



So, Is Russia Fascist Now? Labels and Policy Implications

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So, Is Russia Fascist Now? Labels and Policy Implications

Russia's horrific war in Ukraine has sharply revived debate over charges of Russia's fascist behavior. The most vocal voices in this debate are Yale historian Timothy Snyder, who has proclaimed that "Putin's regime ... is the world center of fascism," and authored an op-ed in *The New York Times* entitled "We Should Say It: Russia Is Fascist."¹ Similar arguments are advanced by Rutgers political scientist Alexander Motyl, who asserted in a recent piece that Russia fits the textbook definition of fascism.² State leaders currently fighting against Russia share that view: Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky has labelled Russia's actions as fascist and drawn parallels between Putin's Russia and Nazi Germany.³ Polish President Andrzej Duda followed suit, stating that "today Russian leaders are behaving in exactly the same way, like Hitler, like the German SS, like the German pilots of the fascist army during World War II."⁴ Among Russian social scientists abroad as well as those courageously resisting at home, the debate about Russia's "fascism" has also become central in discussing post-February 24 transformations, most of them concluding that Russia does not (yet?) fit the typology.

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Is Russia fascist? Or are some Western commentators trying to force it to fit the definition of the worst evil? While we can indeed identify a shift toward a chillingly more repressive imperialist order in post-February 24 Russia, applying the “fascism” label—and the polemical force the term carries—to the entirety of the Russian state or society short-circuits our ability to construct a more complex and differentiated picture. Labeling the whole of Russia as a fascist—if not a Nazi—state is an easy, intellectually lazy way to make Putin understandable and predictable. It also does more to obscure than to shed light on our range of policy options for ending the conflict. Contrary to political scientist Francis Fukuyama’s prediction of a “new birth of freedom” in the wake of a scenario in which Russia loses the war, this conflict does not have the same degree of moral clarity as the Second World War, and envisioning policy options for peace requires avoiding maximalist arguments, a category to which the “fascism” argument certainly belongs.⁵

Refuting the label of “fascism” for Russia does not mean negating the unacceptable suffering of Ukrainians and the responsibility the Russian regime bears for causing it, but instead aids in building up an interpretation of the conflict that is analytically correct and therefore will generate more productive policy. In this paper, after first defining fascism and where to look for it, I address various facets of Russia’s ideological landscape, its state-society relationship, and finally move to a consideration of the policy implications of the “fascism” label to examine why its maximalism is not only analytically wrong but counterproductive, policy-wise.

Is Russia “Fascist” Today?

The existing literature on defining fascism is rich and storied. Definitions such as Motyl’s—“an authoritarian state ruled by a charismatic leader enjoying a personality cult”—lack sufficient specificity and might conceivably encompass almost all non-democratic systems. I prefer the classic definition advanced by political scientist Roger Griffin: that the primacy of a myth of regeneration—the idea that the nation will be totally reborn through violence—constitutes the driving force that makes a vision of the world and society “fascist.”⁶ This offers a much better articulated definition of the specificity of fascism as a subset within the broad spectrum of authoritarian or totalitarian regimes. Once defined, key questions emerge: Where is this fascism to be found? In the president’s speeches? In the rhetoric of televised talk shows? At the government or elite level? In practices by state institutions? In Russian society? The American philosopher Jason Stanley is right in saying that it is easier to identify fascism as a collection of tropes and narratives than as a fixed, institutionalized mode of government.⁷

Putin's Speeches: Fascism or A Return to Old Soviet Tropes?

In his infamous speeches of February 21 and 24, which sought to justify the invasion of Ukraine, Vladimir Putin negated Ukraine's independent identity and legitimacy as a nation (a stance he had already expressed in a more verbose manner in a July 2021 article). Putin argued that Ukrainians have been "contaminated" by Nazism and are in a kind of "denial" of their supposed national unity with Russians and therefore need to be "de-Nazified" in order to regain an awareness of their "authentic" Russian identity.⁸

This preposterous rhetoric attests to the widespread disdain of a former imperial metropole for the supposed lack of autonomous identity of its former "subjects" more than it does to fascism.

