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Putin's Russia as a fascist political system

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ABSTRACT

There is a broad consensus among students of contemporary Russia that the political system constructed by Vladimir Putin is authoritarian and that he plays a dominant role in it. By building and expanding on these two features and by engaging in a deconstruction and reconstruction of the concept of fascism, this article suggests that the Putin system may plausibly be termed fascist. Not being a type of group, disposition, politics, or ideology, fascism may be salvaged from the conceptual confusion that surrounds it by being conceived of as a type of authoritarian political system. Fascism may be defined as a popular fully authoritarian political system with a personalistic dictator and a cult of the leader—a definition that makes sense conceptually as well as empirically, with respect to Putin's Russia and related fascist systems.

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There is a broad consensus among students of contemporary Russia that the political system constructed by Vladimir Putin is authoritarian and that he plays a dominant role in it. By building and expanding on these two features and by engaging in a deconstruction and reconstruction of the concept of fascism, I suggest that the Putin system may plausibly be termed fascist. To make that argument, I shall, in a move that many scholars will consider Quixotic, first attempt to salvage the concept of fascism from the conceptual confusion that surrounds it. Then, once a plausible definition of fascism is on hand, I shall argue that the Putin system meets fascism's definitional requirements and is, thus, fascist.

Throughout, I draw only on secondary sources, scholarly consensus, and logic. Indeed, my argument is primarily a syllogism which premises rest on a plausible definition of the concept of fascism on the one hand and on the scholarly consensus regarding Putin's Russia on the other. If my definition of fascism and the consensus regarding Putin's Russia are accepted as valid, then it follows, logically, that Putin's Russia may legitimately be termed fascist or, at the very least, fascistoid. If my definition of fascism and the consensus regarding Putin's Russia are not accepted as valid, then it follows, logically, that Putin's Russian may not legitimately be termed fascist or fascistoid.

I argue that four features—full authoritarianism, mass support, a personality cult, and an active, personalistic leadership style (whether wise or vigorous)—are the key components of fascism as a system of rule.¹ In order to justify applying fascism to Putin's Russia, it will be necessary to engage in a conceptual deconstruction of the concept and a subsequent conceptual reconstruction. Developing a conceptual framework that identifies fascism's defining characteristics within a typology of political systems is perfectly doable, and the next sections will attempt to do just that. That said, it is important to appreciate that no definition and no conceptual framework is perfect (Gerring, 1999). Definitions and frameworks only help organize our

¹ According to Payne (1995:12), a “fundamental characteristic” of fascism is “the insistence on what is now termed ‘male chauvinism’ and the tendency to exaggerate the masculine principle in all aspects of activity ... Only fascists ... made a perpetual fetish of the ‘virility’ of their movement and its program and style ...”

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thinking. Some do it better; some do it worse. Some are more useful; some are less. All are flawed. Definitional pluralism and a multitude of competing frameworks are therefore inevitable, and expecting unanimity, or even lasting consensus, is illusory.

Part of the problem is the unhelpful public discourse in North America, Europe, and the former Soviet Union, where fascist has come to denote anyone or anything one dislikes. In the United States, for instance, Donald Trump, who may be a populist and demagogue, but who surely wants to practice his populism and demagoguery within the institutional framework of American democracy, has recently been called a fascist by American commentators (Tucker, 2015). In Putin's Russia, much of the confusion traces back to the intentional semantic obfuscation of Soviet and Russian ideologists, who, as Mykola Riabchuk and Taras Kuzio show in this issue, used fascist as a synonym for anti-communist or anti-Russian. As a result, any perceived enemy of Putin's Russia is a fascist, with the bizarre Orwellian result that Ukrainian, Estonian, and other non-Russian democrats are termed fascist by the propaganda apparatus of what in fact is a fascist system. By the same token, Putin's Russia must be a paragon of democracy and any suggestion to the contrary is immediately met with invective and vituperation.

Given this controversy, one might be perfectly justified in suggesting that the term, fascism, has become so broad and controversial as to be meaningless—or, perhaps even worse, useless—and that terming Putin's Russia fascist in no way clarifies matters. I suggest that the concept of fascism can be saved from the conceptual confusion surrounding it, but only after a serious deconstruction and reconstruction of the term is undertaken. Even then, it may still be impossible, given the conceptual chaos within fascism studies, to find more than extremely limited acceptance by its practitioners of any definition, framework, or typology. Although there is general agreement on the broad outlines of what constitutes an authoritarian and democratic system, there is no agreement whatsoever about what fascism is. As a result, no matter how serious and persuasive the deconstruction of the concept of fascism and the reconstruction of a plausible minimal definition thereof, the reception will be, at best, mixed, on the part of both Russia scholars and fascism scholars. Faced with this distressing prospect, one can either shrug and continue or shrug and discontinue. I have chosen the former route.

1. Conceptual confusion in defining fascism

This is not the place to discuss the extreme conceptual chaos² surrounding the term, *fascism*; suffice to say that it may be greater than that surrounding other “essentially contested concepts”.³ Consider the vast differences among the following definitions of fascism.

- Buchheim (1986:23): “The essence of fascism is rebellion against freedom.”
- Corner (2002:351): “fascist dictatorship ensured, for the vast majority of people, that there were no choices to be made; that this is what constitutes the real totalitarian nature of fascism (and not the greater or lesser level of open and direct repression); and that it is this that makes Italian fascism directly comparable to its justly reviled partner and ally, German Nazism.”
- Linz (1976:12–13): fascism is “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.”
- Lyttleton (1973:12): “Fascism, reduced to its essentials, is the ideology of permanent conflict.”
- Mann (2004:13): “fascism is the pursuit of a transcendent and cleansing nation-statism through paramilitarism.”
- Payne (1995:14): “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.”
- Paxton (2004:218): “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.”
- Paxton (1998:17): “The fourth stage [of fascism is] the exercise of power.”
- Riley (2005:288): “I treat Italian fascism and de Rivera's Spain as instances, respectively, of hegemonic authoritarianism and an economic corporate dictatorship.”
- Scruton (1982:169): “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

² Excellent analyses of this chaos were provided in Payne (1980) and Griffin (1993).

³ The term is Gallie's (1956). See also Connolly (1983).

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.”

