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THE WAR IN UKRAINE & THE QUESTION OF INTERNATIONALISM

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dossier

THE WAR IN UKRAINE & THE QUESTION OF INTERNATIONALISM

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INTERNATIONALISM AGAINST CATASTROPHE!

A RESPONSE TO THE WAR IN UKRAINE

By Benjamin Fogel

Just over a year ago, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of its neighbouring state Ukraine, following eight years of asymmetric warfare. Since then, not only have perhaps hundreds of thousands died, but our world seems to have changed dramatically.

The ensuing war has shaken previous assumptions about the durability of global order. Through the long nineteen-nineties, the so-called 'new wars' tended to reinforce US hegemony, being treated as humanitarian crises that required urgent response through aid or even foreign military intervention. However, over the last decade-and-a-half, wars on the margins of the West's immediate sphere of influence have increasingly served as sites of contestation to the existing order. Russia's invasion of Ukraine may confirm a transition that was already in course. But despite mistaken hopes – often reflective of a residual Third-Worldism – that the emerging multipolar order might give birth to a more democratic and just world, this event can be considered another indication of our entry into a time of catastrophe. While, as Samuel Moyn points out in this dossier, the Cold War was 'staged as a contest of emancipatory and futuristic visions', those states with renewed pretensions on global power today offer no promises of a brighter future, they merely add actors at the table.

The war in Ukraine, given the nuclear arsenals of NATO and Russia, has once again raised the spectre of nuclear holocaust. But there are now other risks that were not so present during the proxy wars of the twentieth century. More is known today about the environmental impact of war, from its contamination of vital ecosystems to the consequences of its demands on resources. And the global economy is also more vulnerable than it was during much of the Cold War. The process of what can be termed de-development that has been accelerated by the economic fallout of the war should also, as several of the contributors to this dossier argue, be understood as one of its causal factors. The effects of catastrophes that threaten humanity from the horizon already contribute to immediate crises that, in turn, make such catastrophes more likely. A multipolar world order does not necessarily offer an easier way out of the age of catastrophe.

Rather than reviving a spirit of global solidarity and internationalism, responses to the war in Ukraine have often reflected an emboldened chauvinism that defines the West in opposition to Putin's brand of 'Asiatic despotism' and reaffirms the limits of Euro-American community. The suffering of Ukrainians has been mobilised in justification for denial of the rights of other victims of war and disaster, including those arriving in boats on the shores of European countries after perilous journeys. International solidarity extended to Ukrainians must be universal if it is to contribute to addressing the structural problems behind today's crises.

For these reasons, the need to reinvigorate internationalism has become more urgent. That critical economic and social challenges are international in character became a truism in the high period of neoliberal globalisation, parroted by the executives of big businesses and aid agencies alike. But not only have elite policy agendas failed to create a safer, fairer world; they have also lost popular legitimacy. Scepticism of 'globalism' has become a feature of popular protest, even if it is often mobilised by anti-political and right-wing forces denouncing 'the establishment'. Meanwhile, the influence of working-class internationalism has waned, undermined by the weakening of the labour movement and the related crisis of mass politics across the world.

What, then, are the necessary bases today for an internationalism that can attend to the existential demand for a future?

The war in Ukraine and its implications for internationalism are the focus of this dossier — the first produced by Alameda, a new institute for research aimed at contributing to strategic responses to the catastrophes that cast a shadow over our present. Alameda will promote the collective production of knowledge grounded in contemporary social struggle to help diagnose impasses and inform political strategies for going beyond them, in pursuit of a better world.
The war in Ukraine has been unusual in many senses. It has involved a return to conventional military-against-military battles. Indeed, from the limited information available, it is possible to affirm that this is one of the few wars since the First World War in which there have been significantly more military than civilian casualties. The damage, however, is of course not limited to the horrific toll in human life: entire cities have been destroyed, millions displaced, and the basic infrastructure that enables modern economies to function lies in ruins. Then there are the knock-on effects, which include inflation, gas and heating shortages, and increases in the cost of living, far beyond the range of the bomb blasts. If we are indeed living through the end of the end of history, Ukraine is at the centre of the sprawling ruins.

Even before Russia's invasion, Ukraine was experiencing the consequences of de-development. Since independence, its level of development, as reflected in its industrial output, research capacities, and GDP per capita, has declined significantly. Simply put, Ukraine was a more prosperous country when it first broke away from the Soviet Union, long before the initiation of conflict in 2014. This decline was a product of two decades of failed neoliberal policies, in particular the disastrous shock therapy of the nineteen-nineties, which served to enrich politically connected oligarchs while asset stripping the Ukrainian economy and relegating many Ukrainians to poorly paid service workers or economic migrants seeking a better life in the EU.

This trajectory stands in contrast to the whiggish account of history still embedded in liberal analysis, according to which democracy and free markets inexorably lead to development and progress. Russia, too, finds its economic fortunes declining as a result of the war in Ukraine, but it was already suffering the effects of de-development – effects that can now also be observed in major economies. In countries like the United Kingdom and France, deindustrialisation, rising public debt, and faltering productivity have gone together with increasing precarity of work, falling real wages, and degradation of economic and social rights. Recent strikes and protests should thus come as no surprise. This raises the question: If industrial society gave rise to mass politics, what kind of politics emerges when modernity collapses? For the beginnings of an answer, we might look to popular mobilisations in post-Soviet countries – what Volodymyr Ishchenko and Oleg Zhuravlev, contributors to this dossier, have referred to as deficient Maidan revolutions – and the transformation of civil societies that enabled them.

This question is of relevance here because, on the one hand, as Zhuravlev argues, in his contribution to this dossier, the mobilisation of ordinary people in Russia and Ukraine provoked a 'counter-politicisation' of the Russian state and ruling class, who believed it could threaten their power and the sovereignty of Russia. Indeed, the presumption by Russian elites that popular mobilisation is always guided by external forces seeking to undermine the state emerges as a clear theme here. The form that politics takes in the context of de-development generates pressures that contribute to war. On the other hand, this question about the form of politics is of relevance to considerations about the possibility of directing existing political energies towards the development of international solidarity and the coordination of common struggles. Even posing it implies a refusal to separate politics entirely from economics.

This dossier does not provide a descriptive account of the violence and destruction wrought upon Ukraine. Nor is it a channel for the cathartic denunciation of injustice and villainy. Rather, in keeping with the intention for Alameda dossiers, it opens out from conjunctural analysis to strategic questions.

The first section – included here in print, for the occasion of Alameda's launch – sets up a debate on the tricky question of causality, moving beyond the all-too-common reductionist explanations that focus only on Putin's psyche or on NATO expansion. What drove Russia to launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine? Volodymyr Ishchenko provides the first answer, in an essay on the class politics behind the war. Three other regional specialists – Ilya Matveev, Oleg Zhuravlev, and Olena Lyubchenko – offer critical responses, contesting elements of Ishchenko's argument, and building on others.

Prioritising discussion of the implications of the war for great-power rivalry, Western media outlets have generally relegated the analysis of those with specialist knowledge of social formation in Ukraine and Russia. By centering such perspectives here, we propose not only that it can provide the most accurate and useful explanation of the war's causes, but also that it can contribute to a deeper understanding of broader processes of change. As the late German philosopher Robert Kurz predicted would happen, the social and economic transformation of post-Soviet countries has shown the West its future; as de-development takes hold in Europe and North America, it is even perhaps apt to speak of the 'Ukrainisation' of the West. The war in Ukraine does not occur apart from the forces that drive history; it is a reflection of them.

We have therefore invited a number of public intellectuals to offer reflections on the debate, drawing out themes of universal relevance, related to challenges posed by contemporary capitalism. (These reflections, together with the second and third sections of the dossier, will only be published online).

In the second section of the dossier, Daniel Bessner and Grey Anderson consider what the war means for US empire and, more generally, for the international order over which the US has presided. The final section, then, directly addresses the problem of internationalism: What does it mean to be an internationalist today, when the conditions that compelled previous internationalist movements no longer exist? Here, responses are provided by three young intellectuals from the Global South, Sabrina Fernandes, Nadia Bou Ali, and William Shoki. Samuel Moyn, meanwhile, discusses the possible contribution of humanitarian action to a new progressive internationalism.

This dossier is intended as contributing to a longer strategic dialogue about such questions, one that can ultimately support efforts to find a way beyond the impasse posed by catastrophe.

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THE CLASS CONFLICT BEHIND RUSSIA'S WAR

By Volodymyr Ishchenko

The invasion of Ukraine is not simply a product of Vladimir Putin's expansionism. It corresponds to a project for Russian capitalism that he and his allies have pursued since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Since Russian forces invaded Ukraine earlier this year, analysts across the political spectrum have struggled to identify exactly what — or who — led us to this point. Terms like 'Russia', 'Ukraine', 'the West', or 'the Global South' have been thrown around as if they denoted unified political actors. Even on the left, the utterances of Vladimir Putin, Volodymyr Zelensky, Joe Biden, and other world leaders about 'security concerns', 'self-determination', 'civilisational choice', 'sovereignty', 'imperialism', or 'anti-imperialism' are often taken at face value..

Specifically, the debate over Russian — or, more precisely, the Russian ruling clique's — interests in launching the war tends to be polarised around questionable extremes. Many take what Putin says literally, failing to even question whether his obsession with NATO expansion, or his insistence that Ukrainians and Russians constitute 'one people', represent Russian national interests or are shared by Russian society as a whole.

On the other side, many dismiss his remarks as bold-faced lies and strategic communication lacking any relation to his 'real' goals in Ukraine. In their own ways, both of these positions serve to mystify the Kremlin's motivations rather than clarify them. Today's discussions about Russian ideology often feel like a return to the times of The German Ideology, penned by a young Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels some 175 years ago.

To some, the dominant ideology in Russian society is a true representation of the social and political order. Others believe that simply proclaiming the emperor has no clothes will be enough to pierce the free-floating bubble of ideology. Unfortunately, the real world is more complicated. The key to understanding 'what Putin really wants' is not cherry-picking obscure phrases from his speeches and articles that fit observers' preconceived biases, but rather conducting a systematic analysis of the structurally determined material interests, political organisation, and ideological legitimation of the social class he represents.

In the following, I try to identify some basic elements of such an analysis for the Russian context. That does not mean a similar analysis of the Western or Ukrainian ruling classes' interests in this conflict is irrelevant or inappropriate, but I focus on Russia partially for practical reasons, partially because it is the most controversial question at the moment, and partially because the Russian ruling class bears the primary responsibility for the war.

By understanding their material interests, we can move beyond flimsy explanations that take rulers' claims at face value, toward a more coherent picture of how the war is rooted in the economic and political vacuum opened up by the Soviet collapse in 1991.

What's in a Name?

During the current war, many have referred back to the concept of imperialism to theorise the Kremlin's interests. Of course, it is important to approach any analytical puzzle with all available tools. It is just as important, however, to use them properly.

