

@FuckYouPutin

Written by David R. Marples

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DAVID R. MARPLES, JUL 15 2017

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Slowly, the Ukrainian government's Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) is succeeding, as the anti-Kyiv insurgents are reduced to small areas within the cities of Donetsk and Luhansk. The future is far from clear since there is no guarantee that all the rebels will be captured and they appear to have ample weaponry at their disposal. Russia may or may not launch a full-scale attack, though it seems increasingly unlikely. Its leaders will clearly not be happy at the outcome and the failure of the Novorossiia vision embraced by some Russians and separatists. Those of us who study Ukraine, in my case for over three decades now, the events of the past nine months seem in many ways bewildering: for their violence, the polarisation of parts of society, the severing of ties with once friendly neighbours, the loss of Crimea, and not least for the rhetoric of hatred, which has permeated media. Somewhat lost in the overwhelming haze of propaganda disseminated over social networks, is the human tragedy that has taken place in Donbas, which is not always evident in analyses, though it permeates dispatches from troops on the ground. Several cities that form the heartland of industrial Ukraine are in ruins, their economies shattered.

Yet we read mainly about the triumphs of the ATO or, earlier, the rebels, not about the civilian population that is facing destitution. No doubt most would leave if they could, but one suspects those who were financially able to leave have already departed. Reportedly about 175,000 refugees had left the two oblasts of Donetsk and Luhansk by 20 August.[1] What has struck me most – and I am writing from the distant city of Sapporo, Japan, and thus cannot speak as a direct observer – is the polarised and often bitter nature of the reporting from outside Ukraine, and not just in Russia. The combination of academic and public interest in events has brought about an inflamed discussion in which there seems to be no middle ground. Its focus is largely limited to the person of the Russian president.

Even a glance at the names of Facebook and Twitter sites provides ample evidence of the degeneration of the debate into platitudes and crude insults: Facebook has Blow-up Putinism, Putin khuylo worldwide, Khuylo Putin, and Fuck U Putin; the ubiquitous Twitter carries @FuckingPutin, @FuckPutin123, @PutinPrick, @DarthPutinKGB, @BOYCOTTRUSSIANS, and @PutinisFaggot.

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The level of discussion at such sites can easily be imagined. That is not to say, however, that one cannot disagree (as I do) with scholars like Stephen F. Cohen, who has taken a strong stance in support of the position of Putin. But there is no call to refer to him, as American journalist Julia Ioffe has done, in terms such as 'Putin's toady'.^[2] Reasoned and civil discussion has been lacking for some time in public discussions of this conflict.

Western political leaders have been quick to resort to similar sloganeering, headed by my own Prime Minister Stephen Harper, who not only compared Putin with Hitler – as did some other leaders – but then claimed he was a Communist as well, and thus responsible for all the evils of the Soviet past.^[3] Harper has led the charge against Russian imperialism despite the fact that Canada only spends 1% of its annual budget on its military, the same level as Papua New Guinea.

The Hitler analogy has come up quite often in comments from Western statespersons, from Hillary Clinton to Prince Charles (whose great uncle, the former Edward VIII, was a Hitler admirer) and, less surprisingly, Senator John McCain.^[4] No doubt Western leaders are right to be preoccupied with the machinations of Putin, but to compare him with the perpetrator of the Holocaust is taking things too far.

Alexander J. Motyl, who by his own admission has been comparing Putin to Hitler since the late 1990s, goes even further:

Both Germany and Russia lost empires and desired to rebuild them. Both Germany and Russia suffered economic collapse. Both Germany and Russia experienced national humiliation and retained imperial political cultures. Both Germany and Russia blamed their ills on the democrats. Both Germany and Russia elected strong men who promised to make them grand and glorious again. Both strong men employed imperialist arguments about 'abandoned brethren' in neighboring states, remilitarized their countries, developed cults of the personality, centralized power, gave pride of place in the power structure to the forces of coercion, constructed regimes that may justifiably be called fascist, and proceeded to engage in re-annexing bits and pieces of lost territory before embarking on major land grabs. Both strong men demonized friendly nations.^[5]

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It is a weak analogy. How can one compare Germany, dismembered by the Treaty of Versailles, prohibited from having an army of more than 100,000, with French troops occupying the Saar, an enormous reparations bill for allegedly starting the First World War, as well as suffering – perhaps more than any other country – the impact of the Great Depression bringing rampant inflation, with post-Soviet Russia? Russia has enjoyed overall a relative economic boom in Putin's time, thanks to high world prices for oil and gas.