Confronted with such variety, a person might rationally conclude that fascism is meaningless or nonexistent. I attempt to minimize confusion by developing a definition of fascism in what I trust is a conceptually transparent and useful manner. I first delineate what fascism is not (or what it is less usefully conceived as) before suggesting what it is (or what it is more usefully conceived as). That is, I proceed by a process of elimination until, *faute de mieux*, only one definitional category remains. I propose a definition of fascism that identifies it, not as a type of group (movement, party, or organization), disposition (state of mind or set of attitudes), ideology (worldview or belief system), or politics (exercise of power or competition for scarce resources), but as a type of polity (political system, regime, or state). I submit that these five categories—which refer to agglomerations of individuals (groups), agglomerations of affects (dispositions), agglomerations of ideas (ideology), agglomerations of behaviors (politics), and agglomerations of institutions (polities)—comprise the universe of possible relevant categories of which fascism can be a type.

Obviously, “reality” is more complex, multifaceted, and messy than definitions. In “reality,” fascism appears to be many things. In social science, however, we cannot formulate typologies or classifications—or answer the question of whether Putin’s Russia is fascist, fully authoritarian, or something else—without clear, concise, and persuasive definitions that reduce complex phenomena to one key dimension, their “essence,” or what they “really” are. Such simplifications usually strike historians as reductionist, and they are—for historians. Small wonder that many historians of fascism regard the search for a generic definition as pointless (Allardyce, 1979). For social scientists, clear definitions, as Sartori (1970) has emphasized, are indispensable to clear thinking about causes and effects.

Unsurprisingly, the definitions listed above fit under these five categories. Thus, Buchheim’s (1986:23) notion of fascism as “rebellion” effectively reduces fascism to a rebellious disposition or politics. Linz specifically calls fascism a movement. Lyttleton calls it an ideology. Mann’s notion of fascism as the “pursuit of a transcendent and cleansing nation-statism” is, like Buchheim’s, dispositional and political. Payne sees fascism as an ideology (an ultra-nationalist, vitalist philosophy), while Paxton (2004): (“a form of political behavior marked by obsessive preoccupation”) clearly places it in the realm of disposition and politics as well. Paxton (1998) and Riley see fascism as a form of rule or regime. Scruton ascribes elements of ideology, disposition, and politics to fascism.

Why is there such a broad variety of conceptualizations of fascism? Paxton (1998:2–5, 8) provides five reasons for the lack of consensus:

Five major difficulties stand in the way of any effort to define fascism. First, a problem of timing. The fascist phenomenon was poorly understood at the beginning in part because it was unexpected. ... A second difficulty in defining fascism is created by mimicry. In fascism’s heyday, in the 1930s, many regimes that were not functionally fascist borrowed elements of fascist decor in order to lend themselves an aura of force, vitality, and mass mobilization. ... This leads to the third problem with defining fascism, posed by the dauntingly wide disparity among individual cases in space and in time. They differ in space because each national variant of fascism draws its legitimacy, as we shall see, not from some universal scripture but from what it considers the most authentic elements of its own community identity. ... A fourth and even more redoubtable difficulty stems from the ambiguous relationship between doctrine and action in fascism. ... [T]he words of fascist intellectuals—even if we accept for the moment that they constitute fundamental philosophical texts—correspond only distantly with what fascist movements do after they have power. Early fascist programs are poor guides to later fascist policy. ... The fifth and final difficulty with defining fascism is caused by overuse: the word “fascist” has become the most banal of epithets. Everyone is someone’s fascist.

Paxton’s fourth reason—that scholars too often take fascists at their own word and accept their self-depictions as accurate reflections of the reality—is worth some attention. Mussolini’s Discussion (2004) of fascism is instructive: if we believe him, fascism amounts to everything. Fascists are obviously welcome to believe that, but there is no reason that we should follow in their footsteps. Fascists claim to have totalitarian states, but, despite their self-image, fascist states rarely, if ever, are totalitarian. Hitler Germany came closest, but even it fell short of Stalinist totalitarianism by retaining a market economy, religious autonomy, and significant amounts of rule of law for Aryans.

Consider in this light Eco’s (1995) list of “Ur-Fascism’s” characteristics. Like many other students of fascism, Eco emphasizes its supposed irrationality and love of action for action’s sake. And yet, a closer look at Hitler Germany or Mussolini Italy shows quite clearly that, the poetic claims of fascist ideologists notwithstanding, both the German Nazis and the Italian Fascists pursued eminently rational policies of seizing and maintaining power. Nor did they engage in action just for the sake of action. Quite the contrary, their actions generally had some point or goal. By the same token, even though Mussolini insisted that the fascist state was totalitarian, it was anything but that. Indeed, as Bosworth (2006:563) notes, “On every occasion when the Fascist ‘revolution’ sought to manipulate and control Italians, Italians were hard at work manipulating and adapting Fascism. Like all modern and most ancient ideologies, Fascism talked as though it wanted to impose only one version of history on its people. In reality, however, Italians at the interstices where ideology and practice met clung stubbornly to many pasts and presents and vested their hopes in many futures.”

Although we should approach fascist self-representations with caution, there is one claim that deserves to be taken seriously. Importantly, Mussolini, in his famous essay on fascism (Mussolini, 2004:310), emphasizes that fascism is a state:

“The keystone of Fascist doctrine is the conception of the State, of its essence, of its tasks, of its ends.” Mussolini’s use of the word, keystone, is important. Although he begins by defining fascism as a “political conception,” a “spiritualized conception,” and “ethical conception,” a “religious conception,” and a “historical conception” in that essay (Mussolini, 2004:305–306)—in short, as an all-encompassing way of life that includes groups, dispositions, ideology, and politics—Mussolini recognized that all these conceptions depended on the political core of a state for their coherence. As Bosworth (2006:564) notes, “Mussolini told Franco in October 1936, what the Spaniard should aim at was a regime that was simultaneously ‘authoritarian’, ‘social’, and ‘popular’. That amalgam, the Duce advised, was the basis of universal fascism.”⁴

I suggest we take Mussolini’s recognition of the centrality of the state seriously. All fascists want, above all, to capture the state and transform it into a peculiar kind of authoritarian entity. Groups, ideologies, dispositions, and politics are never ends in themselves. They are means to the end of seizing power and imposing fascist rule on some population. The key to understanding what fascism is may therefore be in understanding what fascist rule is.

Continuing with these insights, I argue in the next section that it is unhelpful to think of fascism as a type of group, or disposition, or politics, or ideology. I also argue that reducing fascism to nationalism is a serious blunder. If neither a group, nor a disposition, nor a politics, nor an ideology, fascism can only be a type of polity. If so—and after explaining why I prefer political system to regime or state—all that will remain to be done is to demonstrate that the defining characteristics of fascism as a political system are identical to those of late Putin’s Russia.