The problem here is that the concept of imperialism has undergone practically no further development in its application to the post-Soviet condition. Neither Vladimir Lenin nor any other classical Marxist theorist could have imagined the fundamentally new situation that emerged with the collapse of Soviet socialism. Their generation analysed the imperialism of capitalist expansion and modernisation.

The post-Soviet condition, by contrast, is a permanent crisis of contraction, demodernisation, and peripherisation.

That does not mean that analysis of Russian imperialism today is pointless as such, but we need to do quite a lot of conceptual homework to render it fruitful. A debate over whether contemporary Russia constitutes an imperialist country by referring to some textbook definitions from the twentieth century has only scholastic value. As an explanatory concept, 'imperialism' turns into an ahistorical and tautological descriptive label: 'Russia is imperialist because it attacked a weaker neighbour'; 'Russia attacked a weaker neighbour because it is imperialist'; and so on.

Failing to find the expansionism of Russian finance capital (considering the impact of sanctions on the very globalised Russian economy and the Western assets of Russian 'oligarchs'), the conquest of new markets (in Ukraine, which has failed to attract virtually any foreign direct investment, or FDI, except for the offshore money of its own oligarchs), control over strategic resources (whatever mineral deposits lie in Ukrainian soil, Russia would need either expanding industry to absorb them or at least the possibility to sell them to more advanced economies, which is — surprise! — only severely restricted because of the Western sanctions), or any other conventional imperialist causes behind the Russian invasion, some analysts claim that the war may possess the autonomous rationality of a 'political' or 'cultural' imperialism.

This is ultimately an eclectic explanation. Our task is precisely to explain how the political and ideological rationales for the invasion reflect the ruling class's interests. Otherwise, we inevitably end up with rude theories of power for the sake of power or ideological fanaticism. Moreover, it would mean that the Russian ruling class has either been taken hostage by a power-hungry maniac and national chauvinist obsessed with a 'historical mission' of restoring Russian greatness, or suffers from an extreme form of false consciousness — sharing Putin's ideas about the NATO threat and his denial of Ukrainian statehood, leading to policies that are objectively contrary to their interests.

I believe this is wrong. Putin is neither a power-hungry maniac, nor an ideological zealot (this kind of politics has been marginal in the whole post-Soviet space), nor a madman. By launching the war in Ukraine, he protects the rational collective interests of the Russian ruling class. It is not uncommon for collective class interests to overlap only partially with the interests of individual representatives of that class, or even contradict them. But what kind of class actually rules Russia — and what are its collective interests?

Political capitalism in Russia and beyond

When asked which class rules Russia, most people on the left would likely answer almost instinctively: capitalists. The average citizen in the post-Soviet space would probably call them thieves, crooks, or mafia. A slightly more highbrow response would be 'oligarchs.' It is easy to dismiss such answers as reflecting false consciousness. However, a more productive path of analysis would be to think about why post-Soviet citizens emphasise the stealing and the tight interdependency between private business and the state that the word 'oligarch' implies.

As with the discussion of modern imperialism, we need to take the specificity of the post-Soviet condition seriously. Historically, 'primitive accumulation' here happened in the process of the Soviet state and economy's centrifugal disintegration. Political scientist Steven Solnick called this process 'stealing the state.'

Members of the new ruling class either privatised state property (often for pennies on the dollar) or were granted plentiful opportunities to siphon off profits from formally public entities into private hands. They exploited informal relations with state officials and the often intentionally designed legal loopholes for massive tax evasion and capital flight, all while executing hostile company takeovers for the sake of quick profits with a short-term horizon.

Russian economist Ruslan Dzarasov captured these practices with the 'insider rent' concept, emphasising the rent-like nature of income extracted by insiders thanks to their control over the financial flows of the enterprises, which depend on the relationships with the power holders. These practices can certainly also be found in other parts of the world, but their role in the formation and reproduction of the Russian ruling class is far more important due to the nature of the post-Soviet transformation, which began with the centrifugal collapse of state socialism and the subsequent political-economic reconsolidation on a patronage basis.

Other prominent thinkers, such as Hungarian sociologist Iván Szelényi, describe a similar phenomenon as 'political capitalism'. Following Max Weber, political capitalism is characterised by the exploitation of political office to accumulate private wealth. I would call the political capitalists the fraction of the capitalist class whose main competitive advantage is derived from selective benefits from the state, unlike capitalists whose advantage is rooted in technological innovations or a particularly cheap labour force.

Political capitalists are not unique to the post-Soviet countries, but they are able to flourish precisely in those areas where the state has historically played the dominant role in the economy, accumulating immense capital, now open for private exploitation.

Recognition of the presence of political capitalism is crucial to an understanding as to why, when the Kremlin speaks about 'sovereignty' or 'spheres of influence', it is not doing so on account of an irrational obsession with outdated concepts. At the same time, such rhetoric is not necessarily an articulation of Russia's national interest so much as a direct reflection of Russian political capitalists' class interests.

If the state's selective benefits are fundamental for the accumulation of their wealth, these capitalists have no choice but to fence off the territory where they exercise monopoly control — control not to be shared with any other fraction of the capitalist class.

This interest in 'marking territory' is not shared by, or at least not so important for, different types of capitalists. A long-running controversy in Marxist theory centred around the question of, to paraphrase Göran Therborn, 'what the ruling class actually does when it rules'. The puzzle was that the bourgeoisie in capitalist states does not usually run the state directly. The state bureaucracy usually enjoys substantial autonomy from the capitalist class, but serves it by establishing and enforcing rules that benefit capitalist accumulation. Political capitalists, by contrast, require not general rules but much tighter control over political decision-makers. Alternatively, they occupy political offices themselves and exploit them for private enrichment.

Many icons of classical entrepreneurial capitalism benefited from state subsidies, preferential tax regimes, or various protectionist measures. Yet, unlike political capitalists, their very survival and expansion on the market only rarely depended on the specific set of individuals holding specific offices, the specific parties in power, or specific political regimes. Transnational capital could and would survive without the nation-states in which their headquarters were located — recall the seasteading project of floating entrepreneurial cities independent of any nation-state, boosted by Silicon Valley tycoons like Peter Thiel.

Political capitalists cannot survive in global competition without at least some territory where they can reap insider rents without outside interference.

Class conflict in the post-Soviet periphery

It remains an open question whether political capitalism will be sustainable in the long run. After all, the state needs to take resources from somewhere to redistribute them among the political capitalists. As Branko Milanovic notes, corruption is an endemic problem for political capitalism, even when an effective, technocratic, and autonomous bureaucracy runs it.

Unlike in the most successful case of political capitalism – that of China – the Soviet Communist Party institutions disintegrated and were replaced by regimes based on personal patronage networks, which bent the formal facade of liberal democracy in their favour. This often worked against impulses to modernise and professionalise the economy.

To put it crudely, one cannot steal from the same source forever. One needs to transform into a different capitalist model in order to sustain the profit rate, either via capital investments or intensified labour exploitation, or one needs to expand to obtain more sources for extracting insider rent.

But both reinvestment and labour exploitation face structural obstacles in post-Soviet political capitalism. On the one hand, many hesitate to engage in long-term investment when their business model, and even property ownership, fundamentally depend on specific people in power. It has generally proven more opportune to simply move profits into offshore accounts.

On the other hand, post-Soviet labour was urbanised, educated, and not cheap. The region's relatively low wages were only possible due to the extensive material infrastructure and welfare institutions the Soviet Union left as a legacy. That legacy poses a massive burden for the state, but one that is not so easy to abandon without undermining support from key groups of voters.

Seeking to end the rivalry between political capitalists that characterised the 1990s, Bonapartist leaders like Putin and other post-Soviet autocrats mitigated the war of all against all by balancing out the interests of some elite fractions and repressing others — without altering the foundations of political capitalism.

As rapacious expansion began to run up against internal limits, Russian elites sought to outsource it externally to sustain the rate of rent by increasing the pool of extraction. Hence the intensification of Russian-led integration projects like the Eurasian Economic Union. These faced two obstacles. One was relatively minor: local political capitalists. In Ukraine, for example, they were interested in cheap Russian energy, but also in their own sovereign right to reap insider rents within their territory. They could instrumentalise anti-Russian nationalism to legitimise their claim to the Ukrainian part of the disintegrating Soviet state, but failed to develop a distinct national development project.

The title of the famous book by the second Ukrainian president, Leonid Kuchma, Ukraine Is Not Russia, is a good illustration of this problem. If Ukraine is not Russia, then what exactly is it? The universal failure of non-Russian post-Soviet political capitalists in overcoming the crisis of hegemony made their rule fragile and ultimately dependent on Russian support, as we have seen recently in Belarus and Kazakhstan.

The alliance between transnational capital and the professional middle classes in the post-Soviet space, represented politically by pro-Western, NGO-ised civil societies, gave a more compelling answer to the question of what exactly should grow in the ruins of the degraded and disintegrated state socialism, and presented a bigger obstacle to the Russian-led post-Soviet integration. This constituted the main political conflict in the post-Soviet space that culminated in the invasion of Ukraine.

The Bonapartist stabilisation enacted by Putin and other post-Soviet leaders fostered the growth of the professional middle class. A part of it shared some benefits of the system, for example, if employed in bureaucracy or in strategic state enterprises. However, a large part of it was excluded from political capitalism.

Their main opportunities for incomes, career, and developing political influence lay in the prospects of intensifying political, economic, and cultural connections with the West. At the same time, they were the vanguard of Western soft power. Integration into EU- and US-led institutions presented for them an ersatz-modernisation project of joining both 'proper' capitalism and the 'civilised world' more generally. This necessarily meant breaking with post-Soviet elites, institutions, and the ingrained, socialist-era mentalities of the 'backward' plebeian masses sticking to at least some stability after the 1990s disaster.

For most Ukrainians, this is a war of self-defence. Recognising this, we should also not forget about the gap between their interests and those who claim to speak on their behalf.

The deeply elitist nature of this project is why it never truly became hegemonic in any post-Soviet country, even when boosted by historical anti-Russian nationalism. Even now, the negative coalition mobilised against the Russian invasion does not mean that Ukrainians are united around any particular positive agenda. At the same time, it helps to explain the Global South's sceptical neutrality when called on to demonstrate solidarity with either a pretender to global power (Russia) or a pretender to integration within the West seeking not to abolish imperialism, but to associate itself with a more successful one (Ukraine).

The discussion of the role of the West in paving the way for the Russian invasion is typically focused on NATO's threatening stance towards Russia. But taking the phenomenon of political capitalism into account, we can see why Western integration of Russia without the latter's fundamental transformation could never have worked. There was no way to integrate post-Soviet political capitalists into Western-led institutions that explicitly sought to eliminate them as a class by depriving them of their main competitive advantage: selective benefits bestowed by the post-Soviet states.

