

Is Putin’s Regime Nazi?

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Neo-Imperial Trend in Putin Regime Politics

The large-scale and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine by the Russian armed forces on February 24, 2022, the subsequent bombing and rocket attacks on Ukrainian cities that resulted in thousands of civilian casualties, Vladimir Putin's ideological justification for this invasion, combined with other recent steps of his regime, raise the question of whether this regime can be qualified not only as authoritarian and repressive towards domestic opponents, but also as Nazi or fascist.

My answer to this question is yes, and- not consider such a qualification of this regime to be an exaggeration, a metaphor or pejorative name-calling. This conclusion can be reached by analyzing the criteria of what should be considered fascism or Nazism and comparing these criteria with the state of affairs that developed in Russia under the Putin regime. This state of affairs characterized by features of fascism and Nazism began to manifest themselves, especially in the last few years preceding the aforementioned military invasion of Ukraine.

First of all, one should note that Russia's military aggression against Ukraine began long before 2022, namely in 2014, in response to the revolution in Ukraine called Maidan – the name of the

square in Kiev, where the mass protests that led to the overthrow of Viktor Yanukovich from his presidency took place. These protests were caused by Yanukovich's rejection of his original intention to sign an association agreement with the European Union, according to which the process of Ukraine's integration into this organization would begin. Prior to that, the Ukrainian authorities negotiated with the European Union on the terms of reaching this agreement and were close to signing it but backtracked at the last moment under pressure from the Kremlin, which considered Yanukovich as its protégé in Ukraine. After Yanukovich fled the country, the Kremlin decided to punish Ukrainians for his removal by seizing Crimea, a territory recognized by international law as a part of Ukraine, as well as invading the Donetsk and Luhansk regions and installing there separatist regimes, de facto directly controlled by Moscow.

Why did Putin's regime do this? I see two initial interrelated reasons: (1) the growth of authoritarian tendencies in the governance system of Russia and (2) accompanied strengthening of the neo-imperial ambitions of the ruling regime. Other reasons, such as the regime adopting an ultra-nationalist ideology, can be considered secondary, prompted by these two.

If authoritarian tendencies started from the very beginning of Putin's rule, then the turning point that marked his transition to a neo-imperial political course was realizing that his mission as the president of the Russian Federation should be to restore the USSR in one form or another. Already in April 2005, he formulated this agenda as one of his highest priorities, calling in his address to the Federal Assembly the collapse of the USSR "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century."ⁱ In March 2018, he again stated that the main historical event that he would like to change was the collapse of the Soviet Union.ⁱⁱ These were not empty words, as proven by his actions and further events.

What did prompt Putin to adopt such a political course? In my opinion, that was his reaction to the following two developments.

First, it was a series of "color" revolutions in the post-Soviet space. Color revolutions are understood mainly as a peaceful change of power under the pressure of mass protests, usually caused by gross violations of the electoral process. Such revolutions occurred in Georgia in 2003 (the so-called Rose Revolution), in Ukraine in 2004 (the Orange Revolution), and in Kyrgyzstan in 2005 (the Tulip Revolution), as a result of which a new leadership, mainly from the political opposition, came to power in the wake of protests. Being an authoritarian leader himself, having never been elected through free and fair elections, Putin could not help but perceive such revolutions as a threat to his monopoly on power and accused the West, primarily the United States, of sponsoring these revolutions.ⁱⁱⁱ In response to the "color" revolutions, Putin began to curtail in his own country the civil liberties that had been achieved under the previous president, Boris Yeltsin. The strengthening of Putin's anti-Western orientation and rhetoric was accompanied by the rise of his nostalgia for the USSR as a world power that opposed the global camp of liberal democracy. According to him, Putin drew one main lesson from that historical past: the West will be forced to reckon with Russia if the latter reacquires the status of a world power that can possess sufficiently strong military and nuclear capacities.

The second factor that contributed to Putin's turn to neo-imperial policies was the Chechen wars, in which he saw a threat of the disintegration of the country. He stated this directly in his address to the Federal Assembly in April 2005.^{iv} In that speech, he condemned the Khasavyurt Agreements of August 31, 1996, which was concluded between the Kremlin representatives and the leadership of the self-proclaimed Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, according to which Chechnya de facto received significant autonomy. At the time of Putin's speech, the second Chechen war was

in full swing, ending only in 2009 by establishing in Chechnya a Kremlin-controlled regime of Ramzan Kadyrov and by the allocation of significant subsidies from the federal budget to this republic for its post-war reconstruction. In this case, too, Putin viewed the Chechen problem in an anti-Western way, accusing the West of sponsoring Chechen insurgents. These accusations he apparently made on the grounds that Western countries condemned Moscow's practice of genocide against the population of Chechnya and provided Chechen refugees with asylum in their countries.