Indeed, fascism hopes for the revival of a *domestic* identity through violence, while in the Russian case, the point is not for Russians to regenerate themselves but for Ukraine's "false identity" to be crushed. Viewed in this light, the tenor of Putin's speech hews more closely to Xi Jinping's argument for rooting out Uyghur identity than to the classic fascist notion of self-regeneration.

To be sure, the current ideological production of the Russian regime is quite ludicrous and complex. It combines celebrating Russia's pre-Soviet imperial identity with strong criticisms of the Soviet nationalities policy that gave birth to Ukraine in its contemporary form, while simultaneously engaging in a redux of the Second World War and the fight against fascism to justify the war. It also blends in a mode of East-Slavic imperialism by asserting the unity of the three Eastern Slavic nations of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus with the cult of Russia's multi-nationality at home—and many of the Russian soldiers sent to Ukraine belong to minorities, such as Buryats and North Caucasians.⁹

The only discursive moment where one finds the fascist idea of Russian society becoming "purified" by war is expressed in Putin's March 16 speech calling for Russia's "self-purification" from "scums and traitors" to "be stronger."¹⁰ This type of narrative is rooted in a totalitarian vision of the healthy body politic needing to be purged in order to remain so, and in the idea of violence to that end as redemptive.

But if the rhetorical components of Russia's self-regeneration comport with the idea of a possible fascist shift in Putin's discourse, they also recall many Soviet tropes. De-Nazification brings to mind Stalin's parallel policy of *de-kulakization*, along with other repressive social-engineering projects of Stalinism. Medical metaphors of purity and contamination, as well as the dehumanization of enemies, were classic tools of the Soviet Orwellian language.¹¹ Denouncing opponents as fifth columnists and "national traitors" is nothing new either.¹²

The primary driving force of fascism is a myth of self-regeneration

Another element that potentially connects the Russian president to the fascist tradition has been his cult of masculinity and the construction of “Putin” as a brand for the man-soldier, the man-defender of the nation, but also potentially the man-aggressor.¹³ His metaphor of Ukraine as a beautiful woman who has to endure what she dislikes (“Like it or not, my beauty, bear with it”) in reference to the implementation of the Minsk Agreements 2, with its rapist undertones, is revealing of Putin’s deeply entrenched, gendered vision of strength and weakness on the international scene.¹⁴

So, is Putin moving more toward fascism, or merely resurrecting old Soviet tropes? The crucial role played by the sloganeering of anti-fascism as the flagship of Russia’s war and the preposterous call for “de-Nazifying” Ukraine lead me to read the transformation of Russia’s political language as a return to old Soviet narratives, namely that the US is fostering far-right groups in Europe to fight against communism and that Ukrainians are automatically “banderites.”¹⁵ One of Russia’s leading sociologists, Lev Gudkov, has coined the idea of a “relapsing” or “recurrent” totalitarianism to express the concept of Russia reactivating Soviet habits of both vertical and horizontal repression.¹⁶ Carnegie Moscow

Suggesting that Putin is a fascist packs a bigger, but ultimately misleading, punch

expert Andrei Kolesnikov, too, speaks of “hybrid totalitarianism.”¹⁷ Recent research by Maria Snegovaya and Kirill Petrov on the background of Russia’s top 100 elites found that the proportion of them with Soviet nomenklatura ties today, thirty years after the collapse of the USSR, is approximately 60 percent.¹⁸

Not surprising then, that old Soviet imagery and patterns of action can take hold again so rapidly. Proponents of totalitarianism theory would argue that both fascism and communism, or at least Stalinism, are equals in terms of their totalizing ideological commitments and the unitary nexus of state-regime-society that leads to this particular type of organic, exclusionary language, and that the nuances between them don’t matter so much.¹⁹ But the Soviet Union was not fascist: its ideology was based on a humanistic idea of progress and not of reaction, and there was no obsessive urge to regenerate the nation through violence, the goal being rather to build a more egalitarian society by force. In such a context, our framing of the new Russia clearly does matter, and suggesting that Putin is a fascist packs a bigger, but ultimately misleading, punch.

