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Fake Russia

Investigations into Moscow's Imitations of Greatness and Power

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FAKE RUSSIA

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The book retains the authors’ style and spelling of names
Pretended Russia: Imitation of Greatness and Power / Zelenko G. (project manager, academic editor), Lisnychuk O., Nahirnyi V., Pavlenko I., Riabchuk M., Starodub A.

The essays in this collected volume are based on the use of both foreign and Russian sources, expert assessments, and empirical data. The real state of affairs in Russia is analyzed from the point of view of the nature of the political regime and rhetoric of Russian state ideology. This popular academic publication analyzes existing and potential sociopolitical divisions and splits, ethnonational processes in the constituents of the federation and the nature of Russian “claims” to Ukraine, as well as World Order Z, which Russia

is trying to build starting with the so-called "special military operation" against Ukraine, and why the war with Ukraine is a tool for constructing a world order on Russian terms.

The book is intended for a wide readership: it is for everyone who is interested in social and political processes in Russia.

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Foreword

Galyna Zelenko

The four lines written in 1866 by the Russian poet Fyodor Tyutchev—"You'll never grasp her with your mind, or cover with a common label, for Russia is one of a kind: believe in her, if you are able..."—are considered the quintessence of the concept of a "mysterious" and "enigmatic" Russia. Which, allegedly, is not worth trying to describe and understand using rational and scientific methods. After all, its organization and order, like the plan of the biblical Noah's Ark, is determined by God and is not subject to any "mathematical" measurements. Not only Russians but, first of all, external observers, are offered to simply believe in this.

Rethinking the processes in and around Russia, one sometimes gets the impression that it is this image that Russia is covering up itself and using to try to justify its own inconsistency, aggressiveness, disrespect for other peoples, unwillingness to respect the rules of the game established on the international arena, and, ultimately, to "export" this "mysteriousness" of its own. Indeed, for countries that have never had any common past with Russia as parts of the Russian Empire and the USSR, the Russian Federation is perhaps the most enigmatic state in the world. Its mysteriousness and huge dimensions have fascinated some people, scared others, but have left none indifferent. On the other hand, for Ukrainians, residents of the former post-Soviet republics, Russia does not seem so obscure. On the contrary, it is very clearly seen, and it presents a noticeable danger. That is why some of its neighbors have resigned themselves to trying to not annoy the "Russian bear", and wait instead, while others—like Ukraine, or Georgia earlier, still try to escape from that bear's embrace.

It should be said that Russia has been quite successful in exporting its own mystique to the outside world. So successful that at some point it decided that it could do anything—arrogance and disrespect for everything that was not subordinate to its view of the

world became a standard of Russian politics. A kind of categorical imperative has emerged "in the Russian way": "why would we want a world without Russia", as President Vladimir Putin put it in his speech commenting on international processes (Kremlin.ru 2022).

However, you can talk a lot, but you need to take concrete steps to advance your interests. And that's what Russia has done by launching a full-scale war against Ukraine. Despite several months of warnings from intelligence agencies of various countries, no one seems to have believed in a "great war." Why should anyone? Russia was already a member of the G8 and the G20, a state that everyone reckoned with, without which no significant international event could be complete, be it in the political, security, cultural, or scientific sphere. This is even though Russia's share of world GDP was 1.5 percent, which is clearly not enough for a country that claims to be a superpower. Nevertheless, Russia was kindly invited to all global platforms, leaders paid state visits, countries willingly traded and generously paid for its resources. However, Russia chose war. To begin with, a war against Ukraine.

Now, no one can say how and when the war will end. There are too many unknowns. Russia seems to have adapted to the sanctions and even increased its weapons production. However, when analyzing the processes taking place in Russia and, most importantly, its ambitions to become almost the second center of power in the world, one inevitably recalls the Russian poet Alexander Pushkin's *Tale of the Fisherman and the Golden Fish*, where, in pursuit of becoming the Ruler of the Sea, the old woman, having gained almost all riches of the world, finds herself finally in front of a broken trough as her only possession. Of course, life is more complicated than that. This conflict between Russia and the collective West is obviously nonlinear. However, does Russia really embody that image of the "great Russia" that it scares the world with? This book analyzes what Russia really is and what lies behind its attempts to "solve the Ukrainian issue".

We express our boundless gratitude to the soldiers of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, thanks to whose heroism, sacrifice, and courage we have the luxury of practicing our profession. We also

express our gratitude to the International Renaissance Foundation and its President, Mr. Oleksandr Sushko, for their foresight and the idea of writing this book!

