

Analysis

Alexander Dugin, the Issue of Post-Soviet Fascism, and Russian Political Discourse Today

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Summary

The past year witnessed a welcome sensitization of the Russian public towards skinhead attacks and ultra-nationalist propaganda. Nevertheless, the administration of Vladimir Putin and the Kremlin-controlled mass media have maintained an ambiguous stance with regard to xenophobic tendencies in politics and public discourse. While primitive hatred of foreigners and ethnic violence are officially stigmatized, the dissemination of national stereotypes and anti-Americanism, in particular, by Kremlin-directed mass media and political pundits continues unabated. For example, the notorious publicist Alexander Dugin, who openly propagated fascist ideas in the 1990s, has become an important player in shaping the discourse of Russian political and intellectual elites today. It remains to be seen how the Russian leadership will handle the challenges resulting from such a contradictory approach to its domestic and foreign policies in the coming years.

A New Sensitization Towards Right-Wing Extremism?

In view of escalating violent attacks and other actions against foreigners, the debate on Russian fascism is currently experiencing a new high in the Russian media. There was a similar debate in the mid-1990s, when the confrontation between President Boris Yeltsin and the “intransigent opposition,” a state of near-civil war in Moscow, the ascent of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, the appearance of neo-Nazi parties, and the first Chechen war, gave rise to the notion of a “Weimar Russia.” Even though this construct has made only rare appearances in commentaries in recent months, the current media debate is also marked by alarmism.

It is to be welcomed that the increasing right-wing extremist tendencies within the party landscape and youth culture, which had been largely ignored for many years, are now at least partially acknowledged by the Russian public, and countermeasures are being debated. Even the Russian judiciary, which has been known for its pro-nationalist bias is beginning to submit to the pressure of public opinion (or the presidential administration), and now applies the Russian penal code’s section on xenophobic crimes more frequently than was the case during the 1990s. Other promising developments include the sharp reactions of state officials to a xenophobic campaign advertisement aired by the “Rodina” alliance ahead of elections for the Moscow municipal parliament and the measures against the often deadly skinhead attacks on immigrants and visiting students. Official statements on such issues occasionally refer to the “anti-fascist” heritage of the Soviet Union and to the Russian people’s alleged special deep-rooted aversion against fascism.

Ambiguous Reactions

Despite such encouraging signs, the Kremlin-controlled mass media have an altogether ambivalent stance toward right-wing extremist tendencies. Although manifest anti-Semitism and violent racism are now heavily criticized and visibly stigmatized, other xenophobic patterns remain present, or are even increasing, in reporting on foreign news and political commentaries. In addition to the traditional anti-Western, anti-Baltic, anti-Gypsy, and anti-Polish reflexes, this is increasingly true for prejudices against Ukrainians and Caucasians, recently, especially, against Georgians. Unquestionably, though, it is the US that holds first place among the “enemies of Russia,” as projected by the Russian state media. The increasingly primitive and profound anti-Americanism seen, for example, in prime time political television shows like “Odnako” (“However”, hosted by Mikhail Leontiev), “Realnaia politika” (“Real Politics”, hosted by Gleb Pavlovsky), or “Post scriptum” (hosted by Alexei Pushkov) is raised to the level of a Manichean world-view, where the US is made responsible for the majority of mishaps and failures in recent Russian, and indeed global, history, and where US society mutates into the negative Other of Russian civilization. It is curious that Germany – the country that has caused Russia the most harm in recent history – is often excepted from this paranoid perception of the external world and stylized as a collective friend of Russia, probably not least because of Putin’s personal preferences (a distorted view that has, however, been stoked by the unorthodox approach to Russia of former German chancellor Gerhard Schröder).

Finally, it is important to note that despite the increasing censure of certain right-wing extremist ten-

dencies, the representatives of ultra-nationalist political groups regarded as close to President Putin have been excepted from the Kremlin's campaigns to discredit the radically nationalist camp. This is true in particular for Zhirinovskiy's so-called Liberal Democratic Party, although many statements made by Zhirinovskiy and his entourage equally stir xenophobic hatred among the population (for example, his notorious pamphlet "The Last Leap toward the South"). Last year Putin personally awarded the "Order of Merit for the Fatherland" (fourth degree) to Zhirinovskiy – a man who in September 1995 had physically attacked a female MP, Yevgenia Tishkovskaya, in the State Duma in front of TV cameras.

