

Russia's Systemic Transformations since Perestroika: From Totalitarianism to Authoritarianism to Democracy—to Fascism?

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Introduction

All the post-Communist states of the former Soviet empire have experienced significant change in the last twenty years, but Russia's systemic transformations since Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika may be most dramatic. Most of the East Central European satellite states and the Baltic republics moved from some form of decayed totalitarianism through generally brief interludes of authoritarianism to democracy—and have stayed there. Serbia, Croatia, Albania, Macedonia, and Ukraine had longer authoritarian interludes, but in the end appear to have adopted democratic forms of government. Belarus, Moldova, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan ended their transitions at different stages of authoritarianism; Turkmenistan has arguably remained totalitarian; and Kyrgyzstan rushed toward democracy, but then fell back to a weak form of authoritarianism.

In contrast to the above, Russia passed from totalitarianism to several years of both authoritarianism and democracy—only to abandon democracy completely and embark on a transition to what is arguably fascism. In using this term, I am suggesting both the magnitude of Russia's change in recent years and the direction in which it has changed. No less important, I am also suggesting that the terms scholars have developed for Russia—such as patrimonial or tsarist—are inadequate, primarily because they fail to place Russia on a spectrum of comparative political-system types. This paper therefore examines fascism as a system type within a typology of political systems. It also suggests why Vladimir Putin's Russia has enough of the defining characteristics of fascism to qualify as *fascistoid*—that is, as moving toward fascism—and why Russia alone moved along so exceptionally turbulent a systemic path. Finally, the paper examines whether a fascistoid or fascist Russia is likely to be stable.¹

A final point about political sensibilities needs making. Fascism is often used as an epithet, especially by the left, but it actually is, or at least can be, a perfectly respectable social-science term that refers to a particular

type of political system. Some Russians may find it objectionable that their country, which waged the “Great Patriotic War” against fascism, should now be called fascist. That is certainly an irony of history, but there is no reason that such a reversal of roles should not be possible. Democracies (such as Weimar Germany) can become dictatorships, and dictatorships (such as Franco Spain) can become democracies. If today's Russia approximates the definition of fascism, then the fault surely lies, not with the scholars who use the term, but with the politicians who made it usable.²

Systems and System Types

Social scientists have since Plato and Aristotle characterized countries or states according to their dominant features, as only such an exercise permits them to engage in comparisons and produce theoretical generalizations. A *political system*—a term that I shall, despite their conceptual differences, use interchangeably with *state* in this paper—consists of those characteristics that define the politics, broadly conceived, of a country.³ Those characteristics concern established institutions, structures, relations, and attitudes—and not individuals or policies. The disassociation of policies from systems means that, for instance, democratic systems may conduct non-democratic policies and still be democratic systems, while authoritarian systems may pursue democratic policies and still be authoritarian systems.

The system types that social scientists employ are ideal types: that is, few countries or states ever match all their requirements exactly. No less important, system types, however plausible they may seem at a macro level, always break down upon closer inspection of the myriad details that comprise the real life of real societies and real countries. In other words, system typologies are useful only at a fairly high, and thus abstract, level of generality (and it is small wonder that they rarely appeal to social

1. Many thanks to Michael Bernhard, Thomas Bernstein, Yitzhak Brudny, Richard Langhorne, Jerzy Mackow, Rajan Menon, and George Schöpflin for comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

2. There have been self-styled Russian fascists in the twentieth century. See John Stephan, *The Russian Fascists: Tragedy and Farce in Exile, 1925-1945* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978).

3. For extended discussions of political systems, see Anton Bebler and Jim Seroka, eds., *Contemporary Political Systems* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1990).

historians, anthropologists, and other scholars similarly inclined to examine micro events⁴). But because system types are at such a high level of generality, they enable us to outline the contours of systems, trace how they are changing, and suggest, however imperfectly, just what their future trajectories are likely to be. Plato thus argues that his ideal republic will eventually break down, while Aristotle believes that democracy as he defines it necessarily results in dictatorship. There is no “correct” typology or classification. Typologies and classifications are “good” as long as they are internally consistent and theoretically fruitful.

The three dominant system types encountered in modern social-science literature are totalitarianism, authoritarianism, and democracy, which differ, to put it over-simply, from one another in the degree to which the ruling authorities exert control and the society enjoys political and economic freedom. Totalitarian systems are most controlling and their populations enjoy least freedom; democratic systems are least controlling and their populations enjoy most freedom; and authoritarian systems are somewhere between the two. Obviously, there is no system that exerts total control over everything, just as there is no system that is perfectly democratic—which may mean, ironically, that authoritarianism is the least ideal of the system types. Soviet studies employed all three categories until about the mid-1960s, when totalitarianism was, in an excessive fit of social-historical revisionism, consigned to the ash heap of history. It was only in the mid- to-late-1980s that totalitarianism again became respectable among western Sovietologists, in no small measure because Soviet analysts began reviving it in order to understand the impact of Gorbachev’s perestroika on the USSR.⁵

The systemic types, and their features, that I employ in this paper are presented in table 1 (see page 12). The categories of totalitarianism, authoritarianism, and democracy are relatively straightforward and, I trust, uncontroversial and require no further elaboration. The fifth column, however, which describes the features of fascism, does require a closer look, if only because there is little scholarly consensus on what fascism is.⁶ It is important to appreciate that this condition of disagreement is hardly unique to fascism. Scholars have yet to find common and uncontroversial definitions for any number of terms—from state to totalitarianism to culture to genocide to revolution to democracy. We still use them,

because they strike us as important; and we can use them well, if we define them well. Others may disagree, but that is their prerogative. Obviously, if unanimity of meaning were a precondition of a term’s being used, then social science would cease activity immediately.

Fascism as a Political System

Let us start our investigation of fascism by examining five definitions, which nicely illustrate both the diversity of opinions and approaches regarding fascism and the weaknesses of existing definitions.

- Juan Linz defines fascism as “a hypernationalist, often pan-nationalist, anti-parliamentary, anti-liberal, anti-communist, populist and therefore anti-proletarian, partly anti-capitalist and anti-bourgeois, anti-clerical, or at least, non-clerical movement, with the aim of national social integration through a single party and corporative representation not always equally emphasized; with a distinctive style and rhetoric, it relied on activist cadres ready for violent action combined with electoral participation to gain power with totalitarian goals by a combination of legal and violent tactics. The ideology and above all the rhetoric appeals for the incorporation of a national cultural tradition selectively in the new synthesis in response to new social classes, new social and economic problems, and with new organizational conceptions of mobilization and participation, differentiate them from conservative parties.”⁷
- According to Robert O. Paxton, “Fascism may be defined as a form of political behavior marked by obsessive preoccupation with community decline, humiliation, or victim-hood 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 elite groups, abandons democratic liberties and pursues with redemptive violence and without ethical or legal restraints goals of internal cleansing and external expansion.”⁸
- Michael Mann says that “fascism is the pursuit of a transcendent and cleansing nation-statism

4. See R.J.B. Bosworth, *Mussolini’s Italy: Life under the Fascist Dictatorship, 1915-1945* (New York: Penguin, 2006), p. 566.

5. Giovanni Sartori, “Totalitarianism, Model Mania and Learning from Error,” *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1993, pp. 5-22.

