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Comments to Magun's and Yudin's papers, by Paul Apostolidis, Albenaz Azmanova, Darin Barney, Gal Kirn, Enzo Rossi, Paul Passavant, David Strecker

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**Comments to Magun's and Yudin's papers, by Paul Apostolidis, Alben
Azmanova, Darin Barney, Gal Kirn, Enzo Rossi, Paul Passavant, David Strecker**

Keywords

Ukraine, Russia, war, capitalism

Paul Apostolidis¹

I find the argument overall convincing, but wonder if Yudin might clarify: is he arguing that the spread of neoliberal subjectivity in Russia made people indifferent to the war; or gloomy and fatalistic, thus seeing war as inevitable; OR aggressive in their own inclinations (not just those of Putin) and hence actually desirous of bloodshed and martial competition?

First, I am interested in the connection Magun draws between liberal and nationalist interests which, in his analysis, enables a neo-fascist formation to coalesce. To what degree might a historical reexamination of liberal-capitalist affiliations with fascist movements in Europe shed further light on the character of this commonly denied but historically consequential inclination of liberalism toward fascism, at least under certain circumstances? Where else besides Russia, today, do we see similar kinds of mutual approximations between liberal and fascist politics, and what should we make of any correspondences that exist between such phenomena and what has been happening in Russia since the 1990s?

Second, I wonder if Magun would be willing to elaborate on his gestural invocation of 'primitive accumulation.' How might a rigorous understanding and application of this concept from Marx (and/or from more recent writers) shed further critical light on the dynamics of the transition to full-fledged capitalism in Russia since the 1990s? Theorists from various perspectives (Marxist-feminists such as Silvia Federici; Marxist historical critics of empire such as Ulas Ince; Marxist indigenous theorists such as Glen Coulthard) have construed 'primitive accumulation' specifically with reference to the destruction of people's social-reproductive capacities and the subjection of social-reproductive resources (spatial, temporal, physical) to market dynamics. What changes in social reproduction for people in Russia might a critique of the post-1990 transition in terms of primitive accumulation thus bring to light?

¹ Paul Apostolidis is Professor of Political Science at the LSE.

Enzo Rossi²

The insightful essays by Artemy Magun and Greg Yudin share a political economy lens: they both explore the role the Russian transition to capitalism played in the build-up to the invasion of Ukraine, and its likely effects on what is to come. More specifically, a common thread in both arguments points toward a link between the extreme neoliberal character of turn-of-the-century Russian capitalism and Putin's aggressive international posture as well as his ostensible disposition to see politics—domestic and international—as an existential struggle. There are two mutually supportive themes woven together here: a familiar narrative about the atomisation and fostering of ruthless competition characteristic of sink-or-swim neoliberalism, and the specifically Russian story of the literally gangster-driven transformation of the Soviet state apparatus into a capitalist oligarchy. I do not wish to take issue with this reconstruction's value as an explanatory hypothesis, but rather to build on it. So in what follows I will sketch a few further tentative hypotheses compatible with the general picture presented by Magun and Yudin.

First, both essays touch on how Russian capitalism quickly became distinctively brutal and unhinged, despite the legacy of Soviet social provisions. Magun tells us that this is because there were no effective countervailing forces to capitalist interests, and that advocates for marketisation set store in politically toothless “moralists ... preaching ‘human rights’”. This suggests several related hypotheses:

- Counterweights to capitalist power do not come from advocacy for human rights or even property rights or the rule of law, or any other moral considerations. Rather, they come from building alternative power structures, such as trade unions and other democratic movements of a genuinely grassroots variety. These alternative power structures seem to be what made the difference in Western societies, rather than the official ideologies of representative democracy and human rights.

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- Consequently, the low resilience of Soviet welfare USSR confirms that there was precious little grassroots people power there: that society was not particularly democratic or even egalitarian—what we have witnessed since 1989 is not the creation of an oligarchy from a different type of society, but a partial change of the guard in the oligarchy, and a marked change in the ways in which that oligarchy could pursue its interests. This may well contribute to a long-term indictment of vanguardist revolutionary practice.
- A corollary to the analysis of contemporary Russian capitalism as a neoliberal oligarchy is that it appears that capitalism is compatible with weak property rights. Or, at the very least, it seems that quasi-feudal structures where the state apparatus can bestow entitlements to large amounts of productive capital upon individuals can be relatively well-integrated in the global capitalist economy (note how even the current sanctions against Russia have limited reach, and are limited to the United States and its closest allies).
- But different types of oligarchy come with far-reaching implications. The considerations above also reinforce the hypothesis that, as has been widely pointed out before, the decline of social protections in the West since 1989/1992 can partly be attributed to the disintegration of an actually-existing alternative social system: it is as if the Soviet masses unwittingly contributed with their unfreedom to the material well-being of their Western counterparts.

Those considerations about domestic policy across the former Iron Curtain may also suggest some speculative hypotheses about the international arena:

- Insofar as we have seen how abstract appeals to moral commitments such as human rights have little political bite, the common Western response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in terms of a non-negotiable commitment to the principle of sovereignty seems to either mask the actual considerations at play, or at the very least miss them.
- If Russia's geopolitical posture is a product of its internal configuration, then a mere palace coup will not alter it (this also resonates with the earlier considerations on vanguardism). It would seem that threats to peace in Eastern

Europe may be best combated by weakening the oligarchic structure of Russian capitalism and developing genuine grassroots forms of people power. Whether and how that may be feasible is the most urgent question, and one that falls beyond the scope of these comments.