Is Patriarch Kirill’s “Holy War” Fascist?

If one wants to search for the ideological motivations underlying the war beyond the strategic incentives to occupying Ukraine, more relevant than fascism is the

Russian Orthodox Church's doctrine. It combines the idea of the existence of a "Russian World" to which Ukrainians belong and a symbiotic relationship with the military, described masterfully by Israel-based scholar Dmitry Adamsky.²⁰

After some minor qualms in the first days of the war about avoiding any schism with its Ukrainian parishes (about one third of the Moscow Patriarchate's parishes are located in Ukraine), Patriarch Kirill, the head of the church, delivered a sermon on March 6 in which he represented Russia's opponents as "evil forces," and explained that "if we see [Ukraine] as a threat, we have the right to use force to ensure the threat is eradicated."²¹ To sanctify the war, Kirill even offered a holy icon to Viktor Zolotov, the commander of the Russian National Guard, a gesture that symbolizes the full ideological compatibility of the Church and the military.

The Patriarch also justified the war as metaphysical, as a struggle between immoral Western (read: liberal) values and the Christian values embodied by Russia, stating that "we are talking about human salvation, something much more important than politics." He referred to the alleged "genocide" in Donbas and legitimized the war as a fundamental civilizational divide, in which accepting or refusing a gay parade signaled belonging to either a Western or Russian civilization.²² Notably, however, this framing of the war as representing a clash between liberal/decadent and conservative values has not been dominant in Putin's speeches on the invasion of Ukraine.

The Church has thus fully endorsed the concept of spiritual warfare by marshalling arguments resembling the notion of a "just war." This concept can be found across many religious traditions: in Christianity with St. Augustine's idea that some wars are necessary to amend an evil—in Islam, in Judaism, as well as, in some form, in Confucianism and Sikhism. It also belongs to a deeply-rooted aspect of Russian religious culture, that of eschatology, here articulated together with the idea that the war can accelerate the final destiny of mankind. Yet here again, while shocking for many holders of both secular and religious worldviews, castigating the opponent as evil and offering religious sanctions for the war is not specifically fascist. But Kirill's implicit assertion—that Russia will regenerate itself as a faithful nation through this civilizational war—is.

Russia's Hawks: The Fascist Tree and the Russian Government Forest

As embedded in fascism's definition at the beginning of the article, determining whether Russia is truly a fascist state today means looking beyond Russia's political and spiritual leaders and at the broader structure of the Russian state as well. Asserting that fascism is a fixed feature of the whole Russian state is a much more difficult position to defend analytically.

Post-February 24 Russia is without any doubt markedly more authoritarian, repressive, and autarkic. In fact, this trend had already begun before the war: over its 22 years of existence, the Russian regime has been gradually skewing toward authoritarianism, with a partial closing of the political space after the massive 2011–2012 anti-Putin protests and many of these new shifts enshrined

in the July 2020 constitutional amendments.²³

It is much more analytically difficult to defend that the whole Russian state is fascist

Putin now rules with almost unlimited power (potentially until 2036), and the country has without a doubt transformed from a hegemonic electoral authoritarian regime (still offering more freedoms, for instance, than its Chinese neighbor) into a closed, personalist authoritarian regime, potentially en route to becoming a more totalitarian model. But does this necessarily mean that Russia has become a fascist state?

The meeting of Russia's Security Council on February 21, a spectacle which featured senior officials cowed into public displays of fealty towards Putin and compelled to stand by the decision to recognize the independence of Donetsk and Luhansk, confirmed the surprise nature of the decision to go to war for the majority of the Russian elites. Their ideological leanings hewed much more closely to a form of "illiberal centrism"—a backlash against liberalism seen as a Western normative imposition but still supporting Russia's modernization and partial "normalization"—and made them more averse to bellicose adventures than the president has shown himself to be.²⁴ After a short moment of shock and panic, Russian elites appear to have fallen in line behind the president, aware that given the scale of Western sanctions there is no future for them outside of the regime as it is. This consolidation seems more based on a strategy of ensuring personal safety and economic security, coupled with a rallying-around-the-flag mood, than on any exaltation of the war's regenerative aspects.²⁵