2. What is fascism?

The case against treating fascism solely as a group (movement, party, or organization) rests on the claim that there is nothing intrinsically fascist about them *as such*. That qualifier, as such, is critically important. All groups, whether fascist or non-fascist, have leaders, all have followers, all have hierarchies, all have flags, parades, and marches, all are demagogic, and all draw on affect as much as, if not more than, on reason in their efforts at mobilizing constituencies. Many are also violent. Adolf Hitler’s comments on organization and propaganda in *Mein Kampf* differ little from Vladimir Lenin’s in *What Is to Be Done?*, and both could easily serve as handbooks for all manner of movements across the entire political spectrum. If we are to distinguish fascist movements, parties, and organizations from their non-fascist counterparts, we have to leave the realm of groups *per se* and explore their dispositions, ideologies, politics, or preferred polities. Naturally, to claim that fascism is not a type of group is not to state that fascist groups cannot empirically exist. They obviously can and do exist—not because of their intrinsically fascist “groupness,” but because of their appropriation of fascist programs.

Fascism as a psychological disposition (state of mind or set of attitudes) appears at first glance to have some conceptual traction.⁵ As Eco suggests, fascists are supposed to be excitable characters prone to various forms of “extremism,” and extremism is a disposition *par excellence*. However, reducing fascism to a psychological condition—such as lethargy, extremism, or moderation—is unhelpful. After all, although some fascists may be psychologically excitable and attitudinally extremist, so are most dedicated political activists on the left, right, and center as well as all devotees of a radical politics. More important, as I already noted, we must distinguish between fascist self-representations and actual fascist behavior. Although they may claim to be irrational, excitable, and action-oriented, the fact is that most fascists at most times behave quite rationally, coolly, and calmly—as do, indeed, most serious political activists on the left, right, and center. If they did not, they would never have been able to seize power in the first place. By the same token, this is not to say that temperamental fascists cannot exist. They can and do, but not because temperament is an intrinsic feature of fascism.

Fascism as politics (exercise of power or competition for scarce resources) is open to the same criticism directed against fascism as group. If we conceptualize fascism as a radical, extremist, or right-wing politics (or as any other kind of politics), we would ultimately have to define these modifiers in terms of dispositions, ideologies, or polities. An excitable, vigorous, or tough politics would direct us to dispositions. An ideologically radical, extremist, or right-wing politics would direct us to ideology. A politics that aspired to build a radical, extremist, or right-wing polity would direct us to polities. In sum, fascism as politics only begs the question: what kind of politics? Once again, a caveat is in order. My claim is not that fascists cannot and do not practice politics; obviously, they do. Rather, my claim is that their politics is not intrinsically fascist.

The case against fascism as an ideology (worldview or belief system) rests on the empirical fact that no such thing as a coherent fascist ideology exists. There is no fascist Karl Marx or John Stuart Mill. There is no fascist equivalent of Marxism or liberalism. Instead, there are bits and pieces of oftentimes contradictory writings and bits and pieces of oftentimes contradictory beliefs produced by self-styled and non-self-styled fascists, but there is nothing comprehensive, systematic, and, most important perhaps, obligatory for all fascists. Mussolini’s writings on fascism are a case in point (Mussolini, 2004). They are a jumble of claims about reality, life, politics, society, and the spirit that provide little practical guidance about how to behave and what to do in order to promote the fascist cause. Paxton (1998:4) puts it well: “Fascism is a political practice appropriate

⁴ Interestingly, dictionary definitions of fascism also emphasize fascism’s political quality as a form of rule. Thus, *Oxford Dictionaries* (2015) define fascism as, first, “an authoritarian and nationalistic right-wing system of government and social organization,” and, second, as “(in general use) extreme right-wing, authoritarian, or intolerant views or practice.” *Merriam-Webster* (2015) defines fascism as, first, “a way of organizing a society in which a government ruled by a dictator controls the lives of the people and in which people are not allowed to disagree with the government” and, second, “very harsh control or authority.”

⁵ As Rocco (2004:313) said, “It is true that Fascism is, above all, action and sentiment”

to the mass politics of the twentieth century. Moreover, it bears a different relationship to thought than do the nineteenth-century 'isms.' Unlike them, fascism does not rest on formal philosophical positions with claims to universal validity. There was no 'Fascist Manifesto,' no founding fascist thinker. Although one can deduce from fascist language implicit Social Darwinist assumptions about human nature, the need for community and authority in human society, and the destiny of nations in history, fascism does not base its claims to validity on their truth.⁶

Griffin (1993) attempts to salvage the fascism-as-ideology project by arguing that fascism is nationalism⁷ or, as he puts it (Griffin, 1993:26), "Fascism is a genus of political ideology whose mythic core in its various permutations is a palingenetic form of populist ultra-nationalism." The primary flaw with Griffin's analysis is that nationalism—whether understood as the exaltation of one's nation or a desire for national liberation (Motyl, 1990)—is ubiquitous in today's world. Who, in the modern world, does not support national "palingenesis"⁸—or the rebirth, regeneration, or revival of one's nation? Modern political discourse, in both democracies and non-democracies, is suffused with claims about reviving and regenerating a nation's pride, glory, prosperity, stature, or status. Every nation, whether communist, liberal, or fascist, has a flag that it regards with pride, a tomb of the unknown soldier and a pantheon of heroes that it venerates, a national narrative that it reproduces in textbooks, and national holidays that it uses to stage parades. Every regime, political system, or state contains some national characteristic—be it the claim that "the nation" is a monolith or the claim that "the nation" is the basis of popular sovereignty or the claim that "the nation" must be embedded in proletarian internationalism. Nation exaltation has become so quotidian (or "banal," to use Billig's (1995) term) that nationalist has become a synonym for human being. But if everyone is a nationalist, then everyone must also be a proto-fascist. Moreover, since ultra-nationalism is, as an ultra-form of nationalism, immanent in nationalism,⁹ and fascism is ultra-nationalism, fascism must be immanent in nationalism. The fascist bacillus is thus present in every form of national exaltation, no matter how innocent, liberal, tolerant, and progressive. Every society is thus proto-fascist, a claim that seems excessive, to say the least.

Although flawed, Griffin's conflation of nationalism and fascism does enable us to get a better conceptual handle on fascism. In contrast to nationalism, fascism's two preconditions are an already existing state and an already existing non-fascist type of regime or political system. Fascists do not build states *de novo*; nor do they build regimes or political systems *de novo*. Fascism and fascists are always found in already existing nation-states with already existing non-fascist types of regimes or political systems. Fascism and fascists do not exist simply in order to assert the ontological reality of fascism as groups, ideologies, dispositions, or politics. They come into being precisely because they aspire to change existing non-fascist regimes or political systems into their fascist counterparts.¹⁰ As I argue in the next section, getting a handle on fascism therefore requires looking at fascism as a form of regime, political system, or state.