Aberrations of the Intelligentsia

Besides such tendencies in the broader public, there are similarly contradictory developments in the discourse of the elites and political pundits. On the one hand, the political leadership is promoting integration of Russia into Western organizations such as the G8 and the World Trade Organization. On the other hand, the political discourse of experts, as well as intellectual life in general, are characterized by the spread of an anti-Western consensus often described as "Eurasian," the essence of which is the assertion that Russia is "different" from, or indeed, by its nature, the opposite of the US. The Russian book market is experiencing a glut of vituperative political lampoons whose main features include pathological anti-Americanism, absurd conspiracy theories, apocalyptic visions, and bizarre fantasies of national rebirth. Among the more or less widely read authors of such concoctions are Sergei Kurginyan, Igor Shafarevich, Oleg Platonov, Maxim Kalashnikov (a.k.a. Vladimir Kucherenko), and Sergei Kara-Murza.

Probably the best-known writer and commentator of this kind is Aleksandr Dugin (b. 1962), who holds a doctorate in political science (from an obscure Russian provincial institute) and is the founder, chief ideologue, and chairman of the so-called International "Eurasian Movement," whose Supreme Council boasts among its members the Russian Federation's Culture Minister Aleksandr Sokolov, Vice Speaker of the Federation Council, Aleksandr Torshin, several diplomats, and other similarly illustrious personages, including some marginal Western intellectuals and CIS politicians. Dugin's increasing celebrity is remarkable considering that the chief "Neo-Eurasian" is not only among the most influential, but also one of the most brazen of the ultra-nationalist publicists. While authors such as Kurginyan or Kara-Murza are satisfied to promote a renaissance of classical Russian anti-Western sentiments in their pamphlets and subtly draw on Western sources, Dugin admits openly that his main ideas are based on non-Russian anti-democratic concepts such

as European integral Traditionalism (René Guénon, Julius Evola, Claudio Mutti, etc.), Western geopolitics (Alfred Mahan, Halford Mackinder, Karl Haushofer, and others), the German "conservative revolution" (Carl Schmitt, Ernst Jünger, Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, etc.), and the francophone New Right (Alain de Benoist, Robert Steuckers, Jean Thiriart).

Furthermore, during the 1990s, Dugin repeatedly hinted at his sympathy for selected aspects of Italian Fascism and National Socialism, such as the SS and its *Abnenerbe* ("Ancestral Heritage") Institute, and has described the Third Reich as the most consistent incarnation of the "Third Way" that he advocates. In the chapter "Fascism – Boundless and Red" of the online version of his 1997 book *Tampliryy Proletariata* (The Templar Knights of the Proletariat), he expressed the hope that the inconsistent application of originally correct ideas by Hitler, Mussolini, etc. would, eventually, be followed in post-Soviet Russia by the emergence of a "fascist fascism". In Dugin's apocalyptic worldview, global history consists of a centuries-old confrontation between hierarchically organized "Eurasian" continental powers and liberal "Atlantic" naval powers. Today, this confrontation is carried out between Russia and the US as the main representatives of the two antagonistic types of civilization, and its final battle is approaching (Dugin uses the German word *Endkampf*, which has fascist connotations, without a Russian translation).

One might expect Dugin, and other extremely right-wing pundits offering similar pro-fascist statements, to be subjected to the same public stigmatization as neo-Nazi parties and skinhead groups are currently experiencing. However, this has not been the case so far. On the contrary, Dugin and others of his ilk, such as the well-known editor-in-chief of Russia's leading ultra-nationalist weekly *Zavtra* ("Tomorrow"), Aleksandr Prochanov, are popular guests in prime-time political television shows such as *Vremena* ("Times", hosted by Vladimir Pozner), *Tem vremenem* ("In the Meantime", hosted by Aleksandr Archangelsky), *Voskresni vecher* ("Sunday Evening"), or *K Baryeru* ("To the Barricade", hosted by Vladimir Solovyov), and are even invited to popular talk shows like *Pust govoryat* ("Let Them Speak", hosted by Andrei Malakhov).