Subsequently, neo-imperial trends in the policy of the Putin regime, combined with increased hostility towards the West, began to grow. In his speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2007, Putin outlined his opposition to the United States and NATO, accusing them of imposing a unipolar world order and violating agreements with the USSR on the non-expansion of NATO to the East.^v

Putin's regime reacted particularly negatively to the 2014 revolution in Ukraine, called the Maidan. After the annexation by Russia of Crimea and the imposition of puppet regimes in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine and the subsequent economic sanctions adopted by Western countries, Putin made another anti-Western statement, this time in his speech at the Valdai Club in December 2014.^{vi} As a justification for his aggression against Ukraine, he outlined in this speech the contours of his neo-imperial policy toward Ukraine, according to which this country was denied its right to its political sovereignty. In defence of this policy, Putin made references to the historical past but interpreted it in the spirit of his subjective views, claiming that significant territories were unfairly transferred in 1922 from Russia to Ukraine, a point which he developed further in 2020. We'll stop on this claim below.

Thus, Putin's view of the Soviet legacy is two-fold. On the one hand, he considered the establishment of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic within the territories of the past Malorossiya and Novorossiya as mistaken and unfair. By the logic of his reasoning, he would agree not to revise the results of the territorial delimitation of 1922-1924 unless Ukraine drifted toward the West. On the other hand, Putin endorsed the USSR as a world power that, under the rule of Stalin, transformed itself into a *de facto* unitarian state kind of empire. That is why the figure of Stalin was totally rehabilitated in recent years, the celebrating the Day of Victory (in the Second World War) has become a cult, a cornerstone of the new statehood ideology. In sum, that was raised to the agenda of restoring the begone imperial past to some extent.

Of course, Putin did not seek to restore the USSR in the literal sense of the word, that is, to subordinate to Moscow both the foreign and internal policies of the former Soviet republics. In principle, it was enough for him to take control over their foreign policy, turn these republics into satellite states, and the sphere of geopolitical influence of Russia as the leader of the post-Soviet world. In this regard, the union of post-Soviet countries controlled by Moscow would be more akin to the past Warsaw Pact, which Moscow controlled.

As a priority at the initial stage, Putin began to strive to create the core of such a union, which would include Belarus, Ukraine and Kazakhstan, with their significant (in the first two – predominant) share of the population of Slavic origin. That is, this core, according to Putin's plan, would be *de facto* a Slavic union under the leadership of Russia, with a special position of ethnic Russians and the Russian-speaking population in all other post-Soviet countries as a lever of influence and pressure upon them. As part of this course, the Kremlin and near-Kremlin political figures began to develop the concept of the "Russian World", to strengthen Moscow's influence in the former Soviet republics.

Interestingly, the concept of "Russian World" in the understanding of Putin and the ideologists associated with him covers not only the ethnic group of Russians but also other "fraternal" Slavic peoples, including Belarusians and Ukrainians. Former Putin's adviser Vladislav Surkov, who in 2014 was one of the Kremlin's leading strategists on Ukraine and the inspirer of the military campaign to seize the territory of Donbass by the Russian armed forces and plant there separatist regimes under the flag of Novorossiia, gave a rather expanded interpretation of the concept of the "Russian world", in which he included not only ethnic Russians themselves, but also the entire Russian-speaking population in the post-Soviet space, and even broader, those who would be happy to embrace close ties to Russia:

"For me, what is the Russian World? This is wherever people speak and think in Russian, or where they have great respect for Russian culture, where they see the Russian model of national development as an alternative to what they have at home, where they respect Putin, where people are afraid of Russian weapons – this is our influence. It is also any country that hopes for Russia, for its protection and patronage..."^{vii}

Given this broadened understanding of what the "Russian World" is, apparently shared by Putin himself, judging by his political course towards the post-Soviet states, it turns out that without the participation of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine in this Slavic union, the creation of a new type of empire, Putin's main agenda, would have been impossible. However, only Ukraine, drifting towards the West, could prevent, In his opinion, the plan of this incarnation of Russia as a world power.

Hence the key narrative in Putin's neo-imperial ideology, according to which Ukraine was invaded by nationalists. Putin even calls them Nazis and accuses the West of supporting them. It is also interesting that by "Nazis", he means not only those right-wing nationalists, whose number and political influence in Ukraine is relatively marginal so that they could not even overcome the five per cent barrier to getting elected to the parliament but a predominant part of the Ukrainian nation, which does not identify themselves with "Russian world" and does not seek integration with "brothers" the Russians. The paradox here is that Putin's sheer perversion of the concepts of "nationalist" and "Nazi" has become a way to justify his super-nationalist ideology and the corresponding neo-imperial political agenda.

The starting point in the development of this imperial-nationalist ideology of Putin was the thesis that the current territories of the post-Soviet states, primarily Ukraine, were seized from Russia and presented to them,^{viii} so they should be grateful to it for such a generous gift and in gratitude for the latter show loyalty to Russia. As we noted above, already in his Valdai speech in December 2014, Putin began to assert this narrative about the territory that in the past was called Novorossiia and which included the territories of the present Kharkiv, Lugansk, Donetsk, Mykolaiv, Kherson and Odessa regions, was unfairly transferred by Moscow to the newly formed Ukrainian SSR. At the same time, he forgets to mention that these lands were before the October Revolution, part of the Russian Empire, which ceased to exist in 1917, and on its ruins, a new, federate state was born.

