

# The character of the Russian regime

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1	The scorpion and the frog.....	1
2	An autocracy.....	2
3	A kleptocracy.....	2
4	A criminal enterprise.....	3
5	Features of fascism.....	6
6	Conclusion.....	9
	Endnotes.....	11

## 1 The scorpion and the frog

*Prologue: About making deals or the Russian fable of the scorpion and the frog*

*A scorpion wants to cross a river but cannot swim, so it asks a frog to carry it across. The frog hesitates, afraid that the scorpion might sting it, but the scorpion promises not to, pointing out that it would drown if it killed the frog in the middle of the river. The frog considers this argument sensible and agrees to transport the scorpion. Half-way across the river, the scorpion stings the frog anyway, dooming them both. The dying frog asks the scorpion why it stung it despite knowing the consequence. To this the scorpion replies: “Sorry but I could not resist; it is in my характер [character]”.*

Four years after the start of Russia’s full aggression against Ukraine (launched on 24 February 2022), twelve years after Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the start of its intervention in the Donbas (2014), three years after the US government committed to defend “freedom for Ukraine, freedom everywhere” (February 2023) and two years after Alexei Navalny was murdered in a Russian prison (February 2024),<sup>1</sup> there is no end to the war in sight. And while it was decided in June 2025 to set up a Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression against Ukraine at the Council of Europe in order to prosecute those responsible for this serious breach of international law,<sup>2</sup> the

US administration of Donald Trump not only commenced negotiations with the Russian regime – over the heads of Ukraine and Europe – but granted legitimacy to it by welcoming Russian president Vladimir Putin to Alaska, USA (August 2025). Putin followed up by further intensifying Russian attacks against Ukraine. Many consider that Trump has given Putin a lifeline by engaging with him while withholding support to Ukraine. The European Union, on the other hand, in February 2026 concluded that Russia was “not ready for peace” with “no tangible signs of serious engagement”.<sup>3</sup>

It is unclear what will happen next. In any case, whether considering continued support to Ukraine, negotiations to end the war, or a future security architecture, it is important to understand the character of the Russian political regime<sup>4</sup> to negotiate and cooperate with or to isolate, contain or defeat.

The character of the regime was laid bare by the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The Russian regime, as is argued in this essay:

- (a) is an autocracy where a single leader is able to make decisions of catastrophic dimensions;
- (b) is a kleptocracy not only permitting self-enrichment by Vladimir Putin and his ruling elites but also generating enormous resources to fund internal and external actions and ensure the survival of the regime;
- (c) functions in many ways like a criminal organization;
- (d) has the features of fascism.

## 2 An autocracy

Following the end of the Soviet Union in December 1991, the prospects that Russia would over time become a modern democracy were uncertain from the outset and were further jeopardized in the “turbulent 1990s” by economic crises and the rise of the so-called “oligarchs”.

In the course of Putin’s rule as president (and prime minister in-between) since 2000, the Russian regime turned increasingly authoritarian. For a few years, some indices considered Russia a “democracy with low performance” or a “hybrid regime”, but there is broad agreement that since 2012, when Putin returned to the presidency for a third mandate, the regime is “authoritarian”.<sup>5</sup> It is marked (a) by the centralization of political power; (b) by power that is not accountable; (c) by the absence of free, fair and competitive elections; (d) by repression of dissent and of political pluralism more broadly; (e) by restrictions to civil liberties, including control of speech and media; (f) by the effective absence of a separation of powers; and (g) by the arbitrary application of norms and laws, that is, by the absence of the rule of law.<sup>6</sup>

In political theory, one type of “authoritarian regime” is that of an “autocracy” where power is concentrated in a single centre or person with absolute power and without being subject to control or limitations.

Analysts have previously been reluctant to label Russia an “autocracy” because of the theory of some sort of collective decision-making by an inner circle with Putin in the centre (“collective Putin” or “Politburo 2.0” or – alternatively – a “court”) where different interests of powerful elite groups or factions with all sorts of resources are balanced or reconciled. According to the author of the politburo-concept, Yevgeny Minchenko,<sup>7</sup> by 2021, the “Politburo 2.0” comprised nine members representing the power vertical (Nikolai Patrushev, Sergey Shoigu, Dmitri Medvedev), state corporations (Igor Sechin, Sergey Chemezov, Sergey Sobyenin) and the banking and business sectors (Arkady Rotenberg, Yuri Kovalchuk, Gennady Timchenko). Some of these have since lost influence while others (such as Alexander Bortnikov, Alexei Dyumin or Vyacheslav

Volodin) could be added. These persons are members of an inner circle that Putin trusts and that represent nodes of power through which he can exercise control. However, this model hardly describes a system of collective leadership. While these “lieutenants” are crucial for the functioning of the regime, the prevailing opinion is that Putin now is fairly alone in decision-making. The widely broadcast Russian Security Council meeting on 21 February 2022, three days prior to the start of the war, was illustrative in this respect.<sup>8</sup>

The “collective Putin” or “Politburo 2.0” theory can definitely be laid to rest since Putin’s decision to launch an all-out war of aggression in February 2022: Putin, who had become increasingly obsessed with Ukraine since the Maidan in 2014, who – compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic – had become extremely isolated in terms of access to him by others and of access by him to information, who possibly self-radicalized over the historical destiny of Russia (and himself), personally made the catastrophic decision to go to war because he had the power to do so. This is only possible in an autocracy where power is concentrated in a single person.

## 3 A kleptocracy

The system of governance in Russia under Putin has often been described as a “kleptocracy” or a “rule of thieves”, that is, a system marked by unlimited grand corruption, where members of the ruling elite appropriate for themselves with impunity the wealth of the country that they govern.

In the 1990s – and prior to Putin becoming president – a small group of businessmen had become immensely wealthy by acquiring state assets during the process of market liberalization and privatization. These “oligarchs” controlled a large share of the economy, banking sector and media. Some of them – the so-called “seven bankers”<sup>9</sup> – decided to organize the re-election in 1996 of the then deeply unpopular president Boris Yeltsin. In a loan-for-shares programme they provided loans to save the government of Yeltsin in exchange for further shares in state enterprises. In the final years of Boris Yeltsin between 1996 and 1999,

Russia had literally been bankrolled by this group of oligarchs.

Russia, at that point, may not have been considered a kleptocracy in the proper sense. While those oligarchs controlled much of the economy and exercised strong influence on the government of Yeltsin, and while the government itself was marked by corruption, the powerbase of the oligarchs was outside the government.<sup>10</sup>

Upon becoming president in January 2000, Putin set out to either remove these oligarchs or put them and their property in their place – and at his service.<sup>11</sup> The system of governance he established in the following years was shaped by his experience at the mayor's office of St. Petersburg between 1991 and 1996. As head of the committee for external relations he was directly involved in a system of corruption, extortion rackets related to the economic activities of the city and its port, the fraudulent sale of export licenses and misuse of public funds. He was in a position to decide which businesses and deals could proceed and which not. His approach was marked by (a) symbiotic relationships with criminal organizations; (b) establishing or putting financial and other private sector organizations – and thus assets worth billions of Euros – at his disposal; and (c) putting trusted friends and persons in charge of these organizations to ensure direct or indirect control over these assets.

Once president, his approach was furthermore shaped by what turned out to be a milestone, namely the case of Khodorkovsky and Yukos. Following the arrest and imprisonment of Mikhail Khodorkovsky in 2003, his company Yukos, with its core asset Yuganskneftegaz, was basically confiscated and auctioned off far below its value to a front company set up by the government and then handed over to Rosneft. This put Rosneft on course to becoming the largest oil company in Russia.<sup>12</sup> In 2004, Igor Sechin – former KGB officer, Putin's deputy in Sankt Petersburg, then his presidential deputy chief of staff and one of his closest friends – was appointed chair of the board of directors of Rosneft.<sup>13</sup>

With the confiscation of Yukos Oil and the trials of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Putin elevated the modus operandi he had developed in Sankt Petersburg to a higher level: (a) appropriation of

the resources of the state, (b) placing his trusted friends in charge of the main actors of the economy and (c) submitting the judicial system to his orders. Numerous examples have been documented in the course of the years of how assets worth billions of Euros have been accumulated by a small number of Russians with close ties to Putin and by Putin himself.<sup>14</sup>

This is why the system of government in Russia under Putin is rightly labelled a “kleptocracy” where persons in power appropriate the wealth of the country for themselves and their associates.

However, self-enrichment is not the only *raison d'être* of Putin and his ruling elite. This system generates enormous resources – resources that are off-budget and not subject to any control, oversight or accountability – that are available to Putin to consolidate political control domestically, to carry out influence operations, hybrid warfare and military interventions abroad, or to create parallel and informal structures, methods or organizations.<sup>15</sup> These resources represent an “*obschak*”, that is, a type of cashbox or common fund – in this case a “*presidential obschak*”<sup>16</sup> – that is typical for criminal organizations in the countries of the former Soviet Union.