And if Russia's government is Fascist, and the term is not defined by Motyl, it is a form of fascism that has little in common with National Socialism, which focused attention on the disaffected and disillusioned lower middle class and former war combatants. Putinism caters to entrepreneurs, cronies, and security services. Whereas Weimar Germany in late 1932 was destitute, contemporary Russia is, at least by this comparison, relatively prosperous. And Putin improvises policy; one would be hard pressed to discern a programme, let alone an expressed policy, calling for the elimination of entire races from Europe as the ostensible cause of all the world's problems. He did not cause the frozen conflict in Transnistria and even in Georgia in the 2008 war, the operation was limited and inconclusive. Hitler moved decisively, swallowing entire countries at a gulp.

The situation in Ukraine today appears more similar to the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s, which prompted many to join the proud, if doomed, cause of the Republicans against the Falangists, one of good versus evil. But the reality on the ground, as George Orwell and others showed, was very different from that envisaged by the crusading writers and poets. Ultimately, the major Fascist powers helped Franco to win that war and Stalin's USSR did not do enough to assist the Republicans. The Western democracies did nothing at all.

In Ukraine, Western powers, while embracing the Ukrainian cause, have acted rather like Britain and France in the 1930s, perhaps, but they are not facing a similar adversary. Putin already appears to have failed in eastern Ukraine, and his protégés such as Pavel Gubarev, who governed the 'Donetsk {People's Republic' for most of 2014 (he was the director of a company that supplied Santa Clauses in the region) and misfit right-wing ideologists have already largely departed the scene.

Let us be clear: the vitriol and outright distortions of Russian propaganda have exceeded that of the Soviet era. The Soviets were adept at rewriting history, doctoring photographs, mythologising key events like the October Revolution and the Great Patriotic War, covering up mass atrocities, and idolising leaders. But they lacked the technology to broadcast fabricated information as Russian networks did when they showed people – allegedly from eastern Ukraine – crossing the Russian border, which was actually the Polish one, or photographs of crucified children and other atrocities that were blamed on right-wing neo-Nazi extremists and the 'junta' in Kyiv.

The entire depiction of the war in Russia is based on fantasy. It has failed entirely to acknowledge any responsibility, even indirectly (providing BUK missile systems to the insurgents), for the shooting down of the Malaysian airliner last month. Likewise, Russia has depicted the United States (and to some extent, the European Union), falsely, as the architect of the uprising that removed former president Viktor Yanukovich from office last February. In reality, while Washington was supportive of Euromaidan (perhaps noisily so), it never directed or controlled it. The EU's Association Agreement, in turn, never entailed the loss of Ukrainian ties with Russia.

Perhaps Euromaidan itself was the catalyst that prompted many Westerners to leap on to a bandwagon in similar fashion to 2004, during the Orange Revolution. But Euromaidan was violent and, as participants inform, was many things to many people. It is simplistic to portray it as a straightforward movement toward Europe, away from Russia and authoritarianism. Yet both politicians and even reputable analysts often use such phrases. Chrystia Freeland wrote recently, for example, that 'in the historic fight over the future of democracy in Ukraine, Kyiv is winning and the Kremlin is losing'.^[6] It is all too easy to overlook the deeper societal problems of Ukraine that existed before and after Euromaidan, which was about power rather than democracy.

Petro Poroshenko, the newly elected president of Ukraine, for example, is an oligarch, who has appointed another oligarch, Borys Lozhkin, as his chief of staff. His closest associates are 'businessmen' with shady pasts. Lozhkin declared his income last year to be just over \$102,000, which seemed questionable considering his sale of his media holdings in this same period for \$450 million to a company linked to Yanukovich.^[7]

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Poroshenko was also one of the founders of the Regions Party, now largely defunct, that carried Yanukovich to power. He was perhaps the popular compromise candidate, but he does not represent fundamental change. Ukraine's most pervasive and crippling problem is corruption, and it is as deeply embedded as ever. There are many key problems yet to be addressed.[8] But there is no indication so far that the new president intends to uproot corruption, as Yulia Tymoshenko promised to do in the 2010 presidential elections. Indeed, to do so might endanger his business empire and connections.

It is illogical therefore, to place all Ukraine's problems today at the door of Vladimir V. Putin. If separatism or federalism has gained a foothold in Donbas towns, there are reasons why. It will remain long after the ATO mission is over, when rebuilding of destroyed towns and villages begins. Even in a free and fair vote Crimea might (just) have voted for union with Russia. Certainly, the city of Sevastopol would have done so, and even a decade ago, Crimean leaders tried to hold a referendum on independence. The problems and disaffection of these regions were not created by Putin. He has behaved abominably, but he has exploited and exacerbated a situation rather than initiated one.