In Search of the True Name for Exquisite Evil

What to Call the Russian Ruling Regime

Oles Lisnychuk

Among all the issues that arose after February 24, 2022, one of the key, if not the decisive, question is, what is Putin's Russia in its recent years as a political phenomenon? How could and how did it become like that? What is the essence, specificity, and generality of the regime that led it to this point?

Why is it important to identify as precisely as possible the Russian political regime, which brought the "great war" back to Europe and unveiled itself in this war in the most undisguised way?

A significant part of the components that led to this development have existed both in previous eras and in other phases of Putin's rule. And, in addition to the classical interpretations of "withdrawal from democratic gains" and "authoritarianism" ("Kak voina izmenila" 2023),[1] there were attempts to explain them through a number of new, sometimes quite creative, concepts and approaches.

For example, political scientist Ekaterina Shulman, who was popular in the Russian Federation until recently, has actively promoted the idea of a "hybrid regime" in the Russian information space, although she was not the author of it. She admits that it is "a term coined by Steven Levitsky and Lucan Wei, who wrote the book *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War*.

1 Even the "great war" and the already undisguised systemic radicalization of the Russian regime did not force some observers to somehow revise the convenient and familiar scheme in which the regime is the result of a "bad autocrat" coming to power. This is concentrated in the thesis of Vladimir Gelman, a well-known Russian political scientist, now in exile, which he formulated almost a year after the start of the full-scale invasion: "What we are witnessing in Russia now is a classic personalist authoritarian regime, which by its basic parameters does not differ much from many regimes of this kind that were characteristic of the second half of the 20th century".

By the way, its cover is decorated with an image of a Russian policeman beating a demonstrator...". Flexible as a caterpillar, hybrid Russia. According to the version of the current hybrid (?) victim of the hybrid regime, the latter is still authoritarianism, but allegedly not quite—it's just its version at the "new historical stage". But definitely not something more, because it is "common knowledge" that "the difference between an authoritarian and a totalitarian regime" is that "the former encourages passivity in citizens, while the latter encourages mobilization. A totalitarian regime requires participation: those who do not march and sing are disloyal. An authoritarian regime, on the contrary, persuades its subjects to stay at home" (Shul'man 2014). However, this "hybrid" is not only non-totalitarian (God forbid!), but also not quite authoritarian: "In fact, the hybrid regime is imitative in two ways. It not only simulates a democracy that does not exist but also depicts a *dictatorship that does not exist in reality* (emphasis mine—O.L.)" (Shul'man 2014). That is, Putin's hybrid regime, according to all these theorizations, is generally whitewashed to a kind of "imitative democracy" (democracy!!!), which is the fruit of "the progress of mores that no longer allows the use of violence as widely and carelessly as it was common some 50 years ago" (Shul'man 2014). In general, any fluctuations, in particular towards radicalization, are excluded altogether, because "in the 16th year of the reign,[2] working magic and turning into a dashing fascist is as difficult as miraculously being reborn as a shining liberal" (Shul'man 2014). Time (primarily after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, but also before that) has shown how misleading this attempt to humanize Putin's regime through the bizarre concept of hybridity was, as well as the half-heartedness of its critics (Komin 2017).

In addition to theories of hybridity, the Putin regime has found a number of other definitions, versions, and explanations. Among them is the personalist component—"Putinism" (Laqueur 2015; Applebaum 2013)—and the concept of the "mafia state" (Fel'shtyns'kyi and Popov 2021), which redefines the system of corruption as the basis of the state mechanism.

2 Written in August 2014.

Ukrainian discourses have long and closely (especially since early 2014) followed the radicalization of the Russian regime and the growth of its actual fascization (Zaitsev 2014). However, Russian propaganda has been acting preventively by identifying "fascists" as the enemy of its regime, and later "Nazis" as well. This created a situation where "people who are undoubtedly fascists call that name other people who are not fascists at all" (Snyder 2022b), which began to be interpreted through the concept of "schizo-fascism". One of the term's authors, philosopher Mikhail Epstein, describes the peculiarities of the phenomenon as follows:

> Schizo-fascism is fascism under the guise of fighting fascism. Fascism itself is a holistic worldview that combines the theory of ethnic or racial superiority, imperialism, nationalism, xenophobia, great-powerism, anti-capitalism, anti-democracy, and anti-liberalism. Schizo-fascism is a split worldview, a kind of caricature of fascism, but a serious, dangerous, aggressive caricature. Schizo-fascism is manifested in hysterical hatred of freedom, democracy, everything foreign, people of a different identity, and the search for enemies and traitors among one's own people. This chauvinistic worldview, however, is schizophrenically split with the desire to use the same benefits provided by the "enemy": real estate abroad, the privilege of educating children in "Gayrope" and "Yankeeland", keeping accounts in their banks, etc. ("'Rasstupaisia, Orda idet!'" 2022)

