Putin: The morally depraved degradation of a strong state leader

“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.*

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 demagogy 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.
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.

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.

Michael Emerson
CEPS Associate Senior Research Fellow

*“The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics”, Oxford
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** For a more detailed analysis see Alexander Baunov,
“The Killing of Boris Nemtsov and the Degradation
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