This thesis about the "gift" was repeated by Putin again in June 2020, in an interview with the TV channel "Russia-1", where he stated the following:

"The question arises: if this or that republic became part of the Soviet Union and received a gift in the form of a huge amount of Russian lands, and then decided to leave the union, it should take then with itself what it had before joining the union and return the gift back to the Russian people."^{ix}

Thus, Putin made territorial claims to neighboring post-Soviet states, conditioning the preservation of these territories for them only on the terms of remaining a member of the union led by Moscow; the union was Putin's imaginary version of the new Russian Empire.

In this regard, it is worth remembering that the thesis about lost territories became the starting point for forming the ideology of National Socialism in Germany and fascism in Italy in the early 20s of the last century.

As in the case of National Socialism, the territorial claims were accompanied in our case by the development of the thesis about the inferiority of certain ethnonational groups of the population that do not deserve the right to exist in the identity that they choose for themselves by the free expression of will. Putin approached this point of his imperial-nationalist doctrine in his article "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians", published in July 2021.^x If, until 2021, Putin limited his rhetoric to the accusation of Ukraine in Nazism and the alleged infringement of the rights of ethnic Russians and the Russian-speaking population in this country, then already in this article, he went further in the ideological justification of his aggressive policy towards this country. He argued that Ukrainians do not have the status of an independent and self-sufficient nation with the right to choose its national identity, separate and "divorced" from the Russians. According to Putin, Russians and Ukrainians are one people, part of a large Russian nation, and have always been so as *Malorossy* (a smaller version of Russians), along with the Belarusians and the *Velicorossy* (Great Russians, or the Russians considered an older brother to the former two) and, thus, altogether forming a triune nation. From this thesis Putin comes to a view that those Ukrainians who do not want to be an integral part of this triune people should be called Nazis, for which they should be punished. Putin did not elaborate in his article on how they should be punished by eliminating them, as the Nazis did to Jews, or by re-educating them in concentration camps, as the Chinese authorities do with regard to the Uighurs.

It should be clarified that when the past Russian Empire dominated the Ukrainian people, they were indeed often called *Malorossy*, and the lands they inhabited were called Malorossia (Little Russia), from the word "Little Rus", which was one of the official names of the Hetmanate (Getmanschina), separate from the region called Novorossiya (New Russia) which, in turn, was located on the East of the nowadays Ukraine. Although, in the past, the word *Malorossy* was used along with the word Ukrainian to identify the inhabitants of said region, by the beginning of the 20th century, this ethnonym began to lose its legitimacy in the eyes of the Ukrainians and their intellectual elite, which is quite natural, given the fact that the national identity of many peoples is often subject to evolution and transformation under the influence of many factors and trends, taking place both in the internal and foreign political arena. Such a transformational process should be considered natural, given that national identity is largely a social construct, an "imaginary community", as Benedict Anderson put it,^{xi} arguing that a nation rather is a late historical phenomenon that arises in the post-feudal era, largely thanks to print capitalism.

However, for Putin, national identity is a kind of a fixed category, not changing over time, once having been established in the distant past. If so, then the only legitimate version of Ukrainian national identity should be considered the one cultivated in the Russian Empire well before the 20th century under the name of *Malorossy*. Then, since today's Ukrainians' ancestors are *Malorossy*, they are destined to be forever in this capacity, tied to their elder brother, *Velicorossy*, and led by them.

As for the Ukrainians living in the former Novorossiya territory, Putin does not even raise a question about them in his article, apparently considering them generally part of the Russian

nationality. He also completely ignores the fact that the descendants of the former *Malorossy* and residents of the former Novorossiia have the right today to form a single civil nation. Such a single undivided nation has actually become a reality, as evidenced by the unprecedented unity of the entire people of Ukraine, including ethnic Ukrainians and Russians, in the face of the latest wave of Russian aggression that started on 24 February 2022. What Ukrainians have demonstrated is an example of a civilized nation. As an authoritarian leader, Putin's notion of a civilized nation is generally alien since its formation would presuppose the existence of civil freedoms, which are in lack in Russia nowadays. The kind of nation that Putin is forming in his own country is rather a hierarchical society that is alien to civil liberties.

Putin does not tolerate Ukraine not only because of its current drive towards self-determination but also for its rapprochement with Europe rather than with Russia. However, this drift of Ukrainians toward Europe is natural for them since only by being a member of the European community can they exist as a civil nation and breathe the air of freedom. On the contrary, rapprochement with Russia and the regional organizations it has created and controls would mean Ukraine's integration into the hierarchical community. Ukrainians would then occupy a lower status in this hierarchy of peoples, compared to the people Putin calls *Velicorossy*.