## 4 A criminal enterprise

The political system under Putin has been called a “*mafia state*”, that is, a state where the government or some of its institutions or officials are part of a criminal enterprise.<sup>17</sup> This term was reportedly first used by Alexander Litvinienko, the Russian defector and former officer of the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (FSB), who had accused his superiors of having ordered the assassination of the oligarch Boris Berezovsky, of having staged the Russian apartment bombings in September 1999 to bring Putin to power and of having ordered the assassination of the journalist Anna Politkovskaya in October 2006. Litvinienko himself was assassinated by poisoning with polonium in November 2006 while in exile in the United Kingdom.<sup>18</sup> The “*mafia state*” label made the headlines again when Yevgeny Prigozhin and some of his associates of the Wagner PMC (private military company) were assassinated in August 2023.

Connections between Russian administrations and criminal organizations have existed for hundreds of years, and relationships between members of the former Soviet nomenklatura with criminals for mutual benefit have also shaped the evolution of post-Soviet Russian organized crime from 1991 onwards. Governments, or those in power, may have tolerated or even sponsored organized crime.<sup>19</sup> However, there is a strong case for the argument that today not only is there a symbiotic relationship between members or institutions of the Russian regime and criminal organizations but that the Russian regime itself has the characteristics of a criminal organization: a criminal enterprise that is aimed at generating profit from illicit activities and that is deploying corruption of officials, intimidation, threats or force to protect its operations. Supporting arguments include:

1. The Russian regime is a profit-seeking kleptocracy as described above.
2. Corruption, intimidation and violence have been the means of Putin to ascend to the office of prime minister of Russia and then to the presidency. In 1998/1999 – as head of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) he produced compromising materials (“kompromat”) on prosecutor general Yuri Skuratov in order to force the closure of corruption investigations of the then president Boris Yeltsin. In the summer of 1999, Yeltsin made Putin prime minister and, upon his resignation on 31 December 1999, his successor as president of Russia. From September 1999, Putin became known to the Russian public by his vigorous response to the “Russian apartment bombings” that had killed more than 300 people in Moscow, Dagestan and Volgodonsk. Ever since these bombings, there have been reports that those had been organized by the FSB in order to bring Putin into power.<sup>20</sup> Several members of an independent commission set up to investigate these allegations were subsequently assassinated.<sup>21</sup>
3. Assassination of opponents is a regular modus operandi of the regime. Numerous politicians of the opposition, journalists, human rights activists or business persons have been assassinated over the last twenty

five years.<sup>22</sup> Poisoning has been one of the means used, including with the radioactive metal Polonium or the nerve agent and chemical weapon Novichok. Some have survived assassination attempts through poisoning but were then imprisoned (examples, Alexei Navalny (who subsequently died of poisoning by a rare toxin in February 2024 while in prison in Russia) or Vladimir Kara-Murza). Since the launch of the war against Ukraine in February 2022, an increasing number of Russian businessmen, oligarchs or politicians – and sometimes their relatives – are dying under suspicious circumstances.<sup>23</sup>

4. Money laundering is a systemic feature of the Russian regime, while the anti-money laundering system is used to control opponents. Russian “dark money” – reportedly amounting to the equivalent of hundreds of billions (some suggest more than 2 trillion) of Euros – have been laundered in recent years, often making use of off-shore or western banking systems (Baltics, Cyprus, Panama, Switzerland, United Kingdom and others), much of it by close allies of Putin and, according to some reports, on his behalf (examples of Sergey Roldugin, Arkady Rotenberg, Yuri Kovalchuk). In 2001, Russia had been blacklisted by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) as an NCCT, that is, a “non-cooperative country or territory”. In 2002, and in line with FATF recommendations, Putin set up a well-resourced financial intelligence unit (since 2004 called Federal Service for Financial Monitoring or “Rosfinmonitoring”) and had anti-money laundering legislation adopted that, *inter alia*, introduced legal measures for the confiscation of criminal assets. Since 2012, when Putin returned to the presidency, Rosfinmonitoring is directly subordinated to him. This anti-money laundering system does not seem to be applied against members and allies of the regime. Rather, it is used to control financial transactions and target and confiscate the property of organizations, opponents and businesses (including “foreign agents”) that don’t agree with the regime. Those that investigate fraud and money laundering are at serious risk (case of Sergey Magnitsky).<sup>24</sup> One of the functions of Rosfinmonitoring is the

compilation of a list of organizations and individuals considered to be involved in extremist activities or terrorism. The actual purpose of this list is to integrate anti-money laundering and countering extremism into a system of political control. By November 2025, the register reportedly included more than 19,000 individuals and over 820 organizations. A steep increase in politically-motivated entries followed the start of Russia's full war of aggression against Ukraine in February 2022. In 2024 alone, 3165 individuals were reportedly added.<sup>25</sup>

5. The regime seeks legitimacy through its relationship with the Orthodox Church – another analogy to mafia-type criminal organizations. The Russian Orthodox Church under Patriarch Kirill since 2009, is a strong ally of Putin (Putin was “a gift of god” and his rule over Russia had been “mandated by god”), blessing the war against Ukraine (dying in Ukraine “washes away all sins”). The Orthodox Church under Putin has received major state funding for religious schools and church buildings since Kirill became its patriarch. Kirill himself is considered immensely rich and a billionaire, reportedly having made his fortune smuggling duty-free tobacco and alcohol. Swiss police records indicate that Kirill, during his time in Geneva (1971-1974) had been working for the KGB.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps even more than the Catholic Church for the mafia in Italy, the Orthodox Church is an important source of legitimacy for the Russian regime.
6. The Russian regime shows the structural characteristics of an organized crime group. At the formal level, the Russian regime is functioning through the official institutions, regulations and procedures foreseen in the constitution and laws of Russia. At the level of the organized crime group, decisions are made by Putin, possibly in consultation with a small group of trusted friends, and executed by his lieutenants while making use of illicit means and informal or parallel structures, including other offenders and criminal organizations. The so-called “power vertical” (see section 5 below) is used to execute decisions both at the formal, normative level of the state and at the informal, criminal level of the organized crime group. In a typology of organized crime, the Russian regime would be an hierarchical organized crime group with Putin as the “capo dei capi” directing the affairs of this group through trusted and highly loyal secondary bosses or lieutenants in charge of different sectors of the criminal enterprise, while making sure that the levels below him remain sufficiently fragmented to prevent (coalitions of) competitors from threatening his position. For example, one role of Yevgeni Prigozhin with his Wagner Private Military Company (PMC) was to keep the military establishment at bay, until he became himself a threat to the regime and thus was assassinated.
7. The Russian regime functions as a “roof” (“krysha”) – a concept often referred to in analyses of post-Soviet organized crime.<sup>27</sup> In the narrow sense a “roof” means a protection racket where businesses have to pay criminal organizations for the protection of their business. In a broader sense “krysha” refers to a patronage system that is a characteristic of the power vertical: those that are loyal and are prepared to serve the regime in solidarity are given protection (a “roof”); those that are not loyal are persecuted by any means, ranging from assassinations and other forms of violence to business raiding,<sup>28</sup> confiscation of property or prosecution through the justice system. This concept (it may be called “Krysha Putina”) explains rather well the methods applied by the Russian regime to ensure that its interests are served.
8. An area illustrating the functioning of the regime like a criminal organization is cyber-crime. The regime has not only developed a symbiotic relationship with cybercrime groups but has itself adopted the structures and methods of cybercriminal organizations:
  - (a) It has created units within its internal (FSB), external (SVR) and military (GRU) security services to carry out cyberattacks and commit cybercrime, at times with global ramifications (example of “NotPetya”). These state actors are also known as APT28/Fancy

Bear, APT29/Cozy Bear, Voodoo Bear/Sandworm Team and by other names;

- (b) the regime supports or outsources activities to criminal groups or individuals in order to make use of skilled resources and cybercrime-as-a-service to serve its interests while providing “plausible deniability”. Foundational models include the “Russian Business Network” (from 2006) and the “Internet Research Agency” – also known as the “Sankt Petersburg troll factory” – that was established in 2013 by Yevgeny Prigozhin for influence operations; and
- (c) the regime is tolerant towards cybercrime groups or individual criminals and permits them to pursue their activities as long as these do not target Russian institutions or otherwise do not run counter the interests of the regime. A long list of cybercrime actors commit crime for profit but are also aligned with the regime, carrying out offences related to ransomware, denial of service attacks, and posing threats to critical infrastructure. And many, if not most of them, have been or are involved in cyberattacks against Ukraine.

