of private and public companies like Gazprom or Rosneft, which theoretically belong to the state, but in reality channel the revenues into the pockets of Putin's cronies. This economic model secured impressive economic growth during Putin's first decade in power and relative resilience to foreign sanctions in the second decade.

However, the growth resulted in huge inequality. Today, Russia is one of the most unequal countries in the world, rivaling the United States in this regard: In 2019, 58 percent of wealth belonged to one percent of the population, while the top 10 percent owned 83 percent of all wealth, according to Credit Suisse. At the same time, Putin has built a trickle-down system similar to the one Ronald Reagan created in his time. While the elites became insanely rich and bought endless luxurious yachts and palaces, the general population was able to raise its standard of living through mortgages and consumer credit. Russia has disproportionately high levels of private debt, with a significant part of poorer families spending half their income on interest payments to banks or microfinance organisations.

Putin has made both the super-rich and the technocrats vow they will never engage in politics, and they don't dare to challenge his decisions.

Putin's oligarchs can be divided into two groups. Some of them are Putin's long-time friends from the KGB. They share his imperialist worldview and probably contributed to pushing him towards this war. Another group consists of those people who became super-rich in the 1990s and were able to multiply their fortunes under Putin. They are obviously unhappy with this war, and some even dare to say it publicly, albeit in a subtle way.

However, both the super-rich and the technocrats in charge of the Russian economy are completely devoid of any political subjectivity. Putin has made them vow they will never engage in politics, and they don't even dare to challenge his decisions. They are afraid of him and accept that this war is the fate that they are going to share with their country simply. Actually, Nabiullina reportedly tried to step down after the war started, but Putin threatened her family and forced her to stay. These people are quite comfortable being hostages.

**When we wrote before the conversation, you said that Putin will invade Poland next. If that happens, there are two options: Either the US/NATO will let Putin take control over Eastern Europe or we will possibly be hedging for World War 3. I still have difficulties imagining such a scenario, since NATO's military seems so much superior to that of Russia.**

Putin's goal is neither a war with Ukraine nor with Poland. For him, these countries are either non-existent or just puppets of the United States. In the eyes of the Russian military command, the war is a defensive war against the US/NATO/West, these terms being used interchangeably. The Ukrainian territory is only the first step in this major war. Russian troops in Transnistria (separatist region in Moldova; note ak) are already mobilised and waiting to establish a connection with the Russian army if it takes Odessa, which would mean that an invasion of Moldova would become possible. The Baltic states and Poland are certainly medium-term targets. It is no coincidence that Putin has demanded complete withdrawal of NATO troops from the countries of the former Warsaw Pact.

His military strategy is simple: threaten with nuclear weapons and seize territory. He believes the West to be fundamentally weak, corrupt, and cowardly. This attitude is extremely popular in Russia, and Putin reinforces it. There is a deep conviction in Russia that the West will never risk a nuclear conflict with Russia over a country in the East, be it Ukraine or Poland. What we are now seeing in Ukraine generally confirms his assessment: it is enough for Putin to invoke nuclear conflict to make Western Europe reconsider what it is willing to do to help Ukraine.

Putin also believes that right now he has a certain military advantage over the US in hypersonic weapons. He probably believes that this would be enough to deter the US from entering a potential nuclear confrontation. According to the Russian army, it has already used hypersonic missiles in Ukraine without any military need, which looks like a message to the West. Importantly, Putin has repeatedly said that this advantage will not last too long, for Americans would soon catch up. It means he has to capitalise on it now.

**How can the left in Germany support the left in Ukraine and Russia in their current struggles?**

I honestly believe that the world is in great danger. We know this beast from the inside, and we have few illusions that it will stop on its own. The left knows the importance of international movements during big wars. Therefore, it should resist the framing of this conflict in terms of nation-states, e.g. Russia and Ukraine, because that would only strengthen the states and further weaken the people. It

is only through international solidarity that this beast can be stopped. And it should be stopped now, before it is too late.

One important thing to do now is to target the money of the super-rich. This brutal aggression has made it clear that capital goes insane when it is not subject to control. Putin's success in corrupting political and economic elites around the world is due to his knowledge that greed and self-interest are the cornerstones of capitalism. He firmly believes that money can buy it all. He knows that liberal democracy is a sham. Putin is an ultra-neoliberal, he eviscerated all solidarity in Russia and replaced it with unbridled cynicism. That is why he is sure that no one will really interfere with his military plans and all sanctions will eventually be lifted, for capital only cares about profit. He has enough evidence of this, and Merkel's Russia policy is a textbook example of how greed dominates political power in capitalism.

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**David Ernesto García Doell**  
**Greg Yudin**

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