The so-called 'anti-corruption' agenda has been a vital, if not the most important, part of Western institutions' vision for the post-Soviet space, widely shared by the pro-Western middle class in the region. For political capitalists, the success of that agenda would mean their political and economic end.

In public, the Kremlin tries to present the war as a battle for Russia's survival as a sovereign nation. The most important stake, however, is the survival of the Russian ruling class and its model of political capitalism. The 'multipolar' restructuring of the world order would solve the problem for some time. This is why the Kremlin is trying to sell their specific class project to the Global South elites that would get their own sovereign 'sphere of influence' based on a claim to 'represent a civilization'.

The crisis of post-Soviet Bonapartism

The contradictory interests of post-Soviet political capitalists, the professional middle classes, and transnational capital structured the political conflict that ultimately gave birth to the current war. However, the crisis of the political capitalists' political organisation exacerbated the threat to them.

Bonapartist regimes like Putin's or Alexander Lukashenko's in Belarus rely on passive, depoliticised support and draw their legitimacy from overcoming the disaster of the post-Soviet collapse, not from the kind of active consent that secures the political hegemony of the ruling class. Such personalistic authoritarian rule is fundamentally fragile because of the problem of succession. There are no clear rules or traditions to transfer power, no articulated ideology a new leader must adhere to, and no party or movement in which a new leader could be socialised. Succession represents the point of vulnerability where internal conflicts within the elite can escalate to a dangerous degree, and where uprisings from below have better chances to succeed.

Such uprisings have been accelerating on Russia's periphery in recent years: not just the Euromaidan revolution in Ukraine in 2014, but also the revolutions in Armenia, the third revolution in Kyrgyzstan, the failed 2020 uprising in Belarus, and, most recently, the uprising in Kazakhstan. In the two last cases, Russian support proved crucial to ensure the local regime's survival.

Within Russia itself, the 'For Fair Elections' rallies held in 2011 and 2012, as well as later mobilisations inspired by Alexei Navalny, were not insignificant. On the eve of the invasion, labour unrest was on the rise, while polls showed declining trust in Putin and a growing number of people who wanted him to retire. Notably, opposition to Putin was higher the younger the respondents were.

None of the post-Soviet, so-called maidan revolutions posed an existential threat to the post-Soviet political capitalists as a class by themselves. They only swapped out fractions of the same class in power, and thus only intensified the crisis of political representation to which they were a reaction in the first place. This is why this type of protest has occurred so frequently.

The maidan revolutions are typical contemporary urban civic revolutions, as political scientist Mark Beissinger called them. Drawing from a wealth of statistical material, he shows that unlike social revolutions of the past, the urban civic revolutions only temporarily weaken authoritarian rule and empower middle-class civil societies. They do not bring a stronger or more egalitarian political order, nor lasting democratic changes.

Typically, in post-Soviet countries, the maidan revolutions only weakened the state and made local political capitalists more vulnerable to pressure from transnational capital — both directly and indirectly via pro-Western NGOs. For example, in Ukraine, after the Euromaidan revolution, a set of 'anti-corruption' institutions has been stubbornly pushed forward by the IMF, G7, and civil society.

They have failed to present any major case of corruption in the last eight years. However, they have institutionalised oversight of key state enterprises and the court system by foreign nationals and anti-corruption activists, thus squeezing domestic political capitalists' opportunities for reaping insider rents. Russian political capitalists would have a good reason to be nervous with the troubles of Ukraine's once-powerful oligarchs.

The unintended consequences of ruling-class consolidation

Several factors help to explain the timing of the invasion, as well as Putin's miscalculation about a quick and easy victory: such as Russia's temporary advantage in hypersonic weapons; Europe's dependency on Russian energy; the repression of the so-called pro-Russian opposition in Ukraine; the stagnation of the 2015 Minsk accords following the war in Donbas; or the failure of Russian intelligence in Ukraine.

Here, I sought to outline in very broad strokes the class conflict behind the invasion, namely between political capitalists interested in territorial expansion to sustain the rate of rent, on the one hand, and transnational capital allied with the professional middle classes — which were excluded from political capitalism — on the other.

The Marxist concept of imperialism can only be usefully applied to the current war if we can identify the material interests behind it. At the same time, the conflict is about more than just Russian imperialism. The conflict now being resolved in Ukraine by tanks, artillery, and rockets is the same conflict that police batons have suppressed in Belarus and Russia itself.

The intensification of the post-Soviet crisis of hegemony — the incapacity of the ruling class to develop sustained political, moral, and intellectual leadership — is the root cause for the escalating violence.

The Russian ruling class is diverse. Some parts of it are taking heavy losses as a result of Western sanctions. However, the Russian regime's partial autonomy from the ruling class allows it to pursue long-term collective interests independently of the losses of individual representatives or groups. At the same time, the crisis of similar regimes in the Russian periphery is exacerbating the existential threat to the Russian ruling class as a whole.

The more sovereigntist fractions of the Russian political capitalists are taking the upper hand over the more comprador, but even the latter probably understand that, with the regime's fall, all of them are losing.

By launching the war, the Kremlin sought to mitigate that threat for the foreseeable future, with the ultimate goal of the 'multipolar' restructuring of the world order. As Branko Milanovic suggests, the war provides legitimacy for the Russian decoupling from the West, despite the high costs, and at the same time makes it extremely difficult to reverse it after the annexation of even more Ukrainian territory.

At the same time, the Russian ruling clique elevates the political organisation and ideological legitimation of the ruling class to a higher level. There are already signs of a transformation toward a more consolidated, ideological, and mobilisationist authoritarian political regime in Russia, with explicit hints at China's more effective political capitalism as a role model.

For Putin, this is essentially another stage in the process of post-Soviet consolidation that he began in the early 2000s by taming Russia's oligarchs. The loose narrative of preventing disaster and restoring 'stability' in the first stage is now followed by a more articulated conservative nationalism in the second stage (directed abroad against Ukrainians and the West, but also within Russia against cosmopolitan 'traitors') as the only ideological language widely available in the context of the post-Soviet crisis of ideology.

Some authors, like sociologist Dylan John Riley, argue that a stronger hegemonic politics from above may help to foster the growth of a stronger counter-hegemonic politics below. If this is true, the Kremlin's shift toward more ideological and mobilisationist politics may create the condition for a more organised, conscious, mass political opposition rooted in the popular classes than any post-Soviet country has ever seen, and ultimately for a new social-revolutionary wave.

Such a development could, in turn, fundamentally shift the balance of social and political forces in this part of the world, potentially putting an end to the vicious cycle that has plagued it since the Soviet Union collapsed some three decades ago.

THE WAR IN UKRAINE AND RUSSIAN CAPITAL

FROM MILITARY-ECONOMIC TO FULL MILITARY IMPERIALISM

By Ilya Matveev

Volodymyr Ishchenko makes an important contribution to the debate on the nature of Russian imperialism and the war in Ukraine. He postulates that behind the war, there is a class conflict between, on the one hand, political capitalists in Russia, and, on the other, an alliance of transnational capital and the professional middle classes in Ukraine.

According to Ishchenko, the Kremlin's decision to invade Ukraine corresponds with the collective interests of the Russian ruling class, even if it goes against the individual interests of this or that political capitalist. While Ishchenko's article is an excellent starting point in the debate, it ultimately misrepresents the nature of the ruling class in Russia, as well as the causes of Russia's aggression in Ukraine. Ishchenko notes: "Some analysts claim that the war may possess the autonomous rationality of a 'political' or 'cultural' imperialism. This is ultimately an eclectic explanation."

Eclecticism might be a sin, but so is misconstruing the evidence for the sake of theoretical purity. In this article, I focus on the historical development of Russian capital, its relationship to the Kremlin's imperialist policies and the divergence between the economic expansion and the military aggression since 2014.

Contra Ishchenko, I argue that Russian imperialism does have its own logic that is not reducible to the interests of the ruling class. The appearance of the non-economic roots of Russia's aggressive expansionism since 2014 raises questions about the contemporary validity of classical theories of imperialism. I return to these questions in the concluding section.

The fractions of the Russian ruling class

Ishchenko defines the ruling class, or the most influential fraction of the ruling class, in Russia as political capitalists whose chief strategy is "the exploitation of political office to accumulate private wealth". He refers to several key authors – Steven Solnick, Ruslan Dzarasov, Iván Szelényi – to describe the strategies of syphoning off public resources and government-sanctioned plunder characteristic of Russian capitalists.

All the researchers quoted by Ishchenko focus on the period of the late 1980s and the 1990s, and their conclusions – which are broadly similar – are undoubtedly correct in relation to that period.

Russia's "primitive accumulation" certainly involved massive appropriation of public wealth – be it the privatisation of state property or profiting off public money that was placed in private banks by corrupt public officials. This is how the "oligarchs", or big businessmen, made their fortunes.

The 1990s was a period of the "virtual economy", with almost zero investment and capital formation, as opposed to frantic speculation and rent-seeking by well-connected insiders. The dominant corporate form that emerged in the second half of the 1990s was the so-called "financial-industrial group" – a conglomerate of financial, industrial and media assets that essentially included everything its owners could grab and seize – most often from the state.

The 1998 economic crisis proved a turning point in this dynamic, however. Many of the opportunities for speculation and profiting off state resources dried up, while the dramatic devaluation of the ruble made commodity exports particularly attractive. Restoring the centrality of exports to the economy required investment in Russia's productive capacity.

Russian businessmen realised they could attract the financing for such investments from the global capital markets. This, in turn, required a change in corporate governance practices and increased transparency. The "financial-industrial groups" of the 1990s were reorganised into more traditional corporations.

The story of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the oligarch turned archfoe of Putin, illustrates this change. He acquired his initial capital in the late 1980s through his connections in the Komsomol – the communist youth organisation that Gorbachev turned into a launch pad for various entrepreneurial initiatives.

Khodorkovsky's bank Menatep engaged in all manner of speculative and arbitrage activities in the first half of the 1990s, and in 1995, he acquired YUKOS, the biggest oil company in Russia, through a shady loans-for-shares scheme for a fraction of its true cost.

Khodorkovsky was the archetypical 1990s "oligarch", running an opaque, sprawling business, harassing minority shareholders, and relying on the threat and practice of criminal violence as a measure of the last resort. However, in the early 2000s, he introduced new accounting and transparency standards and invited independent members to the YUKOS board to secure international legitimacy for his company and increase its market value.

Of Bonapartists and oligarchs

The key part of the story of Russian business since the early 2000s is one of internationalisation. Russian corporations attracted capital from global markets, staged initial public offerings on the key international exchanges, acquired assets abroad, and formed joint ventures with foreign transnational corporations. In the words of political sociologist Georgi Derluguian, they acted as "comprador oligarchies that monopolise the nexus between global economic flows and the local extraction of resources".

Internationalisation became an integral part of their accumulation strategies. In their personal capacity, Russia's richest men acquired luxury properties in London, the requisite superyachts, and sent their children to the most expensive private schools European countries had to offer. It is important to factor in this dimension of ruling class activities as it directly relates to the Kremlin's foreign policy and, as I argue, imperialist goals.