This illustrates that cybercrime and other forms of cyberthreats committed by security bodies of the Russian regime, private sector organizations and criminal organizations are often difficult to distinguish from one another. They pursue the interests of the regime, and they appear to have morphed into one criminal organization or network under the overall direction of the regime. Those organizations that operate in the interest of the regime are covered by the “roof”; others may be investigated and prosecuted.<sup>29</sup>

9. The foreign policy of Russia, in some respects, is an extension of the criminal domain. Unlike the Soviet Union that had an ideology underpinning its foreign policies and its alliances with other states, Russia under Putin has no vision nor ideology to offer to other countries. Russia’s current foreign policy is aimed at permanent destabilization, disruption and corruption of

liberal democracies and of states associated with the West, including through the use of “criminality as a tool for hybrid warfare”,<sup>30</sup> disinformation and interference with elections and other democratic processes. Examples include cybercrime and information operations to interfere with Ukrainian elections (in 2014 and ever since), US elections (in particular in 2016), the UK Brexit referendum (in 2016), or more recently, with elections in Georgia, Germany, Moldova or Romania (in 2024 and 2025). In addition to disinformation, one of the tools used to maintain influence and obtain access to natural resources in the Global South had been the PMC Wagner, which was designated a “significant transnational criminal organization” by the US Department of the Treasury in 2013. Following the assassination of Prigozhin and Utkin in August 2023, the Wagner operations in Africa were taken over by an Africa Corps of the Russian Ministry of Defense.<sup>31</sup> However, in February 2026, it was reported that the Wagner Group was behind acts of sabotage across European countries on behalf of the Russian regime.<sup>32</sup> Some make the valid argument that there is no such thing as a separate “Wagner Group”, but that this group is part of the criminal enterprise of the Russian regime.<sup>33</sup>

In conclusion, in Russia criminal organizations and some official institutions of the regime have morphed into one and are often difficult to distinguish from one another. The Russian regime is not only linked to or making use of criminal groups to pursue the interests of Putin and his associates and to keep them in power, but is itself structured like and is using the modus operandi of a hierarchical organized crime group.

## 5 Features of fascism

Discussions on whether post-Soviet Russia may turn to fascism date back to 2000, that is, the first year of Putin’s presidency;<sup>34</sup> and debates whether and, if so when, his regime has become fascist continued on and off ever since. Opinions have been divided with some arguing that Russia under Putin showed all the elements of fascism or was at least fascistoid, and with others pointing out that key features of fascism were

absent, at least prior to February 2022, such as a revolutionary movement, mass mobilization, a modernising vision for the future, racism or extreme nationalism.

Following the onset of the full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine in February 2022, the question has again come to the forefront with an increasing number of experts now affirming that indeed “Russia is fascist” and with terms such as “Ruscism” or “Rashism” being used to describe the ideology and practices of Putin’s regime.<sup>35</sup>

Putin has consistently justified his war of aggression *inter alia* with the claim that a “neo-Nazi-regime” was set up in Ukraine after 2014.<sup>36</sup> Given fascism in Russia, psychologists may consider this a case of “projection”; political scientists may call it “mirror image propaganda”.

Before discussing this further, a word of caution: (a) There is no commonly accepted definition of “fascism”.<sup>37</sup> Even the obvious fascist regimes in Germany or Italy before and during the Second World War differed in many ways. Opinions on whether pre-1945 Japan, war-time Spain under Franco or Portugal under Salazar were fascist are divided. And (b) accusations of “fascism” tend to be deployed in an inflationary manner. Labelling any opinion that is not liberal or any government that is not a liberal democracy as “fascist” – or “recklessly flinging the word ‘Fascist’ in every direction” as George Orwell already remarked in 1944<sup>38</sup> – deprives this notion of any meaning.

While some features associated with (historical) fascism may still not be present in Russia even after February 2022, many others are. None of these alone would qualify the Russian regime as fascist, but in combination the Russian regime has largely crossed the “fascist minimum”:<sup>39</sup>

1. An autocracy where power is concentrated in a single person. As noted above, the fact that Putin alone was able to make the catastrophic decision to launch an all-out war against Ukraine is ultimate evidence that Russia is an autocracy. Such a concentration of power is not only but also found in fascist systems.
2. Cult of the vigorous leader as the incarnation of the state. Projecting an image of hyper-masculinity and action – in stark contrast to ailing president Yeltsin – was an essential element of Putin’s strategy to becoming president when he launched the second war on Chechnya in 1999. That war cleared the path to his first presidency.<sup>40</sup> Male chauvinism, aggressive masculinity, and a fetish of virility have been features of his leadership cult ever since. Putin is identified with Russia as reflected in the much quoted “there is no Russia today if there is no Putin”.<sup>41</sup> Such a cult and principle of a single vigorous leader as the incarnation of the state is a characteristic of fascist regimes.
3. Direct implementation of central decisions by the “power vertical”. This is a concept that is well-understood in Russia – and is borrowed from Mussolini’s fascist Italy. It describes a pyramid of formal and informal structures that permits centralized command by the person on top, that is Putin, where senior officials are personally responsible for the implementation of presidential instructions, orders or the placement of personnel. Putin began to set up this system immediately after his election, when in May 2000 he expanded central control over regions through the creation of seven federal districts overseen by envoys appointed by him. Or when in September 2000 the first edition of this Information Security Doctrine brought the media sector *de facto* under governmental control. Or in June 2000, when a law on political parties was passed to increase the requirements to be met by parties, and when, as a consequence, the United Russia party and two electoral blocs were created in December 2000. This power vertical has been built and reinforced over more than twenty years, and is one of the main characteristics of the regime.
4. State power exercised through members of the coercive apparatus. Under Putin, thousands of “siloviki” (“people of force”) have been placed in key positions of the government at federal and regional levels, but also in state corporations in order to control those on behalf of the regime.<sup>42</sup>
5. Security services at the disposition of the president. Upon taking power, Putin set up

additional services directly or exclusively under his control. Creating new structures to displace previous ones or creating competition between different security services has been a practice of fascist regimes in the 1930s.<sup>43</sup>

6. Militarization of society. The emphasis on the role of the military in Russian nation-building, the creation of paramilitary structures (National Guard, Youth Army), a thriving private security industry, the founding and proliferation of private military companies, the thousands of clubs and associations that have appeared all over Russia over the past two decades providing military training, and patriotic-military curricula and programmes in educational institutions are evidence of this militarization of Russian society.
7. Domestic suppression of dissent. The intimidation, criminalization, imprisonment or assassination of political opponents and the suppression of independent media and dissenting opinions have been part of the modus operandi of the Russian regime for more than a decade. Since February 2022, measures in this respect have reached yet another level. Anyone speaking the truth about the war of aggression or stating facts that divert from official statements of the Ministry of Defence, risks being criminalized.
8. "Justice" in a "dual state". The Russian justice system is subordinated to the regime whenever a case before a court affects its interests. The concept of the "dual state" was developed by Ernst Fraenkel based on his experience as a lawyer in Nazi Germany: where the interests of the regime are concerned, the GESTAPO is always right.<sup>44</sup>
9. "Gleichschaltung" of media. Starting with the ascend of Putin to the presidency in 2000, the regime has put in place the tools, organizations and procedures to "coordinate" and control the media and thus public opinion. Since February 2022, additional measures to control information are being introduced with increased frequency. During Nazi Germany, the term for such "coordination" was "Gleichschaltung".<sup>45</sup>
10. Corporate statism. Russia under Putin has been moving in the direction of a state where political and economic actors are coopted into different interest or corporate groups under the mediation and thus control of the regime in order to promote a "cohesive society and a united people".<sup>46</sup> This type of corporate organization under the control of the regime was an important feature of fascism in Italy under Mussolini.<sup>47</sup>
11. National rebirth (palingenesis) and showdown with the (western) enemy. The idea of an enemy having humiliated Russia in the past and now aiming to destroy Russia, and in response, the need for Russia to resurrect from its knees, restore past glories and reclaim its place as a major power, is crucial for the legitimacy of the regime. According to fascist philosophies, the existence of an enemy – and the realistic possibility of a war against this enemy – is constitutive for the existence of a nation. The rhetoric of a showdown with the West is accompanied by an obsession with a domestic "fifth column" and conspiracies by foreign agents plotting against the Russian government. A speech delivered by Putin on 16 March 2022, about three weeks into the war against Ukraine, that is reminiscent of fascist rhetoric, illustrates this:  
"Of course they (the West) will try to bet on the so-called fifth column, on traitors – on those who earn their money here, but live over there. Live, not in the geographical sense, but in the sense of their thoughts, their slavish thinking. ... Any people, and especially the Russian people, will always be able to distinguish the true patriots from the scum and the traitors, and just to spit them out like a midge that accidentally flew into their mouths".<sup>48</sup>  
The concept of palingenesis to restore the "lost greatness" of a nation – combined with extreme nationalism – is a core element of fascist ideology.
12. An ideology of extreme nationalism. The war of aggression against Ukraine and the justification provided for it,<sup>49</sup> is evidence that what may have started out as patriotism as a unifying ideology, has turned into an ideology of extreme nationalism. The cultural concept of

“Russia’ness” and the “Russian world” (“Russkiy mir”) has become a justification for irredentism – protection of Russians abroad and reunification with historical Russian territories – under the domination of the Russian regime. By claiming superiority over other Russian-speaking cultures or denying their right to exist (such as that of Ukraine), “Russkiy mir” is also an expression of cultural racism (“racism without race”). With such extreme nationalism or “hyper-nationalism”, Putin disposes of an “ideological weapon of mass destruction” (Vladimir Pastuchov in March 2022)<sup>50</sup> that ensures approval rates of 80% or above. This ideology can rely (a) on the historical narrative of Russian heroics in the fight against Nazis and of the need for a strong and united Russia to fight external enemies that try to keep Russia weak and divided, (b) on patriotic-military indoctrination, and (c) on the support of philosophers (Ivan Ilyin, Aleksandr Dugin among them) with nationalist – and openly fascist or even genocidal – positions that shape or confirm this worldview.<sup>51</sup>

13. External aggression and expansionism with “redemptive violence”. The war of aggression against Ukraine is the logical consequence of the irredentism, militarization and nationalism mentioned above; a purifying struggle leading to renewal. This war – similar to the Chechen wars – is marked by the murder of civilians, rape, torture, atrocities and war crimes (over 200,000 war crimes recorded by the Office of the Prosecutor General of Ukraine since February 2022), and possibly genocide, by Russian forces of which the massacres of Bucha and Irpin or the destruction of Mariupol have become symbols. Such “redemptive violence without legal or ethical constraints [to pursue] goals of internal cleansing and external expansionism” is characteristic of fascism.<sup>52</sup>

Given this combination of features, the proposition that Russia is currently governed by a fascist regime is rather convincing. Features that may be missing are “mass mobilization” and a “revolutionary movement”. Apart from a few stadium rallies to demonstrate public support to the “special military operation”, the regime has been aiming to keep the population passive; it

has also been reluctant to declare a full military mobilization.