Over time, the imperial-nationalist attitude of Putin toward Ukrainians began to acquire a rather aggressive character. In order to justify such an aggressive policy toward Ukraine and to justify it primarily to his own population, Putin began to consolidate his ideology to the point of considering the Ukrainians an inferior nation that needed to undergo "denazification", the agenda he put forward in his address on the day of the invasion of Ukraine on February 24.^{xii} However, he did not explain in his article what he specifically meant by the demand for "denazification" in this appeal. Considering Putin's article mentioned above, it would be logical to assume that "denazification" meant the rejection of Ukrainian's self-determined identity, recognition of them only as a part of the triune people, as well as their submission to the will of Moscow. And that agenda required, according to Putin, a military action.

Can Putin's regime be qualified as fascist?

Now the question arises whether, taking into account what was said above, it is possible to qualify the neo-imperial ideology Putin has developed as a kind of Nazism or fascism. And if both, which of these two terms would more adequately characterize his views and actions.

In literature, the phenomenon of Nazism is mainly associated with National Socialism in Hitler's Germany. Nazism, in turn, is considered one of the forms of fascism, ideology and practice that originated in Italy in the early 20s of the last century. So the first thing to consider is whether Putin's doctrine can be v as a kind of fascism.

Fascism is understood as an ideology that opposes liberalism and Marxism. That is, fascists reject, on the one hand, the norms of liberal democracy and the values of individual freedoms and, on the other, the call for social equality that is associated with the theory of class struggle. In both cases, fascists see a threat to the unity of the nation, the exclusive right to represent which only the leader-dictator, the Duce in Italian or the Führer in the German versions of fascism, would have the exclusive right to represent. Moreover, the legal legitimacy of such an authoritarian dictatorship would be based on free democratic elections but allow for a violent seizure and retention of power in the name of the nation's supreme interests. That is, extrajudicial violence was an integral part of fascists' political culture and doctrine. That is why the fascists, from the very beginning, formed stormtrooper units, whose task would be to intimidate or even eliminate

political opponents and ensure the dictatorship of the National Fascist government. At the same time, for purely pragmatic, by no means programmatic reasons, they followed the procedures of electoral democracy only as a temporary compromise justified by political expediency. Already after the Italian fascists and German National Socialists came to power, the norms of electoral democracy were trampled upon.

Do similar developments characterize the state of affairs in today's Russia, ruled by the Putin regime? We see that this regime is indeed opposed to both Marxism and the norms and values of liberal democracy, despite its attempts to present Putin as a democratically elected president, and the fact that parliamentary and presidential elections are formally held in the country, and even communists are represented in the parliament. In fact, of course, with the departure of Boris Yeltsin from the presidency, not a single election in the Russian Federation was really competitive, free and fair. As for the party of Russian communists, it was admitted to the State Duma only as of the so-called system opposition, on the condition of accepting the role of being a minority in parliament, regardless of the voter's choice, and recognizing the domination of the Putin regime and the party directly associated with it (United Russia), thereby legitimizing this authoritarian regime by their participation in such a parliament. The Communist Party itself in Russia has acquired certain features of National Socialism, for example, by introducing in February 2022 a bill on the recognition of the self-proclaimed DPR and LPR in Donbass, regimes fully controlled by the Kremlin.^{xiii}

Another key feature of fascism is its military aggression against other countries and peoples, dictated by the neo-imperial agenda of fascist parties and their leaders and their territorial claims to neighboring countries. These territorial claims were driven by the historical narratives and mythologies prevalent in these parties, their nostalgia for the greatness of historically previous regimes of government. For Italian fascists, that was nostalgia for the times of Ancient Rome, which in the distant past controlled vast territories in Europe and North Africa through wars of conquest. The National Socialists in Germany, as their ideal, turned their eyes to the peoples of the Aryan-Nordic, which in its modern form embodied the Germanic, white race.

In turn, for Putin, the ideal is the past status of the Russian Empire of the 19th century as an European power and the USSR, which reached world power status under the Stalinist regime. Putin's regime treats Stalin's Soviet Union with special reverence, not because of Putin's loyalty to communist ideals, but because he admired Stalin as the leader of the country that won the war over Hitler's Germany and transformed the country into de facto a unitarian state ruled by an iron hand. To achieve a similar result, Putin sees no other way than to restore the imperial status of Russia, for which it's critical to force Ukraine to stay in Russia's sphere of influence.

Summarizing the above, we see in the case of the Putin regime the key features inherent in fascism:

1. Imperial ambitions and territorial claims to neighbouring countries;
2. Rejection of both liberal values and ideals of social equality;
3. Authoritarian dictatorship, the rule of one authoritarian leader, relying on a repressive apparatus and the loyalty of the bureaucracy and big businesses;
4. Nostalgia for the real or imaginary great, read the imperial past of the country;
5. Extrajudicial violence against internal opponents exemplified in the attempt on Alexey Navalny and other dissidents;

6. Direct military aggression against neighboring states that the Putin regime considers its sphere of influence but does not recognize their subordinate status towards Russia and seek to get closer to other geopolitical players.