I fully agree with Ishchenko's characterisation of Putin's regime as Bonapartist. Similar to Louis Bonaparte, Putin came to power with a promise to "restore order". While rhetorically attacking the "oligarchs", he had no intention of ever redistributing their wealth or revising the fundamental pillars of the post-Soviet political-economic order to tackle extreme inequality. Instead, he offered the business elite a new set of rules: the deal was that it would relinquish its influence over the media and political parties in exchange for the opportunity to maintain and multiply its riches.

For Russia's leading businessmen, this proved an excellent deal as Putin's personal popularity compensated for their weak legitimacy in society.

Furthermore, the state that Putin pledged to renew and restore could protect them from industrial conflicts and popular pressure for redistribution. In turn, Putin saw Russian capitalists as a valuable resource.

According to Vladislav Surkov, one of the Kremlin's most important political operatives at the time, the group of Russian big businessmen is "very thin and very precious... they are the bearers of capital, of intellect, of technologies... The oil men are no less important than the oil; the state has to make the most of them both".

The Kremlin considered the business elite to be useful for ensuring economic development at home, as well as providing the resources for projecting power abroad. Of course, there was the small matter of personal enrichment through bribery and extortion as well.

If there is one quote that characterises the state of Russian capital under Putin most accurately, it is to be found in a passage from Marx's 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte: "In order to save its purse [the bourgeoisie] must forfeit the crown, and the sword that is to safeguard it must at the same time be hung over its own head as a sword of Damocles."

From Marx's analysis in the 18th Brumaire, we can gather that a Bonapartist regime may serve – and probably does serve – the interests of the bourgeoisie, however, there is no guarantee that it will place these interests above all other considerations when making momentous decisions. After all, the sword of Damocles might just fall on the bourgeoisie one day.

Corrupt state managers

Despite relinquishing their influence over public policy, the owners of Russia's largest corporations maintained individual informal ties to the top government officials. As a result, they rarely had problems with the state. Another part of Russia's capitalist class – mostly the owners of small and medium enterprises – lacked these political ties.

In principle, the Kremlin had nothing against these business owners, and they benefited from the same policies that privileged the capitalist class as a whole – not least, a highly favourable tax regime. However, they often fell victim to the predatory attacks of various government and security agencies. The Kremlin proved in most cases unable or unwilling to restrain state agents when they engaged in predatory behaviour.

For these reasons, this fraction of the capitalist class lacking the political connections of larger businessmen could potentially benefit from democratisation if it allowed them to restrain and control Russia's vast bureaucratic and repressive apparatus. However, business owners have rarely joined the opposition movement as they have been unwilling to jeopardise their profits by taking a political stand.

We can identify two more fractions of the Russian capitalist class. Putin's policy of renationalisation and expansion of the public sector created a layer of state managers, who form one of the stronger bases of support for the government, often with a background in the security services. They tended to abuse their positions by enriching themselves through various corrupt practices, however, and this is an important point, in terms of internationalisation, Russia's largest state corporations did not differ much from its biggest private businesses. They too actively sought access to export markets, by raising money abroad and forming joint ventures with foreign corporations.

Like their "entrepreneurial counterparts", these corrupt state managers pursued a particular type of gaudy lifestyle: properties in Miami, London and Dubai and sending their children to the same elite private schools in Europe. The major difference is that state managers are even more dependent on the Kremlin than private businessmen, as they can be dismissed from their positions with the mere stroke of a pen.

Finally, there is another group of businessmen in Putin's Russia that could be termed political capitalists in a straightforward Weberian sense, as their chief activity is servicing government contracts. Members of this group, identified by Forbes as the "The Kings of State Contracts" [changed from "the kings of government Contracts" to the full name Forbes uses] (with a special ranking published every year), are often Putin's closest associates as well as individuals connected to various influential state managers. Their business model is less internationalised than most Russian corporations. However, the services of technologically advanced foreign suppliers are often required for the biggest government contracts to be completed. Furthermore, these political capitalists depend on the overall "size of the pie" available to the state, and thus, indirectly, on other, globally integrated industries.

Russian capital and the global economy

In relation to the global economy, Russian capital played two roles simultaneously, reflecting the paradox of a dependent, semi-peripheral country that is nonetheless imperialist. As members of a "comprador bourgeoisie", the biggest business owners have exploited Russia's natural resources and domestic markets, often in partnership with foreign corporations, while transferring money to offshore accounts and luxury real estate in the Western "metropole".

As vehicles for a "metropolitan bourgeoisie" in the post-Soviet successor states pace, Russian corporations aggressively expanded into regional markets and reconstructed Soviet-era supply chains under their control. The Kremlin tolerated the "comprador" element and actively supported the "metropolitan" element. Coercive measures, such as oil and gas cut-offs, were used to acquire assets in countries like Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and Armenia.

Political and economic motives were often hopelessly intertwined. For instance, in Ukraine, Russian state-owned Vneshekonombank acquired multiple industrial assets in Donbas to the tune of $10 billion in the late 2000s and early 2010s. Vnesheconombank money was used both to take control over coal and metal factories in Eastern Ukraine and to finance Ukrainian politicians such as Yulia Tymoshenko in the hopes of increasing the Kremlin's influence over Ukrainian affairs.

Overall, Putin's vision for the post-Soviet space invariably involved Russia's political and economic dominance, solidified by its own integration project – the Eurasian Economic Union. Within this vision, political and economic expansion fuelled one another.

The Achilles heel for the Kremlin, in its imperialist advance, was its lack of international hegemonic appeal. Putin's preferred method of operation was doing backroom deals with the post-Soviet political and economic elites, and he often succeeded, particularly in the case of his fellow autocrats in neighbouring states. However, for the populations of the post-Soviet states, Russia represented, at best, "more of the same" – the same poverty, inequality and cynicism characteristic of the post-Soviet condition as a whole.

At worst, it was an authoritarian incursion into fledgling democracies with an arrogant sense of entitlement to its "sphere of influence" and military intervention always kept as an option – as seen in Georgia in 2008. While making loud demands on the countries in its "near abroad" and the United States as a global hegemon, the Kremlin could never articulate the positive vision it had on offer. Its constant calls for "multipolarity" rang hollow, as they amounted to nothing more than a desire to dominate the region for post-Soviet space entirely to the Kremlin's benefit and without the West's interference.

The invasion of Ukraine

Coincidentally, Russia's latest round of confrontations with Ukraine began in 2013 as a conflict over trade, as Ukraine could not simultaneously be a part of the free trade agreement with both Russia and the EU. Putin's later reflections (in his interviews with Oliver Stone, for example) reveal his clear understanding of the economic stakes at play. However, what happened next marked a sharp divergence between the economic logic and the political logic of Russian imperialism.

Whatever motivated the Kremlin to annex Crimea, it was not economic considerations: the question, discussed by Putin with his advisors, was not how much Russia would gain economically, but rather, would it be able to withstand Western sanctions in response to the annexation. Ukrainian assets (public and private) that Russia expropriated in Crimea were more than matched by lost or devalued Russian assets in the rest of Ukraine.

Furthermore, the fighting in Donbas between 2014-2015 resulted in the physical destruction of some significant Russian investments. For example, the Ukrainian artillery's shelling of an oil refinery in Lisichansk (Luhansk region) cost its owner, the Russian state-controlled oil company Rosneft, up to $300 million in lost value. More importantly, the confrontation with the West that ensued after the annexation of Crimea has put into question the whole strategy of internationalisation of Russian business.

Russian corporations partly lost access to Western technologies, export and capital markets, a few Russian businessmen were sanctioned, while others lived under the constant threat of sanctions and asset freezes. The number of Russian billionaires on the Forbes list stagnated after 2014 and the GDP growth averaged just 1% between 2014-2021. Russia's economic slowdown is crucial to setting the stage for Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

I agree with Ishchenko that, up until 2014, Putin's regime was acting by and large in the collective interest of the Russian ruling class, especially the three of its most powerful fractions: the biggest private corporations, corrupt managers in the state sector, and political capitalists ("The Kings of State Contracts"). And indeed, the conflict in Ukraine had economic roots.

However, the annexation of Crimea and Russia's covert intervention in Eastern Ukraine were not dictated by economic logic; in fact, they significantly undermined the position of Russian capital. The contradictions of Russian capitalism could not produce such an outcome; it was rooted in something else. From Putin's own subsequent explanations, one could gather that the annexation of Crimea was the product of a deeply held belief in the inevitability of an all-out confrontation with the West in which even the most fantastical scenarios - such as nuclear weapons in Crimea targeted at Russia being considered real threats - could become a reality.

This belief could partly be explained by the unilateral actions of the US in the preceding period, such as the withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in 2002. However, it was also rooted in Putin's denial of the very possibility of popular revolutions (including the 2013-2014 Maidan revolution) which he invariably saw as coups orchestrated by the West against Russia (with an ultimate plan to stage such a coup in Russia itself).

Putin's actions were also driven by the deep fear and mistrust of popular mobilisation. His inability to comprehend the existence of power in the Arendtian sense, that is, collective social power, ultimately led him to rely on force – repression at home, military aggression abroad.

This strategic orientation was certainly not Putin's alone – it was shared by the large part of Russia's national security establishment. Driven by fear and mistrust, the Kremlin engaged in what international relations scholar Jack Snyder termed the "myths of empire" – that is, strategic orientations that dictate that the best defence is a good offence. This logic led the Kremlin to break its own promise to respect Ukraine's national borders (enshrined in the 1994 Budapest memorandum), annexing part of its territory.

Putin's decision to launch the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 reflects recognition of the failure of the Kremlin's own policy of hybrid aggression towards Ukraine in the previous period. The twin daggers thrust into Ukraine's body – the annexation of Crimea and the occupation of Donbas through the Kremlin-controlled proxies – failed to destabilise the country enough to prevent it from acquiring a solidly pro-Western and anti-Russian direction.

'Myths of empire'

When Vladimir Zelensky failed to implement the Minsk agreements in a way preferred by the Kremlin, and closed down three TV channels associated with the pro-Putin businessman and politician Viktor Medvedchuk, Putin realised that he had no veto power over Ukrainian affairs. After that, he tried to persuade the West to pressure Ukraine into accepting his demands, and, when this did not work, he settled on an outright invasion.

The "myths of empire" resulted in an abject failure in 2014-2022, but instead of abandoning them, the Kremlin doubled down on the same logic of preventive aggression. Unsurprisingly, it failed again, this time with even more tragic consequences.

Marxist theories of imperialism emphasise its connection to the process of capital accumulation and the interests of the ruling class or its fractions. However, Russian imperialism since 2014 does not easily lend itself to such an explanation. Russia's military aggression in Ukraine since 2014 has resulted in the significant loss of capital and export markets, as well as investments abroad, diminished cooperation with transnational corporations, and personal sanctions against many prominent representatives of Russian capital.