3. Fascism as a political system

If fascism as group, or disposition, or politics, or ideology does not persuade us, then we have one option only: viewing fascism as a type of polity (political system, regime, or state). My preference is for fascism as a type of political system. The concept of political system, as defined by Easton (1953), enables us to go beyond the political institutions that comprise regimes and states and incorporate relevant social actors implicated in the system's repression of its subject population. As a type of political system, fascism therefore concerns the relationships between and among the actors, rules, and institutions that constitute political systems.

In order to grasp what kind of system fascism is, we need a typological framework that encompasses the major types of political systems, differentiates between and among them along a set of identical criteria, and locates fascism within that typology. Table 1 provides a comparative overview of the defining characteristics of competitive authoritarian, fully authoritarian, democratic, and fascist political systems (I exclude totalitarian systems, not because they do not exist, but because they are irrelevant to this discussion). In contrast to Zimmerman, Levitsky and Way, and Gel'man, who essentially define authoritarianism as the absence of democratic institutions, I have chosen ten dimensions that, while fully consistent with their schemes, give authoritarianism some positive content. They include: political institutions, leader, worldview, popular attitude toward the regime, economy, opposition and civil rights, non-state institutions, coercive apparatus, propaganda apparatus, and violence. Many other features that are commonly assumed to mark fascist systems are not intrinsic to

⁶ On the other hand, Roberts (2000) takes fascist ideology seriously.

⁷ Payne (1995) makes similar arguments.

⁸ According to Griffin (1993:32–33), "the term 'palingenesis' ... refers to the sense of a new start or of regeneration after a phase of crisis or decline ..."

⁹ Griffin (1993:37–38) does not adequately distinguish between nationalism and ultra-nationalism. While he says that ultra-nationalism refers to "forms of nationalism which 'go beyond', and hence reject, anything compatible with liberal institutions or with the tradition of Enlightenment humanism which underpins them," he also speaks of "[n]ationalism (by which scholars clearly mean a profoundly illiberal form which corresponds to what we have called ultra-nationalism)." The first claim suggests ultra-nationalism is an ultra-form of nationalism; the second suggests they are identical. In fact, what scholars really mean by ultra-nationalism is, I suspect, chauvinism. If so, appending the modifier "ultra" to the term "nationalism" is a sleight of hand that creates a putative connection between nationalism and chauvinism when none such connection need exist, whether conceptually or empirically.

¹⁰ In contrast to fascism, which is invariably anti-democratic, the regimes to which nationalists aspire are not. Nationalisms and nationalists have ranged across all political ideologies—Rawls (2001) suggests that liberalism demands the recognition of the right of nations to self-determination and is, thus, an intrinsically nationalist project—because their ideology is fundamentally indifferent to the type of regime that characterizes the nation-state.

Table 1
Political systems and their features.

Features	Democracy	Competitive (hybrid) authoritarianism	Full (consolidated) authoritarianism	Fascism
Political institutions	Multiple parties; genuine elections; autonomous parliament; independent judiciary	Dominant party; semi-rigged elections; subordinate parliament; semi-independent judiciary in non-political sphere	Dominant party; rigged elections; rubber-stamp parliament; semi-independent judiciary in non-political sphere	Dominant party; rigged elections; rubber-stamp parliament; semi-independent judiciary in non-political sphere
Leader	Elected official	Gray eminence or junta	Gray eminence or junta	<i>Personalistic dictator</i>
Worldview	Incoherent; State and nation admiration	Incoherent; State and nation exaltation	Incoherent; State and nation exaltation	Incoherent; State, nation, and leader exaltation
Popular attitude toward regime	Support	Acquiescence	Acquiescence	<i>Mass support</i>
Economy	Minimal state interference in market economy	State alliance with dominant forces in market economy	State alliance with dominant forces in market economy	State alliance with dominant forces in market economy
Opposition	Substantial	Intimidated	Wholly or mostly neutralized	Wholly or mostly neutralized
Civil rights	Respected	Greatly circumscribed	Routinely violated	Routinely violated
Coercive apparatus	Subordinate to government	Part of ruling elite	Part of ruling elite	Part of ruling elite
Propaganda apparatus	None or minimal	Significant, but limited	Significant, but limited	Significant, but limited
Violence and coercion	Sporadic violence and coercion	Targeted violence, widespread coercion	Targeted violence, widespread coercion	Targeted violence, widespread coercion

Source: composed by the author

the concept. Some fascist systems are warlike, others are not. Some are racists and/or anti-Semitic, others are not. Some build concentration camps, others do not.

In fascist systems, as in fully authoritarian systems, the pro-regime party is dominant, electoral outcomes are pre-ordained, parliaments are rubber-stamp institutions, and judiciaries do what the leader tells them in the political sphere. In contrast to authoritarian systems, which are ruled by gray eminences or juntas, and democratic systems, which are ruled by elected officials, fascists systems are ruled by personalistic dictators. Like competitive and fully authoritarian systems (and unlike totalitarian systems), fascist systems do not penetrate into a country's political, economic, social, and cultural life and do not propound all-embracing ideologies that answer all of life's questions. Instead, fascist systems attempt to dominate and control non-state institutions and espouse limited worldviews. Like authoritarian and, to a lesser degree, democratic systems, fascist systems exalt the state and the nation; unlike authoritarian and democratic systems, fascist systems also exalt the leader. Unlike competitive and fully authoritarian systems, fascist systems are genuinely popular. Like competitive and fully authoritarian systems, fascist systems also reject socialism and embrace capitalism: they tacitly acknowledge the autonomy of capitalists, even while circumscribing it by means of dirigisme, occupation of the strategic heights, or corporatism. Like competitive and fully authoritarian systems, fascist systems are highly centralized and hierarchical, giving pride of place within the authority structure to the army and secret police. Like fully authoritarian systems, fascist systems limit freedom of the press, freedom of speech, and freedom of assembly and their oppositions are either wholly or mostly neutralized. Like authoritarian systems, fascist systems have significant, but limited, propaganda apparatuses and engage in targeted violence against regime opponents and widespread coercion against the population in general.

