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## Nationalism and authoritarianism in Russia: Introduction to the special issue



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## ABSTRACT

This article discusses different aspects of the political evolution of Russian President and former Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and the impact of his evolution upon the type of regime that has evolved from soft authoritarianism to a 'militocracy' and 'consolidated authoritarian regime.' The article discusses eight contributions to this special issue by placing them within the broader context of how the West misread two areas pertaining to Russia. The first is how the West by wrongly believing that Russia, being a member of G8, the NATO-Russia Council and other Western structures, continued to be interested in becoming a Western political and economic system. The second is the tradition, stretching back to Sovietology, of ignoring and downplaying the issue of how the nationalities question and different nationalisms interact with democratic revolutions, transitions and, specifically, with Russian politics.

The introductory article next discusses the eight contributions within the context of: Russian messianism, the *Russkii Mir* (Russian World), how and when nationalists and fascists became mainstream in Russian politics, Putin's great power nationalism, Ukrainophobia and Russian chauvinism, historical myths and re-Stalinization of Putin's political system. The final section compares Russia's invasions of Georgia and Ukraine in 2008 and 2014 respectively and the growing xenophobia in Russian foreign policy.

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## 1. Introduction

This special issue is devoted to studying, analyzing and exploring new scholarly ground in understanding the nature of Vladimir Putin's political system in Russia and in particular the evolution of his regime from soft to hard authoritarianism and a revanchist great power. In analyzing what [Freedom House \(2015\)](#) describes as Putin's 'consolidated authoritarian regime' we are conscious that political systems either evolve or stagnate because they never stay fixed in stone. We are therefore laying open the possibility for the stagnation of Putin's political system, as during the Soviet 'era of stagnation' from the mid-1960s to mid 1980s which is most commonly associated with Communist Party leader Leonid Brezhnev. In fact, the corruption, nepotism and cynicism that dominates Putin's political system most closely resembles the Brezhnevite Soviet Union. Stagnation of Putin's political system does not preclude it, as [Motyl \(2016\)](#) argues in this special issue, from already having become a fascist political system. Russia is a declining great power and therefore Putin's attempts at reviving it as a 'consolidated authoritarian regime' ([Freedom House, 2015](#)) or fascist political system ([Motyl, 2016](#)), are doomed to fail.

The social contract Putin forged through high energy prices with his population began deteriorating during the 2011–2012 protests and has declined even further because of low oil prices, international isolation and a growing list of states, including

his recent ally Turkey and the Sunni Arab world, who have become hostile to Russia (Whitmore, 2015). Alternatively, Putin's political system could evolve into what, still only a minority of scholars such as Motyl (2007, 2010, 2016) argue increasingly resembles a fascist system. Regime types in political science literature are always ideal types, and no regime (including Western democracies) ever fully fulfils all the requirements of the ideal type and therefore although Russia's 'consolidated authoritarian regime' does not meet all of the criteria of a fascist system (for example, the domination of corruption in Russia) this should not preclude us from discussing whether Russia is moving in that direction. In other words, what type of political system will emerge in Russia after the 'consolidated authoritarian regime' or will this remain in place indefinitely. Motyl (2016) argues in this special issue that the regime in Putin's Russia has become a fascist political system.

## 2. Western hopes clash with Russian exceptionalism

A misplaced hope continued to exist until the 2013–2015 Ukraine–Russia crisis that the Russian Federation was an imperfect system but nevertheless in transition to a system that would come to eventually resemble Western democratic market economies. In 1998, on the eve of Putin being first elected president, Russia was invited to join the G7 even though it had a weak economy and imperfect democracy. Russia continued to be a member of the G7 from 2005 to 2014 when Freedom House defined it as 'not free' and a 'consolidated authoritarian regime.' The UK House of Lords (2015) reported that EU-Russian relations for too long had been based on the optimistic premise that Russia has been on a trajectory towards becoming a democratic 'European country' which they pointed out 'has not been the case.' Russia's evolution towards a more nationalist, 'not free' and 'consolidated authoritarian regime' was therefore known for nearly a decade prior to the Ukraine–Russia crisis. Nevertheless, 'the West found it easier at the time to disregard them and indulge in the fantasy that Russia was progressing toward a liberal-democratic model with which the West felt comfortable' (Giles et al., 2015; VII). Related to this was the assumption that Russian national identity was evolving in a normal way through decisions made by the rational choice of elites and therefore nothing out of the ordinary was taking place in Russia (Malinova, 2014, 291).

A belief in a Russia in the midst of a convoluted transition but nevertheless heading in a Western direction could never have foreseen the impending Ukraine–Russia crisis. 'The war in Ukraine is, in part, the result of the West's laissez-faire approach to Russia,' a Chatham House report concluded (The Russian Challenge, VII). The West fundamentally misread Russia ahead of the Ukraine–Russia crisis and 'failed to see that although few Russians longed for a return to Soviet communism, most were nostalgic for superpower status' (Krastev and Leonard, 2015, 52).

Putin's turn towards a nationalist and revanchist foreign policy and his Ukrainophobia and xenophobia towards the West were clearly spelled out as early as in his addresses to the February 2007 Munich security conference and to the NATO-Russia Council at the April 2008 Bucharest NATO summit (Putin, 2007, 2008). In 2008, Russia held its first massive military parade since Soviet times (Brudny, 2015).

## 3. Russian exceptionalism

Russia would, Putin and other Russian leaders assert, undertake a unique path of development because it is a Eurasian civilization that is neither European nor Asian and which is superior to the West. The idealization of the West in the late 1980s and 1990s had evolved into envy and hatred of the West, from which Putin promised to protect Russia because the former is seeking to impose its alien values upon the latter (Malinova, 2014). Bugajski (2015) outlines 11 aspects of contemporary Russian national identity under Putin as:

1. victimhood and the Weimar complex (a view also raised from a different perspective by Sakwa (2014));
2. alleged encirclement of Russia by hostile powers and Islamic threats in the Caucasus and from Syria;
3. imagined Russophobia lurking in Ukraine, the 3 Baltic states and Western governments and international organizations;
4. supremacism of Russian culture and Eurasianist civilization over the West;
5. campaign for Russian unity through the gathering of Russian compatriots and lands, an example of which is the annexation of the Crimea. Ukraine and Russia are the equivalent of eastern and western Germany which are destined to be 'reunited' (Tolstoy, 2015);
6. a programme of Pan-Slavism operating through the concept of the *Russkii Mir* (Russian World) organization;
7. instrumental use of religion through a powerful alliance between the Russian state and the Russian Orthodox Church that views the entire former USSR as its canonical territory, not just Russia;
8. attacks on historical revisionism (particularly dealing with World War II) in Ukraine, the 3 Baltic states, and central-eastern Europe;
9. cult of the Great Patriotic War and Joseph Stalin as a great war time leader (and marginalizing or ignoring his crimes against humanity);
10. pre-détente Cold War era anti-Americanism; and
11. dividing Europe through the provision of Russian support for populist-nationalist and fascist and extreme left parties which are in power or seeking to come to power in EU member states.

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