However, even now, at a time of war, the Russian regime is not a unified monolith. Obviously, the more liberal groups have been silenced or exiled, but there are still technocratic figures known for their moderate stances, especially in the economic and financial sectors, such as Elvira Nabiullina, head of the Central Bank of Russia, and Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin. Meanwhile, on the other side of the political spectrum, there is a party of war, more radical even than the government in its will to destroy Ukraine. But this party of hawks shouldn't become the tree hiding the forest: a large part of the Russian elite is uninterested in ideology and the most radical statements of this group should not be read as the position of the whole state, but instead as reflecting a struggle for power and legitimacy by one group inside the system.

Some of Russia's hawks are familiar figures to experts: Secretary of the Security Council Nikolai Patrushev, known for his visceral anti-Westernism and as an adept purveyor of conspiracy theories; Ramzan Kadyrov, the head of the Chechen republic, infamous for running his own subnational dictatorship; and Dmitri Rogozin, former deputy prime minister in charge of the military-industrial complex and now chief of Roskosmos, the state space agency, always first in line for making heated declarations.²⁶ Kadyrov, for one, has been vividly criticizing Dmitri Peskov, Putin's press secretary, for excusing some Russian celebrities who have moved abroad and defending their patriotism in the process—a window into the intra-elite conflict taking place in the corridors of power.²⁷ Kadyrov similarly criticized Vladimir Medinsky, former Minister of Culture known for his cultural censorship methods, now in charge of the diplomatic negotiations with Kyiv.²⁸

Other hawks are less well-known figures: the Chairman of the State Duma, Vyacheslav Volodin; the Secretary of the General Council of United Russia, Andrey Turchak; and Alexey Gromov, the First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Executive Office. Security Council Deputy Chairman Dmitri Medvedev, meanwhile, seems to have joined the ranks of the hawks, first with a condescending article on Ukraine's illegitimacy as a nation and state, published in October 2021, and more recently in statements on the need to reinstate the death penalty and Russia's right to use nuclear weapons.²⁹ On his Telegram channel, he also published a text in support of "de-Nazification," understood as "changing the mythologized consciousness of a section of present-day Ukrainians," in order for them to live better and in harmony with Russia. For all of these circling hawks, the war presents an opportunity to either move up the power ladder or to get Putin's attention in hopes of some form of reward.³⁰

To this war party at the Kremlin should be added the whole spectrum of radical nationalist, imperialist, and monarchist figures who have felt empowered by the invasion, such as Orthodox tycoon Konstantin Malofeev, now under sweeping sanctions, and the fascist public intellectual Alexander Dugin.³¹ But these media figures should not be conflated with the Kremlin's official representatives: the goal of the former is to produce ideological bubbles and echo chambers in the hopes of getting noticed and rewarded by the latter. They find themselves on the receiving end of the chain of command, not at its origin.

More worrisome still has been the expression of openly genocidal opinions, such as those published by the state press agency RIA Novosti on April 3 by Timofei Sergeitsev, a PR specialist who participated in the electoral campaigns of several Russian and pro-Russian Ukrainian politicians, and who now works as a columnist at RIA. In an article titled, "What Russia Should Do with Ukraine," Sergeitsev proposes the methodical eradication of Ukraine as a nation and a state, because Ukrainian identity is "an artificial anti-Russian

construct with no civilizational content of its own, a subordinate element of an alien [read: Western] civilization.”³² He presents the disingenuous de-Nazification argument as a global project of “rejection of the large-scale artificial inflation of the ethnic component in the self-identification of the population of the historical Malorossiya [“Little Russia,” that is, most of present-day Ukraine] and Novorossiya [“New Russia,” that is, Ukraine’s eastern territories], which was started by the Soviet authorities.” This de-Nazification would be Russia’s national burden, as the “Russian civilization has a profound antifascist nature.”