Along with the conceptualization of the peculiarity of the fascization of the Russian regime, the concept of "ruscism" has also been evolving in Ukrainian discourses. One of the earliest attempts to describe it, back in 2010, emphasized that it is "the ideology and practice of the ruling regime of the Russian Federation, based on the idea of the superiority of 'Russian compatriots', their 'special civilizational mission', anti-democracy and neocolonialism of the Soviet-imperial type, the use of Orthodoxy as a moral doctrine, and geo-economic instruments, primarily energy carriers" (Kryvdyk 2010). However, the concept and its meaning remained rather vague and ambiguous for a long time. Thus, in March 2022, one of the interpreters put it this way: "Nazism, fascism, Stalinism, and ruscism are actually the same thing" (Maraiev and Bilyk 2022).

However, with the beginning of the full-scale phase of the Russian-Ukrainian war, in 2022–2023, the concept of ruscism has been most actively used in Ukraine to denote the type of evil that

the country had to face and against which it had to wage a war for survival. In addition to texts in the media, books devoted to the development of the concept of ruscism began to appear. And the first of them was a call to action: *Ban Ruscism* (Ogneviuk et al. 2023). Ukrainian academics, including historians, also paid attention to the development of the concept of ruscism. In the three-volume edition of *Dialogues with Historians*, one of the chapters in the second volume is entitled "The Post-Totalitarian World, Modern Ukraine, and the Neo-Imperial Project of Putin's Russia. Ruscism in the Light of Modern Historical and Socio-Humanitarian Knowledge", and another section focuses on "Ruscism, Fascism, Nazism: Totalitarian-Imperial Origins and Comparative Historical Projections" (Akheieva et al. 2022).

On May 2, 2023, the Verkhovna Rada adopted a resolution "On the Statement of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine 'On the Use of the Ideology of Ruscism by the Political Regime of the Russian Federation, Condemnation of the Principles and Practices of Ruscism as Totalitarian and Misanthropic'". This document names the following signs of ruscism:

> militarism, cult of the leader and sacralization of state institutions, self-aggrandizement of the Russian Federation through violent oppression and/or denial of the existence of other peoples, imposition of the Russian language and culture on other peoples, propaganda of the ideas of the "Russian world", systematic violation of the norms and principles of international law, sovereign rights of other states, their territorial integrity and internationally recognized borders... (Verkhovna Rada Ukrainy 2023)

Ruscism has become the main marker for the political reality of the aggressor country. In general, this is a fairly productive model for identifying its essence, main components, and overall structure. Now the term "ruscism" is integrated into the context of the main evils of the 20th century—fascism and Nazism—not only because of its consonance, but also because of the qualitative similarities identified and demonstrated. But it also has been acknowledged as a part of a broader structure: ruscism is a special and dangerous historical and socio-political form of totalitarianism. In fact, it is through the concept of ruscism that Putin's totalitarianism, ob-

viously already updated in comparison to its historical predecessors, acquires its localization, an expressive national name, inseparable from its homeland, the country of Russia. Perhaps it is the most important advantage of this concept.

However, a closer look at the Ukrainian discourse on ruscism reveals that the part of the concept that deals with the ideological characteristics of Putin's Russia is more developed and well reasoned that its political aspect. When describing and analyzing the political system, its functioning, and identifying the features, including the advantages and vulnerabilities of the political regime, the concept of ruscism still depends heavily on historical precedents. Ruscism is defined as a kind of totalitarianism, but it is unclear just *what kind of totalitarianism* that is, as more attention is paid to the parallels between this present-day phenomenon and the historical fascism of the 20th century rather than to distilling its unique characteristics.

This chapter does not claim to be a scientifically verified description of the model of the Russian regime under Putin, and in no way does it challenge the concept of ruscism, which the author considers to be quite productive and of significant potential for deepening the understanding of, and strategies of action against, the phenomenon it describes. Below are a number of observations, interpretations, arguments, and conclusions that lead to a slightly different designation of Russia's political regime as *postmodern totalitarianism*, despite all the oxymoronic connotations of such a verbal construct. It not only focuses on the specific phenomenon of the political reality produced in the Russian Federation but also seeks to identify its exclusive forms, its ancestral relations, and the specifics of the time of its production.