Fascism is thus a sub-type of full authoritarianism, differing from it in three respects. Fascist dictators exercise a personalistic leadership style, whereas authoritarian dictators are gray eminences or juntas. What passes for an authoritarian worldview centers on the state and nation, while the fascist equivalent also celebrates the wise or vigorous personalistic leader. Finally, authoritarian populations acquiesce in authoritarian rule, whereas their fascist counterparts willingly submit to fascism in exchange for promises of a grand and glorious future. I therefore define fascism as *a popular fully authoritarian political system with a personalistic dictator and a cult of the leader*. In turn, a competitive authoritarian political system with a personalistic dictator and a cult of the leader may be termed fascistoid—that is, almost, but not quite fascist (Motyl, 2010).

Importantly, this definition applies to classic fascist political systems such as Mussolini Italy, Hitler Germany, Franco Spain, and Ustasha Croatia—and suggests that Saddam Hussein's Iraq, the Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran, Muammar Qaddafi's Libya, Hafez-al Assad's Syria, Idi Amin's Uganda, Papa Doc Duvalier's Haiti, and Kemal Atatürk's Turkey may be classified as fascist. Obviously, to classify these systems as fascist is not to preclude the possibility of their having morphed into something else at various times. In contrast, Hugo Chavez's Venezuela, Józef Piłsudski's Poland, and Juan Peron's Argentina may not, as they were not fully authoritarian. Although my definition does not, and cannot, capture all the features of all these systems, it does capture their common “fascist” core and therefore enables us to classify and group them as well as compare and contrast them. If one wants to differentiate between and among sub-types of fascism, one can easily append any number of modifiers

(partial vs. full, authoritarian vs. near-totalitarian, violent vs. coercive, and others) to isolate the different species within the larger genus.¹¹

This definition also enables us to make sense of fascism. A fascist group is thus a movement, party, or organization aspiring to construct a popular fully authoritarian political system with a personalistic dictator and a cult of the leader. Hitler's Nazis, Mussolini's Fascists, Ante Pavelić's Ustasha, and Ion Codreanu's Iron Guard clearly fit the bill. By the same token, a fascist is a person aspiring to construct a popular fully authoritarian political system with a personalistic dictator and a cult of the leader. By these standards, Trump is obviously no fascist. Fascist dispositions and politics are no different from those of other political activists, while their ideas about the world might be termed an ideology only if they were to constitute a coherent set of beliefs about constructing and sustaining a popular fully authoritarian political system with a personalistic dictator and a cult of the leader.

4. Putin's Russia as a fully (consolidated) authoritarian system

Given my definition of fascism as a popular fully authoritarian political system with a personalistic dictator and a cult of the leader, I shall now argue that Putin's Russia is just such a political system. As noted above, I rest my case solely on the consensus in the scholarly literature on Putin's Russia.

Zimmerman (2014:7–8) captures the consensus within the field about the nature of Russia's current political system

There was no unanimity in the literature as to how to characterize Russia's political system in the mid-1990s—democracy (Myagkov), electoral democracy (McFaul), competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky and Way). Most Western specialists, however they classified Russia circa 1996, agreed with Levitsky and Way's statement a propos Russia at that juncture, “[t]he regime was quite open in the early and mid-1990s” with “highly competitive elections,” a “legislature [that] wielded considerable power, and private mass media ... [that] regularly criticized Yeltsin and provided a platform for opposition.”

Zimmerman (2014:7–8) continues:

At the same time, whether using McFaul, Levitsky and Way, or Freedom House as their basis for judgment about how to categorize post-Soviet Russian politics, few scholars would dispute the within-system changes in the Russian political system in the dozen years subsequent to the 1996 election. Over that time period, the trend was away from what had been—warts and all—a highly competitive system. Instead, in the period between the 1996 Yeltsin electoral victory and 2008 when Vladimir Putin selected Dmitry Medvedev as his replacement as president, presidential elections became decreasingly open, decreasingly competitive, and increasingly meaningless. ... There was hyperbole in Gerald Easter's characterization of Russia by 2008 as having become “a normal police state.” Grigory Golosov was not, however, out of line to term the 2008 selection of Dmitry Medvedev to serve as Vladimir Putin's replacement an “election-type event.” This was much of the basis why, of the thirty-five states Levitsky and Way coded as competitive authoritarian in 1990–95, Russia and Belarus were the two that were coded as “full authoritarian” in 2008.

In sum, scholars generally agree that Putin's Russia is authoritarian, and I see no reason to dispute that assessment. Where scholars disagree is on whether Putin's Russia is competitive authoritarian or fully authoritarian. According to Levitsky and Lucan Way (n.d.:4, 6), “Competitive authoritarian regimes are civilian regimes in which formal democratic institutions are widely viewed as the primary means of gaining power, but in which fraud, civil liberties violations, and abuse of state and media resources so skew the playing field that the regime cannot be labeled democratic. Such regimes are competitive, in that democratic institutions are not merely a façade: opposition parties use them to seriously contest for power; but they are authoritarian in that opposition forces are handicapped by a highly uneven—and sometimes dangerous—playing field. Competition is thus real but unfair.” In turn, Levitsky and Way (n.d.:4, 6) “characterize as closed authoritarian all regimes that are non-competitive, in that no viable channels exist through which opposition forces may contest legally for power. This category includes regimes in which democratic institutions do not even exist on paper ... Yet it also includes regimes in which formal democratic institutions exist on paper but are reduced to façade or ‘window dressing’ status in practice.” Levitsky and Way (n.d.:4, 6) point out that “In these regimes, which are often characterized as ‘pseudo-democratic’ or ‘electoral authoritarian,’ elections are so marred by repression, restrictions on opposition candidates, and fraud that there is no uncertainty about their outcome. Though legally tolerated, much opposition activity is forced underground by repression, and leading regime critics are often imprisoned or exiled.”

Zimmerman straddles the fence with respect to the question of whether Putin's Russia is a competitive or fully authoritarian system. According to him (Zimmerman, 2014:11–12), the

2011–12 electoral cycle ... lacked the attributes of a fully authoritarian regime that had been evidenced in the 2008 election cycle, though it bore some resemblance to a modernized analogue to the Soviet system with its ‘circular flow of power,’ to wit, a one-person selectorate accompanied by some cheering from the sidelines by a small but growing group who felt entitled to express their views regardless of their actual impact on the outcome.

¹¹ If one imagines totalitarianism as being an extreme form of authoritarianism, then fascism may also be conceptualized as an “imperfect” sub-type of totalitarianism, inasmuch as it would have all of totalitarianism's characteristics except for one: full state control of the economy.

