

# Putinism as the New Fascism

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I am often asked to compare the current situation in Russia with Stalin's Soviet Union and Hitler's Germany. I am not in favor of such comparisons. They always seem a little bit artificial. Countries, times, and people are always different, and such comparisons can be used only as mind games. You can see some common features, but it is clear that the current regime in Russia is softer than in Stalin's time, and I am sure that it is not as terrible as Germany in the 1930s—so far. But at the same time, every historian *can* try to analyze and describe the situation in a country. And to me it is clear that the Russian political regime, Russia at the moment, can be described as fascist.

The great Italian linguist and philosopher Umberto Eco formulated a list of fourteen features of fascism. Unfortunately we can see all or most of them in today's Russia. We should understand that fascism is not always Nazi Germany, it is not always Auschwitz, but it has a lot of unpleasant features. Let us look at what Umberto Eco writes.

1. *The cult of tradition.* "One has only to look at the syllabus of every fascist movement to find the major traditionalist thinkers. The Nazi gnosis was nourished by traditionalist, syncretistic, occult elements."<sup>1</sup>

The cult of tradition is surely present in Russia. Not only today, of course. Theoretically the cult of tradition is always present. But in the last decade or two it has become stronger

and stronger, and tradition is now perceived as a very aggressive and fundamentalist understanding of Christianity and of the old Russian traditions of everything. This means a very traditional family life, along with moral and even judicial permission of domestic violence. At the same time, it is clear that the Russian state today understands itself as the continuation of the Russian state before the revolution. We can identify a lot of good things in Russia before 1917, but today's Russia mostly takes those things that, in my view, led to the revolution over a hundred years ago, such as the rigid Christianity, the desire to stop any reforms, and so on. And so yes, the cult of tradition is part of today's Russia.

2. *Rejection of modernism.* "The Enlightenment, the Age of Reason, is seen as the beginning of modern depravity. In this sense, Ur-Fascism can be defined as *irrationalism*."

The Age of Enlightenment is strongly connected with modern European development. The life of most European countries today is based on the ideas of the French Revolution: *liberté* (liberty), *fraternité* (brotherhood), *égalité* (equality). These ideas were formulated at the end of the eighteenth century and have been developing all this time. At the moment, Russia is rejecting most things that come from the West, and especially those connected with human rights (which also came from the Enlightenment), and is promoting the old idea that the West is too cold, too

<sup>1</sup> Umberto Eco, "Ur-Fascism," *New York Review of Books*, June 22, 1995, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1995/06/22/ur-fascism/>.

rational, too intellectual, while Russia is emotional, which means irrational.

3. *The cult of action for action's sake.* "Action being beautiful in itself, it must be taken before, or without, any previous reflection. Thinking is a form of emasculation."

It may not be as clear as it was in Germany in the 1930s or in Mussolini's Italy, but Mr. Putin promotes himself as an image of such action. At least, he tried to before the war. These days we see him very rarely, but before the war and before Covid he always presented himself as a very physically strong person, someone who could ride a horse, fly a paraglider, swim, fight, and so on. It was an image of a macho man who never thinks too much. That was an example to the Russian people.

4. *Disagreement is treason.* "The critical spirit makes distinctions, and to distinguish is a sign of modernism. In modern culture the scientific community praises disagreement as a way to improve knowledge."

In Russia, of course disagreement is treason. I remind you of the hundreds, maybe thousands of Russian people who have tried to show their disagreement. First, Alexei Navalny, one of the most important opposition leaders in Russia, who is now in jail and gets a new sentence every few months. And it is clear that the idea of Putin's authorities is to keep him in jail as long as possible. But other people who are not as famous as Navalny are also put in jail for disagreeing, for saying that peace is better than war, or simply for coming out in a public place with a blank piece of paper on which nothing is written. Even something like that is understood as dangerous disagreement.

5. *Fear of difference.* "The first appeal of a fascist or prematurely fascist

movement is an appeal against the intruders. Thus Ur-Fascism is racist by definition."

It is clear that Russia is a really racist country, and this racism is supported and promoted by the state. We have awful, disgusting examples of the racist attitudes toward migrants from Central Asia, toward non-white people. At the moment, although that seems rather absurd, there is a kind of racism toward the Ukrainian people, all of whom are presented as Nazis, as dangerous enemies.

6. *Appeal to the social frustration.* "One of the most typical features of the historical fascism was the appeal to a frustrated middle class, a class suffering from an economic crisis or feelings of political humiliation, and frightened by the pressure of lower social groups."

I am not sure that the Russian regime aims exactly at the Russian middle class because the middle class is rather weak in Russia, but of course Putin from the beginning of his rule has played with this feeling of social frustration that millions of Russian people have unfortunately felt since the 1990s. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, people felt humiliated by the bad economic situation, which led many people—who were used to a certain level of comfort in Soviet times—to lose their positions, their jobs, their self-respect, and of course their great Soviet empire, with which they had felt an association. So when Putin started promoting imperial sentiments with the annexation of Crimea in 2014, it strangely and sadly gave many people a feeling of national pride, just because of the social frustration they had felt before.