In medias res: "Chekism"

For more than a century, the Russian special services have been one of the main supporting structures of the Russian political regime. During this time, their names and some features of their institutional configuration have often changed and evolved. But, in gen-

eral, they can be labeled by the Soviet tag of "state security agencies", although their representatives themselves tend to refer to themselves using an earlier and more romantic name from the Soviet times—"Chekists". It is they who form the basis of the main group of influence in the Russian government of the Putin period and are the main alma mater for its top political leadership. They are the basis of a larger group, which is the institutional framework of the Russian state—the *siloviki* (defense and law-enforcement bodies).

Throughout the Soviet period, the state security apparatus was one of the two main elite groups that constantly fought for power. The other was the party nomenklatura. Researchers of Russian special services Yuri Felshtynsky and Volodymyr Popov note:

> Since December 1917, when the Cheka was created, there has been a constant struggle for power between the party and the Cheka-GPU-NKVD-MGB-KGB. It was not always clear and obvious to an average person. From the party's point of view, those who had controlled the VChK-KGB for decades tried to take over and, as part of this struggle, occasionally destroyed the party nomenklatura. The party leadership, periodically gaining victory in the VChK-KGB, shot or removed the state security leadership, while restructuring the agency itself, renaming it, and making it less dangerous for the party, as it seemed at least every time it was restructured. (Fel'shtyns'kyi and Popov 2021)

It is noteworthy that the aforementioned name changes for the state security agencies occurred mainly as a result of certain turning points in this confrontation and when party structures gained the upper hand. On several occasions, the state security agencies were close to gaining the upper hand and bringing their nominees to the pinnacle of power.

The well-known economist Daron Acemoglu expressed the opinion that the so-called *siloviki* "played a more important role in Russian history than Russian culture" (Acemoglu 2022). At the same time, he notes that "by the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, a *special Russian culture* was formed, *which doomed the country to life in a dictatorship*" (Acemoglu 2022).

In the "wild 1990s", the security forces in Russia were only one of several groups of influence. Moreover, there was internal competition between their individual factions. Yeltsin's Russia was indeed very similar to the Weimar Republic, not only because of economic turbulence and growing political conflict, but also because of the growing resentment in all sectors of society, including the elites, as well as the actual regrouping of the former regime's support, the *siloviki*, and their movement towards revanche. It was the *revanche of the* siloviki *that became the main line of restoration and re-Sovietization of Russia*, not the communist forces of which Yeltsin, the average citizens, and the West were very scared at the time.

Certain groups of *siloviki* also moved outside the state apparatus to regain influence and, ultimately, power. It was the merger of large financial capital with significant political influence that gave rise to the phenomenon of the Russian oligarchy. All the major financial and industrial groups of the Russian Federation of the 1990s could not have emerged without the connection and participation, partly decisive, of former or current *siloviki*. At the level of the Most Group, this was manifested in the direct participation in the Group's leadership of Philip Bobkov, one of the legendary Chekist figures of the late USSR, who at various times was the head of the most odious Fifth Directorate of the KGB, a deputy head of the KGB as a whole, and in the last Soviet years—the first deputy head of the KGB. It is noteworthy that the Most Group formed an alternative to Yeltsin and actively promoted Yevgeny Primakov, its candidate for Yeltsin's replacement. For a time, in 1998–1999, Primakov was prime minister. His career fully corresponded to the idea of a state security nominee.

Yeltsin's camp found itself in such circumstances that it had to choose its protege, Yeltsin's heir apparent, out of the security forces. After an unsuccessful and short-lived attempt to bet on a police leader, Sergei Stepashin, they finally settled on the figure of the recently appointed head of the FSB, Colonel Putin. His exquisitely engineered elevation to the key power orbit is well known, though unrecognized—this no-name figure was imbued with a story and subjectivity through the Chekists-inspired bombings of residential buildings in a number of Russian cities, including Moscow itself,

and the instigation of the Second Chechen War, which Russia eventually won. At least, this is what is believed in Russia itself.

What is called Chekism here refers to both domestic political processes—in Russia itself, in neighboring countries, and in Western countries—and events in international politics. This way of seeing reality clearly drifts toward conspiratorial interpretations. It is aggravated by the fact that the Chekists' main mode of action is organizing "special operations"—a series of carefully arranged events that should lead to a certain result, a significant part of which can and should be non-public, so that the information is accessible to, and understandable for, only the organizers themselves or observers with appropriate professional training.