Levitsky and Way (2010:186, 190, 200) also adopt a middle ground, stating that

Russia was a stable competitive authoritarian regime through 2008. ... Under Vladimir Putin (1999–2008), increased state and party capacity helped eliminate many potential sources of regime instability, and the regime – largely immune from outside pressure – consolidated. ... As we shall see, increased state and party capacity helps to explain Russia's transformation from a relatively fragile regime under Yeltsin to an increasingly stable and closed one under Putin. ... Putin succeeded in consolidating authoritarian rule mainly by eliminating key organizational sources of vulnerability. In a context of very low leverage and a weak opposition, he met virtually no resistance as he eliminated the last vestiges of democracy.¹²

Much of the ambiguity about the degree to which Russia has moved beyond competitive authoritarian and toward full authoritarian status is due to the fact that some of the criteria distinguishing competitive from full authoritarianisms are themselves ambiguous. Levitsky and Way (n.d., 2010) distinguish between the flawed democratic institutions that characterize competitive authoritarian regimes and those that are mere façades, which are found in fully authoritarian regimes. Conceptually, the distinction makes perfect sense, but it should be obvious that there is no clearly identifiable point, whether conceptually or empirically, at which a flawed institution becomes a mere façade. We can certainly identify the point at which a flawed institution ceases to exist, but even a façade-like institution may serve some genuine institutional purpose. In the Soviet Union, for instance, the republics enjoyed no real sovereignty, despite being termed sovereign by the Soviet Constitution. Even so, the façade-like nature of their sovereignty did provide republican elites with some degree of autonomy from Moscow even in Stalinist times. Even façades are never only façades.

The ambiguity is also due to the fact that, while scholars agree that Putin has been actively eviscerating democratic institutions throughout his entire tenure in office, that evisceration became most pronounced after the 2011–2012 anti-regime protests in Russia and the Euromaidan revolution of 2013–2014 in Ukraine, reaching its apex during Russia's war with Ukraine and economic crisis in 2014–2015. Significantly, it is within this timeframe (2014–2015) that a variety of Russian analysts (Yampolski, 2015; Ikhlov, 2015; Shiropaeu, 2014; Zubov, 2015; Inozemtsev, 2015a, 2015b) have claimed that Putin's regime is fascist. Gerasimov (2015:67) openly states that Putin's Russia is “a classical fascist regime of a corporate state.” Inozemtsev (2015a) agrees: “The state that is currently being formed in [Russia] in many respects accords with the scholarly definition of a ‘fascist’ [state].” Ikhlov (2015) finds that fascism is at the core of Putinism, which “reactivated the fascist tendency in full gear. At that time, there were no more anti-market or Soviet-cosmopolitan components in the state ideology. Thus, Brezhnevite ‘left-wing fascism’ became classic ‘right-wing [fascism].’ And it is all the more becoming the essence of Putinism.” Finally, while emphasizing the uniqueness of Putin's political system, Zubov (2015) insists that it is comparable to a variety of authoritarian states, including those that were fascist

Contemporary Russia is highly reminiscent of Latin American dictatorships. Or of Thailand in the 1940s–1950s. But it is not at all reminiscent of anything in Russian history. Putin is constructing an unprecedented state. On the one hand, he evinces tendencies toward authoritarianism, with a controlled pluralistic economy: a seeming corporative economic system reminiscent of Italian fascism under Mussolini with its nationalism and alliance with the church. Although, I repeat, there is no complete similarity. In a word, what is currently transpiring in Russia is, I believe, quite unique. Although it has already been found in the history of other countries in the twentieth century. What is currently being built, simply put, is a corporative state of the fascist type wrapped up in Soviet ideology, the ideology of Stalinism.

These analysts obviously sense that the Putin regime has continued moving in a more than fully authoritarian direction within the last two years. We need not agree with them, of course—just as we need not agree with Putin's supporters, who might claim that the system is becoming ever more democratic—but their willingness to use a term, fascism, that has so many distinctly negative, and provocative, connotations within the Russian context is significant. These analysts clearly believe that something qualitatively different has transpired in Russia, as Putin has concentrated ever more power in his hands and eliminated remaining democratic residues from the system, and that a new vocabulary is necessary to capture this change.

A sharp turn toward full authoritarianism in 2014–2015 should not surprise us. Internal threats, wars, and economic decline—and Russia experienced all three as a result of the Euromaidan revolution, its invasion of Ukraine in 2014, the subsequent Western sanctions, and the sharp drop in the price of oil and gas (Connolly, 2015; Deuber and Schwabe, 2015)—generally lead to a concentration of power in the hands of the executive, intolerance of dissent, and increased pro-government propaganda. Shiropaeu (2014) emphasizes the Ukrainian angle: “The Kremlin sharply fascisized the country on the wave of its anti-Ukrainian policy. Many today call that a national transformation, a restoration, the rebirth of and return to Russianism. In fact, it is simply a galloping FASCIZATION. Russian fascism ... has become a FACT.” Yampolski (2015) focuses on the economic dimension

In the current economic downturn, the appeal of quasi-fascist discourse was predictable Anything that could be seen as a sign of weakness or femininity is rejected; this includes liberalism and homosexuality. Typically, it is these same negative qualities that end up projected onto the ‘enemy.’ This, too, is a feature of projective identification. Thus

¹² In contrast to Zimmerman (2014) and Levitsky and Way (n.d., 2010), who see Putin's Russia as moving from competitive authoritarianism toward, if not necessarily quite reaching, full authoritarianism, Gel'man (2015:7) claims that Putin's regime deserved to be called a competitive authoritarian regime.

Ukrainians are systematically accused of fascism, while Russian fascism is displaced by a false idealization of one's own image.

Shevtsova (2015) summarizes the overall trends within Russia since 2014 and is worth quoting as some length:

The events of 2014 in neighboring Ukraine—the EuroMaidan protests and the fall of President Viktor Yanukovich—gave the Kremlin an opportunity to test its new doctrine. By annexing Crimea and backing pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine, the Kremlin was able to justify its military-patriotic mobilization of society and its transformation of Russia into a “besieged fortress.” This was a traditional survival maneuver, but with a new twist for a new century. The Kremlin’s style of “hybrid warfare” used military force without admitting it, and “weaponized” other areas of life. Thus we now have customs wars, natural-gas wars, information wars, culture wars, and history wars. ... Public mobilization around the leader and the motherland rose to a new pitch, aided by the lack of traditional cultural or moral regulators ... capable of shielding an atomized society of disoriented, demoralized individuals from the schemes of an overweening state. ...