To achieve this goal, Sergeitsev advances a set of measures to be assigned to a state agency in charge of the mass lustration (exclusion of specific categories of people from civil service positions for ideological reasons) of Ukrainian institutions, the carrying out of death sentences, and collective re-Russification of Ukraine over more than one generation: “at least one generation should be born, educated, and reach adulthood under the conditions of de-Nazification.” In this vision, Ukrainians would be typologized based on their political stance: the most active “Nazis” would be tried and sentenced to prison or death, less active supporters would be sentenced to forced labor, and average citizens would be re-educated as to their Russian-ness. The final goal is to ensure that “the name of Ukraine itself cannot be preserved.”

Sergeitsev’s cold and methodical argument belongs more clearly to the Nazi repertoire than anything else so far published by Russian leaders. And it is not a coincidence that it was published just after the first information on the massacres of civilians conducted by the Russian army in the Kyiv suburb of Bucha spread on Western media. But here one confronts the key problem of how representative one article is of a regime as a whole,

given the black box of the Kremlin’s decision-making: should the fact that such an article can be published by a state-run press agency be read as the regime speaking to justify mass violence? Or instead as a sign that hardliners are pushing for the Kremlin not to weaken its ideological objectives?³³

The latter reading seems to fit better with what we know: disappointed by Moscow’s decision to readjust its military strategy to more modest objectives focused on the

Donbas and the Sea of Azov; abandoning the battle for the capital, Kyiv; and jettisoning the “de-Nazification” point in Russia’s demands during diplomatic talks, the article likely represents the position of the hawks, but not the official line. There was indirect evidence of that dissatisfaction in angry and disappointed Telegram channels discussions once it became clear that the Kremlin was not trying

The party of war is the faction closest to fascism but shouldn’t be interpreted as the entire regime

to capture Kyiv anymore.³⁴ One can therefore identify the party of war as the faction closest to fascism inside the Russian political system, but it shouldn't be interpreted as representative of the entire Russian regime.

The State-Society Relationship: No Mass Mobilization

Even more central to the definition of fascism is the need for heavy mobilization of the population and the exultation in a cult of war. So far, Russia fits neither of the two requirements: the authorities do not celebrate war, but on the contrary hide it and have even passed a law that condemns those talking about a "war" and not a "special military operation" to up to fifteen years in prison. They try to avoid actual military mobilization, as a large-scale draft of young men would force a recognition that the "operation" is indeed a "war" and could jeopardize the Russian people's passive consensus around the regime's "special operation." The Kremlin therefore do not celebrate war as regeneration of the nation, and want to keep the population more demobilized than mobilized. And Russian society does appear indeed more amorphous than zealous.

So far, the signs of top-down pressures exerted on the population to display loyalty and support for war have been manufactured in a pretty poor, Soviet-inspired manner, and with a quite low degree of conviction on the part of much of the population.³⁵ We don't see any signs of mass mobilization, which would entail a fanaticized population exalting this ideology through rallies and parades. For instance, state-sector workers had to be forced to attend Putin's stadium speech on March 18, and hurried back home immediately after it was over.³⁶ Contrary to Snyder's claim, there is no cult of the dead in the Nazi sense, but instead a state-sponsored obsession with the memory of the Second World War forms the core social consensus of Russian society.

Moreover, while youth support is a central component of any fascist regime, in Russia, the youth are the most unreliable part of the population from the regime's point of view, and the least supportive of the war.³⁷ The renewal of old-fashioned patriotic-military inculcation is mostly limited to prevent undesired sentiments spreading among broader constituencies (especially schoolchildren and college students), rather than taking a tack of inculcating them with "the one and only true creed."³⁸

One can of course identify some potentially fascist mobilization dynamics such as, for instance, the reporting that Z signs (Z has become the visual rally-'round-the-flag symbol of the pro-war camp) are painted on the doors of antiwar activists to expose and threaten them. However, this possible mobilization remains difficult to quantify and seems to be a pretty marginal movement at the grassroots level, and likely to be mostly a PR construction pushed by the authorities. The passivity of a large part of Russian society does allow for violence to take place,

and this makes it indirectly complicit in Russia's actions in Ukraine, but this nonetheless differs from the sort of active grassroots collective mobilization seen in fascist regimes.³⁹

