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**Russia**

# **From Managed Democracy to Fascism: Putin's Imposition of Obedience and Order on Russian Society**

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**In just a month and a half since the outbreak of war in Ukraine, Putin's Russia has entered a new period in its history. The authoritarian regime built over the last twenty years, despite ever-increasing repression, has until recently allowed the existence of limited freedom of speech, party struggle within a so-called "managed democracy," and most importantly, the right for private life.**

The latter was a key element in the permanent depoliticization of Russian society: you might be unenthusiastic about government decisions or presidential rhetoric, but you always had a safe haven from "politics" in your daily business or your family circle. Today, with the letter Z, which has become almost an official grim symbol of the invasion of Ukraine, adorning the windows of public transport, schools and hospitals, the cosy space of private life has lost its right to exist.

The regime now requires unequivocal public acceptance of the war from every citizen. Any sign of deviation from this civic duty is condemned as treason, and any dissemination of information about the war other than official Defence Ministry briefs is treated as a crime. Since the war began, dozens of Russians - young and old, residents of Moscow and provincial towns - have been charged with new criminal offences of "discrediting the Russian army." Not only going into a square with an anti-war poster, but even a pacifist badge on a backpack or a careless comment in the workplace can be grounds for arrest or a huge financial fine. The persecution of dissidents is gradually becoming not only a matter for the police, but also for "vigilantes" who are prepared to write a denunciation about a neighbour or a colleague. All this does not mean, however, that mass nationalist fanaticism has taken the place of depoliticization - on the contrary, propaganda and repression remain the exclusive monopoly of the state.

Support for the war is strictly controlled from above and does not allow for any form of self-organisation. For example, the authorities have banned right-wing radicals from organising independent marches in solidarity with the Russian army - such actions can only be carried out by local authorities according to a uniform script approved by the presidential administration from Moscow. Backing for the war can only come in the form of backing for Putin; it must reflect the complete identity of the national leader and his people, and nothing else. Anyone who is not prepared to do so is defined as an abettor of the "Nazis." This maniacal fixation of official propaganda on the terms "denazification" and "Nazism" seems as if it specifically suggests the right definitions for the changed nature of Putin's regime.

I think it can already be stated that today's political regime in Russia is rapidly evolving towards a new form of fascism - the fascism of the twenty-first century. But what are its characteristics? What are its similarities and differences from the European fascism of the first half of the previous century?

A huge body of historical and philosophical literature on fascism of the past has provided a variety of answers about the nature of this phenomenon. I would focus on two largely opposing approaches, one of which can be described as a theory of "movement" and the other as a theory of "move." The first approach (by historians such as Ernst Nolte, for example) saw fascism primarily as a mass movement aimed at suppressing a revolutionary threat from outside the state, which was too weak to protect the rule of the ruling elite. According to this approach, the fascist movement broke the state's monopoly on violence against political opponents and then, once in power, transformed that state from within. The fascist regimes in Italy and Germany were, therefore, primarily movements that radically transformed the state and gave it a form of its own.

The second approach, by contrast, viewed fascism primarily as a top-down coup by the ruling classes themselves.

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This position was most clearly expressed by the sociologist Karl Polanyi, who saw in fascism an aspiration for the final victory of capitalist logic over any form of self-organisation and solidarity in society. The aim of fascism, according to Polanyi, was the complete social atomization and the dissolution of the individual into the machine of production. Fascism was thus something more profound than a reaction to the danger of revolutionary anti-capitalist movements from below - it was inextricably linked to the final establishment of the domination of the economy over society. Its goal was not only to destroy workers' parties, but any element of democratic control from below in general.



*A Russian flashmob in the form of a letter "Z".*

*Flash mob at the Platinum Arena in Khabarovsk on 11 March 2022, organized by the Central District Management Committee and the United Russia party as part of the "We don't abandon our own" (!2>8E 5 @>A05<) campaign. Attendees including Young Guard of United Russia members and local residents arrange themselves in "Z" symbol formation. Photo by the City of Khabarovsk.*

Modern fascism (or, as the historian Enzo Traverso defined it, post-fascism) no longer needs mass movements or a more or less coherent ideology. It seeks to affirm social inequality and the subordination of the lower classes to the higher classes as unconditional as the only possible reality and the only credible law of society.

Russian society, after thirty years of post-Soviet authoritarianism and neoliberal market reforms, has consistently been reduced to a state of silent victimhood, a malleable material from which a full-fledged fascist regime can be built. External aggression, based on the complete dehumanisation of the enemy ("Nazis" and "non-humans," as Putin's official propaganda puts it), was the decisive moment in the "move" made from above. Of course, the Russian regime has its own unique features and was produced by a complex combination of specific historical circumstances. However, it is very important to understand that Putin's fascism is not an anomaly, a deviation from "normal" development - including in Western societies.

Putinism is a frightening sign of a possible future to which extreme right-wing parties striving for power in various European countries could lead. In order to fight for a different future, we all need to reconsider the very foundations of the capitalist logic, which is quietly but persistently preparing the ground for a "move" from the top, which could happen in a heartbeat. The old and somewhat forgotten dilemma of Rosa Luxemburg, "socialism or barbarism," has become an urgent reality for Russia and for the world since the fateful morning of the 24th of February.

23 April 2022

Source [Tempest](#).

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