6. For an indication of the diversity of views, see Adrian Lyttelton, “What Was Fascism?” *New York Review of Books*, vol. 51, no. 16, October 21, 2004; Antonio Costa Pinto, “Back to European Fascism,” *Contemporary European History*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2006, pp. 103-115.

7. Juan J. Linz, “Some Notes Toward a Comparative Study of Fascism in Sociological Historical Perspective,” in Walter Laqueur, ed., *Fascism: A Reader’s Guide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 12-13.

8. Robert O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (London: Allen Lane, 2004), p. 218.

through paramilitarism.”⁹

- Stanley G. Payne writes that “fascism may be defined as a form of revolutionary ultra-nationalism for national rebirth that is based on a primarily vitalist philosophy, is structured on extreme elitism, mass mobilization, and the *Führerprinzip*, positively values violence as end as well as means and tends to normalize war and/or the military virtues.”¹⁰
- According to Roger Scruton, “Fascism is characterized by the following features (not all of which need to be present in any of its recognized instances): nationalism; hostility to democracy, to egalitarianism, and to the values of the liberal enlightenment; the cult of the leader, and admiration for his special qualities; a respect for collective organization, and a love of the symbols associated with it, such as uniforms, parades, and army discipline.”¹¹

Linz’s and Paxton’s definitions are, in reality, historically-grounded descriptions of movements, and not definitions of a system type. Although Linz has a point in emphasizing the “anti” character of fascism—if only because the definition of any object necessarily entails stating what it is not—he underplays the no less important part of any definitional exercise—stating what an object *is*. Paxton is surely right to suggest that fascism is a “form of political behavior” (what is *not* a form of political behavior?), but that form appears to be primarily rooted in a psychological condition characterized by obsessive and compensatory attitudes and only secondarily in political phenomena. Mann’s definition actually is a definition, but its emphasis on “pursuit” reduces fascism to an activity with a set of goals—a characterization that, like Paxton’s, applies to most human endeavors and has the effect of removing fascism from the realm of movements or regimes or systems or, for that matter, even politics. Like Mann, Payne provides an actual definition, but his differs from the others in reducing fascism to an ideology—ultra-nationalism—which tells us little about fascism as a system of rule. Scruton’s is a list of family characteristics that sidesteps the question of whether fascism is an ideology, movement, or system, but it does have the advantage of being pithy and clear.

Despite these definitional difficulties and

disagreements, it is noteworthy that Payne’s and Scruton’s defining characteristics overlap, while also resonating with many of the points made by Linz, Mann, and Paxton. All five scholars more or less agree that fascism is hyper-nationalist; anti-democratic; elitist; leader-centered; mass-oriented or collectivist; and vitalist. They disagree about violence and mass mobilization, with Payne and Paxton regarding both as central, and Scruton disregarding the former altogether and only hinting at the latter with his reference to collective organization and parades. Note also their points of disagreement with Linz. Payne, Paxton, Mann, and Scruton say nothing about fascism’s supposedly anti-capitalist, anti-bourgeois, anti-communist, or anti-proletarian qualities.

These definitions point to three conclusions. First, we need to differentiate between fascist systems and fascist movements. Although they may share similar ideological goals and aspirations, political systems are established sets of institutions, structures, relations, and attitudes, while movements are mass organizations that are “on the move.” Since fascist movements are far more numerous than fascist systems, most scholars defining fascism are actually defining fascist movements and not fascist systems.¹² But, obviously, there is no reason for the two political formations to share the same exact characteristics. Violence and mass mobilization, for instance, can easily be defining features of movements, especially of revolutionary movements committed to overthrowing an established order. Indeed, one could argue that such movements, whether on the right or on the left, have to be violent and have to mobilize their followers if they want to achieve their goals. Systems, in contrast, even highly repressive systems, generally employ violence and mass mobilization only in spurts, if only because violence and mobilization are, by their very nature, too disruptive of the institutionalized quality of all systems, even repressive ones. Thus, Stalin’s, Hitler’s, and Mao Zedong’s versions of totalitarianism employed violence and mobilized populations only at particular times. Eventually terror and mobilization had to be reined in, because they threatened to destroy their initiators and upend institution-building. In that sense, real totalitarianism is totalitarianism *without* terror and *without* mass mobilization—or what the Soviet Union and China became after, respectively, Stalin’s death and the end of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.

Second, we must appreciate that why fascist systems emerge is a question of causality and that the origins of things should not be confused with the characteristics, or definitions, of those things. In other words, it is perfectly possible for similar or identical fascist systems to be “caused” by different factors at different times. The

9. Michael Mann, *Fascists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 13.

10. Stanley G. Payne, *A History of Fascism, 1914-1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), p. 14.

11. Roger Scruton, *A Dictionary of Political Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), p. 169.

12. See Ernst Nolte, *Die faschistischen Bewegungen* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1966).

“anti” qualities emphasized by Linz reflect the historical origins of inter-war fascisms and tell us more about causation than about system type. There is thus no reason to expect early-twenty-first century fascisms to have the same causes as twentieth-century fascisms. Just as there are many causes of nationalism, war, revolution, empire, and so on, so too there may be many causes of fascism.

And third, we need to dissociate the particular characteristics of particular historical fascisms from the defining characteristics of fascism as a system type. In the first case, there is no need to be especially rigorous about how systemic categories vary across systems (such as totalitarianism, authoritarianism, democracy, and fascism) because the focus is on some country at some time; in the latter case, that kind of rigorous, controlled, cross-systemic comparison is the very point of the whole exercise. We cannot expect every example of fascism to be identical in every single respect to every other example of fascism. Nor should we think that every case of fascism must be identical to the Italian variant.¹³ (Surely, fascist leaders need not all be named Benito Mussolini, and fascists need not speak Italian.) Our goal should be to grasp those defining and associated features of fascism that define it on its own terms and in relation to other system types. And that means that we can only define fascism as a system type in comparison to other political system types, such as totalitarianism, authoritarianism, and democracy. It is only through a sustained and rigorous across-the-board comparison of the defining characteristics of these systems that we can begin to distinguish fascism from the others and get a better grasp of what it is. Table 1 attempts to do just that.

Totalitarianism, Authoritarianism, and Fascism

Unlike democracies, fascist systems lack meaningful parliaments, judiciaries, parties, political contestation, and elections. The key word here is *meaningful*: in fascist systems, as in all authoritarian or totalitarian systems, parliaments are rubber-stamp institutions, judiciaries do what the leader tells them, opposition parties are marginal, and electoral outcomes are preordained. Unlike totalitarian states, fascist states do not penetrate into every dimension of a country’s political, economic, social, and cultural life; fascist states do not propound all-embracing

ideologies that purport to answer all of life’s questions. Instead, like all authoritarian states, fascist states attempt only to influence and control these dimensions of life and they prefer to espouse limited worldviews.

Like authoritarian systems, fascist systems are highly centralized and hierarchical, they give pride of place within the authority structure to soldiers and policemen, usually secret policemen, and they always have a domineering party that, in contrast to the single hegemonic party of totalitarian systems, may tolerate other parties but that, in contrast to the dominant parties characteristic of authoritarian systems, brooks no interference in its running of the political system. Like authoritarian states, fascist states limit freedom of the press, freedom of speech, and freedom of assembly. Like authoritarian states, fascist states also reject socialism and embrace capitalism—which means that they tacitly acknowledge private property and the autonomy of capitalists. But this autonomy is circumscribed by substantial state intervention—ranging from simple *dirigisme* to occupation of the strategic heights to corporatism. And like authoritarian states, fascist states generally espouse some form of hyper-nationalism glorifying their nation and its fabulous past, present, and future. But fascist states also go further than authoritarian states in fetishizing the state and its glory and power.

