

Putin: The morally depraved degradation of a strong state leader

Michael Emerson

31 March 2015

“Will no one rid me of this turbulent priest?” So asked King Henry II of England to his council of knights in 1170. Four of them departed to Canterbury and assassinated the Archbishop, Thomas Becket. But the king had not at all ordered this dreadful deed. His overzealous counsellors had just done what they thought their master wanted.

And is Putin responsible for the death of Boris Nemtsov? “Complete nonsense”, says Dmitri Peskov, the Kremlin’s spokesman.

After 15 years in power Putin is responsible for the tragic degradation of Russia, its political regime and society. The assassination of Boris Nemtsov signals one more step down this dreadful path. The time has come to end diplomatic euphemisms in describing Putin’s regime.

Kremlin propagandists seek to justify Russia’s war against Ukraine on the grounds that Kyiv is fascist, while acrobatically denying that it is intervening there at all.

What is fascism, and who is fascist? A dictionary of politics offers this definition:

A right-wing nationalist ideology or movement with a totalitarian and hierarchical structure that is fundamentally opposed to democracy and liberalism.¹

The dictionary’s longer elaboration goes on to note recurrent features of fascist regimes, including total mastery of communications, a charismatic leader embodying the ‘real’ interests of the nations and the use of military means to reverse national decline. Liberal democracy is seen as a device to fragment the nation and subordinate it in the world order.

This obviously bears no resemblance to the Poroshenko regime in Kyiv. Right-wing extremists in Kyiv got around 2% support in the recent presidential election. So much for the fascists there. The match with the Kremlin is much better. While Putin avoids the messianic demagoguery that would qualify him as a 5-star fascist, his propaganda machine has made respectable the likes of Alexander Dugin and Alexander Prokhanov, preaching radical Russian neo-imperialism, having them appear as omnipresent contributors to the national mass media debate.

¹ “*The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics*”, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

The author is Associate Senior Research Fellow at CEPS and former EU Ambassador to Moscow. This Commentary is being published simultaneously as an editorial in the April 2015 issue of [European Neighbourhood Watch](http://www.ceps.eu/content/ceps-european-neighbourhood-watch-archive-o) (<http://www.ceps.eu/content/ceps-european-neighbourhood-watch-archive-o>).

CEPS Commentaries offer concise, policy-oriented insights into topical issues in European affairs. The views expressed are attributable only to the author in a personal capacity and not to any institution with which he is associated.

Available for free downloading from the CEPS website (www.ceps.eu) • © CEPS 2015

The lies about the fascists running Kyiv and Russia's non-intervention in the Donbass –these are geo-political lies on a scale that Europe has not witnessed for over half a century. The Kremlin still denies incursions of Russian troops, tanks and artillery into the Donbass. It denies any responsibility for the over 5,000 battlefield deaths in the Donbass. To which can be added the 298 deaths in MH17, shot down by a BUK missile fired from separatist territory, this being highly sophisticated equipment that cannot possibly be mastered by a ragbag of local separatists. The Kremlin's spindoctors fabricate rumours that it could have been the Ukrainian air force. It denies and hides its own Russian bodybags returning home, leaving only the soldiers' mothers to speak out. But Boris Nemtsov was going to say more on this. People criticising the war are branded as traitors.

Russia has been flouting every line in the 1975 Helsinki basic principles about non-use of coercive force, respect for territorial integrity, etc., and in the more recent 1994 Budapest memorandum where it explicitly guaranteed the territorial integrity of Ukraine within its existing borders. But the Kremlin's immorality goes far deeper from this high diplomacy into everyday ethics of the citizen. Does not our common (Western and Eastern) Holy Bible say in the 9th Commandment: "Thou shall not bear false witness against thy neighbor." And the neighbour here is Ukraine, which Putin last visited in July 2013 with Patriarch Kirill, celebrating the 1025th anniversary of the region's conversion to Christianity.

Beyond the immorality of telling huge lies, the Kremlin's propaganda machine goes further still in manipulating Russian mass public opinion to the point of having changed its mindset over the last year. For those of us who happen to be in continuous contact with Russian society, we are aghast at how normal political conversation with normal people has become meaningless, or impossible. Two real examples:

- A professor of mathematics from St Petersburg: "We are happy to suffer to support our president who is being attacked by the rest of the world".
- A psychoanalyst/counsellor from Moscow: "If we have to be poorer to defend ourselves from the fascists, so be it".

The Putin regime has changed its category. It has become evil. Yes, this is strong language. Worse than just bad, it means morally depraved. Putin has deliberately manipulated public opinion to buttress his own power, but at the same time his very immorality has caused the huge schism that is now tearing apart Russian society between the Kremlin loyalists and the 'traitors'. The regime's immorality has cultivated in society the growth of terrible things, like the 'volunteers' who went as Russian heroes to the Donbass to fight a brutal war civil war, mixed up with inter-state war, now returning home to fill the ranks of those who feel emboldened to take the law into their own hands in dealing with traitors.²

Yet Putin gets 85% approval ratings from his people. Yes, and Hitler got elected Führer in 1934 with 90%, with the aid of a devastatingly effective propaganda machine, the likes of which we have not since, until now with 'Russia Today'. Anschluss and Crimea, Suddetenland and Donbass, all so popular.

In a few weeks time, all of Europe will approach the 70th anniversary of the end of the Second World War. Most of Europe is blessed to be able to observe this anniversary with sober respect and thankfulness that war has become inconceivable between our nations. The Kremlin approaches the same anniversary with allusions to an eternal fight against fascism, implicitly both past and present, and pop singers on the Russian mass media now pull out their repertoire of patriotic war songs.

² For a more detailed analysis, see Alexander Baunov, "The Killing of Boris Nemtsov and the Degradation of Russian Authoritarianism", Carnegie Moscow Center, 1 March 2015.