The gains from Russian corporations' increasing monopolisation of the domestic market and plundering of occupied territories do not nearly compensate for the losses. The discrepancy between the economic interests of the ruling class and military aggression is not unique to Russia: David Harvey has captured it by studying the dynamic interaction between "capitalist logic" and "territorial logic" across different historic and contemporary examples of imperialism, and Michael Mann has described it in relation to the United States as an "incoherent empire".

This discrepancy in Russia is rooted in the ideology and strategic orientation of the national security establishment. Clearly, more work needs to be done to identify the particular cliques and coalitions in the Russian elite that were supporting and encouraging Putin's belligerent impulses; another task would be to understand the role of irredentist Russian nationalism. However, the attempts to find a direct causal link between the contradictions of capital accumulation and Russia's military aggression should be abandoned, as they conceal the real origins of the terrible war in Ukraine.

Imperialism does not need to be a simple extension of capitalism to be deserving of normative critique. To quote historian Salar Mohandesi's broad revision of the Marxist approach to the subject: "Imperialism… has to be broadly understood as a relationship of domination between states, rather than as a synonym for capitalist expansion."

As a form of violence and domination driven by an unaccountable political class and, as usually is in the case of these things, its victims are predominantly the working classes – both in the aggressor state and in the countries that fell victim to it – imperialism should be opposed and fought on its own.

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COUNTER(REVOLUTIONARY) WAR AGAINST SOCIETY

By Oleg Zhuravlev

Volodymyr Ishchenko and Ilya Matveev debate the question of what kind of rationality stands behind Putin's decision to attack Ukraine. Is Russia's elite an ideologically-motivated political actor? If so, is its ideology expressive of class interests (as Ishchenko argues) or in contrast with them (as Matveev claims)?

I deal with a similar but distinct question. My argument concerns not motivations behind the Russian state's decision-making, but rather the social condition within which this state is becoming a radical political actor. Before 2011, the Russian state was a more prominent economic actor, retaining a monopoly of power over society through management and policing. However, after 2011 and especially after 2014, it faced problems that led it into political radicalisation, which, ultimately, brought about the decision to invade Ukraine.

In this essay, I ask the question: is the elite that backs Vladimir Putin a rational economic actor or is it a volitional political subject? This question has not only produced an academic debate, it also puzzles ordinary people in Russia and around the world, who once thought that the Russian elite was made up of 'crooks and thieves' (as Russian protesters have said), opportunist managers and administrators, but now recognise it as a group of ideological fanatics.

The decision by the Russian authorities to intervene militarily in Ukraine was the result of a process of what I term the counter-politicisation of the Russian state, in response to the politicisation, sometimes revolutionary, of certain groups in Russia, Ukraine and other post-Soviet countries.

It is important to note that this counter-politicisation of the state in response to the politicisation of society took place not in the form of political dialogue or a struggle for hegemony, but through these political forces declaring themselves independent and thus opposed to each other: the politicisation of social groups and of the state has occurred not through the logic of the creation of a common political space, but rather through the logic of mutual separation and exasperation.

Matveev, in his response to Ishchenko, correctly points out that: 'Putin's actions were also driven by the deep fear and mistrust of popular mobilisation. Putin's inability to comprehend the existence of power in the Arendtian sense, that is, collective social power, ultimately led him to rely on force – repression at home, military aggression abroad'.

The reactionary, counter-revolutionary character of Putin's war, as well as the 'detachment from reality' of the elite, living in an 'information bubble', have been noted by a number of experts. At the same time, as a rule, these same experts do not address certain key questions: what are the properties of the social structure in Russia and the post-Soviet countries that lead to this state of mutual isolation and exasperation? What is the role, not only of Putin's state, but also of the protest movements to which this state is responding? What kind of politicisation did both the contentious social groups (previously apolitical) and the state (previously managerial) undergo? To answer these questions, I will briefly examine the state of Russian apolitical society in the 2000s, its tumultuous ' hyperpoliticisation' in the 2010s, and the state's counter-politicisation that made the war possible.

Depoliticisation and the crisis of hegemony

Post-Soviet Russia has been widely regarded by scholars as a depoliticised society. Depolitici sation here means not just the political indifference of ordinary people. Indeed, sometimes people might have engaged in collective action, including volunteering, civic activism and even protest campaigns, without crossing the border into the realm of the political: a corrupt and tainted space associated with the state, political parties and oligarchs. At the same time, Putin's regime consciously avoided the political mobilisation of its own support, preferring instead to pacify various social groups by guaranteeing them autonomy of private life and economic stability.

Political theorist Sergey Prozorov describes 'a mutual exclusion of the state and society from each other's respective domains, whereby formal politics and social life unfold at such a distance from each other that it is increasingly impossible to conceive of any possible relation between them'.

According to Prozoroy, Putin's bureaucratic depoliticisation suspends the legitimacy of all political options (witness the decline of all ideological parties, from liberals to communists) without itself occupying a substantive ideological locus.

Indeed, as the political scientist Vladimir Gelman points out, the 'formal politics' of the state was aimed at 'the economic performance of the regime' rather than at the establishment of a hegemonic rule. Thus, the depoliticisation of Putin's Russia resulted in the mutual exclusion of the social and the political, of the social movements and the state. This also gave a predominantly economic and managerial character to state governance. In the 2010s, certain social groups in Russia opposed to the government then became increasingly politicised (although society-at-large did not), as did the Russian state in response. However, this politicisation and counter-politicisation did not overcome the logic of mutual exclusion. Instead, it reproduced and intensified this logic.

Protest and hyperpoliticisation

Putin's invasion of Ukraine was partly a reaction to protest movements in post-Soviet countries, especially in Ukraine (2014), Belarus (2020), Kazakhstan (2021), and in Russia itself (2012-2021). It is necessary to analyse the specificities of these protests themselves in order to understand why the regime reacted to them by launching a war. In what follows, I will draw on the sociological research of the Public Sociology Laboratory, focusing on the Russian protests, on the ideology and political strategy of those involved. From 2011 to 2021, we carried out interviews, focus groups and ethnographic observations, communicating with Russian protesters and activists in different contexts.

In December 2011, a wave of huge rallies, marches and 'Occupy' camps began to emerge in Russia, triggered by widespread fraud during the 4 December Duma elections. At the time, there were no strong opposition parties, either within or outside Parliament able to prepare and organise protests of this magnitude. But, after social media platforms (such as Facebook and vkontakte.ru) were flooded by independent observers' reports of the fraud, and the ruling United Russia party's historically low results despite manipulating the polls, thousands of people — many of them youngsters participating in protests for the first time — took to the streets. On the following Sunday, about 100,000 people gathered for an officially authorised rally in the centre of Moscow with smaller but still considerable rallies held in other major cities. The protesters' demands centred on fair elections, a rerun of the December vote, and the denunciation of corruption. Honesty and dignity were held up as the animating values of the protests. The protesters, heterogeneous as they were, represented on average a richer and more educated strata of the Russian population.

On 6 May 2012, the police brutally dispersed the protesters, after which many were accused of violence and were imprisoned. That same day, Putin declared victory in the presidential elections. To further complicate matters, the movement faced a severe internal crisis after it failed to propose a clear political programme and develop a strategic agenda. In the wake of these events, the protest ers demobilised, at the same time as the state became more authoritarian and repressive. Since then, new protest campaigns have emerged almost every year, while new local anti-Putin activist groups, social movements, and municipal deputies' campaigns have taken form.

The movement 'For Fair Elections' was characterised by what can be called 'the politics of the apolitical'. The Russian protests constituted a movement that based its legitimacy on 'authentic' experience of the collective action itself.

The collective sentiment that those in power had abused the population by stealing the election, as well as the experience of unity in the streets, produced a new collective identity. This identity was self-referential, as it expressed not belonging to a class or commitment to a common political agenda or ideology, but rather the experience of togetherness, itself forged through the act of protesting. At the same time, it was a movement that had strong anti-political characteristics that built its image on an opposition between morally dignified protesters and immoral elites. This anti-political element was evident in that the protesters expressed their scepticism towards both the state and opposition parties and politicians. The leaders of the protest were journalists, bloggers, and cultural figures. However, the protest movement was able to move beyond anti-politics by giving birth to a new more politicised civil society.

In our research we show that the protesters avoided articulation of any particular social demands and ideological preferences in favour of moral unity. Moreover, protesters positioned themselves in opposition not only to political elites , but also to 'politics' per se. The specificity of the Russian version of 'anti-politics' was that while in the West anti-politics has tended to challenge the basis of liberal democracy, the Russian protesters demanded fair elections.

Protestors did not use 'liberal political grammar', which, according to the French sociologist Laurent Thevenot, involves people coming together, communicating, and acting in concert via the articulation and taking into account of individual needs, objectified as a list of publicly available options (for example, competing political parties) to be chosen. Instead, they demonstrated the logic of 'affinity through common places' that presupposes a more silent means of uniting and acting in concert, based on the personal, emotional investments people have in what's common, which can be places (homes or parks), but also songs, pictures, and other such objects.

The theft of votes became a common complaint for Russian protesters. For example, this is how one of the protesters we interviewed answered the question of why he decided to attend the protest rallies:

> *Yes, I believe that [fair elections] are important, because whatever the elections are like, they should be fair. They should not forget we are not fools. People have eyes and brains. We understand everything quite well, and they should not take us for fools. I'm not sure we can shunt aside Putin, because he is backed by major financial organisations. He's the head of state, what can you say? But, in fact, we could at least show them that we are not stupid louts, that we see the violations, that we know they are deceiving us. Why are they doing this? So yes, I support fair elections. What matters is that elections are held. Let people have their say. That is what matters to me: the right to vote (March 2012, St. Petersburg; male protestor with higher education qualifications, born in 1982).*

In this case, we see that the appeal to emotions is both subjectively significant and a legitimate argument for the protestor's involvement in the movement. Our informants told us they had been personally insulted by the manner in which the elections had been held. It was not a problem for the protesters that a vote for a party other than Putin's United Russia had not been tallied, but rather that each individual vote had not been counted, whatever party the person had voted for. One's vote was not deemed a means of expressing one's opinion or part of the machinery for maintaining the commonwealth, but as a personal belonging. Our interview subjects were first morally invested in voting. Then, after encountering proof that their votes had been stolen (in the form of videos published on YouTube), they became outraged:

> *Yeah, those videos showing violations [at polling stations]... are quite important. Those videos also influenced me. [I watched] literally a dozen of them, but they had a big impact on me. [Question: In what sense?] Well, you see they're deceiving you. And anger rises inside you: what the hell?! It's like you want change, you believe [in the process] and go to vote, you spend time going to the election, you spend two hours or so on it, and before that you spend a bunch of time figuring out whom to vote for, although there is no one to choose from (Interview continued).*

Replete with moralising and personal complaints, such as 'My vote was stolen!' and 'Give me back my vote!', the expressions of the protesters pointed to the fact that votes were regarded as belonging to individuals, as material even. The protest space itself (together with the stolen votes) turned out to contribute to a sense of the common for participants in the rallies. Their shared identity based on the experience of togetherness was in many ways the result of personal attachment to this space.