Like totalitarian systems, fascist systems always have a supreme leader enjoying cult-like status. Run-of-the-mill authoritarian states typically connote images of dour old men ruling a sullen population. Totalitarian states generally connote images of wise patriarchs. Fascist leaders, in contrast, exude vigor and want to appear youthful, manly, and active. These qualities of hyper-masculinity are most starkly evident in such fascist and fascistoid leaders as Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, Juan Peron, and Hugo Chavez, but they are lacking in such totalitarian and authoritarian autocrats as Joseph Stalin, Francisco Franco, Augusto Pinochet, Nicolae Ceausescu, or the Ayatollah Khomeini. A fascist leader may, like Mussolini, fit the historical stereotype and be hyper-masculine and histrionic or, like Putin, he may not and instead be hyper-masculine and cool.¹⁴

Fascist leaders also evoke and appeal to vitalism and vigor in the population and usually coopt the young into their movements or parties. No less important, fascist states are popular and they always implicate the population in its own repression. Fascist states incorporate the population into the system of rule, promising it a grand and glorious future in exchange for its enthusiasm and support. Fascist leaders are especially popular, presenting themselves as the embodiments of a nation’s best

13. Consider Zeev Sternhell’s comment: “Fascism in power was something to which fascist parties made remarkably different contributions, depending on the country concerned. Every country where there was a fascist party had peculiarities duly reflected in its local political organizations; nevertheless, where a so-called fascist regime came into being, these national features usually became even more exaggerated. Thus movements have much more in common than regimes.” (“Fascist Ideology,” in Laqueur, *Fascism A Reader’s Guide*, p. 318.)

14. This point does raise the question of whether fascist leaders can be women and, if so, just what sort of leader style they would have to adopt to meet the definitional requirement.

Table 1
Political Systems and Their Features

<i>Defining Characteristics</i>	<i>Totalitarianism</i>	<i>Authoritarianism</i>	<i>Democracy</i>	<i>Fascism</i>
Politics	Single hegemonic party; staged elections; rubber-stamp parliament	Dominant party; rigged elections; subordinate parliament	Multiple parties; genuine elections; autonomous parliament	Domineering party; rigged elections; rubber-stamp parliament
Leader	Cult of supreme leader	Strong man	President, premier	Hyper-masculine cult of supreme leader
Ideology	All-embracing	Statism and hyper-nationalism	Popular sovereignty	Statism and hyper-nationalism
Popular attitude to regime	Widespread support	Acquiescence	Support	Widespread support
Economy	Central planning of non-market economy	State alliance with dominant forces in market economy	Market economy	State control of commanding heights of market economy
<i>Associated Characteristics</i>				
Pro-leader movement	Yes	No	No	Yes
Police/Army	Subordinate to party	Part of ruling elite	Subordinate to government	Part of ruling elite
Media/Society	Complete control	Domination	Free	Domination
Violence	Widespread	Selective	Minimal	Selective

qualities and as the only hopes for its future. It is small wonder, therefore, that fascist and totalitarian systems are often characterized by parades and flag-waving. (Russia's decision in January 2008 to revive the May 9th military parades on Red Square was therefore quite significant.) But *pace* Scruton, parades are not defining characteristics of either system—indeed, it would be bizarre if something that ephemeral were—but associated characteristics of such systems' populist nature.

The above similarities to and differences from totalitarianism and authoritarianism suggest that we may hazard a definition. I therefore define fascism as a *non-democratic, non-socialist political system with a domineering party, a supreme leader, a hyper-masculine leader cult, a hyper-nationalist, statist ideology, and an enthusiastically supportive population.*¹⁵ The elements

of the typology in table 1 that are not found in my definition—such as pro-regime movement, police/army, media/society, and violence—can be dealt with in one of three complementary ways. The presence of a pro-regime movement, the prominence of police and army cadres, and the employment of violence may be more appropriately considered the defining characteristics of fascist movements that are carried over into fascist systems. Alternatively, these elements may be considered associated characteristics that can logically be derived from the central defining characteristics. Thus, the quality

15. Note how similar this definition is to one developed by Payne in 1980, when he concluded *Fascism: Comparison and Definition* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980), p. 211, with a list of the "key features" that "reemerge in radical movements and national

authoritarian regimes in later times and other regions, even the profile of the new groups is on balance distinct from the generic European fascisms." These features are: "(1) permanent nationalistic one-party authoritarianism, neither temporary nor a prelude to internationalism; (2) the charismatic leadership principle, incorporated by many communist and other regimes as well; (3) the search for a synthetic ethnicist ideology, distinct from liberalism and Marxism; (4) an authoritarian state system and political economy of corporatism or syndicalism or partial socialism, more limited and pluralistic than the communist model; (5) the philosophical principle of voluntaristic activism, unbounded by any philosophical determinism."

of being non-democratic implies some dominance by the army and police, the domination by the state of the media and society, and the willingness to employ violence. And a leader cult combined with popular support implies a pro-leader movement. Last, as already noted above, violence—whether selective or widespread—may be considered a policy stance and not a system characteristic, a claim that clearly contradicts the view that war is the “essence” of fascism.

As this definition suggests, fascism appears to share some characteristics of totalitarianism and some of authoritarianism. Like totalitarian systems, fascist systems have cults of the leader, enjoy widespread popular support, and have pro-regime movements. Like authoritarian systems, fascist systems have dominant parties, rigged elections, and rubber-stamp parliaments, promote ideologies of statism and hyper-nationalism, control market economies, incorporate the army and secret police within the ruling elite, and dominate the media and society. At the same time, fascism differs from both totalitarianism and from authoritarianism in significant ways. By virtue of being non-socialist, fascist systems will always fall short of fully totalitarian systems. And by virtue of having hyper-masculine cults of supreme leaders and domineering parties, fascist systems differ from authoritarian systems.

Is fascism therefore a separate system type? Is it a cross-between authoritarianism and totalitarianism? Is it a peculiar form of authoritarianism—one with a specific type of leader, leader cult, and party? Or is it a peculiar form of totalitarianism—one without socialist aspirations? There is no correct answer to these questions. I treat fascism as a separate system type, but one could just as easily adopt any of the alternatives.¹⁶ Scholars yearning for certitude will be unhappy with this conclusion and may decide that conceptual clarity is therefore pointless, but they would be failing to appreciate that all theorizing, while unavoidably linked to and enriched by conceptual distinctions, is also, and always, limited by those same distinctions.

Russia's Systemic Transformations

Russia has experienced at least three systemic transformations in the last two decades. It moved from totalitarianism to authoritarianism in the late 1980s and from authoritarianism to democracy in the early 1990s. It then remained a weakly democratic state until the early 2000s, when, under President Putin's tutelage, it began to move toward fascism—a process that, for all its progress, has not yet culminated in a full-fledged,

consolidated fascism. As I suggest later in this paper, a fourth transformation may soon be in store, as fascism contains within it several disintegrative tendencies that are likely to produce system breakdown in the not too distant future.

