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Far right

“The crisis of liberal hegemony is the reason why so many Europeans are turning to the extreme right”

- Features -

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Exiled Russian political scientist and activist Ilya Budraitskis explains the causes of the rise of the extreme right, the goals of the new fascists, and what lessons the radical left should draw from the 20th century for the fight against fascism. He makes a few suggestions for where anti-fascist politics could begin today in this interview by Philipp Schmid (BFS Zürich) first published in [Sozialismus.ch](https://www.sozialismus.ch).

Philipp Schmid: The political development in Europe is extremely concerning. The fascist party Alternative for Germany (AfD) achieved 20.8% in the 2025 federal elections. At demonstrations in Germany, people are saying it's not 5 minutes to midnight, but 19:33 hours. Is this panic justified?

Ilya Budraitskis: Yes, I think these fears are justified. We can observe how the influence of various far-right parties in Europe, in the USA, in Latin America, etc. is constantly increasing. Of course, this global trend manifests differently in various national contexts, but the danger is real. Because it is connected with the will of certain parts of the elites to radically change the political configurations of bourgeois power and install a different kind of political regime. In Russia, this has already happened; in the USA, this process is underway. In Western Europe, the extreme right has achieved great electoral successes, but the transformation of political rule is still pending. However, given their strengthening, this is a possible scenario for the future.

What political order are they aiming for?

This can best be seen in the example of the USA. With Trump, the extreme right is back in power. They control the most important parts of the state apparatus such as the Senate, the House of Representatives, and the Supreme Court. And now they are trying to rebuild the political system from above towards authoritarian rule. It is to be organised like a capitalist enterprise. That's the goal of Trump and Musk. And consequently, that means the abolition of liberal democracy and the replacement of this system with a kind of modern monarchy. They are striving for a regime where authority is not based on democratic legitimacy, but on the principle of personalised power and an authoritarian leader.

What is the ideological programme of the extreme right besides the authoritarian restructuring of society?

The core of their ideological programme is that liberal democracy is at an end. They claim it is fake and only a pretence rule, behind which hides a concealed global elite, guided by false principles such as international law and tolerance. The extreme right criticises the supposed morality and values of liberal elites because they allegedly protect the weak and not the strong.

"One of the main reasons for the rise of the extreme right is the neoliberal restructuring of European societies. The constant social atomisation of people and the destruction of trade unions go hand in hand with the decline of traditions of democracy. This is the material basis for the ideological crisis of the liberal elites."

In the imagination of the extreme right, the only principle of international politics should be the power of the strongest. This is the "natural" way to govern society. This is the logic behind the way Trump and Putin govern. We see this in the example of Putin's criticism of support for Ukraine: in his way of thinking, small nations that cannot defend themselves have no right to exist. And therefore their sovereignty, that is, their existence as independent countries, is artificial in the eyes of the extreme right.

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How do you explain the rise of far-right and fascist forces in Europe over the last 10 years?

There are many reasons for the increasing electoral successes of far-right parties in Europe. One of the most important is the transformation of European societies as a result of the neoliberal reforms of recent decades. The progressive social atomisation of people, the smashing of trade unions and other forms of self-organisation of workers goes hand in hand with the decline of democratic traditions, which are to be understood not only as a system of liberal institutions, but also as the ability of society to defend itself collectively and in an organised manner.

This is the material basis for the ideological crisis of the liberal elites, because people are increasingly disillusioned with bourgeois-liberal democracy and its institutions. They do not feel represented and not heard. The extreme right skilfully ties in with these widespread feelings.

Classical Marxist analysis of fascism has always understood fascism as a reaction to the crisis of capitalism and as the bourgeoisie's answer to the strengthening of the workers' movement. Does this analysis still apply?

Despite the historical differences, there are indeed similarities between the 1920s/30s and today's situation. The crisis of the political institutions of the Weimar Republic, the Great Depression from 1929 onwards and the associated enormous social disruptions formed the breeding ground for the rise and seizure of power of German fascism. Although there was no immediate danger of a proletarian revolution, the workers' movement in Germany was one of the strongest in the world. The social democratic SPD and the communist KPD were mass parties with which the fascists competed for influence. Due to the overall social crisis, there was mass disillusionment in the population with the system of bourgeois-liberal democracy. We can also observe the latter in today's situation, which is also characterised by a multiple crisis of the capitalist order. However, there is a central difference.

