



Putin's Russia as a fascist political system



Alexander J. Motyl

Department of Political Science, Rutgers University, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 23 January 2016

Keywords:

Fascism
Nationalism
Authoritarianism
Personality cult
Political system

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.

© 2016 Published by Elsevier Ltd on behalf of The Regents of the University of California.

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 ...”

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).

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1046345>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1046345>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)