The story begins in 1985, when Gorbachev became General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The country had just emerged from over three decades of post-Stalinist change. State terror had been abandoned in the early 1950s, but the system of total control built by Stalin remained essentially in place.¹⁷ That it began to malfunction seriously by the 1970s bespoke a weakening, or decay, of the totalitarian system, but not its replacement by something else.¹⁸ Totalitarianism's decay appears to have been the inevitable consequence of over-centralization; totalitarianism's collapse, as Karl Deutsch suggested in the 1950s, would probably have been inevitable as well.¹⁹ What Gorbachev effectively did by introducing glasnost and perestroika was to determine the timing of that collapse

Perestroika aimed to revive the Soviet Union but succeeded in liberating the media and society from total Party domination, destroying the centrally planned economy and Communist Party hegemony, and ushering in, by 1989-1990, an unstable authoritarian system of rule in the USSR. The Party remained the dominant force even after its constitutionally-enshrined “leading role” was abandoned in early 1990, although the 1989 elections to the Congress of People's Deputies and the 1990 elections to the republic Supreme Soviets were more or less competitive and the resultant legislatures became more than rubber-stamp institutions. Gorbachev was still the strong man, though getting increasingly weaker by the day as Boris Yeltsin increased his power base in Russia; the population acquiesced in, without being enthusiastic about, Gorbachev's rule; the media and society, though strikingly freer, were still dominated by the Party and state; repression had become decidedly selective; and the army and KGB still played a large role in the ruling elites. With the Soviet economy and Communist ideology in shambles, it would be hard to speak of anything resembling a state alliance with dominant market forces or of an overarching ideology of statism or hyper-nationalism.

This imperfect form of authoritarianism lasted in Russia for about two to three years, until the failed coup

17. See Jerzy Maczków, *Totalitarismus und danach* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2005).

18. János Kornai, *The Socialist System: The Political Economy of Communism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 360-378.

19. See Karl Deutsch, “Cracks in the Monolith: Possibilities and Patterns of Disintegration in Totalitarian Systems,” in Harry Eckstein and David E. Apter, eds., *Comparative Politics: A Reader* (New York: Free Press, 1963), pp. 497-508.

16. One difference is clear, however: namely, that fascism, at least as I have defined it, is necessarily different from communist totalitarianism.

attempt of August 19-21, 1991 and Yeltsin's subsequent accession to power, when Russia's political system began moving more decisively toward democracy. The system built by Yeltsin was deeply flawed—the bombing of the Duma in late 1993 was anything but democratic and the manipulation of the presidential elections of 1996 was scandalous—but it was democratic. Russia did have multiple parties, genuine elections, and an autonomous parliament. Its leader was the president, and not some charismatic man on horseback. The dominant ideology rested on notions of popular sovereignty, and not on statism or hyper-nationalism. The economy was becoming increasingly market-oriented and state control was weakening, not increasing. Popular support was at best lukewarm; pro-regime mass movements were absent; representatives of the military and secret police—the notorious *siloviki*—were only just beginning to seep into the ruling structures; the media and society were more or less free; and repression was minimal. Crime, corruption, and violence from below were rampant, but those were not features of the system per se. Yeltsin's system also had elements of authoritarianism, and it was characterized by an extensive blurring of lines of authority between and among ministries and regions, thereby creating the impression, if not reality, of chaos. But, in the final analysis, Yeltsin's Russia was not quite hybrid—if by that is meant a system that is equally democratic and equally authoritarian—but rather imperfectly democratic, that is, a democracy with substantial elements of authoritarianism.²⁰

As soon as Putin became president in 2000, a move away from Yeltsin-style democracy quickly became evident. In Lilia Shevtsova's words, "In 2000-2001 the new Russian leader practically began refashioning the Yeltsin regime by taking apart its most important building blocks. Instead of the Yeltsin principle of mutual connivance, shadowy checks and balances, tolerance for opposition, and the maintenance of power by redistributing and decentralizing it and provoking constant revolutionary shocks, Putin turned to the principle of subordination, hierarchical submission, quelling opposition, control over alternative ways of thinking of the elite, and centralization of the federation. In essence, Putin began to build a 'conveyor belt' political regime."²¹

Eight years later, Russia had moved decisively

away from any reputable definition of democracy ("managed" or "sovereign" democracy obviously does not count) and toward what I term fascism. By late 2008, democratic institutions were at best moribund, having been transformed into pliant tools of the Kremlin; the party of power, United Russia, dominated the political scene, even if its members were rarely fanatics of the kind often encountered in fascist movements; civil society and the press were severely circumscribed; the *siloviki* dominated all ruling elites and suffused them with their antidemocratic ethos; the state promoted capitalism while making sure to command its strategic heights by means of controlling key industries, especially in energy, defense, mining, and manufacturing; the Russian state was unabashedly glorified to the point of representing a genuine fetish; despite the election of Dmitri Medvedev as president in the spring of 2008, Prime Minister Putin remained the undisputed "national leader," and his image exuded vigor, youth, and manliness²²; a variety of rabidly pro-Putin youth groups—with *Nashi* as the most celebrated example—acted as the vanguard of the leader; the population overwhelmingly supported Putin, and had done so since he assumed the presidency; a growing mistrust of both internal and external foreigners and a corresponding glorification of Russia's past (including its criminal Stalinist period) and present were the official worldview.

Is Putin's Russia Fascist?

Of all these factors, the defining characteristics of fascism—the non-democratic and non-socialist nature of Russia's political system, the hyper-nationalist, statist ideology, the hyper-masculine cult of the supreme leader, and the enthusiastically supportive population—are central to our enquiry. I consider these briefly in turn.

- *Non-democratic and non-socialist political system:* Elections to the Duma and presidency are generally regarded as unfair and unfree—even though almost everyone agrees that Putin and his allies would win even if elections were fair and free. (This seeming paradox is resolved easily enough when one remembers that Putin and his comrades are not democrats and have no need of democracy.) By the same token, the Duma has been effectively transformed into a rubber-stamp parliament, partly as a result of changes to its structure and procedures and mostly as a result of the dominance within it, and the larger political system, of the pro-presidential

20. There is another reason, at least in retrospect, to consider Yeltsin's Russia more democratic than authoritarian. If Yeltsin's Russia is the former, then Putin's changes represent systemic discontinuity; if Yeltsin's Russia is the latter, then Putin's changes represent systemic continuity.

21. Lilia Shevtsova, "Political Leadership in Russia's Transformation," in Alexander J. Motyl, Blair A. Ruble, and Lilia Shevtsova, eds., *Russia's Engagement with the West* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2005), p. 100.

22. For an analysis of Putin's relationship with Medvedev, see Amy Knight, "The Truth about Putin and Medvedev," *New York Review of Books*, May 15, 2008, pp. 11-14.

party of power, United Russia. To be sure, United Russia does not resemble twentieth-century fascist movements striving for power. The former is a loose agglomeration of mostly opportunists who boarded a regime-sponsored political band wagon; the latter were, like the Bolsheviks, cadre parties of true believers. A more apposite comparison would be with the Nazis or Fascists *in* power, by which time their ranks had been swelled by hangers-on and careerists and both had become popular container parties that only slightly resembled the militant movements from which they had sprung. At the same time, United Russia clearly does not—or does not yet—dominate all of Russia’s political, social, economic, and cultural institutions and, in that sense, falls far short of the reality in Hitler’s Germany or Mussolini’s Italy. The claim that post-Soviet Russia is non-socialist requires, I trust, no elaboration.