But can Putin's regime be considered Nazi?

The next question is whether Putin's regime can be considered Nazi. As we noted above, there is no particularly fundamental difference between the concepts of fascism and Nazism. Both are highly extremist ideologies and corresponding regimes of government. We have noted that Nazism is a form of fascism, only its more radical form, more extremist than the Italian fascism represented by the regime of Benito Mussolini. It should be noted that in the Soviet Union, the term "Nazism" was used much less than "fascism" in relation to Hitler's Germany - it was called there and still often is called "German fascism". The term "Nazism" regarding Hitler's Germany is more often used in Western countries.

What makes Nazism radical is its extreme, aggressive form of racism, which is expressed in identifying certain ethnic groups as inferior and harmful to the domination and purity of the German "Aryan-Nordic" race. First of all, this racism was directed against Jews, but also against Slavic peoples and Gypsies. In the first case, the Nazis justified the physical liquidation of the Jews, then in the second – the forced expulsion of the Slavs from their lands to expand the living space the Germans need in.

It should be noted that Italian fascism also featured a certain degree of racism and intolerance towards certain ethnic groups, for example, Albanians and Slovenes, but not in such a radical form as Nazism in Hitler's Germany. The latter justified and used more radical violence in internal politics and foreign policy.

Do we see the same radical racism in the case of Putin's regime? To a certain extent, yes, but mainly starting from 2021 and in the aftermath of the Russian military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. As noted above, in his later version of the neo-imperial ideology he outlined in the article mentioned above, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians", he put forward the thesis that Ukrainians are none other than the *Malorossy*, who therefore have a right to exist only as a part of the triune "Russian world", and those who do not identify themselves in such capacity should be called Nazis and therefore persecuted. In the context of recent statements and actions by Putin, who declared "denazification" to be one of the main goals of a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine, it can be assumed that, although Putin did not specify what he meant by "denazification," what specific measures it implied, it is not difficult to guess that Putin planned at least repressive measures against Ukrainians who refuse to associate themselves with the "Russian world". And these measures could likely include eliminating the most active part of Ukrainian patriots in the event of a military victory over Ukraine. The evidence massacre of the local residents in Bucha, Gastomel and Irpen of the Kyiv region, obtained right after the Russian troops left these towns, suggests that "denazification" would amount to genocide and indiscriminate killing of not only the Ukrainian elite and its associates, but a much larger number of Ukrainians.^{xiv}

Although Putin himself did not elaborate on how "denazification" will proceed, that was done in the article "What Russia should do with Ukraine", published in *RIA Novosti* on April 3, 2022, and authored by someone Timofei Sergeitzev.^{xv} Given that *RIA Novosti* is a state-controlled news agency, one can reasonably suggest that the ideas expressed in this article reflect the thinking of the Kremlin and are most likely endorsed by it.

The author of this article states that the operation on the denazification of Ukraine, which began with the military phase, will follow in peacetime the same logic as the military operation. Apart from Ukraine's top leadership, army, law enforcement and self-defence forces, all of whom should be liquidated, a significant part of the population should also be considered Nazis, albeit passive ones, accomplices of Nazism, and therefore also guilty. A just punishment of this part of the population is possible through the hardships of a just war against the Nazi system. In the post-War period, the denazification would imply "ideological repression" (suppression) of the Nazi attitudes and strict censorship, not only in the political sphere but also in culture and education. The period of denazification should be long enough and in no way take less than one generation. A new generation must be born, grow up and reach maturity in conditions of denazification. The name "Ukraine" cannot be retained as a title of any fully denazified state. As history has shown, the author claims, Ukraine is impossible as a nation-state, so attempts to build such a state would only lead to Nazism. Ukrainism is an artificial anti-Russian construction that has to be rejected, so the denazification would also inevitably imply and lead to de-Ukrainization and de-Europeanization.

Thus, both articles, by Putin himself and his propagandist, and the war crimes committed by the Russian military force in Ukraine allow us to qualify the current ruling regime in Russia as a new form of Nazism. The Russian version of Nazism has already identified at least one ethnic group, even an entire nation, as inferior and subject to repression and even mass scale extermination.

Given that the Nazi tendencies in the formation of Putin's ideological doctrine appeared relatively recently, in mid-2021, it cannot be ruled out that Putin will take steps to develop it further if he is not stopped in time on this path. Putin's very actions create the preconditions for such an even worse scenario - military aggression against Ukraine, his reaction to the failures of the Russian military force on the Ukrainian front, realized in massive bombing and rocket attacks on the civilian population and infrastructure of this country, as well as in the cases of the massacre of a local resident by the Russian soldiers. Western economic sanctions, leading to the international isolation of the Putin regime, undermining its economy and lowering the standard of living of the Russian population, force this regime to look for additional sources of maintaining its political legitimacy, which is likely to push it towards an even more radical form of nationalist populism.