This political culture, or ideology, characterised protests not only in post-Soviet countries but also elsewhere during the so-called 'global wave' of uprisings from 2011-2014. As Sidney Tarrow wrote about the Occupy Wall Street movement, its legitimacy derived from an occurrence of co-presence experienced by participants during collective action. He defined this type of collective action as the 'we are here' movement: 'By their presence, they are saying only, "Recognise us!" If Occupy Wall Street resembles any movement in recent American history, it would actually be the new women's movement of the 1970s (...) their foremost demand was for recognition of, and credit for, the gendered reality of everyday life.'

Their identity, based on the experience of co-presence, was developed not only in opposition to, but also 'in separation' from, the Russian authorities. One of the popular slogans of the Russian protesters addressed to those in power was 'Vy nas dazhe ne predstavliaete' which simultaneously means 'You don't even represent us' and 'You can't even imagine us', indicating that the protesters opposed those in power not through the articulation of a political alternative but, rather, by celebration of their civic autonomy and moral virtue. At the same time, they sought to delegitimise Putin's regime by labelling it as immoral, corrupt and abusive.

The protests of 2011-2012 gave birth to a new anti-Putin civil society: local activist groups, the communities of municipal deputies and the movement in support of Alexei Navalny became civic laboratories in which the anti-Putin spirit inherited from the protests was combined with various forms of collective action at different levels, from local to national. As a result, the politicised language used to criticise the government which was formed during 2011-2012 simply became common sense language for the many civil society institutions. It has spread among many small activist collectives across Russia, all loosely connected to each other by their rhetoric and history. Denunciation of the regime, and a demonstration of its faults became a central goal for the new oppositional and civic movements.

The new civil society that emerged from the protests of 2011-2012 was curiously both anti-political and politicised. It was anti-political in that it created realms of collective action autonomous from the state and parties, as well as often rejecting both the state and political parties as legitimate sites of action. And it was politicised because, unlike civic activism that existed in Russia before 2011 when activists focused on local agendas only, it now openly challenged the political regime. This civil society was autonomous from the state and in conflict with the state at the same time.

The Russian protests of 2011-2012, as well as the post-protest civil society, can be characterised by what political theorist Anton Jäger calls 'hyperpolitics'. 'The mood of contemporary politics', Jäger writes, 'is one of incessant yet diffuse excitation… "Hyper" indicates both a state of supersession and intensification: the elongation of a vowel that has already been vocalised but does not yet spell out a new word. This is not simply about securing a sense of continuity with the preceding period of post-politics, which first split politics from policy, and whose division hyperpolitics widens rather than closes.' It was precisely in this manner that the protests of 2011-2012 in Russia led to the emergence of widespread democratic practices that, in turn, contributed to a crisis of political legitimacy.

In an article that I wrote with Ishchenko, entitled 'Post-Soviet vicious circle: revolution as a reproduction of a crisis of hegemony', we showed that the Euromaidan revolution possessed important similarities with the Russian protests in that it constituted an autonomous space of dignified civic action in opposition to corrupt and abusive authorities. Protesters were correct when they declared that those in power could not even have imagined them. Indeed, for political leaders such as Putin, the realm of popular collective action could never be authentic. Rather, it represented a political threat to both Russian elites and the country itself manufactured by US elites.

In his text, Ishchenko rightly argues that Putin conceived the protests and revolutions in the post-Soviet countries as a threat to the existing political and economic order. It was for this reason that Putin and his allies believed that in order to preserve Russian sovereignty, the protests must be actively neutralised. The task of suppressing the protests required the state to politicise itself and attack what are regarded as proxies of anti-Russian political forces – most notably the US. One of these proxies, according to Putin, is the Ukrainian state.

Counter-politicisation of the state

In Russian and other post-Soviet countries, the state responded to the protests with its own counter-politicisation through a conservative propaganda campaign. The so-called 'Crimean Spring' – the patriotic mobilisation that followed Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 – was an important event during this process. However, this counter-politicisation reproduced the mutual exclusion of society and the state instead of bridging the gap between these spaces. Paradoxically, it relied on demobilisation instead of engagement.

I reflect on this in an article written with Matveev:

> *The Kremlin's response to the protest movement turned out to be 'politicisation without mobilisation'. It consisted of a crude media campaign to delegitimise the protests in the eyes of the regime's supporters... The creative style of the protest rallies led by people with high levels of cultural capital was unfamiliar to the broader society. This fact was sophisticatedly exploited by the Kremlin, which turned the discrepancy between the protest movement's style and ordinary people's expectations into a kind of 'culture war'... Nevertheless, even in the nationalist fervour of 2014, the regime stopped inches away from finally combining 'politicisation with mobilisation', that is, creating its own loyalist street movement. The most striking mobilisation in support of the 'Crimean Spring' happened in the territory of Ukraine, not Russia. Indeed, it was the war in Eastern Ukraine that attracted newly politicised conservatives — combatants, volunteers, and other civic supporters. Within Russia itself, the regime still preferred tight top-down control of any mobilisation or street activity.*

The Russian elite – to be precise, the narrow cadre of military leaders, bureaucrats and businesspeople around Putin – politically mobilised not its audiences but itself. In doing so, it became more concerned with political threats to its power, which it equated with threats to national sovereignty.

Putin's understanding of sovereignty reflects the counter-politicisation of the state and the Russian elite. In a recent speech he articulated his vision of sovereignty in the following terms: 'In order to claim leadership, any country must ensure its sovereignty. Either the country is sovereign, or it is a colony.' Indeed, Putin has long propounded a concept of sovereignty that he now applies in relation to Ukraine. In a speech delivered on the eve of the war, he asked: 'Do the Ukrainians themselves understand that their country has been reduced to the level of a colony with a puppet regime? The government has lost its national character and is consistently working toward the complete dissolution of the country's sovereignty.'

Putin's denial of Ukraine's national sovereignty turns the reference to its 'complete dissolution' into an ominous threat. But what is most interesting here is his denial of the sovereignty of the people of Ukraine. He thus denies the people the possibility of politicisation, the possibility of becoming a source of sovereignty.

When Putin speaks about sovereignty, he means absolute sovereignty, as understood by Jean Bodin, rather than the popular sovereignty privileged by modern theories of democracy. It is relevant to note the tension that exists between Putin's conception and that which is today dominant in political theory and in modern constitutions (including that of Russia), according to which sovereignty originates in the will of the people.

The politicisation of the state was occurring at the same time as a perceived threat posed by a practical realisation of the people's sovereignty through revolutionary protest in the post-Soviet countries. When people are depoliticised, the state's sovereign power can be exercised within a managerial mode of government.

Before 2011, Putin's regime could retain a monopoly of power without needing to politicise the state. However, after popular mobilisations openly challenged the regime's legitimacy, it started suppressing its political enemies, who were denied a space of dialogue in which a struggle for hegemony could develop.

Putin's embrace of absolute sovereignty precisely constituted the politicisation of the state itself, and this in turn required the deliberate exclusion of all popular groups. This demanded that the Russian state itself become a counter-revolutionary subject, making itself a source of constituent power. The 2019 Russian propaganda film The Salvation Union, about the Decembrists' uprising, is revealing. In the film, one of the Decembrists remarks to Emperor Nicholas I: 'We are the same. You and we have the right aims, but the ways are criminal.' In these words, one can see the equation of the state with the revolutionaries in the sense that the state produces constitutive (rather than constituted) power, power that creates law rather than obeys it.

The origins of popular sovereignty, in its modern conception, can be traced back to the decline of Medieval Europe and the opening of a space for the self-organisation of the people. From this moment on, as Russian sociologist Alexander Filippov notes, revolution is always possible, simply because the people have opportunity for association and action: 'Underneath the supposedly solid foundation is a boiling magma. And it's not boiling because someone is doing something wrong. It is not because of the things themselves, but because there, in the depths, is the primordial atomic cauldron of social and political life, from which new tongues of revolutionary flame can burst forth at any moment.'

The energy of self-organisation in Russia and Ukraine promoted the people as an actual source of sovereignty.

This revolutionary spark was apparent in the slogans of the Russian protest movement: 'We are the power here' and 'You do not even imagine us'. It was no surprise, then, that Putin's political advisor Gleb Pavlovsky responded to a question about the government's position on the 2011-2012 protests with the following words: 'Imagine you're sitting there and all of a sudden a stool bites you in the ass. How would you feel about that? It can't be!'

Of course, there are other causes behind Putin's war against Ukraine and the American-led world order. However, the popular politicisation in post-Soviet countries and the Russian state's counter-politicisation played an important role. The logic of mutual exclusion and hostility intensified a pre-existing political crisis in Russia – a crisis of legitimacy and crisis of hegemony.

As I have argued in my work with Ishchenko, both the rise of bonapartist authoritarianism and the mobilisation of popular discontent were 'deficient' reactions to the crisis of hegemony. And, in turn, they created the conditions for the extreme decision to go to war. Interestingly, new research conducted by the Public Sociology Laboratory shows that it is depoliticisation and alienation from the state, not sincere commitment, that stand behind the 'support' of a large part of the Russian population for the war. Justifying the war, many of our informants have said that they are not experts in global politics, but that for this reason they trust that those in power have the knowledge to decide when it is appropriate to go to war.

This alienation demonstrates the effectiveness of the Russian state's counter-politicisation. In the name of national sovereignty, Putin has undermined the sovereignty of the Russian people. And this has also allowed him to undermine the sovereignty of foreign populations deemed to pose a threat to his power. In this way, Putin's regime has self-organised and initiated its own (counter-)revolutionary war – against Russian society and, principally, against Ukraine.

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RUSSIAN CAPITALISM IS BOTH POLITICAL AND NORMAL

ON EXPROPRIATION AND SOCIAL REPRODUCTION[1]

By Olena Lyubchenko

In 2006, in his book The Development of Capitalism in Russia, the late sociologist Simon Clarke wrote that, "a voluntaristic and dualistic approach, which analyses the emerging forms of capitalism as a synthesis of an ideal model and an alien legacy, fails to identify the indigenous roots and real foundation of the dynamic of the transition from a state socialist to a capitalist economy and so fails to grasp the process of transformation as a historically developing social reality [...] The liberal theorists of totalitarianism were taken completely by surprise when the apparently all-powerful soviet state disintegrated, not as a result of any liberal critique but under the weight of its own contradictions".

The tendency that Clarke cautioned against in 2006 – to characterise capitalism in Russia in terms of a hybrid of an "ideal model and an alien legacy" – has been revived in the current moment. Just over a year into Russia's war in Ukraine, most analysis of the war tends to emphasise political or ideological explanations at the expense of understanding the material interests that underlay its causes[2].