However, these particular features may not be necessary to qualify the Russian regime as fascist. Unlike historical fascist regimes that needed mass mobilization or a revolutionary movement in order to gain power, the Russian regime already had the power when it turned fascist. In a way, fascism in Russia is fascism from above.

## 6 Conclusion

The Russian regime is a kleptocratic criminal autocracy with fascist features. Putin is its autocratic leader, who relies on a small inner circle of trusted associates to maintain his power. A rather long list of “Putin’s people” (Catherine Belton) and “clerks” (as Anne Applebaum would call them) help sustain a regime that they benefit from, depend on or go along with.

The question is whether this is a regime to negotiate with to end the war or design a future security architecture, or that can otherwise be relied upon.

Given its character, domestically the current regime will further increase the control of society, the suppression of dissent, human rights and the rule of law, and the militarization of Russian society.

Internationally, it will continue

- (a) its expansionist posture, disrespecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of other countries, and posing a military threat to countries it considers to belong within its sphere of influence. It will therefore also not respect any peace agreement with Ukraine;
- (b) its hybrid warfare to disrupt and undermine democracies anywhere, including through disinformation, cyberattacks, election interference, corruption, and other influence and hybrid operations;
- (c) to support authoritarian regimes and radical political movements wherever it can;

- (d) to resort to assassinations, war crimes and other forms of extreme violence without constraint if that serves its purposes.

The fall-out is not limited to Europe or Russia's immediate neighbourhood; it can impact governments and societies in any region of the world.

The Russian regime cannot be trusted to respect international agreements and contractual obligations.<sup>53</sup>

This regime, in short, will continue to pose a threat to other countries and to core values of democratic societies. Those who insist that supporting Ukraine was not only about freedom for Ukraine but about defending democracy, human rights and a rules-based international order everywhere, are right.

The longer the war continues, the more the regime will be confronted with its intrinsic internal contradictions: while the aggression is the logical consequence of the fascist character of the regime, it is not compatible with its kleptocratic and other criminal interests. Those were better served in a more stable environment with open access to markets and financial services.<sup>54</sup>

By February 2026, Russia had been failing in its strategic and security objectives: the war and over 200,000 war crimes committed by Russia were reinforcing Ukrainian nationhood; Ukraine was closer to the European Union than ever before; Finland and Sweden had joined NATO and thus Russia's direct territorial border with NATO had been extended by 1340 km; Russia's military weakness had been exposed; and overall, the war signalled to become a disaster for Russia's future. The Russian regime had achieved the opposite of what it set out to achieve with this war; it was acting against its own interests. At the same time, ending the war was no option for Vladimir Putin as that would cause incalculable risks to the survival of his regime.

And by early 2026, it was also evident that negotiating to meet Russia's "legitimate security interests" or other demands – or making some sort of "deal" – will not change the character of the regime. Continued support to Ukraine will be more likely to achieve that: attempting to defeat

and isolate the Russian regime and to bring offenders to justice, and making the war as costly as possible will sooner or later weaken support for the autocratic leadership. Removing economic benefits will further weaken the kleptocratic and criminal state and will have different factions turn against each other. And since fascist regimes typically do not survive their leader: no Putin, no [fascist] Russia.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> In February 2026, the UK, Sweden, France, Germany and the Netherlands issued a joint statement on Alexei Navalny's death:

"The UK, Sweden, France, Germany and The Netherlands are confident that Alexei Navalny was poisoned with a lethal toxin.

This is the conclusion of our Governments based on analyses of samples from Alexei Navalny. These analyses have conclusively confirmed the presence of epibatidine. Epibatidine is a toxin found in poison dart frogs in South America. It is not found naturally in Russia."

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/joint-statement-by-the-uk-sweden-france-germany-and-the-netherlands-on-alexei-navalnys-death>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.coe.int/en/web/special-tribunal-ukraine/home>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2026/feb/19/ukraine-russia-zelenskyy-putin-peace-talks-deal-donald-trump-europe-latest-news-updates?CMP=share\\_btn\\_url&page=with%3Ablock-6996faba8f0818efc5c6cb00#block-6996faba8f0818efc5c6cb00](https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2026/feb/19/ukraine-russia-zelenskyy-putin-peace-talks-deal-donald-trump-europe-latest-news-updates?CMP=share_btn_url&page=with%3Ablock-6996faba8f0818efc5c6cb00#block-6996faba8f0818efc5c6cb00)

<sup>4</sup> A short explanation of the term "regime": The term "government" would be too narrow to encompass the centre of political power in Russia, while the notion of the "state" would be both too broad and too narrow at the same, as it would not cover informal structures, institutions or rules, nor non-state actors that are essential for the exercise of political power in Russia. The term "political regime", for the purposes of this paper, denotes the formal and informal organization of the centre of political power, including formal and informal principles, norms, rules and procedures for decision-making and for access to power, the behaviour, motivations and character of its actors, in particular, of its ruler, and its horizontal relations between executive, legislative and judicial powers, as well as its vertical relation with the broader society. In the case here, the "ruler" refers to Vladimir Putin.

The concept as used here has been adapted from Van den Bosch, Jeroen (2013): [Political Regime Theory: Identifying and Defining Three Archetypes, in: The Copernicus Journal of Political Studies 2013](#), no 2(4)), and his references to Robert Fishman and to Svend-Erik Skaaning. While the term "regime" is typically used by social scientists in a neutral manner, it is also sometimes used colloquially with reference to governments believed to be "repressive, undemocratic, or illegitimate".

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/regime>

<sup>5</sup> For example:

Freedom House, in recent years, considered Russia a "consolidated authoritarian regime" with a Global Freedom Score of 12/100 in 2024.

[Russia: Country Profile | Freedom House](#)

The IDEA democracy index listed Russia between 1995 and 2000 as a "democracy with low performance" in terms of "representative government", "fundamental rights", "checks on government" and "impartial administration", then from 2005 to 2015 as a "hybrid regime", and from 2016 onwards as an "authoritarian regime". By 2024, Russia's rule of law and rights scores had fallen further and were approaching values similar to those at the times of the Soviet Union (<https://www.idea.int/gsod-indices/democracy-indices>).

The democracy index of the Economist Intelligence Unit classifies Russia as "authoritarian" since 2013 with a major fall in 2022 following its invasion of Ukraine. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democracy\\_Index](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democracy_Index); <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2022/>; <https://www.eiu.com/n/russia-suffers-biggest-global-fall-in-the-democracy-index-following-its-invasion-of-ukraine/>).

The rule of law index of the World Justice Project ranked Russia at 107 out of 140 countries in 2022 and at 113/142 in 2024

(<https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/global>).

And the World Press Freedom Index of Reporters Without Borders placed Russia at 171 out of 180 countries in 2025 (<https://rsf.org/en/index>).

<sup>6</sup> Freedom House summarises the state of the Russian regime as follows:

*"Power in Russia's authoritarian political system is concentrated in the hands of President Vladimir Putin. With loyalist security forces, a subservient judiciary, a controlled media environment, and a legislature consisting of a ruling party and pliable opposition factions, the Kremlin manipulates elections and suppresses genuine dissent."*

[Russia: Country Profile | Freedom House](#)

It has also been proposed to classify Russia as an "illiberal democracy", that is, is a system of governance where elections still take place but are manipulated and serve to legitimize the rulers while civil liberties are restricted. However, that concept is too diffuse to describe or explain the political system of Russia. (See Laruelle, Marlene

(2021): *Is Russia Fascist? Unravelling Propaganda East and West*. Ithaca.

<https://www.cornellpress.cornell.edu/book/9781501754135/is-russia-fascist-/#bookTabs=4>

<https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/accusing-russia-of-fascism/>.

In his 1997 contribution to *Foreign Affairs*, “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy”, Fareed Zakaria defines illiberal democracies as “democratically elected regimes, often ones that have been re-elected or reaffirmed through referenda, [but] are routinely ignoring constitutional limits on their power and depriving their citizens of basic rights and freedoms”.