Debate about Russian fascism

The theme of Russian fascism is not new in the academic and analytical literature. The debate around this issue arose long before the military invasion of the Russian military into Ukraine that happened in February 2022. The discourse of Russian fascism emerged mainly after Russia's annexation of Crimea and the creation of two separatist regimes in eastern Ukraine in 2014. I will focus here on just three authors who contributed to this discourse.

The theme of emerging fascism in Russia was elaborated by Timothy Snyder in his book "The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America",^{xvi} in which he raised concerns over the growth of authoritarian tendencies around the world, not only in Russia. But in the latter, he noticed the rhetoric in the spirit of fascism increasingly used by the Putin regime. He calls this phenomenon schizo-fascism, referring to the paradox when this regime, in its public statements advocates anti-fascism, while accusing Ukraine of Nazism, whereas itself increasingly has resorted to the narratives and practices that can be qualified fascist by their nature.

Snyder's position was criticized by Marlene Laruelle in her book "Is Russia Fascist? Unraveling Propaganda East and West", published in 2021.^{xvii} In it, Laruelle called it unfounded to

characterize the Russian political regime as fascist and even neo-imperial, arguing that the concept of postcolonialism would be more appropriate for characterizing the state of affairs in Putin's Russia. In my opinion, Laruelle's position on this issue is rather weak, for the following two reasons.

First, her criticism of Timothy Snyder is indeed valid, but in the part that concerned the arguments he used to make his points on the subject. These arguments are indeed weak and could have been more convincing if he had followed the evolution of Putin's views more closely. His main arguments were as follows: (1) that Putin allegedly justified Stalin's conclusion of a treaty with the Hitler regime in 1939, known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact; (2) the fact that Putin's regime is supporting far-right political parties across Europe; (3) Putin's sympathy for thinkers such as the writer, religious and political philosopher Ivan Ilyin, known for his anti-Semitic views; 4) Russia's annexation of Crimea. Of all these arguments, only the latter worked well to prove the tendency of the Putin regime towards fascism. Indeed, Putin's increasing nostalgia for the lost territories, the sentiments that were indicative and inherent also in the regimes of Mussolini and Hitler, could be evidence proving his regime is becoming increasingly fascist.

Second, Laruelle's critique of Russian fascism is based on her assertion that the Putin regime did not develop and adopted a more or less elaborated fascist ideological doctrine.^{xviii} Apparently, her book was being prepared for publication in 2020, when Putin's fascist views had not yet fully taken shape, although already in a number of his statements, starting in 2005, had already slipped down towards fascism. Due to the publication date of her book (2021), Laruelle could not consider and take into account Putin's article "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians" published in mid-2021. It was in this article, as noted above, that Putin most fully formulated his views, which can be qualified as Nazi.

Finally, I would pay attention to the third author whose positions on this issue are closest to me. In his short article "Russia's Flirtation With Fascism," published in 2016,^{xix} Russian economist and publicist Vladislav Inozemtsev defined the political system in Russia as "proto-fascism," noting its such features as state-centrism, an authoritarian dictatorship, nostalgia for the imperial past and lost territories. He argued in his article that Putin's version of fascism is tamer compared to the fascist regimes and ideologies of the 20s - 40s in the last century. But if he had written his article after the publication of Putin's aforementioned article and Russia's aggression against Ukraine, as well as taking into account the genocide against the civilian population of Ukraine committed by the Russian troops, then Inozemtsev's characterization of Putin's regime would be most likely much harsher, and the word "proto" would certainly have been omitted.

Distinctions

Finally, the question is whether there are fundamental differences between past forms of fascism and Nazism, on the one hand, and the Putin-style fascism (or Nazism), and if so, what are these differences? In my opinion, there are at least the following three.

First, the territorial issue is considered by the Putin regime not through the prism of the need for additional living space but in the context of the narrative about the lost territories; those that were allegedly seized and transferred from Russia to Ukraine (as well as to Kazakhstan, by the way) due to the decision of the Lenin-led Bolsheviks.

Second, the doctrinal and ideological component of the nascent Nazi regime in Russia is not yet so developed and is not so decisive factor in the Kremlin's behavior compared to previous

variants of fascism. The fact is that this ideological factor in Putin's regime has been largely balanced by the systemic corruption, which he nurtured as an integral part of his ruling regime. Initially, Putin, to strengthen his authoritarian power, relied not on ideology, but on "bribing" the most influential part of the ruling, power, and business elite. By tacitly encouraging the illicit enrichment of this elite, often at the expense of public finance and via laundering money in offshore territories, Putin bought their loyalty but also received compromising material on them in case they betray his interests,¹ a kind of carrot and stick system. In addition, by creating a loyal oligarchy, a wallet, an extra-budgetary source of financing was created, which could be used for covert operations or bribing influential figures in Western countries. But over time, the ideological factor in Putin's policy choices has increased, especially in the past few years. The culmination of this process of transforming the nature of the Putin regime was his July 2021 article and his decision to invade Ukraine.