Shevtsova (2015) continues

Individuals are invited to compensate for their helplessness by looking for meaning in collective national “successes” that promise to bring them together and restore their pride. The annexation of Crimea has become such a “success,” giving ordinary Russians a chance to forget their woes and feel a surge of vicarious optimism. ... The Kremlin’s shift to a war footing will mean more than higher military spending and a resurgent military–industrial complex. Russian militarism is a unique form of the order-based—as opposed to the law-based—state. Although turning Russia into a Stalin-era armed camp is no longer possible, the Kremlin is militarizing certain walks of life and imitating militarization in other areas where it cannot achieve the genuine article The Kremlin has demonstrated its ability not only to use the traditional means of autocracy, but also to invent new means of prolonging its life. Among the traditional instruments of influencing the public is the elimination of any remaining channels of self-expression.

Finally, says Shevtsova (2015):

Under Yeltsin and the earlier Putin, the regime tended to tolerate some protests and preferred “managed political pluralism.” Today, the pocket parliament has passed a series of laws that liquidate basic constitutional freedoms and point the way to full-scale dictatorship. There are several dimensions to this subjugation of society. First, the Kremlin has robbed elections of their meaning by barring popular candidates whom the authorities do not control, and by falsifying results. With no access to television or major newspapers, genuine oppositionists can no longer compete. Second, the authorities have continued an unprecedented campaign of reprisals against civil society. The NGO and “anti-extremist” laws ... feature deliberately ambiguous wording that allows authorities to clamp down on any civil activity.

If we look more closely at Zimmerman’s (2014:4) emendation of Levitsky and Way’s (n.d., 2010) criteria, it is clear that the current Russian system meets four of his five characteristics of full authoritarianism. Thus, “core democratic institutions” are “nonexistent or reduced to façade status.” “Electoral uncertainty” is “low.”¹³ A “handful” actually select, while the “electorate” is “unlikely.” “Regime goals” are “international and domestic security,” and the regime “resists external influence.” The only criterion of full authoritarian status that falls a bit short of the criteria concerns the “major opposition.” In a competitive authoritarian system, the opposition “exists legally, but is significantly disadvantaged by incumbent abuse,” while in a full authoritarian system, the “major opposition” is “banned or largely in exile or underground.” Putin’s Russia’s opposition is at present still somewhere between the two, though moving in the direction of being banned, in exile, or underground.

Freedom House’s (2015) Nations in Transit ratings refine these findings. They focus on somewhat different criteria (electoral process, civil society, independent media, national democratic governance, local democratic governance, judicial framework and independence, and corruption), but reach the same conclusion about the nature of Russia’s current regime (termed a “consolidated authoritarian regime”), showing a marked deterioration in 2014 (Freedom House, 2015). Whereas the cumulative Democracy Score (with 1 as the best score and 7 as the worst) declined from 6.11 in 2008, to 6.14 to 2009, to 6.18 in 2010 and 2011, to 6.21 in 2012, and to 6.29 in 2013, it experienced a huge 0.17 decline in 2014, falling to 6.46.

5. Putin as a personalistic dictator

Central to Russia’s move toward full authoritarianism is the person of Putin. Unfortunately, while conceptualizations of Russian authoritarianism generally emphasize the absence of democratic institutions, they do not devote sufficient attention to the nature of the authoritarian leader or leaders. More fundamentally, their understanding of authoritarianism is marked

¹³ There is an unresolvable ambiguity in any assessment of Putin’s Russia’s electoral institutions. It is impossible to say just what national elections in Russia would be like if they were held today. How such a counterfactual question would be answered depends on one’s assumptions about the system. If one believes it is now fully authoritarian, then one would expect elections to be fully rigged. If one believes it is still competitive authoritarian, then one would expect the elections to be merely slanted. A related test of one’s underlying assumptions would be the question of Putin’s eventual possible departure. If one cannot imagine his being voted out of office, then one obviously believes that elections are a sham.

by little substantive content. Thus, authoritarian systems appear to be characterized by what they lack: democratic institutions. While true, authoritarianism is not just non-democracy or the absence of democracy. The overwhelming emphasis scholars place on elections distracts from an equally important feature: the relationship between and among the branches of government. In democracies, the executive, legislature, and judiciary exist, are meaningful and are balanced; in authoritarianisms, the executive dominates, sometimes to the point of transforming the others into façades. Following Aristotle, we expect an authoritarian system to exhibit a strong concentration of power in the hands of one individual or a few. The few who rule are juntas, cliques, and camarillas; the one who rules is a dictator, autocrat, monarch, leader, or emperor. Fully authoritarian systems ruled by juntas, cliques, and camarillas obviously differ from fully authoritarian systems ruled by individuals. In the former, some degree of consensus is necessary for decision-making to take place, and consensus presupposes some forms of compromise, horse-trading, and negotiating. In the latter, the ruler dictates and therefore imposes his will on the elites. The dictator may or may not be an autocrat—the only one who makes decisions—but he or she is always the *primus* without *pares*.

In turn, rule by one can be divided into two types: rule by a gray eminence or rule by a personality. A gray eminence is withdrawn, making decisions in the privacy of his or her cabinet. A personality plays a direct, hands-on, activist, ever-present role in policymaking. He is not some unapproachable philosopher king or an anonymous general in uniform. Quite the contrary, the personality is always and everywhere actively present, openly and publicly ruling the people by virtue of one of two assets—his wisdom or his vigor. Naturally, these comments apply to leaders in all types of political systems. Democracies tend to produce gray eminences bound by the rules of office. Competitive and fully authoritarian states connote images of dour old men such as Augusto Pinochet ruling a sullen population. Totalitarian states connote images of wise patriarchs. In contrast, fascist leaders are always personalistic, though there is no reason that wise or vigorous personalistic leaders cannot rule democratic, authoritarian, or totalitarian systems. Vigor was the trademark of Benito Mussolini, Juan Peron, Aleksandr Lukashenko, Hugo Chavez, John F. Kennedy, and George W. Bush. Wisdom was the trademark of Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Francisco Franco, Nursultan Nazarbayev, Józef Piłsudski, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Abraham Lincoln, and the Ayatollah Khomeini.

These two forms of leadership style—gray eminence vs personalistic rule—have their own advantages and disadvantages. The gray eminence's legitimacy and authority rest to a large degree on her ability to get the policies right. The advantage is that a smart autocrat with a sense of realism may be able to generate a “winning streak” that makes her look good. The danger is that, if policies fail or appear to fail, only the autocrat is to blame and elite and popular support may erode. The personality attempts to legitimize policy by means of an active outreach to the people and elites. The ability of the personality to produce and sustain the appropriate image, whether of the wise or vigorous ruler, is thus of extreme importance. The advantage of such an approach is that the personality can sustain legitimacy by means of the clever manipulation of image and representation by a vast propaganda apparatus. The danger is that images and representations can easily fall out of sync with actual lived facts. A wise leader may never commit blunders. A vigorous leader cannot grow old.