The Post-Soviet Conception of Fascism

The fact that Dugin has so far been "spared" by the Kremlin-controlled media and his political opponents is not only due to his recent celebrity as a "radical centrist" and fanatical supporter of Putin, but also his ability to win the sympathies of prominent members of the Russian legislative and executive branches. He has likewise managed to avoid the charge of promoting fascism by adapting his writings and public image to the distorted conception of fascism inherited from Soviet

propaganda. In the post-Soviet discourse, the term “fascism” is equated with German National Socialism and its external trappings, such as the swastika or Roman salute. Occasionally, the propagandistic usage of the term “fascism” goes so far as to include all ideas regarded as “anti-Russian”, and, paradoxically, becomes a rhetorical instrument in xenophobic agitation campaigns of Russian ultra-nationalists.

The example of Dugin illustrates that, as a result of the idiosyncratic conception of generic fascism in post-Soviet Russia, it is sufficient to rhetorically dissociate oneself from the worst crimes of Nazi Germany and to refrain from blatant copying of Nazi symbols in order to avoid public stigmatization as a “fascist”. This approach would, at least, explain why, on the one hand, obviously neo-Nazi groups such as the “Russian National Unity” of Aleksandr Barkashov or skinhead gangs are being vocally suppressed by the executive and judiciary, while on the other hand ultra-nationalist writers who, in terms of their rhetoric, are no less radical are not only tolerated, but have unhindered access to public platforms and state-controlled media, and are, sometimes, allocated an active role in PR projects of the Kremlin’s political technologists.

1984 – Déjà Vu

Another factor in favor of Dugin and similar publicists is the return of the Russian leadership to quasi-Orwellian forms of organizing public discourse. Kremlin-controlled political reporting in the mass media has become a succession of national-patriotic happenings in which international developments of any kind – whether a Russia-China summit or Russian athletes’ performance at the Olympics, the “Orange Revolution” or foreign success of a Russian fantasy movie – are exaggerated into either collective triumphs or shared humiliations of the Russian nation under its faithful leadership.

The attendant superficiality and emotionality of public debates, which occasionally degenerate into bizarre shouting matches between participants of political television shows, replace serious analysis. Political commentaries are fixated on the “here and now” which, in the case of Dugin, may have contributed to the fact that his well-known neo-fascist stance during the 1990s has been “forgotten”. The mantra-like disparagement of the

West that accompanies the agitational realignment of foreign news reporting increases the playing field for the propagation of anti-Western slogans which also furthers the spread of extremist ideas proposed by Dugin and theorists with similar leanings.

Outlook

Will the newfound sensitivity towards nationalist tendencies lead to a sustained return to tolerant and liberal aspects of Russia’s political tradition? Or is this new tendency no more than the latest episode in the Putin administration’s fluctuating media campaigns?

One can identify two contrary trends – one ideological, the other pragmatic – whose collision has restored a certain measure of controversy to the generally dull public discourse in Russia. On the one hand, the dualist worldview introduced by the Kremlin in the past few years – the simple, but honest Russians struggling for independence against a devious, soulless, imperialist West – fulfils an important role in legitimating the “tough” course of the resurging Russia under its new president. However, the officially approved paranoia also opens the floodgates for radical conclusions. Since the US model of society is presented as the antithesis of Russian civilization, one should not be surprised when youth gangs of violent thugs try to prevent an “Americanization” of Russian society in their way. The damage caused by such reactions to the international image of Russia is, in turn, incompatible with the equally strong tendency towards establishing the country as a respected partner of the Western countries and as becoming a part of the “civilized world” (the preferred Russian term for the economically advanced democratic states). Besides, the leadership of the Kremlin appears to be considering large-scale immigration as a way of replenishing the rapidly dwindling population of the Russian Federation, which would create new, potentially explosive, tensions. Finally, the fanatical anti-Americanism and pro-Iranian positions of Dugin and others are in contradiction to a number of security policy preferences of the Kremlin and its efforts to join the international coalition against terrorism as a full member. Due to these and other challenges in the coming years, the – at least partial – handover of power in 2008 will gain additional importance.

Translated from the German by Christopher Findlay

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Further Reading:

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Roger Griffin, Werner Loh, and Andreas Umland (eds.), *Fascism Past and Present, West and East: An International Debate on Concepts and Cases in the Comparative Study of the Extreme Right*, Stuttgart: Ibidem Publishers, 2006 (Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society, vol. 35).