7. *Obsession with a plot.* "At the root of the Ur-Fascist psychology there is the obsession with a plot, possibly an

international one. The followers must feel besieged.”

This is a favorite idea now; a lot of different forces are plotting against Russia! American imperialism, of course, is suspected of wanting to overthrow the Russian regime and make Russia weak, as if Russia were not weak by itself. Now Europeans are also considered enemies. The European Union is plotting against Russia; they do not want to have our gas and oil. The Ukrainians are part of this plot. And the Russian opposition is seen as connected with these terrible enemies.

8. *The enemy is both strong and weak.* “By a continuous shifting of rhetorical focus, the enemies are at the same time too strong and too weak.”

This is clearly seen if we look at the image of the United States in Russian propaganda. On the one hand, people are told that the US is plotting to destroy Russia. It is trying to bring a host of bad things, from McDonald’s to corrupt morals. This image shows the US as a strong and terrible enemy. At the same time, propaganda presents the US as a weak country. People who think of themselves as political experts explain that it will soon fail, that the American economy is weak, that the American political situation is too turbulent. So the US on the one hand is a terrible enemy, but on the other hand is quickly headed for its demise.

9. *Pacifism is trafficking with the enemy.* “For Ur-Fascism there is no struggle for life but, rather, life is lived for struggle.”

At the moment in Russia, you cannot even call the things happening in Ukraine “war.” There is a phrase used, a very strange description of this situation: the “special operation.”

You cannot criticize the war because Russia is not at war with anybody. Russia is presented as a peaceful country, though at the same time it is a country moving its armies forward because it fights for the right reason. You can’t fight against it. If you do, you are an enemy; or even worse, you are a traitor.

10. *Contempt for the weak.* “Elitism is a typical aspect of any reactionary ideology.”

Being a weak person, or weakness of any kind, is considered shameful in Russia. There are thousands and thousands of disabled people, who get very little help from the state. And (maybe even worse) disabled people, children with physical or mental problems, are continually laughed at, sometimes persecuted at school, left in isolation. Elderly people, as well as anybody who is not a physically strong man capable of beating up whomever he wishes, these are considered as nobody or almost nobody.

11. *Everybody is educated to become a hero.* “In Ur-Fascist ideology, heroism is the norm. This cult of heroism is strictly linked with the cult of death.”

It was very strong in Stalin’s time. Suicidal actions during the war were presented as a kind of model for everybody. Everybody should be prepared to die for the motherland. And now, during this unnamed war, people are also supposed to fight for the motherland—at least people say so (you can’t judge what they feel or think). They say they are ready to die, they are ready to give their children for the state, because being a hero is better than being alive.

12. *Machismo and weaponry.* “Machismo implies both disdain for women and intolerance and condemnation of

nonstandard sexual habits, from chastity to homosexuality.”

I am not sure about chastity but as for homosexuality, as for women’s rights, all this is out of the question in today’s Russia. Homophobia is widespread; domestic violence is everywhere and is more or less supported by the state and by the church. It is looked at as an old Russian tradition that the husband can beat his wife, the father can beat and abuse his children. There is nothing bad in it. You should maybe moderate the violence—do not beat them to death—but the idea of physical abuse is regarded as Russian tradition.

13. *Selective populism*. “There is in our future a TV or Internet populism, in which the emotional response of a selected group of citizens can be presented and accepted as the Voice of the People.”

This is constantly evident on TV and in rallies organized by the state, where thousands of teachers or medical workers or others who receive a salary from the state are brought in to show their support. Young people cry and shout how they adore their president. Sometimes all of this is entirely fake. Sometimes people are overwhelmed by this wave of organized enthusiasm, and these events are presented as the will of the whole country. We now have a heated debate about how many people really support the war. Though it’s clear that many people do, not everybody is so sure that supporters of the war are really as numerous

as propaganda presents. Showing all these rallies and groups of elderly women shouting their support for Putin is one way of suggesting how much people love their president.

14. *Ur-Fascism speaks Newspeak*. “All the Nazi or Fascist schoolbooks made use of an impoverished vocabulary, and an elementary syntax, in order to limit the instruments for complex and critical reasoning.”

It’s not so easy to explain this to an English-speaking audience, but Newspeak as understood by George Orwell is clearly present in Russia. The Russian language is getting more and more impoverished, more and more primitive. Maybe a year or two ago, a very important and well-known Russian linguist, Gasan Guseinov, wrote an article calling the official Russian language—the language used in the mass media at the moment—a “crap” language. This produced a wave of protest, and changed the social position of this previously respected academician. He left Russia and now teaches somewhere in Europe. It was clear that all the protests and hate speech directed against this person and his ideas were inspired by the state, because the state recognized the truth of his accusations.

All fourteen of these features of fascism are present in today’s Russia, some more and some less. It is a very sad conclusion and I really hope it will not be like this forever. I hope that in my lifetime I will see changes. Let’s say no to war. ✱



**Tamara Eidelman** is a historian and teacher. Her popular YouTube channel in Russian, “Уроки истории с Тамарой Эйдельман,” is found at <https://www.youtube.com/c/TamaraEidelmanHistory/videos>.