Which one?

In the 1920s/30s, the fascists competed with the workers' movement for alternative visions of the future to the capitalist system. They propagated a vision of the future in which there would be no more class conflicts and in which national glory would unite the population. And they had the ambition to create a new human being who would be connected to society in the sense of national solidarity and a kind of fascist collectivism. That's why this reactionary fascist utopia was so attractive to many people in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s. And that's why it competed with the socialist utopia and the socialist vision of a different kind of human relationship. Today, I don't see a competition between alternative visions of the future.

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But don't the fascists still propagate a different society today with national borders, a homogeneous people and clearly distributed gender roles?

Yes, but the sense of time and the understanding of time are quite different from a hundred years ago in Europe. At that time, the question of a better future and social progress was at the centre of society's aspirations. Under the rule of late capitalism since the 1980s, the idea of a future is disappearing. People are primarily concerned with the present and the interpretations of the past that have led to the current situation. We live in the now, in which an alternative future is unimaginable. That is exactly the result of the neoliberal restructuring of society. Margaret Thatcher's famous saying "there is no alternative" (TINA) has more or less become the social consensus. Trump's political programme clearly shows this. He doesn't make concrete proposals and doesn't propagate a clear vision of

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the future. He merely negates the "liberal now" in the name of a "truth" defined by him.

Back to the characterisation of the new extreme right. The well-known Marxist fascism researcher Enzo Traverso proposes the term postfascism in his book 'Les nouveaux visages du fascisme' from 2017 to describe the new fascists. What does he mean by that?

Enzo Traverso takes the view that today's post-fascist parties, unlike their historical role models, do not try to break with the mechanisms of bourgeois-liberal democracy. Instead, they successfully use the mechanisms of democracy to expand their influence. They only want to use the system to come to power. This can be observed in the example of Italy. The post-fascist Giorgia Meloni has not turned the political system upside down and replaced it with a fascist regime. Such a scenario is also unlikely if Marine Le Pen in France or the AfD in Germany participate in government. Rather, they will try to gradually change the mentality of societies and elites. As yet, there is no consensus in the ruling circles to transform the political system into a new form of authoritarian fascism. But this can change under the continuing pressure of the extreme right.

Already today, liberal and conservative governments are taking over the demands of the extreme right. We must understand that the use of bourgeois-liberal institutions and elections by the extreme right could represent a transitional point on the way to the realisation of their ultimate political project for all these movements. For these reasons, I think the term postfascism is useful to describe the commonalities and differences between the current extreme right and the historical fascists.

Can this analysis also be applied to Russia and Putin's regime?

Yes, Russia has gone through exactly this process and is today an ultra-authoritarian regime. In the last 25 years of Putin's government, the Russian regime has fundamentally changed. In the first decade, in the 2000s, Russia was more of a kind of authoritarian, technocratic, neoliberal regime. The global economic crisis from 2007/08 led not only to a general political crisis in the Arab world, but also in Russia. In 2011/12, there were massive protests in Moscow and other Russian cities against Putin's re-election. These civil society protests were perceived as a political and ideological threat and led to the conviction of the Russian elites that an authoritarian transformation of their rule was necessary.

How has this transformation affected things?

The idea that social movements from below could overthrow a government is an existential threat to autocratic regimes. Therefore, Putin's return to the presidency in 2012 was associated with an ideological turn towards so-called traditional, anti-democratic values. And these anti-democratic elements were based on the idea that the Russian state was not the result of a social contract, but the result of history. The Russian Federation is the direct continuation of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. This means that Putin does not have to be elected by the people, but is destined by fate to lead the country. Putin sees himself as the direct successor of Peter the Great and Stalin. These ideas were eventually enshrined in the Russian constitution in 2020. At their core, these convictions are also responsible for the violent reaction to the events in Ukraine during the Maidan protests in 2013/14.

Why?