- *Statism and hyper-nationalism*: Although Russia lacks a coherent ideology of the sort encountered in the Soviet Union, fascist Italy, or Nazi Germany, the prevailing ideological currents, or discourse, clearly promote and glorify both the Russian state and the Russian people. The concept of “sovereign democracy”, for instance, is about a strong Russian state, and not about democracy. Especially emblematic of this discourse is Putin’s 2007 “Speech at the Reception on the Occasion of National Unity Day”, in which he emphasized the indivisible relationship between national unity, national greatness, and state strength.²³ Unlike Mussolini and Hitler, whose style was histrionic and whose language was often bombastic, Putin usually comes across as cool and collected. Notwithstanding the style,

23. “On this very day a long time ago, in 1612, at the foot of the Kremlin’s walls we celebrated more than simply a victory over foreign invaders. Thanks to the unity displayed by the multinational people of Russia we managed to end the many years of troubles and internal strife. It was the way Russian society rallied together and the responsibility it took for the country’s destiny that allowed us to defend our independence and renew Russian statehood. We created the conditions to construct and establish an enormous great power, stretching from the Baltic to the Pacific Ocean. Without a doubt, authentic patriotic actions by Russian citizens have constituted the might and power of our people over many centuries. They have promoted unflinching spiritual values that are transferred to generation from generation.... Modern Russia is strong not only because of its new economic successes or its growing influence in international affairs. Russia was and remains powerful thanks to national unity and, of course, thanks to the tremendous intellectual and creative potential of our people, talented, qualified people who sincerely desire to act for the benefit of their nation. This is the best bridge to the successful future of Russia, to reviving and strengthening our country’s historic role.” <http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2007/11/04/0924_type127286_150361.shtml>.

Putin’s message of state greatness differs little from that of other fascist leaders. Russia’s official ideology of nationalism, meanwhile, does fall short of the style and substance of Mussolini’s or Hitler’s extreme claims. Accordingly, Russians are great, as are their past and present and future, but—aside from official toleration and encouragement of Russian superciliousness toward other non-Russians—that greatness does not yet entail racism and overt ethnocentrism.²⁴ On the other hand, Russia’s unofficial discourse of nationalism has witnessed the mainstreaming of such ultranationalists and fascists as Aleksandr Dugin, Aleksandr Prokhanov, Dmitri Rogozin, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, and Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov.²⁵ It is surely indicative of both great-power and ultra-nationalist rhetoric that Putin on March 8, 2008 called Medvedev a “Russian nationalist”—in the presence of, of all people, German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Even though Putin insisted that he meant that “in the good sense of the word,” he could not have not known that his use of the term was a slap in the face of German discursive sensibilities.²⁶

- *Hyper-masculine cult of supreme leader*: Like Mussolini, Putin favors stylish black clothing that connotes toughness and seriousness.²⁷ Like Mussolini, Putin likes being photographed in the presence of weapons and other instruments of war. And like Mussolini, Putin likes to show off his presumed physical prowess. The specially released late-2007 pre-electoral video showing Putin in a variety of manly poses—on horseback, with automatic rifles, wading through a river—and usually bare-chested deserves particular attention and arguably represents a watershed in Putin’s self-representation.²⁸ Not only is the video extraordinary in its blatant depiction of

24. Note Schöpflin’s comment: “The rise of a fairly unpleasant brand of chauvinist nationalism in Russia has two consequences. It makes all things non-Russian inherently suspect and makes the criteria of Russian-ness—language, race, a very particular version of history, Orthodoxy and territorial ambition—the sole way of interpreting the world.” George Schöpflin, “Russia’s reinvented empire,” March 5, 2007, <www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-institutions_government/russia_empire_4589.jsp>. See also Elfie Siegl, “Von Stalins Sieg zum Sieg Putins. Der Kreml und sein Geschichtsbild,” *Russlandanalyse*, November 9, 2007, nr. 148, pp. 2-4.

25. Charles Clover, “Invasion’s Ideologies,” *Financial Times*, September 9, 2008, p. 9.

26. “Otvety na voprosy zhurnalistov po okonchaniy peregovorov s Federal’nym kantslerom Germanii Angeloi Merkel’,” March 8, 2008, <president.kremlin.ru/text/appears/2008/03/161952.shtml>.

27. See Catharine Nepomnyashchy, “Man in Black: Putin and the Power of the Image,” Unpublished paper.

28. This video may be viewed on www.russia.ru/putin/.

Putin as the quintessence of virility and a man's man, but it is quite open in targeting the youngish female voter to whom, apparently, Putin's "political technologists" believed such gendered representations of masculinity would necessarily appeal.²⁹

- *Widespread popular support:* Like Mussolini and Hitler, Putin enjoys enormous popular appeal.³⁰ Despite the many ups and downs of his years in office, Russians have consistently supported him to the tune of 70-plus percent. Like Hitler and Mussolini, Putin has restored law, order, and stability—or at least the semblance thereof.³¹ Far more important, Putin has also restored Russians' pride in themselves, their present, and their past—in part by rehabilitating Stalin—and given Russians hope in their future. And like Hitler and Mussolini, Putin claims to be fulfilling nothing more than the people's mandate.³²

29Note in this light Mussolini's claim, "Fascism desires an active man, one engaged in activity with all his energies: it desires a man virilely conscious of the difficulties that exist in action and ready to face them." Adrian Lyttleton, ed., *Italian Fascisms: From Pareto to Gentile* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 40.

30. One Russian historian who compared Putin with Hitler in a December 2007 article entitled "Putin—Our Good Hitler" became the object of official investigation. See <<http://www.kommersant.ru/region/perm/page.htm?year=2008&issue=27&id=247780§ion=7272>>.

31. See David Schoenbaum, *Hitler's Social Revolution: Class and Status in Nazi Germany, 1933-1939* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1980).

32. Consider the following exchange, from Putin's December 12, 2007 interview with *Time* magazine:

QUESTION: You have spoken very confidently about Russia's role in international affairs. People say that it was harder to carry out this policy at the start of your presidency, but now that you have become a very strong president, I want to ask you: when did you become a national leader? What determines this position? When were you able to say to yourself, "Yes, now I have become a true leader"?

VLADIMIR PUTIN: First of all, this is something I never thought about, just as I never thought that I would one day be President. And now, to be honest, I try not to think about it because I think that when people start to think they are somehow exceptional, some kind of exceptional leader, they start to lose touch with reality.

I never called myself a national leader. It is others who have called me this. I did not think up this term and have never sought it. When I became President the country found itself unwillingly plunged into the chaos of civil war in the Caucasus and faced enormous economic difficulties, the collapse of the social sphere and a huge number of people living below the poverty line.

I can say to you with all certainty that I did not just take this job, step into this office, as it were, but I decided for myself that I was ready to do everything I could, to make any sacrifice, in order to restore the country. I made this the main purpose of my life and I decided that my own life in the broad sense, my personal life and interests, therefore ended.

Destiny has given me the chance to play a positive role in the history of my people, and I see myself as a part of this people and feel very strongly my connection to them. I have always felt this and I feel it now, and from the moment I made my decision I have subjugated my entire life to this goal.