<https://globalchallenges.ch/figure/what-is-illiberal-democracy/>

Some propose to go a step further and consider that the Russian regime is not only authoritarian but also totalitarian. See Frans Timmermans (at the time Vice-president of the European Commission) in February 2023: “The violence unleashed on Ukrainians for being Ukrainians is comparable to Stalin’s Red Terror, when millions of innocent people were killed for being “class enemies.” The terror worked precisely because it targeted the innocent and enforced total conformity to the state. It is now clear that Russia, having descended ever deeper into authoritarianism in the last 15 years, has now become a totalitarian state.” ([Totalitarianism Has Returned to Europe. It Must Be Defeated. - The Moscow Times](#)).

However, totalitarianism not only requires a strong concentration of power but also an ideology that is forced on society. “Totalitarian regimes are entitled to a separate category because they are unique in the simultaneous presence of an ideology, a single mass party and concentrated power in the hands of an individual or small group. Each of these characteristics can be found separately in a wide variation of authoritarian regimes, but their combination leads to a unique form of regime performance (stability, mobilization, control, etc.) and behaviour (the “unachievable” aim of destroying the line between state and society” (Van den Bosch, Jeroen ((2013): *Political Regime Theory: Identifying and Defining Three Archetypes*, in: *The Copernicus Journal of Political Studies* 2013, no 2(4)), with reference to Juan Linz (1975): *Totalitarian and authoritarian regimes*).

7

[https://minchenko.ru/netcat\\_files/userfiles/PB\\_2.0\\_summer\\_2019\\_ENG.pdf](https://minchenko.ru/netcat_files/userfiles/PB_2.0_summer_2019_ENG.pdf)

See also: <https://khodorkovsky.com/the-new-politburo/>  
<https://carnegiendowment.org/posts/2017/08/court-and-politburo-putins-changing-inner-circle?lang=en>

8

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/21/putin-an-gry-spectacle-amounts-to-declaration-war-ukraine>

<http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/security-council/67825>

<sup>9</sup> [Boris Berezovsky](#) – United Bank, [Sibneft](#), [ORT](#), [Mikhail Khodorkovsky](#) – [Bank Menatep](#), [Yukos](#), [Mikhail Fridman](#) – [Alfa Group](#), [Vladimir Vinogradov](#) – [Incombank](#), [Vladimir Gusinsky](#) – [Most Group](#), [NTV](#), [Vladimir Potanin](#) – [UNEXIM Bank](#), [Alexander Smolensky](#) – [Bank Stolichny](#)

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/07/what-kleptocracy-and-how-does-it-work>

<sup>11</sup> Already in 2000, following criticism of Putin, Gusinsky was arrested and forced to sell his media empire for 300 million US\$ to Gazprom-Media in return for this freedom. He then left Russia. Smolensky was briefly the subject of an arrest warrant in 1999. In 2003 he handed over his bank to his son who then sold it to Potanin. Berezovsky fled to the UK in 2003 where he committed “suicide” (or was probably strangled) in 2013. Vinogradov died of a stroke in 2008.

In May 2004, the European Court of Human Rights held that the arrest and criminal charges against Gusinsky were in violation of Article 5 and Article 18 of the Convention on Protection of Human Rights and Basic Freedoms, stating that the facts of the case established that the prosecution of Gusinsky in Russia was politically motivated and used to intimidate him. The Russian Federation appealed. In November, the European Court of Human Rights declined Russian Federation’s request to review its decision, thereby upholding its ruling. With that the [decision of the Court became final](#).

<sup>12</sup>

<https://www.investopedia.com/articles/markets/100515/5-biggest-russian-oil-companies.asp>

By 2022, ROSNEFT accounted for almost 6% of global oil production.

<sup>13</sup> The chief executive officer of ROSNEFT is Igor Sechin, who happened to be chief of staff of Putin while that one was deputy mayor of Sankt Petersburg.

<sup>14</sup> For a detailed account see Belton, Catherine (2020): *Putin’s People*. New York.

<https://us.macmillan.com/books/9780374712785/putinspeople/>

Research by investigative journalists published in March 2022 tracked assets worth US\$ 17 billion that were linked to 35 Russians with ties to Putin.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/21/global-assets-russians-alleged-ties-putin-wealth-oligarchs-navalny>

For other examples of assets and networks of organizations and persons linked to Putin see:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/20/russian-emails-vladimir-putin-llcinvest>

For Putin and GAZPROM see:

[Putin and Gazprom. Not a nuclear suitcase, but a gas valve became an attribute of presidential power — Novaya Gazeta](#)

For a report in 2025 on how assets of persons and businesses are systematically targeted in view of confiscation see:

<https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2025/07/09/top-500-genprokuratury>

Another example is Domodedovo Airport in Moscow that was first nationalized, and then – when an auction failed in January 2026 – given at low cost to a company linked to Arkady Rotenberg, one of the closest allies of Putin.

<https://meduza.io/en/feature/2026/02/13/throughout-the-putin-era-the-owners-of-moscow-s-domodedovo-airport-fought-off-every-takeover-attempt-wartime-nationalization-proved-their-undoing>

By February 2026, the now former owner of Domodedovo Airport kept appealing the nationalization.

For a list of “Putin’s people” see [Personas – The database “PUTIN’S LIST”](#)

<sup>15</sup> According to Lansky/Myles-Primarkoff (2018): “In Vladimir Putin’s Russia, opaque financial flows and an equally murky network of ex-KGB officers, with its roots in the 1990s, come together in a distinctive system of corruption. This system serves dual purposes: Those at the top follow the imperative of self-enrichment, but they also find in corruption a highly effective tool for consolidating domestic political control and projecting power abroad.” (Lansky, Miriam/Myles-Primarkoff, Dylan (2018): *The rise of Kleptocracy: Power and plunder in Putin’s Russia*. In: *Journal of Democracy* 29/1, pages 76-85.

<https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/the-rise-of-kleptocracy-power-and-plunder-in-putins-russia/>  
<https://www.power3point0.org/2018/01/31/russias-kleptocratic-projection-of-power/>

<sup>16</sup> See also Chapter 10 of Belton, Catherine (2020): *Putin’s People*.

<sup>17</sup> See for example:

<https://imrussia.org/en/opinions/3067-the-result-of-20-years-of-putin-russia-as-a-mafia-state>  
<https://us.macmillan.com/books/9781137048387/expelledajournalistsdescentintotherussianmafiastate>  
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/dec/01/wikileaks-cables-russia-mafia-kleptocracy> (2010)  
<https://www.nybooks.com/online/2016/03/14/putin-mafia-state-lesin-killing/>

<https://meduza.io/en/feature/2015/12/17/opinion-russia-the-mafia-state>

Following the onset of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the thesis has been put forward (by François Bonnet) that the war against Ukraine was not about a neo-imperial project but to sustain a criminal system that had been established by a regime that is marked by corruption, assassinations, imprisonments, phenomenal enrichment and financial looting of the country.

(Bonnet, François (2022): *Poutine, la guerre et le crime - Derrière l’idéologie néoimpériale russe*. In: *La Découverte, Revue du Crieur* 2022/2 no. 21, pages 4-27. <https://www.cairn.info/revue-du-crieur-2022-2-page-4.htm>)

<sup>18</sup> In 2021, the European Court of Human Rights held the Russian State responsible for the assassination of Litvinenko. It concluded “that Mr Litvinenko was poisoned by Mr Lugovoy and Mr Kovtun acting as agents of the respondent State”.

<https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre?i=001-211972>

<sup>19</sup> According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, “Organized crime is a continuing criminal enterprise that rationally works to profit from illicit activities that are often in great public demand. Its continuing existence is maintained through corruption of public officials and the use of intimidation, threats or force to protect its operations.”

<https://www.unodc.org/e4j/en/organized-crime/module-1/key-issues/defining-organized-crime.html> NB: Recognising the difficulties to define “organized crime”, this is working definition for the purposes of training modules).

<sup>20</sup>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian\\_apartment\\_bombings](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_apartment_bombings)  
<https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/vladimir-putin-1999-russian-apartment-house-bombings-was-putin-responsible>  
<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2012/11/22/finally-we-know-about-moscow-bombings/>  
<https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2024/03/25/remembring-ryazan-en>

<sup>21</sup> Between 4 and 16 September 1999, four explosions in Daghestan, Moscow and Volgodonsk killed 309 people living in apartment blocks. On 22 September, two persons were arrested for having set up explosives in a further building in Ryazan. These two persons turned out to be FSB agents. Putin’s successor as head of the FSB, Nikolai Patrushev, explained that this had been an

exercise to test the readiness of the country. An independent commission is set up to investigate the matter. Two members of this commission, both deputies of the opposition in the Duma, are murdered in 2003 (one poisoned and the other one killed by gun shots). Others that investigated these bombings in the following years were also killed (Anna Politkovskaya among them).