The Russian regime's imperialism, authoritarianism, corruption, and patriarchy are juxtaposed with Western liberal democracy, private property relations, universal human rights, and a non-negotiable commitment to the principle of sovereignty.

The Putin regime, particularly following the invasion of Ukraine, is presented as distinct from, and at times exceptional to, the "normal" and healthy workings of global capitalism. The stated reason for this differentiation often lies in Russia's particular transition to capitalism, which resulted in an irrational, hybrid or mixed capitalism, with political-ideological interests driving Russian imperialism. This has led many to even question if the current Russian regime serves the interests of capital at all. Focusing on the political-ideological factions in Russia risks portraying Russia as external to global capitalism, in a way reminiscent of the non-materialist teachings of the Gospel of John – how to be in the world but not of the world.

1 / This paper builds on collaborative work with Rhaysa Ruas, and, in particular, our comparative working paper, "Expanding Social Reproduction Theory: Multilinearity and Sub-Imperialism". I have greatly benefited from teaching All Shock No Therapy course in November 2022 at the Brooklyn Institute for Social Research, and I want to thank the students and second faculty, Rafael Khachaturian, for a valuable discussion. I am thankful to Brent Toye and Lina Nasr El Hag Ali for feedback on this draft and to comrades at LeftEast for rigorous comradely exchange during this year of the war.

2 / There have been several rigorous and honest debates. One example: the debate between Yudin and Magnum in the "Symposium on Capitalism and (Putin's) War" in Emancipations: A Journal of Critical Social Analysis 1(4) https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/emancipations/vol1/iss4/

In an effort to transcend the polarised debate between those who offer political-ideological explanations and those who offer material-economic ones, Volodymyr Ishchenko highlights how 'the political and ideological rationales for the invasion reflect the [Russian] ruling class's interests.' Instead of Putin's simple irrational obsession with domination, or national(ist) interests, he argues that since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the formation and reproduction of the Russian ruling class – "political capitalists" – has been tightly linked with the transformation of political office into a vehicle for private enrichment. Accordingly, this structure of accumulation, in part dependent on territorial expansion to sustain the rate of rent, originated in the process of primitive accumulation during the collapse of the Soviet Union, where the expropriation of the state became its very source.

Ishchenko's analysis captures the relationship between the political and the economic in a way that does not reproduce dichotomous ideas of Russia exceptionalism and the idea that it stands external to global capitalism, gesturing instead toward what Clarke termed "the weight of its own contradictions". In response to Ishchenko's call for demystifying the connection between the political and economic interests of the Russian ruling class through the lens of post-Soviet transformation, my intervention offers two additional points.

First, I caution against using hybridity or mixedness to explain "Russian capitalism" and the invasion of Ukraine, because it contains an implicit assumption about capitalism as it should be: a pure system. Here I offer a critical response to Ilya Matveev's call that we must account for Russia's particularity – the primacy of the (geo)political – on its own terms, rather than fitting into economistic Marxist preconceptions. I believe this necessitates revisiting what capitalism really is, its global development, and the inter-relation between the "liberal-democratic" world and post-Soviet Russia.

Applying the "mixed capitalism" concept to supposed deviants from liberal democratic states risks emptying the capitalist mode of production of its political and social content. It juxtaposes "rational" and "irrational" capitalism, thus reproducing the myth that capitalism can be free from racialised, gendered, and environmental violence. To address this, I draw on Social Reproduction Theory (SRT) and the literature on primitive accumulation in order to demonstrate the integral relationship between production and social reproduction in capitalism. These insights reveal that oppression and expropriation are not limited to hybrid cases, but are instead essential to the workings of capitalism in general.

Using this understanding of capitalism, second, I build on Ishchenko's analysis of the 1990s as a time of primitive accumulation, but I centre the restructuring of the relationship between production and social reproduction to trace how capitalism is concretised in the Russian case. I argue that the current heteronationalist ideological-political feature of the Putin regime, its militarisation and the war in Ukraine, often cited as proof of Russia's deviation from capitalism proper, is in fact a feature of its neoliberal regime of accumulation.

Specifically, I examine the close links between the financialisation of social reproduction and the militarisation of the Russian state, which is driven by dispossessive pronatalist social policy under Putin. Debt-based inclusion of working-class households through pronatalist social policy serves as a mechanism for targeted recruitment for military service.

The task of demystifying these intertwined dynamics of capitalist expropriation, oppression, and exploitation in the Russian case is not just a descriptive exercise. It advances our understanding of how capitalism operates in general. Without this task in mind, not only will we fail to comprehend the nature of the Putin regime as a product of global capitalism, but we will also fail to devise effective strategies for political opposition against it.

Of hybrids

Russia's economy is often characterised as hybrid, with labels such as crony, managed, dependent, patrimonial, authoritarian, or kleptocratic highlighting its distinction from the "normal" capitalism of post-industrial liberal democracies. These different qualifiers signify that something went wrong with the capitalism-equals-democracy equation, as promised by post-war modernisation theorists.

It is now widely acknowledged even in solid mainstream accounts like Aslund Anders's recent book *Russia's Crony Capitalism: The Path from Market Economy to Kleptocracy* (2019), that the 1990s transition laid the groundwork for Putin's statist-authoritarian turn, beginning in the mid-2000s and present-day Russian expansionism. The Russian regime's almost metaphysical thirst for political domination at home and abroad, then, is not only irrational, but also exceptional.

No country should invade its neighbour in the twenty-first century! This sentiment has become common sense to the point that in March 2022, roughly a week after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the US Department of Justice launched a task force dedicated to enforcing US sanctions against Russian capital named KleptoCapture. Calls by US progressives to seize all – including American – oligarchs' wealth and redistribute it to the people went unanswered, because, as CNN declared: "Russia's oligarchs are different from other billionaires." It is in this way that Russian capitalism is depicted as intrinsically corrupt and alien compared to "normal capitalism".

When critical researchers utilise the term hybridity or mixed regime, they rightly want to account for Russia's difference with liberal democratic capitalist states[3].

By contrasting Russian predatory capitalism, characterised by close political and personal ties to the state, with the supposedly rational private property relations of (usually Western) liberal democratic capitalist states, we risk reproducing an idea of capitalism stripped of oppression and expropriation, with "extra-economic" violence associated exclusively with historical moments or particularly backward regions..

To show how they represent integral ingredients of the capitalist system in all its historical and concrete manifestations, including in Russia, we should instead utilise a more comprehensive definition of capitalism offered by SRT and the literature on primitive accumulation.

The hybridity framework assumes the existence of two separate types of accumulation: advanced economic exploitation which, though subject to crises, is based on "free" workers and arms-length "soft" regulation, and a more archaic form of accumulation based on "extra-economic" violence and political "intervention".

Yet, Marx's critique of primitive accumulation questions the romantic assumption that capitalism can come in a "clean", "non-political" form. As political theorist and historian Ellen Meiksins Wood writes: "For Marx, the ultimate secret of capitalist production is a political one." Indeed, as Marxist Feminists have shown, productive and established accumulation under a legal form of contract between capital and "free" labour (free from subsistence) has always been accompanied by violent expropriations in the sphere of social reproduction, formulated in laws and public policies, and thereby facilitated by the state at home and abroad.

3 / Critically examining the ways in which political and economic processes in the '90s created a basis for the increased primacy of the political under Putin, Ilya Matveev argues that "instead of a rational western capitalism, a predatory "patrimonial capitalism" emerged, on insider control of enterprises' financial streams". Matveev, "Russia, Inc.", Open Democracy, 16 March 2016. https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/russia-inc/

The accumulation of capital necessitates the ongoing subordination of reproductive labour in households and communities through the regulation and discipline of workers' bodies and sexuality, aimed at reproducing labour power and this tends to take the form of the "traditional" heteronormative family structure.

The significance of social reproduction as theory, in Tithi Bhattacharya's words, is that it shows how social oppression related to gender, sexuality, and race – often relegated to "the margins of analysis or [understood] as add-ons to a deeper and more vital economic process" – are in fact "structurally relational to, and hence shaped by, capitalist production". As the Brazilian historian Virginia Fontes points out, it is a Western assumption that extra-economic violence is a rare moment of capital accumulation during crises. Indeed, if capitalism is global, then expropriation is prevalent not just at a particular moment in history or "outside" regimes of capitalist accumulation.

In short, the idea that post-Soviet Russia could have followed the trajectory from the welfare state model to neoliberalism akin to Western capitalist states, is flawed for two reasons. First, because a clean notion of capitalism is a myth. Second, the centre and periphery of global capitalism are interdependent parts of the same global capitalist system. The particular story of the transformation of the Soviet Union casts light on the nature of capitalism.

Normal capitalism

Much has been written about the formation of the capitalist state in Russia as we know it today, which emerged from the ruins of the Soviet political economy and the dynamics of its integration within global capitalism that fell into crisis in the late 1980s.

There is a crucial yet overlooked aspect to contemporary Russian capitalism: the restructuring of the relationship between production and social reproduction during this period. This was not the privatisation of the pre-capitalist/non-capitalist commons, but the reconfiguration of state ownership of the means of (re)production.

To put it crudely, in comparison to the Keynesian welfare states, the centralised system of surplus appropriation and redistribution in the Soviet Union was based on subordination of (re) production to the material needs of the state/ military apparatus. As both Simon Clarke and Tony Wood show, this was characterised by a serious contradiction: the state aimed to maximise the material surplus extracted from enterprises under its control, while the enterprises aimed to maximise the cost or the state resources at their disposal and conceal their potential productivity.

This was the case, in part, because the fundamental guarantees of (although inadequate) social citizenship – childcare, leisure, housing etc.– were fulfilled through the Soviet enterprise, in other words, in addition to meeting the production plan, the enterprise was responsible for the reproduction of its labour force. The significance is that wages were only one part of the value necessary to reproduce the Soviet worker, where public services, de- and non-commodified social goods which (however inadequately) subsidised the unpaid social reproductive labour in households and communities formed the other part, to a greater extent than in the Keynesian welfare states.

During the period of transformation in the 1990s, class relations between alienated and disempowered workers and Soviet enterprise managers and stronger institutional state infrastructure eased the implementation of the "shock therapy" that so devastated the post-Soviet Russian economy.

State-owned enterprises and the public sphere were transformed into private sources of income, while Soviet state institutions, legal resources, and apparatuses formed an infrastructural foundation for capital accumulation. For instance, with privatisation in 1992, enterprises lost state subsidies and were required to divest social reproduction functions like housing in order to focus on business.

As Ishchenko notes, Steven Solnick is correct when he states that theft of the state by Soviet officials meant more than theft of its resources. In terms of restructuring social reproduction, it meant social collapse. Economic insecurity resulted in dramatic decreases in life expectancy at birth and increases in pre-mature deaths. According to Goskomstat, the Russian GDP's decline was 60% steeper during the early 1990s than the United States' GDP decline during the Great Depression.