I think that these goals have been reached to a large extent. We now

The following quotation, from Putin's last press conference as president in February 2008, is an excellent example of his discourse of statism, hyper-nationalism, cult of personality, and popular support and needs no commentary. According to the *Financial Times* correspondent, Putin "poured scorn on speculation in the western press that he had built up an enormous personal fortune while in power, saying the reports had been 'picked out of their noses and then smeared all over the papers.' He said: 'I am the richest person not only in Europe but also in the world. I collect emotions. And I am rich because the Russian people twice entrusted me with the leadership of such a great country as Russia. I think this is my greatest fortune.'"³³

Is, then, Putin's Russia fascist? As this checklist suggests, Russia is rather more than a simple authoritarian state. Some scholars have tried to capture this difference by employing such terms as patrimonial or tsarist. Anne Applebaum speaks of "Putinism."³⁴ Although these terms are fine as descriptive designations, they fail to locate today's Russia on a spectrum of political systems and, thus, to convey the magnitude of the changes wrought by Putin. I suggest that the term fascism can therefore tell us just how much, as well as the direction in which, Russia has changed.

To be sure, although Putin's Russia possesses many of the defining characteristics of fascism, it does so only to a greater or lesser extent. Having emerged haphazardly only in the last few years, these characteristics have not yet assumed the form of a consolidated political system; nor is it clear that they are here to stay. In that sense, Russia today resembles Germany in 1933 or Italy in the early-to-mid-1920s. Russia could follow in their footsteps, or it could falter and find its way back to some form of democracy or authoritarianism. Located somewhere between authoritarianism and fascism, today's Russia may therefore be termed *fascistoid*. If the system remains as is, or even hardens during Medvedev's presidency, then one will be able to say that Russia has moved even further toward a full-fledged fascism. If the system breaks down, or undergoes significant change in the direction of democracy or authoritarianism, then the

have other problems, just as big, that we must address, but these are already problems of a different kind, and we have every opportunity for making progress.

So when you ask me when I first had this feeling of being a leader, I can say that I haven't had this feeling and I don't have it now. I feel like a work horse that is hauling along a cart filled with a heavy load, and I can tell you that the satisfaction I feel from my work depends on how rapidly and effectively I manage to make progress along this road. <http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2007/12/19/1618_ttype82916_154779.shtml>.

33. Catherine Belton, "Putin maps out strategy to retain powerful role," *Financial Times*, February 14, 2008, p. 4.

34. Anne Applebaum, "Putinism: Democracy, the Russian Way," *The Berlin Journal*, spring 2008, no. 16, pp. 43-47.

transition toward fascism will have proven unsuccessful. For the first few months of Medvedev's tenure, the verdict seemed unclear, as both he and Prime Minister Putin appeared to be jockeying for power. The August war against Georgia saw Putin return to prominence—in exactly the kind of hyper-masculine role he had crafted as president—and suggested that Russia was moving toward fascism.³⁵ Medvedev's "Go, Russia!" article of September 2009, on the other hand, seemed to suggest that he was pushing back and that a return toward simple authoritarianism might still be possible.³⁶ In sum, Russia remains mired in the fascistoid no-man's land between authoritarianism and fascism. And it may stay there until the next presidential elections. If, at that point, Putin runs and wins, the verdict should be clearer.

Theoretical Approaches to Systemic Change

One may explain Russia's, or any country's, systemic transformations as the product of 1) political culture, 2) structural or institutional forces, or 3) elite decisions—with the first two approaches reflecting "structure" and the third reflecting "agency" in the structure vs. agency debate. Cultural explanations that assume the persistence of cultural norms, attitudes, or discourses are best at explaining systemic continuities or reversions to past forms; they are generally weak when it comes to explaining breaks with the past. Structural and institutional explanations can explain persistence and change, but they cannot account for timing. Elite explanations can explain persistence, change, and timing, but in being able to account for everything, they easily run the risk of being trivially true.

In explaining the shift from totalitarianism to authoritarianism, a cultural explanation would focus on the growing gap that developed in the last two decades of Leonid Brezhnev's rule between official Soviet ideology, discourse, and norms on the one hand and popular ideology, discourse, and norms on the other. Such an explanation would then emphasize how the notion of systemic failure was "constructed" by opposition elites—in particular the non-Russian popular fronts that emerged during perestroika³⁷—who managed to delegitimize the

authorities, mobilize their own discursive constituencies, and create systemic collapse. A cultural explanation would then emphasize the emergence of a democratic discourse of popular sovereignty in the late-perestroika years, Yeltsin's appropriation of democratic rhetoric in the aftermath of the failed August 1991 coup, and the resultant discursive momentum toward a democratic form of government. Seen in this light, democracy could never really have taken hold because, despite the temporary emergence of a democratic discourse, Russian political culture, as it developed in the course of hundreds of years, is non-democratic and imperial and Russians like strong rule by strong men—a point the Marquis de Custine would probably have endorsed.³⁸ The drift away from democracy was therefore inevitable. Russians were therefore grateful to Putin for having restored both stability, which they supposedly value above all else, and their sense of pride, in themselves and in their formerly humiliated country, great Mother Russia.

In explaining the shift from totalitarianism to authoritarianism, a structural/institutional explanation would focus on the internal systemic contradictions and inefficiencies of totalitarianism and argue that totalitarianism was fated, as in Karl Marx's understanding of capitalism, to collapse.³⁹ That it collapsed at the time it did was due to Gorbachev's institutionally induced inability to appreciate—indeed, to *see*—the importance to the USSR's stability of the nationality factor and unwillingness to stop perestroika from eviscerating the Soviet body politic. A structural/institutional explanation would then highlight the collapse of the Communist Party, as an all-embracing institution that defined the nature of the political system, and its replacement by a plethora of parties, movements, and groupings that began competing for power in a manner that approximated competition and democracy. Finally, democracy had to fail from this perspective because the construction of stable democratic institutions was incompatible with Russia's inheritance of the institutional legacies of totalitarian and imperial collapse.

An elite explanation of the shift from totalitarianism to authoritarianism would focus on Gorbachev's decisions, first, to implement glasnost and perestroika and, second, not to rein them in once disintegrative processes had been unleashed. The rise of Yeltsin as president of Russia and the emergence with him of a counterforce to Gorbachev, the gradual transformation of the Communist bosses of the non-Russian republics into national Communists supporting sovereignty and then independence, and the

35. See Stephen Blank, "Russia's War on Georgia: The Domestic Conflict," *Perspective*, October 2008, vol. 18, no. 4, pp. 1-5. According to Blank, "Apart from the enshrinement of a condition of permanent threat and the predisposition to adventurism, the other domestic context of this invasion is the extension of Putin's primacy. Even if we concede that the war's motives and origins lie largely in the realm of geopolitical considerations, it is clear that it has served to extend Putin's leadership."

36. Dmitrii Medvedev, "Rossiya, vpered!" September 10, 2009. <<http://news.kremlin.ru/news/5413>>

37. See Thomas Sherlock, *Historical Narratives in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Russia* (New York: Palgrave, 2007).