The entire period of Putin's rule can be described through the history of such special operations. This applies to both domestic and foreign policy of the Russian Federation. In particular, one of the first among such operations could well have been the plan to undermine the position of Leonid Kuchma, who had just been re-elected for the second presidential term, and to sway him into a pro-Russian orbit. There are reasons to believe that the "cassette scandal", the final act in the disappearance and murder of journalist Georgiy Gongadze, had distinct Russian traces, although it made use of the particularities of Ukrainian politics and its key figures. The Operation Tuzla in 2003 and the promotion of Viktor Yanukovych to the presidency in 2004 had similar features.

In general, Russia's noticeable influence on Ukraine from the early 2000s until 2014, with a phase of maximum activation in 2013–2014, was due to a series of such special operations. The seizure of the Crimea in February 2014, followed by the outbreak of the military conflict in the Donbas in the spring of the same year, the so-called Russian Spring, also belongs to this series. Finally, on February 24, 2022, Russia launched an attempt to annex all of Ukraine, also granting it the status of a special operation, though with the clarification that it was a "military operation".

The tendency to see the world and influence it through such special operations has an interesting effect: the Russian leadership, led by FSB Colonel Putin, perceives world politics and political processes in other countries in line with their own ideas. They assess

the policies of the Western countries toward Russia through the prism of special operations. The Russian propaganda machine joined this process and made it as public and massive as possible. Accordingly, *the period of Putin's rule is a time of triumph for diverse and promiscuous conspiracy theories*, which have helped create and cement the image of Russia as a fortress surrounded on all sides by enemies who constantly harbor evil plans and insidious designs against it.

Fraud-cracy

Russian economist Sergei Guriev and American political scientist Daniel Treisman have proposed a witty concept of so-called "spin dictatorships" (Guriiev and Treisman 2023). In short, it boils down to the fact that modern dictators have become frauds and disguise their dictatorship in every possible way, often trying to pass it off as democracy.

Through the model of spin dictatorships, the authors try to explain the changes that have taken place globally in non-democratic countries since the end of the Cold War, including the third wave of democratization. In their opinion, the main trend is the replacement of traditional forms of authoritarianism, which they call "dictatorships of fear", with this updated format of manipulative dictatorships.

The Guriev-Treisman model is another attempt to assess, describe, and understand the changes in authoritarian rule that occurred at the turn of the millennium. The authors rightly point out that the type of spin dictatorships they describe is not a unique invention of today; it existed before, but on a statistically much smaller scale. In the period following the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the rollback of the last democratic wave, this type became the most common, and it determines the trend of undemocracy in the first decades of the 21st century. The authors have accumulated, processed, and systematized a huge statistical empirical material, on the basis of which they have developed their concept.

Many of their observations, comments, and conclusions are interesting, important, and necessary for the discussion of modifications of today's political regimes.

However, this analytical model begins to crumble when verified by reality—most importantly, through Russian reality. This is an important drawback because it is quite clear that the experience and achievements of the Putin regime were one of the main inspirations for Guriev and Treisman's construction of the concept of new autocracies. The researchers themselves single out the "Moscow methods" as one of the first successful examples of following the inventions of the Singaporean ruler Lee Kuan Yew, whom they consider a pioneer among spin-dictators (Guriiev and Treisman 2023). It is noteworthy that they speak about the methods of the late Soviet, "soft" totalitarianism, not the dictatorship of the Putin era.

However, the *main challenge for this model (and not only for it) is Putin's Russia*. It is quite obvious that the authors refer to Putin and his regime when describing the most influential spin dictatorships that are the focus of their attention. However, a closer and deeper look reveals that Russia, at least after 2008, does not fit the model of a fraud dictatorship very well. After 2014, and even more so after 2020 and 2022, the Russian regime has evolved into something completely different.

What exactly is it about Russia that makes it a stumbling block for the ambitious and original theoretical constructions of a Russian economist and an American political scientist? The idea that the Putin regime can best confirm the model of spin dictatorships they have constructed has substance. After all, after he came to power, and for many years afterwards, visible signs of democracy persisted in the Russian Federation. This democracy was not liberal—it was described by Putin's ideologues as "sovereign", but still it had what were supposedly elections, supposedly political competition, supposedly opposition media, political violence and repression were supposedly minimized, de-ideologization was supposedly tangible, and everything was more or less as described by Guriev and Treisman. At the very least, the young president Putin was definitely a spin-dictator. That is, he was still a dictator, but one who was very skillful at pretending to be a democratic ruler.