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## Reply to Comments

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I am grateful to all commentators for the opportunity to expand on several important points. I will try to summarize them by putting forward five propositions, addressing the issues from the origins of the current condition in Russia to the trajectory of its development and possible strategies and outlooks for the future.

1. In Russia, neoliberalism won over democracy under Putin. After the fall of the Soviet Union, theorists of modernization were certain that liberal democracy was the only game left in town, and therefore to be implemented in Russia. However, the uneasiness of the alliance between democracy and liberalism was never a concern. It was assumed that one of them automatically entails another, and for a long period market reforms and democratization were literally used as synonyms.

As a result, the liberal governments of the early 1990s strongly prioritized economic reforms following the neoliberal templates. Despite the initial enthusiasm about political participation after the 1991 revolution, very little attention was paid to developing the institutions of self-government. Gradually, the neoliberal intellectuals grew increasingly resentful to popular rule: the first elections brought disappointing outcomes to the liberal parties, as the masses protested by voting for the extreme right-wing parties like the Communist Party and the Liberal-Democratic Party. After Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's LDPR surprisingly won the first Russian parliamentary elections in 1993, the liberal philosopher Yuri Karyakin famously exclaimed "Russia, you lost your f\*\*g mind", signaling a deep disenchantment with democracy among the Russian liberals.

In this emerging conflict between democracy and liberalism, Boris Yeltsin was ambiguous: while promoting market reforms, he consistently declined to introduce censorship in spite of demands from the liberals, deliberately protected political plurality and opposition, and underscored the value of federalism. With Putin, those restraints ended. Putin learned to navigate the free market economy in Saint-Petersburg of the 1990s (as Artemy rightly points out, his gangster background and close friendships with the heads of criminal gangs are more consequential than his KGB years) and became its staunch defender after his ascendance to the presidency. At the same time, he saw self-government and pluralism as a potential source of chaos and a hindrance to the functioning of the free market, which resulted in the removal of the democratic elements in the system. The economic neoliberals like Elvira Nabiullina or Sergei Kirienko retained and solidified their status within

Putin's regime, while political liberals like Boris Nemtsov who were not ready to give up on democracy were kicked out of the system, persecuted, and destroyed.

To answer Albena's question, radical neoliberalism took off in Russia in the 2000s<sup>1</sup>. It brought about the rise of true oligarchy: according to the *Forbes* ratings, Russia had 112 billionaires before the war, and remains one of the global leaders with 78 billionaires despite the war. The lists of Russian billionaires consist chiefly of two groups: the oligarchs from the nineties who grew much richer under Putin (like Abramovich, Potanin, Deripaska, or Fridman) and Putin's close friends who got their fortunes through their proximity to him (like Timchenko, Rotenberg, Miller, or Kovalchuk).

More importantly, however, the logic of *homo oeconomicus* got fully entrenched in Russia in the 2000s. While there is certainly a correlation between Putin's legitimacy and the rise of consumption opportunities for the majority of Russians, it takes a legitimization turn to make people value material well-being only and give up completely on political freedom, justice, or equality. The installation of a neoliberal subjectivity was a prerequisite for that.

The Bonapartist, or plebiscitarian, regime described by Artemy was a natural outcome of popular passivity and cynicism. Paul Passavant rightly points out that firm belief in brute force creates a vacuum of legitimacy. However, Bonapartism partly compensates for it by introducing a monarchical presidency, the only political institution enjoying legitimacy. Relying on the numbers gained through plebiscites, the president threatens the elites, the bureaucracy and the dissociated masses with the power of the people supposedly accumulated behind him. In a society with broken solidarity, there is no way to verify these claims.

2. With the outbreak of the war, the Russian political regime turned fascist but failed to create a fascist society. The radical imposition of deep egotism and individualism inevitably contributes to the rise of resentful masses susceptible to a fascist takeover, as Paul Apostolidis rightly reminds us. The Russian political regime in 2022

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<sup>1</sup> As Elisabeth Schimpfössl correctly points out, "while Russianists usually regard the 1990s as the peak of neoliberal policies, from a comparative perspective [the 2000s were] outstanding in neoliberal ambition". See: E. Schimpfössl. *Rich Russians: From Oligarchs to Bourgeoisie*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. P. 26.

underwent a fascist turn<sup>2</sup>, building a strong identity between the leader, the state, and the people. This identity is performed through militarization, the rise of violence both domestically and outwards, and the promotion of a fascist aesthetic. The war is presented as a self-assertion of the nation resolved to retake dominance through struggle.

The fascist regime is not necessarily accompanied by a fascist society. Contrary to what David Strecker suggests, there is very little evidence of the rising support for Putin after the invasion. Opinion polls are not only misleading but deliberately orchestrated as a weapon by the Kremlin<sup>3</sup>, while all other studies suggest that what is going on can instead be described as “defensive consolidation”, to borrow the term invented by Jeremy Morris<sup>4</sup>.

The discrepancy between the new condition of the regime and the congealed society implies that there may be limits for mobilization. The Kremlin is wary of rapidly repoliticizing society after the decades of forced depoliticization. On the other hand, the inherent anarchist tendencies within Russian society tend to wreck some of the mobilization strategies. In other words, indifference prevails over bloodthirstiness in Russia at this point. However, the aggressive groups that followed the fascist turn are vocal enough to dominate the agenda and instill fear within society.