38. See also Edward Keenan, "Muscovite Political Folkways," *Russian Review*, vol. 45, 1986, pp. 158-181.

39. For a structural argument along these lines, see Alexander J. Motyl, *Imperial Ends: The Decay, Collapse, and Revival of Empires* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

inability of Gorbachev to meet the challenge they posed to him and his authority would round out the picture through 1991. Yeltsin's ability to outflank his opponents by employing force against the recalcitrant parliament in late 1993, his decision to hold more or less fair and free presidential elections in 1996, tolerate party competition, and refrain from pursuing unlimited presidential power would be the key factors behind the emergence in the 1990s of a weak form of democracy. Finally, an elite explanation would focus on Putin the ex-KGB officer who packed the ruling elites with his allies from among the *siloviki*, emasculated the regions, and progressively dismantled the country's democratic structures and replaced them with fascist-like ones.⁴⁰

Although these approaches are different, the fact that they all do an adequate job of explaining Russia's systemic transformations suggests, first, that Russia's move toward fascism may have been over-determined and, second, that we may therefore employ all three in explaining Russia's fall from totalitarianism and drift through authoritarianism and democracy toward fascism. The next section will attempt to craft a coherent account of Russia's systemic transformations that draws on all three approaches within a framework that employs two key concepts—totalitarianism and empire.

Explaining Russian Exceptionalism

Russia's exceptional trajectory—from totalitarianism to authoritarianism to democracy to fascism—is the result of its exceptional status within the Soviet system of rule. In contrast to all the other post-Communist states, Russia was the core of both the totalitarian system and the Soviet empire. That is, although the Russian population suffered enormously from the misrule of the Communist Party, the Soviet secret police, and their leaders, the institutions that ran the totalitarian and imperial systems were lodged in Russia, were run by Russian cadres, and employed Russian language and culture as instruments of rule. Russians also viewed these institutions and the Soviet state and empire as fundamentally theirs.

The collapse of totalitarianism and empire thus had different implications for non-Russians and Russians. First, collapse meant expanded freedom for all the peoples of the former Soviet empire, but for Russians it also, if not primarily, meant strategic defeat and intense national humiliation.⁴¹ Second, while collapse forced non-Russians to embark on ideologically legitimated positive projects of nation- and state-building, it forced Russians

to salvage what remained of a superpower and great state. Third, collapse bequeathed weak and underdeveloped institutions and armies to the formerly Soviet non-Russian states in the “near abroad,” and relatively coherent, experienced, and well-staffed governing institutions, a secret police, and a powerful army to the Russians.

In other words, collapse stacked the cards against democracy in Russia. The population, whose political culture was anti-democratic to start with, viewed nation-building as being primarily about reestablishing its lost position of glory as a “great people” and state-building as being primarily about reestablishing the “great Russian state.” No other population in the former Soviet space was encumbered with such a mind-set. Worse, the Russian Federation inherited the very institutions—still powerful central ministries and a strong and powerful secret police and army—that were least inclined to support democratic projects. Further complicating things was the economic collapse and breakdown in law and order that afflicted Russia and every other post-Communist state in the 1990s. All elites and populations in all the states had to cope with the resulting disorder and many were tempted to adopt or prolong authoritarian solutions, but only in Russia did this time of troubles become transformed into a discursive mantra that blamed democracy for all of Russia's ills and seemed to justify a widespread systemic transformation toward dictatorial rule.

Putin's ability to assume power in 1999-2000, to consolidate his rule quickly, and to attain the status of a popular “national leader” therefore had as much to do with the condition of post-Soviet Russia as with any personal talents he may have possessed. Putin the career KGB officer represented the ideal “man on horseback” who would end the *besporjadok* and *khaos* (disorder and chaos) that was created by the collapse of empire and totalitarianism and that was so repugnant to an authoritarian political culture. That same background also provided him with invaluable contacts with the already large percentage of *siloviki* who had managed to infiltrate the establishment in the 1990s. Unlike Mussolini and Hitler, Putin was an insider who neither had to march on the capital nor wage street battles and sit in jail. And because Putin emerged from within the system, he did not need—or have—a full-fledged ideological program for storming the citadels of power. Instead, he could proceed to construct a fascistoid state without declaring that he would do so—and, perhaps, without even knowing that he would do so.

Unsurprisingly, post-Soviet Russia's developmental path resembles that of post-World War I Germany. Both countries lost empires and experienced profound humiliation. Both countries then experienced extreme economic hardship under the stewardship of weak and corrupt democratic regimes. Both countries blamed

40. See Andrew Jack, *Inside Putin's Russia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

41. See Alexander J. Motyl, “Why Empires Reemerge: Imperial Collapse and Imperial Revival in Comparative Perspective,” *Comparative Politics*, vol. 31, no. 2, January 1999, pp. 127-145.

democracy and its internal and external supporters for their ills. Both countries turned to hyper-nationalism, state fetishization, and strong-man rule. In both countries strong men seized power—by legitimate means, by the way—and exploited popular willingness to submit to domination to establish their dictatorial rule. Seen in this light, fascism, *pace* Marxist theories thereof, is not so much the product of the “crisis of capitalism,” as of the “crisis of democracy” in weakened and humiliated states with nondemocratic political cultures. Linz’s explanation of inter-war fascism is strikingly relevant to post-Soviet Russia: “Fascism was the novel response to the crisis—profound or temporary—of the pre-war social structure and party system and to the emergence of new institutional arrangements as a result of war and post-war dislocations. It would be particularly acute in defeated nations, in those which were divided about entry into the war and disappointed with the fruits of victory, such as Italy, and those countries where the crisis led to unsuccessful revolutionary attempts. Fascism would be a counter-revolutionary response led by a revolutionary elite.”⁴²

Challenges for Fascistoid Russia

Although totalitarianism decays in the long run, it tends to be stable in the short to medium term, as all its components reinforce total control—until they do not, at which point the slide toward breakdown may be inevitable. Authoritarian systems are stable as long as they can repress populations—which becomes increasingly hard to do over time, as the costs of repression mount and revenues usually decline. Democracies may be the most stable, especially in the long term, as they are generally able to enjoy some degree of popular support, minimize the costs of compliance, and promote economic growth. Fascism may be least stable in the short, medium, and long terms, generating three contradictions, or weaknesses, relating to the supreme leader, the willingness of the population to obey, and the effect of fascist rhetoric and behavior on neighboring states.

(1) Cults of vigorous leaders cannot be sustained as leaders inevitably grow old or decrepit. A continual rejuvenation of the supreme leader might solve the problem were it not for the fact that fascist leaders do not want to give up power. Sooner or later, fascist leaders lose their core legitimacy, and when they do, both their followers and the submissive population begin to look for alternative idols. Putin, although young and vigorous today, will not remain young forever. And an old and decrepit Russian leader will not be able to make the case for youth, vigor, and manliness in typical fascist style.

Moreover, fascist regimes are invariably fragmented. Extreme centralization of power in a supreme leader is supposed to ensure elite coordination and submission; instead, it inclines elites to compete for the leader’s favor, to amass resources and build regional or bureaucratic empires, and not to cooperate with their colleagues-turned-competitors. Fascist regimes are thus brittle, and when supreme leaders falter—as they inevitably do, especially during times of crisis—or leave the scene, successor elites engage in cutthroat competition to assume the mantle of authority. In so doing, however, they not only weaken the regime, but they also expose the system as less than the imposing monolith projected to the submissive population.