Russia's President Putin is a good example of a personalistic dictator with a vigorous leadership style. There is little disagreement among scholars that Putin plays an exceptional role in Russia's authoritarian system. Scholars capture Putin's central role by calling him an autocrat, dictator, tsar, and the like and terming Russia's political system “Putinist” (Applebaum, 2008), a tyranny, or autocracy (Carafano et al., 2015). Trenin (2015), for instance, writes that “Russia's political system is clearly czarist, and Putin is the leader closest to a present-day absolute monarch.” Lipman (2015) states that “His power is unchallenged and unchecked. Everyone recognizes his superior authority, and everyone pledges allegiance.” Shelin (2015), meanwhile, argues that “the features of feudalism along with its monarchical spirit, the uncontrolled dominance by all manner of bosses, and the transformation of the rest of the people into a mass of humiliated simple folk have long since been visible.... But to say ‘feudalism’ is to say far from everything. The movement backwards, into the archaic past, is proceeding along a broader front. I think one may already call it barbarization.”

A “clearly czarist” system with an absolute monarch is obviously fully authoritarian. The all-powerful Putin is the supreme leader who determines which policies he will determine (foreign policy, security, and defense, above all) and which he will devolve to his inner circle. He “dictates” in the sense of having the final word on all matters. He stands above the law; he was elected, in 2012 if not before, in violation of the law. But Putin is not just an all-powerful “new tsar,” as Myers (2015) calls him. If he were, there would be no grounds for claiming that Russia is anything but fully authoritarian. Two more features of Putin's leadership style need underlining. First, as a variety of scholars have pointed out, it rests on a cult of personality. The cult is not quite as ubiquitous and mandatory as Stalin's, but Putin is a constant presence in Russian media. Second, Putin's leadership style is personalistic and vigorous. That is, Putin's is a peculiar kind of dictatorial rule. Instead of being a gray eminence or a wise personality, he has chosen to construct a cult of vigorous leadership (Cassiday and Johnson, 2010; Schroeder, 2014:9), one that, like Mussolini's, emphasizes his hyper-masculinity and bare-chested prowess (Sperling, 2015). Like Mussolini, Putin favors stylish black clothing that connotes toughness. Like Mussolini, Putin likes being photographed with weapons. And, like the Duce, Putin likes to show off his physical prowess.¹⁴

¹⁴ The late-2007 election-campaign video showing Putin in a variety of usually bare-chested manly poses—on horseback, with automatic rifles, wading through a river—may have been a watershed in Putin's Duce-like self-representation (www.russia.ru/putin/).

6. Putin's Russia as a fascist political system. Conclusion

Is, then, Putin's Russia fascist?

All the ten characteristics of fully authoritarian systems listed in Table 1 clearly apply to Putin's Russia at present.¹⁵ As Zimmerman's (2014), Levitsky and Way's (n.d., 2010), and Freedom House's criteria of full authoritarianism lead us to expect, United Russia is the dominant party, elections are rigged, the State Duma and Federation Council (the lower and upper houses of the Russian parliament) are rubber-stamp institutions that eschew debate and take their cues from the president (partly as a result of changes to their structure and procedures, partly as a result of the dominance within them, and the system, of the pro-presidential party of power, United Russia, and mostly because of Putin's dictatorial dominance), and the judiciary retains some autonomy in non-political spheres (Yakovlev et al., 2015). As I established in the previous section, Putin's rule is a personalistic dictatorship. The official worldview (or what Brian Taylor usefully calls a "code"¹⁶) is incoherent, while focusing on the exaltation of the Russian state, the Russian nation, and the personalistic, macho leader (Cassiday and Johnson, 2010; Sperling, 2015). Putin's popularity has consistently been high—and highest in the last ten years, as he was consolidating fascism in Russia (White and McAllister, 2003; Volkov, 2014). No one would dispute that Russia has a market economy that is dominated by the state, which has formed alliances with key oligarchs or actually owns significant portions of key industries (Dawisha, 2015). The opposition, especially after Boris Nemtsov's killing, is almost completely marginalized. Civil rights are greatly circumscribed and routinely violated (Freedom House, 2015). The *siloviki* constitute a significant portion of the ruling elite (Kryshtanovskaya and White, 2003). The propaganda apparatus—television, print media, radio, and Internet—is huge, actively promoting the official worldview and the cult of the leader,¹⁷ but far short of the ubiquitous machine found in Soviet times (Van Herpen, 2015). Official violence is directed against key critics, with intimidation and coercion being the preferred methods of rule.

The case for Putin's Russia being fascist rests on two reasons. The first reason is empirical. As the above typological exercise demonstrated, the three characteristics that distinguish fascist systems from fully authoritarian ones—personalistic dictator, a leader cult, and mass popular support—apply completely to Putin's Russia. In a word, Putin's Russia is a fascist political system because it shares the defining characteristics of fascism as a sub-type of full authoritarianism.

The second reason is logical. Putin's Russia may also be termed fascist because of the syllogism upon which my argument rests. If Putin's Russia is a fully authoritarian system and Putin is a personalistic dictator; and if fascism can be salvaged as a concept and defined as a political system that combines full authoritarianism with a personalistic dictatorship, then it follows that Putin's Russia is indeed fascist.

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¹⁵ Schroeder (2014), and Habdank-Kolaczowska (2015) provide detailed discussions of most of these points.

¹⁶ According to Taylor (2015), Putinism consists of ideas (statism, including great power statism, anti-Westernism and anti-Americanism, conservatism/anti-liberalism), habits (control, order, unity/anti-pluralism, loyalty, hyper-masculinity), and emotions (respect/disrespect and humiliation, resentment, vulnerability/fear). Note the similarity with the fourteen features of fascism listed by Eco (1995).

¹⁷ According to Applebaum (2015), "In the past decade, for example, the Russian regime has reconstructed a state-run media machine far more sophisticated than anything the USSR ever invented and yet similarly blinkered. Although there are dozens of domestic news outlets, entertainment channels, and magazines, they all toe the same political line, with only a tiny number of exceptions. There is an appearance of variety but a unity of messages. Among them: The United States is a threat; Europe is degenerate; Ukraine is run by Nazis; Russia, unfairly deprived of its role in the world, is finally becoming a superpower again. To anyone who remembers how Communist ideology once sought to express all of history and all of contemporary politics through the lens of one giant conspiracy theory, this is nothing new."

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