3. Present-day Russia is an extreme case of neoliberalism representing a dangerous model for societies on a similar trajectory. Even if, as Artemy Magun suggests, the Russian state produces a negation of Western capitalism, it does so through

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<sup>2</sup> Ilya Budraitskis. *Putinism: A New Form of Fascism?* Spectre. 2022. Iss. 6.

<sup>3</sup> See: Greg Yudin. *Do Russians Support Putin?* *Journal of Democracy*. 2022. 33 (3): 31-37

<sup>4</sup> Jeremy Morris. *Russians in Wartime and Defensive Consolidation.* *Current History*. 2022. 121 (837): 258-263.

radically affirming the neoliberal principle as Russian leadership understands it<sup>5</sup>. American foreign policy is perceived as the brute imposition of force, with rules being merely a hypocritical disguise for violence. And the Russian response to it is not to challenge the principle but to insist forcefully: *We want to do the same. We want to kill, brutalize, rape, and subjugate just like you Americans do, because who are you to be the only ones to enjoy this right of force?* In this feeling of deep resentment, there is indeed a dangerous convergence between Vladimir Putin and large groups of the Russian population, which contains a potential for popular passivity to turn into an open aggression.

While I am no expert in post-Soviet countries (and I even doubt this label is analytically useful), I share Albena's concern that Russian-style neoliberal capitalism is a dangerous template for the European societies. If one adopts the language of the "varieties of capitalism" literature, Russia has set out on the Anglo-Saxon path, rather than a Nordic/Japanese one. As many commentators have rightly pointed out, what keeps capitalism from sliding into a cutthroat competition driven by the winner-takes-all mentality are not human rights but basic solidarity and safety nets developed in the society. Inasmuch as those balances are eroding in Europe, Russia becomes a tempting model for the entrepreneurs. It is no coincidence that European big capital is reluctant to leave Russia after the outbreak of the war. At the same time, the "party of resentment" has many followers far beyond Russia: the experience of humiliation in neoliberal settings makes for nihilist, vengeful, and cynical attitudes to politics, which explains the limited but still visible popularity of Putin in both the Global South and Global North.

4. Russia is now undergoing a massive transformation, which will be shaped by social-democratic demands. The need for solidarity, mutual support, and self-government is in fact reflected within Russian society, particularly among the younger generations and the less affluent. Multiple studies, including my own,

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<sup>5</sup> "The turn from the liberalist to the total-authoritarian state occurs within the framework of a single social order. With regard to the unity of this economic base, we can say it is liberalism that 'produces' the total authoritarian state out of itself, as its own consummation at a more advanced stage of development. The total-authoritarian state brings with it the organization and theory of society that correspond to the monopolistic stage of capitalism." (Herbert Marcuse, "The Struggle Against Liberalism in the Totalitarian View of the State". In: *Negations. Essays in Critical Theory*. London: MayFly Books. P. 13.)

demonstrate that the Russian youth are not only significantly less supportive of military aggression, but also cherish the hope for a more equal country<sup>6</sup>. Enzo makes a crucial point about a possible change in Russia, which can only be attained by activating popular power. The findings provide some grounds for optimism: there is, indeed, a tangible demand for that in Russia. While there is a long way from weakly articulated preferences to a collective action, a strong preference for a Scandinavian type of society within Russia indicates the disaffection with aggressive capitalism. It is also a sign of demand for popular sovereignty, rather than national sovereignty, an alternative that David Strecker wisely emphasizes for the Ukrainian case.

This war is in many ways a war to prevent these dreams from turning into political projects, a war waged by the past aiming to suffocate the future in its cradle. The eventual military defeat of Putin's aggressive regime will likely result in a deep disappointment with the mode of social organization and a search for a different model. While this search will be most significantly shaped by specific outcomes on the battlefield, it will still present an opportunity. This will be an opportunity not be squandered with another round of pleas for human rights, the free market, and negative liberty.

5. Major wars cannot be ignored, and the international Left needs to be proactive to shape them and dictate their outcomes. Wars are radical manifestation of objective contradictions that cannot be contained. As these contradictions accumulate in contemporary neoliberal capitalism, wars are likely to become an inevitable development. Recently, the Left has too often taken the “a plague on both your houses” stance, searching for moral purity and running the risk of becoming politically irrelevant. Taking sides in imperial wars is certainly not an option; however, “imperial” is a framing that shouldn't be taken for granted. Looking into the contradictions at the origin of these wars can help reframe them, much in the way Lenin called for turning imperial wars into civil wars and eliminating the real contradictions.

The current war is not an outcome of some essential and inescapable animosity between two empires, as conservative thinking suggests. The real contradiction behind this war is the one inherent in Russian neoliberal capitalism that

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<sup>6</sup> See: Greg Yudin et al. *How the New Generation Envisions the Future: Inequality and Mobility*. A Report for Boris Nemtsov Foundation for Freedom, 2019.

projects the zero-sum logic onto international politics and perceives the land not conquered as a threat. Rather than ignoring this contradiction, the task for the Left is to reframe this war and contribute to defeating the logic of unchained capital.

Under current circumstances, the pressure to stop the war has a decent chance of stripping Ukraine of the means to resist aggression. What the calls for peace are yet to demonstrate is how they are going to stop Vladimir Putin.

I express my deep gratitude to the members of the Radical Critical Theory Circle for their warm support in these difficult times and for making me feel that radical thinking defeats darkness.