The Ukrainians on the Maidan protested against Russia's influence and for Ukraine's national sovereignty. The protests were not only described by the Russian regime as "staged from outside", but also perceived as an internal threat to the so-called "historical Russia". In this second decade of Putin's rule, military intervention in Ukraine began, including the annexation of Crimea. This went hand in hand with the increasing authoritarianisation of Putin's rule and

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his establishment as ruler for life.

How did the democratically minded Russian civil population react to these developments?

Putin was once again confronted with a strengthening democratic protest movement and the dissatisfaction of large parts of Russian society. He also understood this wave of protest as a combination of external and internal threats. All revolutions, including the Russian one of 1917, had allegedly been covertly controlled by Russia's external enemies. The West had poisoned Russian society with false, liberal or socialist ideas. Putin's response to the renewed protests was the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. For Putin, the Ukraine question is not just a question of the geostrategic interests of the Russian state in the global arena. It was not just about competition with NATO, but also about the existence of his own regime. That's why the invasion of Ukraine was a turning point. Putin used the war to transform the regime into a repressive dictatorship.

So do you describe Putin's regime today as fascist?

Yes, why not? Of course, today's fascism differs in many respects from the historical one. In Russia, unlike in Germany and Italy, fascism has no historical model. Instead, there are various other authoritarian traditions that Putin's regime can draw on. Thus, Putin uses the extremely conservative, clerical tradition of the Russian Empire to justify his autocracy. Repressive practices from the Stalinist past were also adopted, as the role of the secret service FSB (successor to the KGB) shows. The FSB is now the most influential element of the Russian regime.

Part of the radical left in the West ignores – or worse: negates – the danger posed by the fascist regime in Russia.

Exactly, and what is even more tragic, it is also completely unprepared for the rise of fascism in its own countries. The rise of the new fascism is a great challenge for the left. In the USA, for example, before Trump's re-election, the radical left concentrated its criticism mainly on Biden and the Democratic Party, forgetting the actual danger of Trumpism. Now it is completely lost. This can also happen in other countries. We know from history that the left in the 20th century was also not prepared for the rise of fascism. The Stalinist Communist International downplayed the fascist danger for far too long. The difference to today is that the radical left is much weaker than it was a hundred years ago.

What other lessons can be drawn from the anti-fascist resistance in the 20th century?

The most important lesson from history is that fascism always leads to militarisation and war. This was not clear to the European anti-fascists at the beginning of the fascists' rise to power in the 1920s and 1930s. Today, this is much more obvious and therefore we should combine our anti-militarist and anti-imperialist propaganda with anti-fascist propaganda. The left should not limit itself to criticising the rising military expenditure. A regime like Putin's rejects any form of peaceful coexistence and glorifies war as a means of governing the country and expanding its influence. This logic is behind the concept of the so-called multipolar world – a world in which there should no longer be universal rights and rules, but in which the strongest nation prevails.

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What would an anti-fascism of the 21st century have to be based on in order to combat (post-)fascism more

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successfully than before?

We need to form broad coalitions against the rise of the extreme right. But these must not invoke the defence of bourgeois-liberal institutions. That is not our task and would also be futile. Because precisely the crisis of liberal hegemony is one of the reasons why so many people lose trust in the existing structures and turn to the extreme right.

In my opinion, the radical left should pursue two thrusts: firstly, we must address social discontent – but offer other solutions. The extreme right wants to make people believe that migration is the cause of all their problems. That this is objectively not true can be seen from the fact that the AfD received the most votes in the 2025 federal elections where the population share of migrants was lowest. This opens up a possible political vacuum that the left must fill by pointing out the true causes of the real problems of the people.

And secondly?

Secondly, we should put the defence of "democracy" at the centre, and not a "democracy" that is limited to bourgeois-democratic institutions and their functioning. We must connect the defence of "democracy" with the demand for equality and participation, because that's what it was about when it emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries: the struggle of the lower classes for political influence and representation. Such a left or socialist understanding of democracy as "power from below" can serve as a common basis for a broad anti-fascist coalition that brings together left-wing parties, trade unions and the diverse forms of feminist, anti-racist, ecological and neighbourhood self-organisation. Because these are exactly the projects that the post- or neo-fascists want to destroy, because they contradict their idea of a hierarchical state order built like a capitalist enterprise.

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Translated by Adam Novak [for ESSF](#).

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