Third, unlike the fascist regimes in Italy and Germany in the first part of the last century, the Russian society is not militarized to such extent as they. The militaristic mobilization is limited by the economy's orientation toward a free market economy and the respective consumerism. In this respect, the Putin regime has some characteristics of modern capitalist society. Although it should be recognized that the Nazi regime in Germany also supported big businesses while receiving support from them for suppressing trade unions. Because of this adherence to the principles free-market market economy, at least before the invasion of Ukraine and consequent economic sanctions adopted by the Western countries against Russia, Putin's regime rejected autarky and excessive state interference in the economy. At the same time, a systemic government corruption had and still hurts on doing business in Russia.

Along with the political bloc in the government, represented by the President's office, law enforcement agencies and security services, the prosecutor's office, the judiciary and the penitentiary system, there is also has its economic bloc, represented by the Central Bank and the relevant ministries and departments that regulate the country's economy and do that mainly in line with the norms of a free market economy. As a country that follows the free market rules, the Russian Federation became a member of the World Trade Organization, actively participating in world trade and creating sufficiently favorable conditions for foreign direct investment. It's notable also that before the invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 shares of the Russian companies themselves were traded on international stock markets. Over the past twenty years, the standard of living and, accordingly, the consumer market have grown significantly in the country. Many Russians began to travel to other countries as tourists, acquired cars from foreign brands and improved their living conditions and the quality of food. In other words, they have tasted many of the joys of a consumerist society.

Because already quite numerous social classes of businessmen, professionals and representatives of creative professions have integrated into respective international networks, the authorities, as a compromise with and a concession to these segments of the population, were forced to allow certain, albeit very limited civil liberties in the country, including a small number of independent media, free access of citizens to social networks.

¹ By the way, in my article on the mechanisms of government in Uzbekistan, I consider this tool of authoritarian regimes, used to ensure the loyalty of subjects. See: Alisher Ilkhamov, Mirziyoev-Led Uzbekistan: Choosing Between Political Legitimacy and Autocracy, *Central Asia Due Diligence*, January 2022, <https://cenasiaduediligence.uk/our-report-example-2/>

As we said above, all this took place only before the full-scale invasion of Russian troops in Ukraine, after which Western countries began to impose unprecedented, large-scale sanctions against Russia, largely isolating it from the global economy, leading to its economic downturn and falling living standards. In response to these sanctions, the country began to close; the authorities began to significantly tighten repressions against dissidents and even those who have demonstrated their anti-war sentiments and reduce the already small number of independent media. In the economic field, the question arose whether the government would maintain the course following the principles of a market economy or begin a transition to a command economy. Such a transition has not yet happened, but its probability remains. Accordingly, the space for a lifestyle in the spirit of consumerism is narrowing, and the emigration flow from the country of representatives of the business and middle classes is increasing. Accordingly, the authorities have now fewer incentives to provide a favorable social environment that meets the needs and interests of these relatively advanced categories of the population.

Once again, we would note in conclusion that under these conditions, Putin's regime, losing legitimacy in the eyes of domestic businesses and the middle class, will most likely look for sources of legitimacy in the populist politics of inciting extreme nationalism, thereby becoming closer and closer to those models of fascism and Nazism that were developed before the Second World War and were eliminated only with the military defeat in this war.

A Multifactorial Comparison of Putin's Regime with Previous Variants of Fascism

Below is a table summarizing the comparison of the main characteristics of the German, Italian and Russian variants of fascism and summarizing what was said above. In the appendix one can find the chronology of Putin's evolution toward his fascism.

Key characteristic	German Nazism	Italian Fascism	Russian Fascism/Nazism
Anti-liberalism, totalitarianism, dictatorship	Yes	Yes	Yes
Anti-egalitarianism	Yes	Yes	Yes
Far-right political orientation	Yes-	Yes	More moderately right-wing orientation
Apologia for authoritarian leadership	Yes: <i>Führer</i>	Yes: <i>Duce</i>	Yes: it also manifested in the rehabilitation of the figure of Stalin.
Social corporatism, the priority of the unity of the nation; priority of collective over individual or labor rights	Yes: Pan-Germanism; <i>Völkisch</i> ; <i>People's community</i>	Yes	Partially yes
Neo-imperialism, nostalgia for former imperial status, the transformation of the nation into an empire	Yes: <i>German Empire</i> (1871-1918)	Yes: Ancient Rome	Yes: Russian Empire; the USSR as a world power and the winner in the "Great Patriotic" War
Militaristic mobilization of society, the transformation of the nation into a nation of warriors and fighters	Yes	Yes	No: this would contradict consumerism, which has become part of the population's lifestyle.
Attitude to specific ethnic groups as inferior; anti-Semitism, extreme racism	Yes: "scientific" racism, eugenics targeting Jews; Slavic peoples; Gypsies	Yes, but to a lesser extent than Nazism: Albanians, Slovenes	Yes, mainly in relation to Ukrainians who do not recognize their belonging