Yet, thanks to Putin, Ukraine is united as never before. Even those who detest the Kyiv government do not support a Russian invasion. So how should he be viewed? Like Yanukovich and Belarus' Lukashenka Putin is essentially a gangster who perceives politics as a conflict and life-and-death struggle.[9] In this respect, his actions are quite rational. One should keep in mind that he leads a country with a GDP less than that of California and *seven* times less than the EU. Its population, which until recently was declining at an alarming rate, is 45% that of the United States.

Russia is not a Great Power even though it may pretend to be; it is a fading middle power with nuclear weapons. If the West is resolute, Russia cannot win. But the point to be made is that Ukraine has problems that are not derived from Russia or the Putin presidency.

Perhaps it is unreasonable to expect that the Ukrainian Diaspora will ever look at Russia differently, given the Soviet legacy. But most would also prefer to see Ukraine as a unitary state, which means that they need to take into consideration the views of all residents, probably of which at least 40% (without Crimea) are opposed to both Euromaidan and the current government in Kyiv. They need to consider the future of Donbas, the industrial heartland, as well as other regions, like Dnipropetrovsk, which is ruled like a medieval fiefdom by governor Ihor Kolomoisky, who has his own private army, controlled, along with at least three airline companies, by his company Privatbank.[10]

Analysts of Ukraine in the West likewise need to examine the situation more rationally. Soviet texts always used to cite the devastation caused by the German army to towns and villages in European USSR, as if the powerful Red Army that moved westward in 1943-45 carefully avoided causing any damage. The same applies today to the Ukrainian reports that are designed to exculpate the ATO from the deaths of civilians and the destruction of property. That was the choice of Poroshenko: it may bring victory but it will be at a terrible cost. The president clearly had his reasons for this choice. But few analysts, the American-based Ukrainian scholar Serhy Kudelia is a notable exception, dwell on the human losses brought about by the Ukrainian president's decision.

On 19 August, Mark 'Franko' Paslawsky, an American fighting as a private in the Ukrainian army even though he was a graduate of West Point, died at the age of 55. As Simon Ostrovsky indicates, Paslawsky was motivated in part by hatred of Russians. But he was also disarmingly honest and his tweets about the war are far more revealing than most official media reports. Paslawsky was deeply troubled by the corruption at the head of the Ukrainian army and predicted also that 'volunteer battalions' would turn on Kyiv when the war in the east was over.[11]

Thus, it is time to dwell less on a 'struggle for democracy' or West versus East in a new Cold War to quell the mad Putin – barring of course a full-scale Russian invasion – and more on the future of Ukraine, which is facing not only a social and economic crisis and plummeting currency, but hard decisions about its future destiny. As Ukraine commemorates 23 years of independence these questions are far from resolved. It must address the problems of Donbas and ensure the region has appropriate representation in parliament and other bodies, and it must deal with corruption.

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In the ranking of corrupt nations by Transparency International last December, 'Ukraine tied for 144th place in the ranking with Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Iran, Nigeria, and Papua New Guinea'. [12] Corruption ultimately is a more serious problem than ideology or language, or whether Ukraine can be part of the EU in the future. It is why radical dilettantes who promise to address it, like Oleh Lyashko, have gained instant popularity and it will be a critical issue on the October parliamentary elections. It is also one reason why Yanukovich was ousted from office. It will outlast the separatists and Russian convoys, will persist after this war is won, and could be the source of a new Euromaidan. But all too often Western analysts perceive only one problem: the ogre in the Kremlin.

Notes

[1] <http://tsn.ua/politika/ponad-190-tisyach-bizhenciv-zalishili-svoji-domivki-v-zoni-ato-ta-v-krimu-oon-364073.html>

[2] <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/117606/stephen-cohen-wrong-russia-ukraine-america>

[3] http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2014/05/30/stephen-harper-communism_n_5421360.html

[4] http://www.businessinsider.co.id/people-who-compared-putin-to-hitler-2014-5/#.U_a1WLySxss

[5] <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/blog/alexander-j-motyl/hitler-and-putin-tale-two-authoritarians>

[6] http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/08/kiev-is-winning-the-war-109935.html#.U_biKrySxss

[7] <http://www.rferl.org/content/poroshenkos-right-hand-man-emerges/25426487.html>

[8] See Taras Kuzio, <http://www.kyivpost.com/opinion/op-ed/taras-kuzio-20-question-for-poroshenko-parliament-and-government-353902.html>

[9] See my comment at <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/what-putin-lukashenko-and-yanukovich-share/488684.html>

[10] http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/08/14/ukraines_oligarchs_are_still_calling_the_shots_0

[11] <https://news.vice.com/article/the-only-american-fighting-for-ukraine-dies-in-battle>

[12] <http://www.kyivpost.com/content/ukraine/transparency-international-slams-ukraine-as-most-corrupt-in-europe-332965.html>

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