Furthermore, Russian society does not seem to buy the most radical arguments advanced by the state media machine to justify the war. Even though one should look with caution at today's surveys conducted in Russia, they still give us some insights.⁴⁰ A survey conducted on March 22 by the very official FOM (Funds for Public Opinion) on the reasons for the "special operation" gives the following results: the Russian public sees the war as an issue of strategic security for Russia to avoid the installation of NATO bases on Ukrainian territory (71 percent), and as the defense of the population of the two self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Luhansk (52 percent).⁴¹ Only 21 percent think the "special operation" aims at changing the political course of Ukraine and 10 percent think one of its goals is "liquidating Ukraine's statehood and integrating it into Russia." A Levada Center survey (the last independent poll agency in Russia) conducted a few days later gives slightly different results (43 percent to protect Russians in Donbas, 25 percent to protect Russia, 21 percent to de-Nazify Ukraine, and 3 percent to integrate Ukraine into Russia).⁴² Both surveys confirm that the Russian population reads the conflict mostly as a geopolitical struggle with the West and does not show any particular enthusiasm for the more cultural, political, and genocidal aims of liquidating Ukraine's statehood and nationhood.

One way to assess Russia's possible move toward fascism will be to see how its militia culture evolves in the war context. As stated by American University and University of Melbourne political scientists Lucas Dolan and Simon Frankel Pratt, "fascism starts with paramilitary ties to mainstream parties."⁴³ The Putin regime has cultivated a large militia space ranging from Cossacks to paramilitary groups to Orthodox vigilantes, and even including mixed martial arts and other trained fighters. Russian mercenary groups, including the most infamous of them, the Wagner Group (its name itself a reference to Hitler's favorite composer), have taken to displaying Nazi-inspired symbols.⁴⁴ If militia culture were to gain a new status in post-February 24 Russia and become a larger vigilante movement, it would constitute compelling evidence that the Russian state apparatus is becoming fascist.

Dangerous Policy Implications: Near and Beyond

Another critical component of our discussion relates to the usefulness of the label "fascism" for policymaking purposes. What political ends does the term serve as far as Western policy toward post-February 24 Russia is concerned?

Referring to Russia as fascist feeds into the historical metaphor that today's Russia is repeating Nazi Germany's actions in Ukraine, a metaphor that both Zelensky and many Central and Eastern European leaders put forth regularly. In March, the Western public's reactions to a Russian missile hitting the Babi Yar memorial site (where some 33,000 Jews were executed by the Nazis), and the death of one of the last Ukrainian (non-Jewish) survivors of Buchenwald in the Kharkiv bombings, drew immediate parallels with fascism not simply as a broad category of regime, but with Nazi Germany and the Holocaust in particular. Since the discovery of the mass killings of civilians in the Kyiv suburbs, illustrated by the Bucha massacre, as well as the release of more information on filtration camps and reportage on rapes of Ukrainian women by Russian soldiers, the notion of genocide has been raised to qualify Russia's war crimes and crimes against humanity, often paired with an implicit or explicit reference to the Holocaust.⁴⁵

But genocide and fascism should not be conflated, for genocide can emerge under different types of murderous regimes. In his book *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing*, UCLA sociologist Michael Mann rightfully insists on genocide's diversity of ideological contexts.⁴⁶ Some scholars, such as Johns Hopkins University political scientist Eugene Finkel, consider that the threshold for using the term "genocide" in the case of Russia's actions in Ukraine has been reached; others, like University of Amsterdam Professor of Holocaust and Genocide Studies Ugur Üngör, argue that it has not.⁴⁷ The issue of intentionality, top-down orders, and the relationship between the killing of civilians, rapes, filtration camps, and cultural annihilation will have to be investigated by international justice authorities in order to confirm or negate the genocidal nature of these murderous events.⁴⁸ Whatever qualifier is given to the violence happening in the wartime context, one should notice that it is not being replicated on the other side of the border: millions of Ukrainians continue to live in Russia, not threatened at all and not even discriminated against, meaning that there is no popular ethnic hatred or ethnic cleansing against Ukrainians within Russia itself.