<sup>22</sup> The case of Alexander Litvinienko was already mentioned above. Other examples of assassinations or attempted assassinations include Vladimir Golovlev (liberal Russian politician, shot dead 2002), Sergei Yushenkov (liberal Russian politician, shot dead 2003), Yuri Shchekochikhin (journalist and liberal Russian politician, killed through poisoning with radioactive materials 2003), Yiktor Yushchenko (Ukrainian politician running for presidency (President of Ukraine 2005 – 2010), survived poisoning with dioxin in 2004), Anna Politkovskaya (Russian journalist, shot dead in October 2006), Anastasia Baburova (journalist) and Stanislav Markelov (human rights lawyer, both shot dead 2009), Natalya Estemirova (member of the NGO Memorial, abducted and shot dead 2009), Sergei Magnitsky (Russian tax adviser, died in prison 2009), Boris Berezovsky (Russian oligarch, possibly strangled to death in UK 2013), Timur Kuashev (Russian journalist, human rights activities, probably killed by poison 2014), Boris Nemtsov (Russian politician, shot dead 2015), Vladimir Kara-Murza (Russian politician and activist, survived poisoning in 2015 and 2017, criticised war against Ukraine, then arrested for high treason in 2022), Sergei Skripal (former Russian double agent, survived poisoning with nerve agent Novichok, UK 2018), Aleksei Navalny (Russian politician, survived poisoning by Novichok in 2020, subsequently sentenced to nine years in prison, then died (and was possibly killed) in February 2024 while imprisoned in the Arctic Circle's Polar Wolf penal colony). Most of these cases have been attributed to agents of or contract killers recruited by the internal security service FSB, the external security service SVR, the military service service GRU, or the so-called "Kadyrovtsy", that is, forces of the Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov.

Assassination has furthermore been a method often used against persons considered to be terrorists or traitors, primarily in Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, but also other parts of Russia as well as abroad. For example, in 2019, Zelimkhan Khangoshvili was shot dead in Berlin, Germany, by a killer contracted by the GRU.

See also this interview with details on such operations by the FSB:

["Our people poisoned Navalny": Former FSB officer on surveilling opposition figures and running black ops in Russia and Ukraine](#)

<sup>23</sup> Examples include Alexander Tyulyakov (Gazprom, found hanged, Sankt Petersburg, February 2022), Mihail

Watford (Ukrainian-born oligarch, found hanged, Surrey, UK, February 2022), Vasily Melnikov (billionaire, found dead with his wife and two sons, Nizhny Novgorod, March 2022), Sergey Protosenya (former Director General of Novatek, allegedly committed suicide after having killed his wife and daughter in Spain, April 2022), Vladislav Avayev (former Gazprom Bank, found dead by gunshot along his wife and daughter, Moscow, April 2022), Alexander Subbotin (LUKOIL, found dead in Mytishchi, Russia, May 2022), Yuri Voronov (Gazprom sub-contractor, shot in his swimming pool, July 2022), Ravil Maganov (Lukoil, falling from hospital window in Moscow, August 2022), Pavel Antov (Russian politician and businessman, dead after falling from his hotel window in India, December 2022), Vladimir Bidenov (Russian fellow traveller of Subbotin, found dead in his hotel room in India, two days prior to Subbotin, December 2022), Vladimir Makarov (former deputy head of the Main Directorate for Combating Extremism. Found dead in an apparent suicide shortly after being dismissed from his position, February 2023), Marina Yankina (head of the financial support department of the Russian Defense Ministry's Western Military District, died after falling from a window of a high-rise building in St. Petersburg, February 2023), Pyotr Kucherenko (Deputy Minister of Science and Higher Education, dead after having fallen ill on a plane during his return from Cuba, May 2023), Mikhail Rogachev (former vice-president of Yukos, died after falling from his tenth-floor apartment in Moscow, October 2024), Vladimir Shklyarov (renowned ballet dancer and critic of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, died after falling from the fifth floor of his apartment building in St. Petersburg, November 2024), Vadim Stroykin (musician known for his opposition to the war in Ukraine. Died after falling from a ninth-floor window of his apartment in St. Petersburg, February 2025), Vyacheslav Leontyev (Former head of Pravda, the official news paper of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Fell from the fifth-floor window of his Moscow apartment and died, October 2025), Anton Panov (Russian "diplomat" and possibly agent found dead in a swimming pool in Cyprus, January 2026), Alexey Sklyar (former Deputy Minister of Labour, found dead in his home in Moscow, January 2026), Sergei Tropin (former Deputy Minister of Justice, found dead in his bathroom in Moscow, February 2026). The suicide, in July 2025, of Roman Starovoyt, Minister of Transport, hours after he had been dismissed by Putin, was particularly worrying for the Russian elite because the protection given to him by the Rotenberg brothers – and thus by the "krysha" or roof – was not sufficient to prevent his fall. (Starovoyt was suspected of having embezzled the equivalent of some EUR 10 million that had been foreseen for border fortifications while being governor of the Kursk oblast between 2019 and 2024, a

region which was then partially invaded by Ukrainian forces in August 2024.)

<sup>24</sup> <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-195527>  
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-49481471>  
<https://www.csce.gov/articles/legacy-sergei-magnitsky/>  
<https://www.billbrowder.com/sergei-magnitsky/>

<sup>25</sup> See <https://www.alexnotes.net/notes/#Dec-2025-ML-blacklisting>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.euronews.com/2023/02/06/patriarch-kirill-worked-for-the-kgb-in-the-1970s-swiss-media-reports>  
<https://theswisstimes.ch/fr/spying-for-the-kgb-a-russian-priest-in-switzerland/>  
<https://www.spiegel.de/panorama/patriarch-kirill-i-soll-in-der-schweiz-fuer-den-kgb-spioniert-haben-a-edc6c5bb-bb43-407f-bf32-fb5ad6d1f6dc>

<sup>27</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/06/14/krysha-putin-russia-how-muscle-works-in-moscow/>

<sup>28</sup> <https://imrussia.org/en/analysis/3322-report-review-reiderstvo-2-0-the-illegal-raiding-pandemic-in-russia>

<sup>29</sup> See also Recorded Future/Insikt Group (2025) Dark Covenant 3.0: Controlled Impunity and Russia's Cybercriminals (October 2025)  
<https://assets.recordedfuture.com/insikt-report-pdfs/2025/cta-ru-2025-1022.pdf>

<sup>30</sup> See GLOBSEC 2025 report on "[Russia's Crime-Terror Nexus](#)"

<sup>31</sup> PMC Wagner, established by Dmitry Utkin and Yevgeny Prigozhin and named "Wagner" because of Utkin's passion for the Third Reich. Wagner PMC had been active since 2014 in support of the annexation of Crimea and then in the Donbas to destabilise Ukrainian security forces, since 2015 in Syria, and then also in Libya and Sudan, and by 2021 in a number of other African countries as well as Venezuela. As is typical for the regime, much of the funding for Wagner PMC was off-budget and channelled to Prigozhin via government contracts and business deals in countries in which it operated (for example, paid in commodities such as gold and diamonds in the Central African Republic or oil and gas in Syria). In June 2023, Prigozhin turned against the regime; and in August 2023, he as well as Utkin and others were assassinated. The former Wagner operations in Africa were then taken over by an "Africa Corps" under the control of the Russian Ministry of Defense.

<sup>32</sup> [https://www.lexpress.fr/monde/europe/menace-russe-en-europe-lombre-de-wagner-derriere-des-operations-de-sabotage-7LZ7J2QTMZFM5OZBDCHHH34W4Q/?cmp\\_redirect=true](https://www.lexpress.fr/monde/europe/menace-russe-en-europe-lombre-de-wagner-derriere-des-operations-de-sabotage-7LZ7J2QTMZFM5OZBDCHHH34W4Q/?cmp_redirect=true)

<https://www.ft.com/content/dbd1d803-ab37-43f1-920f-fce74952313a>

<sup>33</sup> [https://www.linkedin.com/posts/ruslantrad\\_russias-wagner-group-pivots-to-european-activity-7428882561881362433-9LU2](https://www.linkedin.com/posts/ruslantrad_russias-wagner-group-pivots-to-european-activity-7428882561881362433-9LU2)

<sup>34</sup> In 2000, political scientist Yuri Fedorov, posited that Russia may gradually become a democracy but "Russia may also look for some other, special way, including (as absurd as it may seem today) a return to some form of totalitarianism, be it Communist or national-patriotic and essentially fascist."

Fedorov, Yuri (2000): Democratization and Globalization: the Case of Russia. Working Paper for Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

<https://carnegieendowment.org/files/fedorov.pdf>

And in 2001 there were early warnings of the neo-fascist ideas of Alexander Dugin.

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0962629801000439>

In 2007, Pierre Hassner observed that Putin "has led Russia into a harsh brand of authoritarianism with some fascist features"

<https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/Hassner-19-2.pdf>

In 2008, a "drift towards fascism in Russia" was noted by Alexander Motyl who argued that Russia under Putin had "many characteristics of a fascist system in power ...". Motyl at that point considered Russia "fascistoid". In an event organised by the Wilson Center he also made this prediction:

"Finally, all fascist states scare their neighbors and provoke them to defend themselves against perceived threats. Fascism thus effectively creates the very enemies it invokes as its justification. Motyl suggested that aggressive responses from a fascist Russia to its neighbors' defensive stances would likely lead to overreach on Russia's part, resulting in foreign policy disasters that would expose the regime's relative weakness and thereby accelerate elite fragmentation and popular dissatisfaction. If this analysis is correct, Motyl concluded, a post-fascist Russia will probably enter an extended time of troubles, and could lead future generations of Russians to blame Putin for their misfortunes."