By the 2000s, the state's capacity to fulfil duties of the state such as pensions, healthcare, benefits – thanks to economic recovery after 1998 fuelled by oil profits – had recovered somewhat. This indicated a break with the explicitly neoliberal economic policy of the 1990s. As "insiders" or "political capitalists" were consolidated under Putin, the boundary between state and capital in Russia became increasingly blurred.

Social policy research has shown that state interventionism and pro-natalism have become central features of the regime in response to the chaos of shock therapy of the 1990s. Scholars such as Anna Tarasenko, Linda Cook, Ilya Matveev and Anastasia Novkunskaya, among others, have shown that monetisation of welfare benefits, decline in state spending, establishment of public-private partnerships in service delivery, and other austerity measures coincided with the legal institutionalisation of traditional values centred on the heterosexual family.

The narrative emphasising how the hybrid nature of the Russian state – neoliberal regulatory and statist interventionist – led it down the path to war in Ukraine, offers a fragmented (and misleading) explanation of reality. The problem is that the ideological and political features of the state are interpreted as exercised for purposes outside of capitalist accumulation – be it nationalism, patriarchy, racism, homophobia – conceived as separate systems of oppression from class.

Instead, I argue that the implementation of interventionist pronatalist social policies is key to the Putin regime's project, including the militarisation of the state through the war in Ukraine and maintaining neoliberal capitalism.

Social policy and citizenship in Putin's Russia

Following the logic of rent that Ishchenko describes, we are witnessing the reconfiguration of citizenship in Russia, attached to debt-based financial inclusion encouraged by the state through pronatalist social policy. This form of dispossession is an extension of post-Soviet neoliberal social policy couched in Soviet-era discourse of state protection of mothers and children. This speaks to the lingering belief that the state should be responsible for welfare provision and maintain an expanded public sector.

From the Maternity Capital benefit (2007), a pronatalist bank voucher intended for recent mothers-recipients and mostly used for mortgage down payments, to the more recent Order of the Mother-Heroine (2022), awarded to women who have given birth and raised ten or more children, this was introduced against the background of conscripted young men dying in Ukraine, to War Mortgages (2022) given to soldiers at low interest rates.

Russian social benefits schemes reflect the merging of finance and social policy against the continued impoverishment of the public sector, precarisation of labour, child poverty, and gendered violence. Yet, more than a process of continued neoliberal privatisation, Putin-era pronatalist social policy has become an intricate mechanism in which state benefits, as opposed to being a direct, state-provided form of social provisioning, are fed through circuits of financial capital for profit (in particular for Russian banks and construction companies) — expropriating public goods and working-class households.

Without the imposition of fiscal burdens that universal welfare provision or social citizenship would involve for the state, debt-based inclusion normalises reliance on credit to meet basic needs such as housing, created sense of social improvement through individual, often mother-targeted provision attached to Russian citizenship. Since the mid-2000s, there has been a clear trend of skyrocketing increases in household indebtedness, particularly through mortgage loans, coinciding with an increase in child poverty the impoverishment of multiple-child households and lone-mother/grandmother households.

The state promotes both the Maternity Capital benefit and War Mortgages programme for soldiers as the solutions to the housing crisis in Russia. Advertisements targeting impoverished regions show smiling Russian families who are grateful to their husbands, brothers, and sons for their service to the motherland and for the opportunity to secure a cheaper mortgage. Indeed, these programmes serve as mechanisms for recruiting working-class people, as military service provides an opportunity for dispossessed households to reproduce themselves.

In this way, social reproduction is increasingly privatised and its responsibility downloaded on to women through a kind of militarisation of motherhood. The family, literally, becomes a direct site of financial accumulation feeding the militarisation of the Russian state.

The institutionalisation of the "Russian traditional family" model is based on the criminalisation and exclusion from welfare provisions and full citizenship of LGBTQ+ people and migrant workers. Feminist theorist Jennifer Suchland's term "heteronationalism" helps to describe the construction of Russian nationalism embodied in pronatalist, protectionist and ostensibly developmentalist direction of state discourse that supports the neoliberal regime of accumulation.

In multiple interviews, officials like Elena Mizulina as Head of State Duma Committee on Children and Families in Russia, has explicitly linked the supposed traditional Russian value of having large families to the preservation of the nation against its internal and external enemies. Labour migrants from Central Asian countries are frequently depicted as sources of crime, public health risks, and drug trafficking. The racist policing of migrants occurs in both the sphere of production and social reproduction, as illustrated by the expressed anxiety over pregnant undocumented women utilising Russian public healthcare, and concerns regarding the children of undocumented migrants in Moscow's state-subsidised public pre-schools/kindergartens.

It is not coincidental that, during the first year of Maternity Capital benefit, on March 26, 2008, Putin's United Russia introduced an annual holiday called the "Day of Family, Love and Fidelity".

It is also not coincidental that while the Russian troops engage in extraction and land grabbing in the mineral-rich lands of Southern and Eastern Ukraine, the Russian state passes legislation expanding the 2013 law on prohibition on the spread of "gay propaganda" among minors now to apply to all ages. Just as labour and socialist organisers are incarcerated in Russia.

Contrary to Western depictions of Russia's otherness or hybridity, as Suchland explains: "Political homophobia and heteronationalism are not just measures of illiberalism in Russia, but symptoms of a post-Soviet imperial project that is not opposed to Eurocentrism but entangled with it."

Yet, if the political is also economic, then Russian heteronationalism's entanglement with Eurocentrism also implies an entanglement with global capitalism.

Russian capitalism is political, and is as normal as global capitalism itself -- which produced it.

ABOUT ALAMEDA

A RESPONSE TO A CATASTROPHIC PREDICAMENT

By Juliano Fiori

At a time in which catastrophe dominates our collective political imagination, Alameda identifies the eclipse of modern utopias as a strategic problem, rather than the consequence of a conclusive historical resolution.

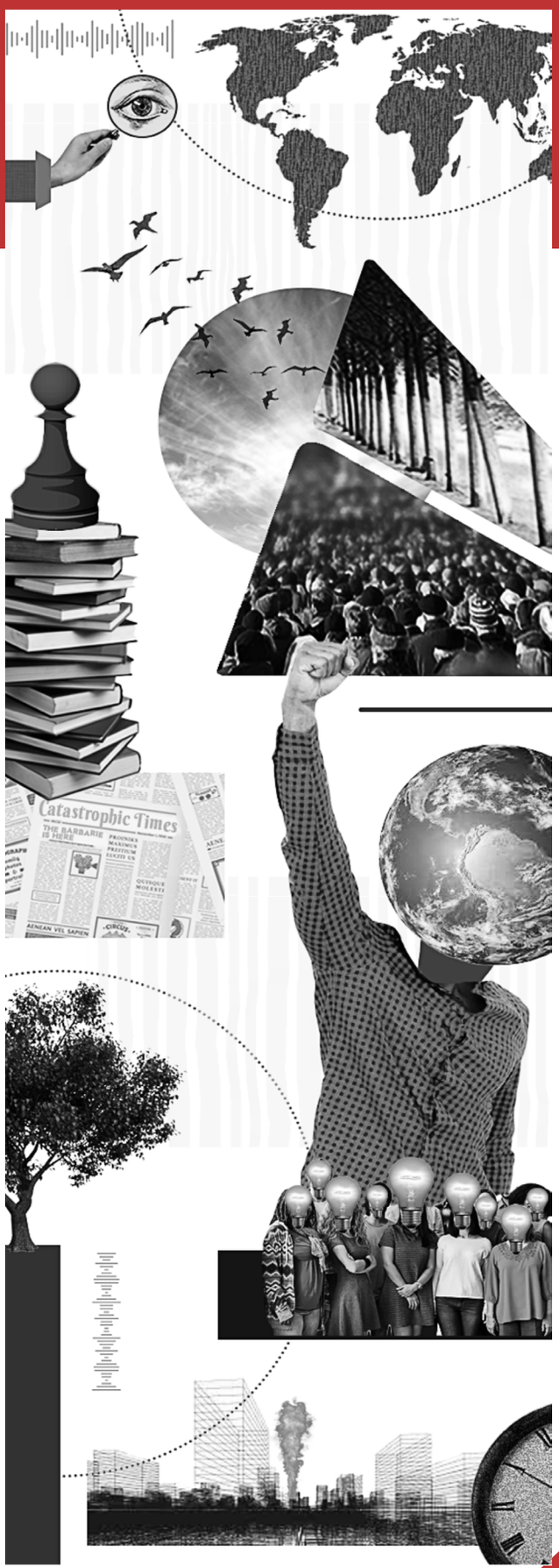
The increasingly frequent recurrence of crisis has transformed politics from a dispute for the future into an exercise in management of the present. The urgent demand to act in response to crisis – to stabilise, to restore order – obscures its structural causes. And yet, the apparent ubiquity of crisis produces a sense that there loom ever larger catastrophes more devastating, more totalising, with potentially irreversible effects.

Today, ecological collapse, nuclear war, and world-economic disintegration appear as abstract, but insurmountable, threats on the horizon, even as their concrete effects already proliferate in the present. They contribute to generalised anxiety, as well as melancholia for past ideals. And if these affective conditions can mobilise political action, they can also nonetheless become instrumental to the naturalisation of a voracious – indeed, autophagic – regime of accumulation that now expedites the realisation of catastrophic threats.

These threats are not new, of course. But a decade-and-a-half of disorganised rebellion against the normal order of things, following the financial crisis of 2007-2008, has put paid to illusions of a sustainable social pact that might yet rescue progress from the civilisational collapse augured by disenchanted intellectuals more than a century ago. Through the turbulence, the gig economy was expanded, further undermining the modern formalities of work. In turn, the accelerated destruction of living labour – the source of value – has compelled an even more frenzied and perilous push for profits.

A new common sense now prevails, according to which there is not enough capitalism to go around. A politics of spoliation, enabled by the state's capture by racketeers, is complemented by the widespread assumption of a duty to hustle – an entrepreneurialism of the self, whose most brutish manifestations can be seen along frontiers of accumulation, such as the Amazon, where, still, the natural world and its designated guardians resist.

** Juliano Fiori is Director at Alameda*



It is this moment – in which a large portion of the human population has not only given up on the future, but has become set on rushing to *the end* – that confirms entry into a time of catastrophe. But this moment also reluctantly offers signs of hope, not so much in the bastions of civility and order, but amidst the debris of social institutions hard-won through struggle from below: public health and education, rights and democracy.

Here, organised defiance is still suggestive of an alternative world waiting to be born with the eruption of crisis. Its political limitations, however, are symptomatic of a predicament configured by this new time: already serving as an impasse, catastrophe defines strategy as redundant, even though strategy is now imperative to survival in *this world*.

If catastrophe does indeed turn out to be a definitive impasse, the postponement of its consummation will depend on preparations for a new world.

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STRATEGIC RESEARCH

FOR CATASTROPHIC TIMES


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