The parallel with Nazi Germany is problematic for many other reasons. First, tracing the historical metaphor of the Second World War to its end implies that the war should end for Russia the way it ended for Nazi Germany in 1945: with total capitulation, collective guilt, foreign military occupation, and a Nuremberg-style trial for its leaders. This is more than improbable: the likelihood of Putin killing himself in his bunker amidst the ruins of Moscow is null. The war is not being fought

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on Russian territory and therefore the parallel with Germany's total defeat that would allow for a profound transformation of Russian political culture is not to be expected. If regime change in Moscow is perceived as the West's endgame—as bellicose statements by President Biden or Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin that Putin “cannot remain in power” and Russia “must be weakened” would seem to suggest—this may only reinforce the perception by Russian leaders that victory is an existential question for the regime.⁴⁹

Second, while the war is, to be sure, the full and sole responsibility of the Putin regime, the strategic deadlock that preceded it is not. It has been a co-created dynamic in which the West has its own share of responsibility, primarily for sending mixed signals about NATO expansion.⁵⁰ As in any human relationship, which is what relationships between countries ultimately boil down to, communication problems are a two-way street. These mixed signals on NATO directly clashed with Moscow’s “red lines”: that any Western military presence on Ukraine’s territory (whether directly through NATO enlargement or indirectly through EU agreement, which allows for foreign troops to be stationed there) would be seen as an existential threat.⁵¹

But Western ambiguities also impacted the Ukrainians themselves, who are still trying to understand to which degree they are “in” or “out” of the transatlantic community, now at the price of their own lives.

Moving forward, Ukraine’s grievances toward Western partners, already increasingly expressed by Zelensky, will continue to grow once the war reaches its stalemate, the country’s reconstruction will be slow, and Western opinion will undoubtedly show some Ukraine fatigue. These outcomes will in part be the result of the West’s two decades of mixed signaling.

It is naïve to hope that liberalism can reinvent itself just by creating an existential threat to battle

Third, the parallel with the Second World War is also analytically wrong because it presupposes a clear, Manichean triumph of good over evil. The war in Ukraine creates the illusion of a rejuvenated liberal order to come, of the type Fukuyama expressed. But blithely predicting that liberalism will find a new legitimacy only because it is united against an enemy does not prefigure a happy ending: Viktor Orbán’s and Aleksandar Vučić’s recent electoral victories in Hungary and Serbia, as well as Marine Le Pen’s garnering of an unprecedented 41 percent of the vote share in the French presidential election, serve to remind us that illiberalism remains highly attractive to a substantial swathe of the European electorate. It may be toxic to refer to Putin as a role model now, but that doesn’t mean that the homegrown elements of illiberalism in Europe and the US have miraculously

disappeared—or that illiberal leaders will not continue to partner with Russia, even if more discreetly.⁵²

Moreover, the West is denouncing Russia's language of an existential civilizational conflict even as it itself employs a civilizational vision of the world order (Biden's 2021 Democracy Summit was an unfortunate example of this) and frames the war in ideological terms of democracy versus dictatorship.⁵³ A Manichean polarization between friend and foe and enforcing a reading of the war as being a fight for the “free world” reveals an inability to conceptualize the new world (dis)order outside of outdated Cold War references, and the naïve hope that liberalism can reinvent itself just by creating a new existential threat to battle.⁵⁴

Furthermore, while the war may have awakened (at least temporarily) a renewed sense of European unity, it has not automatically made “the West” more legitimate in other regions. For the Global South, the war is an internal conflict belonging to the Global North that distracts the world community from much more important and long-term issues such as fair redistribution of the planet's wealth, fair representation in international organizations, climate change, etc.⁵⁵ The fact that 35 nations abstained at the UN General Assembly vote condemning the Russian invasion does not mean they are neutral toward Russia's aggression and indifferent to Ukraine's unjustified and unjustifiable suffering. It does mean that they consider the West partly responsible for the war because of its own normative imperialism and thus will not condone playing the sanctions card. Seen from the Global South, Russia's behavior, while unacceptable, does not in and of itself make the West any more legitimate.⁵⁶