<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/systemic-transformations-and-the-drift-toward-fascism-russia>

In 2016, Motyl then suggested that "the Putin system may plausibly be termed fascist".

Vol. 49, No. 1, Special Issue: BETWEEN NATIONALISM, AUTHORITARIANISM, AND FASCISM IN RUSSIA: EXPLORING VLADIMIR PUTIN'S REGIME (March 2016)

Others reject the proposal that Russia is fascist. Marlene Laruelle in 2021: "Talking of 'Russia's fascism' cannot withstand scholarly inquiry. Obviously, the Russian regime has no ideology of racial destruction or domination that would allow for a parallel to be drawn with Nazism. Nor does it display an ideological doctrine forcibly inculcated in the population, successful mass mobilization around a utopian project of regeneration, a high level of repression, or dictatorial functioning. Not only is Putin neither Hitler nor Mussolini, he is not even Pinochet" (p. 158). For her the utopian feature is the "lowest common denominator of fascism" (p. 145). (Laruelle, Marlene (2021): *Is Russia Fascist? Unravelling Propanda East and West*. Ithaca).

<https://www.cornellpress.cornell.edu/book/9781501754135/is-russia-fascist-/#bookTabs=4>

<https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/accusing-russia-of-fascism/>

Others – in this compilation of views ([Nasty, Repressive, Aggressive -- Yes. But Is Russia Fascist? Experts Say 'No.' \(rferl.org\)](#)) – consider that while Russia under Putin may suffer from the "Weimar syndrome" of a sense of dislocation, isolation and loss of status, may have experienced humiliation and loss of identity, and while anti-Westernism and revanchism have become more pronounced, fascism is "a revolutionary form of nationalism". According to Roger Griffin, this type of ideology is absent in Russia. Putin was not trying to create a new order but is reactionary and trying to recreate a modified version of the Soviet Union." Also, Putin's regime was not the result of a revolutionary movement of ideology but has been developed top-down in a traditionally Russian manner, according to Payne; it was more a "mafia state" under a centralized personal dictatorship. And crucially, Putin's Russia lacked mass mobilization. This was not how Putin came to power nor how he operates.

According to Sheri Berman, "Like most dictatorships, Putin would rather his people be demobilized.... It is not just that he is not charismatic. I mean, the image that we have of him in our minds now, for better or worse, is him sitting alone at the end of the table." More conservative, right-wing, neo-traditionalist dictatorships discourage mobilization. In Russia, passive acceptance of Putin's revanchism, society does not embrace these ideas. Public events typically carefully orchestrated. Putin not charismatic, but product of Russian state. Like Japan, Russia emulates fascism in many ways but is not fascist (Griffin). Therefore, Russia under Putin was more like a revival of Tsar Nicholas I of 19<sup>th</sup> century or Ivan the Terrible (Payne).

<sup>35</sup> A well-known proponent of the notion of Russia as fascist is Timothy Snyder. Following the onset of the war of aggression by Russia against Ukraine in February 2022, he attracted much attention with his essay in the *New York Times* (May 2022): "We should say it. Russia is fascist"

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/19/opinion/russia-fascism-ukraine-putin.html>

He later on added a list of characteristics of Fascism that apply to Russia, that included one-party-system; leadership cult; control of the media; cult of imperium, its deaths and its historical innocence; explaining the world through conspiracies; a corporate state; cult of the will and of the action: its war, the combination of propaganda and violence may be seen as the triumph of the will over reality; the idea of the enemy (quoting Carl Schmitt: politics is to determine who is the enemy).

<https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/timothy-snyder-zum-ukraine-krieg-parallelen-zwischen-putin-und-hitler-18079215.html>

Some of those considering Russia fascist underline the influence of fascists theoretics on Putin, including Ivan Ilyin.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/10/26/how-fascist-are-putins-views>

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/64718139>

<sup>37</sup> For example, consider the standard and well-respected approach of Robert Paxton according to which fascism is ". . . a form of political behavior marked by an obsessive preoccupation with community decline, humiliation or victimhood and by compensatory cults of unity, energy and purity, in which a mass-based party of committed nationalist militants, working in uneasy but effective collaboration with traditional elites, abandons democratic liberties and pursues with redemptive violence and without ethical or legal restraints goals of internal cleansing and external expansion." (Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (Vintage Books, 2005), p. 35).

Or consider Umberto Eco's sketch about "the cult of tradition", and the judgment that "disagreement is treason." There is a constant search for a "fifth column" consisting of "foreign agents" and perhaps, above all, the "fear of difference" posing as praise for "stability"; there is an "obsession with a plot" with everything nefarious attributed to "outside detractors." (Eco, "Ur-Fascism," *New York Review of Books*, June 22, 1995).

Or Vladislav Inozemtsev, in 2017 applying an economic perspective with fascism, he means "a particular regime type as regards three key relationships: the structure of the political economy; the idealized relationship between society, the state, and moral authority; and the posture of the state in regard to other states".

Inozemtsev concludes with an interesting statement:

“So Mr. Volodin, who insists that, ‘there is no Russia today if there is no Putin,’ is right. Putin correctly understands that the present system cannot survive him. So as long as he does not blunder into a major war he cannot win, the end of Russia’s fascist regime will resemble that of the Franco’s or Salazar’s, not Mussolini’s....

Putin’s Russia looks like a belch of communism and imperialism in a world lukewarm to both; it’s something built “from the top” that is passively supported by the people rather than pushed forward by them. So the main task of the Western powers consists not in trying to undermine or destroy the current Russian regime, but simply to outlive it. As depleted as the power of many Western states today may be, that, at least, ought to be doable.”

[\[Putin’s Russia: A Moderate Fascist State - The American Interest \(the-american-interest.com\)\]](https://www.americaninterest.com/putin-russia-a-moderate-fascist-state)

38

[https://www.orwell.ru/library/articles/As\\_I\\_Please/english/efasc](https://www.orwell.ru/library/articles/As_I_Please/english/efasc)

Orwell calls for a clear definition of “fascism” but also cannot offer one.

39 Eatwell, Roger (2007): On defining the ‘Fascist Minimum’: The centrality of ideology. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13569319608420743>

40 See his statement at a press conference in September 1999: “We will pursue them everywhere ... Excuse me for saying so: We’ll catch them in the toilet. We’ll wipe them out in the outhouse.”

<https://www.rferl.org/a/putin-russia-president-1999-chechnya-apartment-bombings/30097551.html>  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qM\\_OPbgN00Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qM_OPbgN00Y)

41 <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/10/23/no-putin-no-russia-says-kremlin-deputy-chief-of-staff-a40702>

42 Key positions in government are filled by “siloviki” (“people of force”), that is, persons working or having worked for any of the security bodies, be it the KGB or its successors FSB (internal intelligence), GRU (military intelligence) and SVR (external intelligence), the police, the armed forces, the Federal Protective Service, the drug control agency, the immigration control service and others. These institutions are estimated to comprise some 5 million persons. They are not a coherent force – as otherwise they could pose a threat to Putin’s power – but are marked by rivalries. Under Putin, thousands of “siloviki” were placed in key positions of the government

at federal and regional levels but also in state corporations to control those on behalf of the regime.

For illustration: it has been reported that every state structure and company has section of FSB staff that supervise access to classified information and that monitor whether employees are inclined to resign or even leave the country. Following the onset of the war of aggression these FSB staff now also enforce travel bans.

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/03/16/a-year-of-war-has-left-russias-elites-anchorless-and-atomized-a80499>

43 In addition to the FSB and the Federal Protective Service of some 50,000 staff, in 2016 a National Guard with over 350,000 staff was added that, inter alia, includes the Special Purpose Mobile Units (OMON) but also a cyberintelligence unit to monitor online activities by citizens. In 2011, the Investigative Committee was established as the main federal investigative authority directly under the control of Putin, replacing the investigative authority previously under the authority of the prosecutor general. De facto, the National Guard and the Investigative Committee thus sit above the Office of the Prosecutor General. In addition to these competing formal structures, there is a proliferation of private, paramilitary or other security services of state corporations (such as private security companies set up by GAZPROM) or ethnic guards (“Kadyrovtsy” in Chechnya) or Private Military Companies (Wagner, “Aksyonovites” in Crimea, Redut and others ) that are illegal under the law but operating from Russia. These different services are available and used to protect the interests of the regime including through assassinations, influence operations or terrorism without accountability. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/articles/2023/05/22/7403217/>  
<https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-other-mercenary-companies-ukraine/32424520.html>

44 The trial of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, resulting in prison terms and the confiscation of Yukos in 2003, was perhaps the one case that compromised the justice system because much was at stake and because Putin got away with it. That and many other cases – including those of Alexei Navalny, Ilya Yashin, Vladimir Kara-Murza, Dmitry Ivanov and many others who have been convicted, or organizations that were forced to cease their activities or had their assets confiscated; or crimes that were not properly investigated such as the death of Sergei Magnitsky and the assassinations of journalists and political opponents – follow a logic similar to that described in late 1940 by Ernst Fraenkel based on his experience as a lawyer in Nazi Germany: while at the level of the “normative state” the courts do apply the law in regular cases, at the level of the “prerogative state” it is

not laws but political considerations that guide court decisions.