The global financial crisis of 2008-2009 and its impact on Russia’s banks, oligarchs, stock market, energy, and growth prospects are likely to intensify elite infighting and erode Putin’s aura of omnipotence, especially if popular living standards begin to decline. The next few years will be particularly difficult for Russia, as Putin tries to remain in control of a political system formally led by Medvedev without becoming the target of popular opprobrium and elite opposition. Chances are that Putin will attempt to shift the blame onto Medvedev, present himself as Russia’s only hope, and manipulate elites and publics to force Medvedev to resign—just as the economy is about to improve. Of course, Putin could fail. The *siloviki* and other elites may turn against him and the public may tire of his play-acting—especially if the economic crisis proves deeper and longer-lasting. Whatever the outcome, Russian politics will be exceedingly unsettled. And regardless of who leads the government, these tensions and uncertainties will undermine the effectiveness of the system and its capacity to retain popular support.⁴³

(2) Popular humiliation and the willingness to submit to unconditional authority are weak foundations on which to build states. Sooner or later, Russians will not feel humiliated and, when that happens—as it surely will, once their prosperity and exposure to the world and its blandishment increases—they will be less inclined to accept leader cults and authoritarian rule by shadowy *siloviki*. To be sure, Russian political culture may be authoritarian, and, as such, it will sustain fascism. But strategic sectors of Russia society—the middle class and students—will increasingly reject that culture and prove to be a source of new thinking about Russia’s politics.

The rise of a middle class committed to private property, rule of law, and greater involvement in the political process is an obvious challenge to the longer-term stability of a fascist state. Even if official elites

43. See James Sherr, “Russia and the West: A Reassessment,” Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, *The Shrivenham Papers*, no. 6, January 2008, p. 19.

42. Linz, p. 7.

succeed in converting affluent and educated Russians to hyper-nationalism and neo-imperialism—as many elites have done in the past—a middle class could force the state to make concessions to its preferences and, over time, evolve into a milder form of authoritarian rule. The middle class could come to play a more directly destabilizing role in times of political or economic crisis, especially during periods of intense elite infighting. Ukraine's more affluent citizens threw in their lot with the Orange revolutionaries in late 2004 and, by providing them with material support, were able to ensure their victory. Russia's affluent citizens could just as easily follow in the Ukrainians' footsteps, if conditions appear to favor their interests—as they just might if the financial collapse of 2008 has severe repercussions and the elites appear incapable of finding quick and painless solutions.

Students are the traditional bearers of revolution in almost all societies, and it is at first glance remarkable that Russia's many students have thus far been quiet. Like Americans and Europeans in the 1950s, they may be responding to past economic insecurity and current economic prospects by focusing on their educations and careers. But, like their American and European counterparts in the 1960s, they may, once a certain degree of prosperity can be taken for granted while politics remains nondemocratic, have the self-assurance to translate their critical thinking and youthful enthusiasm into protest. On their own, students in developed societies are rarely able to do more than cause trouble. If their rebellions coincide with or feed off larger social unrest, economic crisis, and political infighting, however, the potential for instability can grow correspondingly.

(3) All fascist states scare their neighbors and provoke them to defend themselves against perceived threats emanating from the behavior and bluster of fascist leaders. In that sense, fascist hyper-nationalism becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy—effectively creating the very enemies it invokes as the reasons for its justification. The soldiers and policemen who run fascist states have a natural proclivity to toughness and weaponry. The hyper-nationalism, state fetishes, and cult of hyper-masculinity incline fascist states to see enemies everywhere. The cult-like status of leaders encourages them to pound their chests with abandon. And the population's implication in its own repression leads it to balance its self-humiliation with attempts to humiliate others. Unsurprisingly, Russia has taken to asserting its “rightful” place in the sun by engaging in energy blackmail vis-à-vis Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltic states, cyber-wars against Estonia, a war against Georgia, Polar land grabs, saber-rattling in the Crimea, and other forms of aggressive behavior.

Russia will create ever more suspicious and terrified neighbors the longer it remains fascistoid.

Those neighbors—in particular Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan—will not just roll over and accept a fait accompli crafted in Moscow. Instead, they will seek existential solutions to existential threats. At a minimum, this means beefing up substantially their defense expenditures, crafting anti-Russian alliances, subordinating economic reform to the exigencies of security, and viewing their own Russian-speaking populations as potential fifth columns. More likely than not, the non-Russian states that feel most threatened by Russia will follow in Israel's footsteps and seek security guarantees from the United States and shelter under the American nuclear umbrella. At a maximum, this means doing exactly what the Israelis have done: secretly acquiring nuclear weapons. All the ex-Soviet states have the know-how to build nuclear reactors and weapons; Belarus, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan even inherited hundreds of warheads after the collapse of the Soviet Union. And some of their leaders have openly expressed regret at having transferred them to Russia in the early 1990s.

Naturally, these defensive reactions will only succeed in persuading Russia's ruling elites that continued power enhancement is imperative, both in defense of the fatherland and in defense of their “abandoned brethren” in the non-Russian states. A “quick, little war” might then become tempting, as a means of rallying the population around the flag, of distracting attention from economic woes, and of teaching the non-Russians a lesson. Crisis and overreach will then become likely—especially as Russia is far weaker than its elites believe⁴⁴—and the resulting foreign-policy disasters will serve to expose the regime and leader as less than all-knowing and all-competent and thereby accelerate elite fragmentation and popular dissatisfaction.⁴⁵

The End of Fascistoid Russia

Russia faces an additional problem—one peculiar to its economy. Because energy resources have fueled Russia's economic development, the centrality of energy and, thus, of easy money will transform, and perhaps already has transformed, Russia into a “petro-state” that already serves as an impediment to further economic development and political stability. Energy-generated easy money encourages state elites to engage in corruption and outright theft and to use the state as a source of patronage. Easy money therefore promotes a

44. See Allen C. Lynch, *How Russia Is Not Ruled* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Rajan Menon and Alexander J. Motyl, “The Myth of Russian Resurgence,” *The American Interest*, vol. 2, no. 4, March/April 2007, pp. 96-101

45. On overreach, see Charles A. Kupchan, *The Vulnerability of Empire* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994); Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

bloated and parasitic state apparatus whose efficiency and effectiveness decline as lines of command become blurred, elites engage in localized empire building, resources are diverted from their intended uses, and corruption gets out of control. Elite fragmentation weakens the supreme leader, while untrammelled rent-seeking both undercuts the persuasiveness of statist ideology and impedes the development of the middle class. Easy money also encourages elites to engage in saber-rattling vis-à-vis their neighbors.

The 2008-2009 economic crisis will both enhance these tendencies and create debilitating contradictions. On the one hand, capital flight, declining foreign direct investment, and the drop in energy prices will reduce the ability of the petro-state to generate easy money. On the other hand, growing state intervention in a crisis-ridden economy will inevitably increase corruption and promote further elite infighting, both over policy and over the shrinking pie. In sum, a fascistoid Russia faces the risk of decay, and perhaps even breakdown, in the not too distant future.

Which way will a destabilized Russia go—toward democracy or toward authoritarianism? A cultural approach to systemic change would suggest that authoritarianism, as being more in sync with an

authoritarian political culture, is more likely. A structural/institutional approach would probably come down on the side of some messy form of democracy as the most likely aftermath of the supreme leader's fall from power and the concomitant elite infighting. An elite approach could go either way, especially as Putin's opponents can be found among both the democratic opposition and the hard-line *siloviki*. If these calculations are correct, then the most one can say with any degree of confidence is that a post-fascist Russia will probably enter an extended time of troubles characterized by different forces pulling it in different directions—both toward and away from democracy. The only thing that seems certain is that, as *besporyadok* and *khaos* increase, Russians will curse Putin for their misfortunes.

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