			to the triune "Russian world."
Apologia for violence against the aforementioned ethnic groups and races	Yes: physical elimination of Jews and Roma; eviction of Slavs from their lands	Yes, but to a lesser extent than Nazism	Yes, targeting Ukrainians
Revanchism, claims for lost territories; justification of aggression against other nations by the need for living space for the nation.	Yes: <i>Lebensraum</i> ; <i>Generalplan Ost</i> policy targeting Central and Eastern Europe	Yes: <i>Italia Irredenta</i> ; <i>Spazio Vitale</i> : targeting Corsica, Nice, Savoy, Malta, Dalmatia, Albania, Slovenia, "Italian" East Africa, Libya and Tunisia.	Lost territory - yes: Crimea; Donbass as part of the former Novorossiia. Living space – no (has enough own space).
Revolution	Yes: to radically change one's society and the world order	Yes, but to a lesser extent than Nazism	Partially yes: Radically Change the World Order
Conservatism	Yes	Yes, and to a greater extent than Nazism	Yes
Autarky in economics	Yes	Yes	No
State protectionism, dirigisme	Yes	Yes	Not much; more adherence to the principles of the market economy

Implications for global politics

Let us dwell only on two main implications for the global politics of the developments reflected in the above analysis.

The first implication is the need to realize that the main threat to the world of democracy and the world as a whole is nowadays not China, which, after all, plays by the rules of the world order more than Moscow, but Russia, which has challenged this world order, the cornerstone of which is national sovereignty and the rights of the nation for self-determination and is already trying to destroy it. Having become inherently fascist, even to some extent Nazi, the Putin regime, combined with the Russian nuclear capacities, has become a threat comparable to the danger that Nazi Germany in the 30s and 40s of the last century posed to the world. Then the victory over the Nazi regime became possible only thanks to the highest mobilization of all countries that opposed the Nazi invasion. It is very unlikely that now it will be possible to contain Putin's aggression without a similar mobilization. That is why curbing the aggressor, driven by a new form of Nazi ideology, has become a number one priority facing world politics today. The problem is that the measures taken by the NATO member-states, though unprecedentedly large-scale and far-reaching, do not still match the scale of the threat represented by the Russian Nazim and account for only a small fraction compared to the scale of the lend-lease assistance the US had provided to the Soviet Union that fought Nazi Germany in the Second World War.

The second implication is related to the above. There is a growing need to realize the degree of threat to the stability, peace and security of Europe caused by the neo-fascist and neo-Nazi plague coming from Putin's Russia. The restoration of peace and stability in this part of the world is necessary, among other reasons, because this region represents a kind of a model of democracy, which many countries have followed so far, especially in Eurasia. If this model is destroyed, and this can happen if Europe allows the defeat of Ukraine in its war with Russia, then the prospects

for democracy, not only in Europe itself but throughout the world, will be in question. Democracy must be able to defend itself.

However, the problem is that those countries that dominate the decision making process in the European Union, due to their economic and political weight, and these are primarily Germany and France, have not yet managed to take the lead in the fight to curb Russian Nazism, despite quickly realizing the danger posed by the Putin regime. Rather, they are still in the second echelon of this struggle, likely seeking the possibility of concluding a compromise with this regime and due to their economic interests. Germany, although it settled on the results of the Second World War by paying huge reparations to the Soviet Union, Israel and other victims of the Hitler-led aggression and atrocities, today faces a choice – either to take the lead in the fight against the new wave of Nazism or remain on the sidelines in this fight. Due to Germany's dark past, the citizens of post-war Germany have developed a complex of collective guilt for those crimes committed by the Third Reich. But now, they need to transform this complex into a sense of increased responsibility for the fate of European democracy; the main threat today comes from the country in relation to which this complex previously manifested itself most of all.

APPENDIX

Chronology

December 31, 1999 - Vladimir Putin assumes the presidency of the Russian Federation.

April 2005 - Putin addresses the Federal Assembly, saying the collapse of the USSR is "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century".

February 2007 - Putin speaks at the Munich Security Summit and expresses a challenge to the West and the world order.

February 2014 - Russia invades Ukraine, annexing Crimea and establishing separatist regimes in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

December 2014 - Putin speaks at the Valdai Club forum, states Ukraine was gifted Russian territories.

March 2018 - Putin speaks at the All-Russian People's Forum in Kaliningrad and expresses a desire to restore the USSR.

June 2020 - Putin gives an interview to the TV channel "Russia-1" and repeats the thesis about the "gifts" of Russian territories, also hinting at Kazakhstan.

July 2021 - Putin's article "On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians" published elaborates on the inferiority of Ukrainians as an independent nation.

February 24, 2022 – Putin announces a full-scale military invasion of Russian troops in Ukraine and issues an address justifying this action.

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