[https://cooperism.law.columbia.edu/files/2023/11/E.F.raenkel\\_The-Dual-State\\_2017\\_171-187.pdf](https://cooperism.law.columbia.edu/files/2023/11/E.F.raenkel_The-Dual-State_2017_171-187.pdf)

<sup>45</sup> The control of media in order to control public opinion commenced in the first months of Putin's presidency, when the oligarchs Vladimir Gusinsky and Boris Berezovsky lost their TV stations NTV and ORT – that were perceived as critical of Putin – and were forced to leave Russia in 2000. NTV was then placed under the control of GAZPROM. In September 2000, Putin also signed the first iteration of the “Information Security Doctrine of the Russian Federation”<sup>45</sup> not only aimed to secure information systems but also to protect Russian society and individuals against unreliable information. The doctrine was aimed, inter alia, at “the assurance of a spiritual renewal of Russia, and the preservation and reinforcement of the moral values of society, traditions of patriotism and humanism and the cultural and scientific potential of the country”. In a country where the vast majority of people receive their information via TV, the main TV stations are now directly controlled by the regime and operate either as state enterprises or are owned by quasi state corporations. The same is true for major news agencies. Reportedly, the heads of major public and private TV channels have weekly meetings at the Kremlin where they received instructions on what to report and what not. Press services of government agencies have a separate meeting with the same purpose. The space for dissenting opinions has become ever more restricted in recent years. Critical media and journalists have been subjected to hostile takeovers or are declared foreign agents or prosecuted or assassinated. In 2019, Putin signed the so-called “fake news” laws no. 31-FZ and No. 27-FZ to block access to and fine persons for revealing “unreliable information”. Following 24 February 2022, additional laws were issued or modified to censor information, including supplements to the Criminal Code punishing with imprisonment of up to 15 years the “public dissemination of knowingly false information about the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation”. In March 2023, the DUMA further expanded laws to make it a criminal offence to discredit PMCs like Wagner that are themselves illegal in Russia. In short, the regime has put in place the tools, organizations and procedures to coordinate the media and thus public opinion.

<sup>46</sup> At the level of political parties this corporatism is reflected in the All-Russia People's Front that was set up in 2011 by then prime minister Putin to have the United Russia party engage in alliances with other political parties, trade unions, youth organizations and others in order to create a “broad popular front of like-minded

political forces. This was an important step towards a top-down corporatist state under the leadership of Putin who in 2013 was elected leader of this front.

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/04/28/putins-new-corporatist-state-a34795>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/All-Russia\\_People%27s\\_Front](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/All-Russia_People%27s_Front)

The largest banks and corporations – in particular in the oil and gas sectors declared “national treasures” by Putin – are corporations under the control of the state. Major private banks and businesses are controlled by close associates of Putin or oligarchs at the mercy of the regime. This type of corporate organization of the economy aimed at the collaboration of the productive sectors under the control of the regime has been an important feature of fascism in Italy under Mussolini.

[Putin's Russia: A Moderate Fascist State - The American Interest \(the-american-interest.com\)](https://the-american-interest.com/putins-russia-a-moderate-fascist-state)

And then, of course there are the current and former members of the security forces, the Siloviki, who, although not always coherent, have their own corporate culture and are in key positions of the state and economy.

<sup>47</sup> [Putin's Russia: A Moderate Fascist State - The American Interest \(the-american-interest.com\)](https://the-american-interest.com/putins-russia-a-moderate-fascist-state)

<sup>48</sup> <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67996>

<sup>49</sup> In his “historical essay” of July 2021 on the “Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians” he underlined that Russian and Ukrainian people were twins. In his speech on 24 February 2022 he said it was necessary to “denazify” and demilitarise Ukraine and to save “our Russian brothers” from genocide.

<https://static.poder360.com.br/2022/03/Article-by-Vladimir-Putin-On-the-Historical-Unity-of-Russians-and-Ukrainians.pdf>

<https://www.dw.com/de/putins-kriegsgr%C3%BCnde-im-faktencheck/a-60901735>

<sup>50</sup> Vladimir Pastuchov in Dekoder (March 2022)

[Totale Aufarbeitung? | dekoder | DEKODER | Journalismus aus Russland und Belarus in deutscher Übersetzung](https://www.dekoder.de/DEKODER-Journalismus-aus-Russland-und-Belarus-in-deutscher-Übersetzung)

<sup>51</sup> The search for a national idea commenced soon after the end of the Soviet Union and the ideology of communism. Proposals like a “common European house” (Gorbachev) or “return to European civilisation” (Yeltsin) did not get traction. Putin, in particular following his re-election in 2012, identified patriotism as the unifying idea, with “Russia'ness” – that is Russian language, culture and traditional values, and the greatness of the Russian empire – at its core and uniting the peoples of Eurasia under Russian leadership and within a “Russian world” (“Russkiy mir”) as its mission

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian\\_world](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_world)).

While “Russkiy mir” was initially a cultural concept – and soft-power instrument – to create informal ties among Russian speakers all over the world, between the colour revolutions of 2003 (Georgia) and 2005 (Ukraine) and the annexation of Crimea in 2014 it increasingly became an instrument to pursue the interests of the Russian regime, that is a justification for irredentism – protection of Russians abroad, reunification with historical Russian territories – under the domination of the Russian regime (<https://www.dekoder.org/de/article/russische-welt-konzept-geschichte-untergang>).

If ideology in politics “is generally understood as a coherent set of ideas, beliefs, and opinions about the organization of a political system and the ways to bring them to reality” Russia’sness is the ideology that the regime has identified and put into practice (<https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/02/moscows-mind-games-finding-ideology-in-putins-russia/>).

The prospects of patriotism turning into hyper-nationalism and an ideology of cultural domination or destruction had been simmering for a while. Over the last decade, a number of philosophers with such nationalist – or openly fascist – views have come to the forefront and have shaped, or influenced or confirmed the worldview of Putin and other members of the Russian political elite or security apparatus. Following the protests of 2012, Putin was increasingly drawn towards philosophers like Ivan Ilyin (1883 – 1954) who had been promoting Russia as a distinct Euroasian civilization within the boundaries of the Russian empire, who opposed the separation of Ukraine from Russia, who had been a proponent of fascism and admirer of Hitler and Mussolini, and who predicted a bright future where Russia would liberate itself through Christian fascism ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ivan\\_Ilyin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ivan_Ilyin)). Putin ordered Ilyin’s remains to be transferred from Switzerland to Russia where he consecrated his grave in 2009. Putin has frequently quoted Ilyin, including in his speech annexing Ukrainian territories in September 2022.

Another philosopher who has either shaped or confirmed the worldview of Putin and others is Aleksandar Dugin.

Dugin strongly opposes liberalism and US hegemony and favours the foundation of a Euro-Asian empire unifying all Russian-speaking people. He considers that Russia’s destiny lies in “genuine, true, radically revolutionary and consistent, fascist fascism”.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aleksandr\\_Dugin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aleksandr_Dugin)

Dugin is a strong supporter of Russia’s war against Ukraine. Another example is Timofei Sergeitsev, who had been a rather obscure author or “political operator” until in April 2022 – around the same time that the atrocities in Bucha became known – he published his plan for the denazification of Ukraine through brutal repression, dehumanising Ukrainians (For a translation see [What should Russia do with Ukraine? \[Translation of a propaganda article by a Russian publication\] | by Mariia Kravchenko | Medium](#)). This article has also been called a “handbook of genocide”. This type of ideology is not only reflected in the rhetoric of members of the government, parliament, academia or national media in Russia calling for the elimination of anything that is Ukrainian – that is for genocide (See the collection of eliminist rhetoric against Ukraine.

<https://www.justsecurity.org/81789/russias-eliminationist-rhetoric-against-ukraine-a-collection/>)

These philosophers or writers not only shaped or confirmed or reflected the public discourse and the views of the Putin and the elite. With the war of aggression against Russia, this ideology was turned into action.

<sup>52</sup> Robert Paxton 2004: The anatomy of fascism.

[https://www.academia.edu/23541236/The\\_Anatomy\\_of\\_Fascism\\_by\\_Robert\\_Paxton\\_2004](https://www.academia.edu/23541236/The_Anatomy_of_Fascism_by_Robert_Paxton_2004)

<sup>53</sup> Examples of the UN Charter, the Geneva Conventions, the agreement on the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Treaty between Ukraine and Russian Federation on the Ukrainian-Russian State border, the Helsinki Act, the Budapest Memorandum.

<sup>54</sup> Something the Cosa Nostra also realised after the high-profile killings of judges Falcone and Borsellino in 1992.