Why Naming Russia's Regime Matters

Even after the war's shocking effects, the Russian regime is best described as personalistic, patrimonial, authoritarian, promoting revisionist positions on the international scene, and possessing an illiberal and imperialist ideology. One can point to fascist-like aesthetics (the Z-sign), some fascist-like rhetoric (eliminationist language around Ukrainian “de-Nazification” and an East-Slavic forced unification), and some religious sacralization. There is a “party of war” among the Russian elite that pushes for both unlimited ideological and physical violence, with Sergeitsev's text serving as their manifesto in favor of the total destruction of Ukraine, all the way up to justifying cultural “re-education,” Chinese-style, or physical extermination.⁵⁷

But applying the “fascism” label to the entirety of Russian society, or even just the state, conveniently overlooks a more complex and differentiated picture. We are still missing three key components of fascism: (1) the mobilization push—we

have no totalitarian party or youth organization aiming at full mobilization of the citizenry, and even a denial of military mobilization/conscription (2) a regenerative call, with some utopian futuristic plan to remake society from scratch, and (3) a genuine grassroots fascist dynamism.

Fascist regimes are mobilizational and ideological, while patrimonial regimes are anti-revolutionary, demobilizing, and based on appeals to “tradition.” Lacking the glorification of violence and the idea of regeneration through war, Russia belongs without doubt to the second category. As the historian of fascism Stanley Payne put it, Russia is “a conservative, right-wing, neo-traditionalist dictatorship … not interested in much mobilization, but in discouraging mobilization.”⁵⁸

Classifying Russia as fascist or not is not only an academic debate about use and misuse of terminology. There are policy consequences to forcing the

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Russian peg into a fascist hole and overlooking the complexities of the Russian state, of Russian society, and denying the West’s partial responsibility in the strategic deadlock that existed before the war. Drawing comparisons with Nazi Germany is convenient because we know how the history ends and who was on the right side of it. But it leads us down a hall of distorted historical metaphors that mirror Russia’s obsessive narrative about the war.⁵⁹

There is no need to reproduce Putin’s own rhetorical extremism with charges of “fascism,” or to get caught up in circular narratives.

“Fascism” offers a lazy historical analogy, painting Russia as a nation-state of “absolute Otherness” in comparison to the rest of Europe, and signaling that the country is a lost cause in and of itself. It reinforces confirmation bias and is moncausal; accepting this approach, everything bad happening in Russia can then be read through the sole analytical lens of “fascism.” It is also associated with a deep lack of historical contingency: those calling Russia fascist advance a tautological approach of “we told you so a long time ago,” conveniently forgetting to look at Putin’s and the regime’s many evolutions over more than two decades. They refuse to recognize that several futures were still possible up until very recently, as this would mean addressing the role of the West’s actions in creating a chain of events that resulted in all other options failing. The invasion of Ukraine was not encoded in the regime’s DNA.

One day, Russian society will need to take a hard look at its level of acceptance of state violence carried out in the name of the nation’s survival, its silence regarding its own harsh actions, and its deeply-seated colonial view of its neighbors. But any hope of a trauma being imposed by a military defeat that would be

great enough to force Russian society into an abrupt rethinking of its acceptance of state violence is destined to fail. If Russia is to change from the inside, it can only come from an endogenous transformation, and the mechanisms of regime transformation will be internal—even if a partial defeat in the war and the impending economic recession might help. While Putin has surely changed the future of his own country and closed the door on some alternative futures for it, Russia is still at a crossroads: the country could indeed move toward full fascism of state and society, or it could end up in a kind of authoritarian, autarkic purgatory until the current leader exits and a new future presents itself.

Claiming the moral high ground with righteous hawkish geopolitical posturing in the hopes of bringing about a “Russia Year Zero” is thus counterproductive and could very easily backfire. This hyper-moralization seems to match the US’s ill-defined war endgame: is the goal to force Russia to leave Ukraine, or do we want to see Russia definitively weakened in its great power status? The West may have to downgrade its expectations of what “success” means in ending the war.⁶⁰ The arrogance of maximalism embodied by the “fascism” qualifier, both analytically wrong and morally hawkish, is unlikely to push us closer to a solution for Ukraine and for Europe, as well as for Russia’s long-term future.

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