David Strecker³

I would like to preface my remarks by highlighting that I am no expert on Russia, Putin, or Ukraine, and only touch on international relations and international political economy every once in a while in my own work. Yet, as a sociologist and political scientist doing work in social and political theory and philosophy, neither am I fully unacquainted with the relevant issues. And of course, I am closely following news, reports and some academic work on the war Putin's Russia is waging on Ukraine.

This being said, both Artemy Magun's 'Capitalism and the Post-Socialist Road to Hell' as well as Greg Yudin's 'The Neoliberal Roots of Putin's War' offer thought-provoking analyses of the economic factors relevant to explaining the war, and I have learned from both. While Artemy's Marxian perspective on Russia as a (Neo-)Bonapartist regime and Greg's Foucault-enhanced Marxist perspective on neoliberalism as the decisive explanatory factor are illuminating, both do appear to require further elaboration of their central concepts and seem to underestimate the importance and (at least partial) autonomy of further factors which seem to have caused and to be shaping the current situation. The following is not in any way intended to downplay the relevance of economic factors in general and capitalism in particular in explaining the war but instead meant to highlight further general factors which are in play here and which all permeate each other within the specific sociohistoric context in ways which are not fully captured by the two pieces. These further factors are made apparent by the well-established model of society and for explaining societal integration and social development (elaborated in different variations, e.g., by Offe, Habermas, and others) in relating the three dimensions of interests (material/economy), coercion (state) and solidarity (culture/legitimation/democracy). With regard to the issue at hand, this model draws attention to how

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economic grounds of the war connect with geopolitical aspirations (a conception of the Russian state based on an ideological view of the world as divided among three imperial powers) and a perception of democratic culture emerging across the border as an existential threat to the Putinist system.

Yet, before turning to the issues of geopolitics and democracy, let me set out by addressing three aspects of Magun's explanation of how capitalism is at the root of Russia's current bellicose imperialism. While it is worth stressing that "Putin's Russia" is "far from returning to the Soviet model" and instead "actually a monstrous form of capitalism" (p. 1), the decisive question, first, appears to be what kind of capitalism ("developing in unfortunate circumstances of postcommunism") this is. The papers defines capitalism by descriptively listing features usually associated with capitalist economy (p. 3: wage labor, private ownership of the means of production, free market). But surprisingly, modern capitalism's main analytical aspect is neglected, i.e., that it is a system of the self-valorization of value (M-C-M'). Modern capitalism requires ongoing investment for the creation of profit. As far as I can tell, Russia's economic model does not match this type of capitalism. According to my limited knowledge of the Russian economy, it is primarily based not on entrepreneurial growth and rising wages allowing for increased consumption but instead on resource extraction, particularly (and significantly more important than other natural resources like metals which comprise the next most important goods to the Russian economy) energy (most notably oil and gas). Russia's rent economy is capitalist but not in the sense of 'rational' modern capitalism (Marx, Weber, etc). While the climate crisis is only another reason to hold that modern capitalism is not sustainable in the long run, rent economies are not sustainable in a more dramatic sense. They require the continuous acquisition of further resources (like Ukraine's extensive agrarian assets, there may be an analogy here to the expansionism of National Socialist Germany). An economic explanation of the war would thus need to highlight not only capitalism but Russia's specific type of capitalism.

Further, it is at best unclear whether the distinctiveness of capitalism in Russia can be understood in terms of primitive accumulation (p. 3). In Marx, primitive accumulation describes the process of amassing sufficient value to allow for accumulation (the self-valorization of value, i.e., continuous investment) to kick off.

His main examples are the violent extraction of foreign resources (South American silver, exploitation of slave labour in the 'New World') and expropriation of domestic resources (by forcibly transforming collective into private ownership). This is very different from the situation of postcommunist Russia where the means of industrialized resource extraction and networks of transnational trade already existed. Moreover, state ownership of the means of production was not in any way equivalent to communal control of the commons. The 1990s (Magun's focus in this regard) marked the transfer of economic power from a (kleptocratic) dictatorial political elite to an emerging private elite of oligarchs. The belief that "economic gains are always made by force" (p. 7 in Yudin's respective considerations) can possibly be elucidated in terms of something like 'permanent primitive accumulation'. But this would require a thorough reconceptualization of what in Marx was coined to answer the question of how premodern society could provide the conditions for capital accumulation to kick-off. In this sense, the manifest violence of primitive accumulation brings capitalism about but is subsequently replaced by actual capitalism (where violence is veiled). Neo-Luxemburgian reconceptualizations of 'primitive accumulation' (e.g., as 'Landnahme' by Klaus Doerre) may be helpful in making sense of Russian capitalism in terms of primitive accumulation. But this would need to be demonstrated. Likewise, with regard to understanding capitalism, the implications of placing a theory of imperialism at the core of accumulation would need to be spelled out.

Magun's central claim, finally, concerns the characterization of contemporary Russian politics as Bonapartism. The general idea that Putin's rise to, consolidation and expansion of power feeds on the weakness of Russian interest groups who are unable to seize power and rule themselves is illuminating. But is the main group in question here really a rising economic class which, not yet sufficiently developed to dominate politically, found their economic interests best served by supporting an autocrat? Are "the new ultra-rich class as well as the newly emerged middle class of the urban professionals" (p. 4) equivalent to Marx's interpretation of the bourgeoisie in mid-19th century France? The oligarchs (and their families) as well as service sector professionals active in the knowledge industry are quite different from the ascending economic class at the center of classic capitalism. As far as I am aware, it remains disputed how far economic growth can rest on service provision and

knowledge production instead of the production of material goods. And if, as mentioned above, the Russian economic model does not correspond to modern, 'rational' capitalism but is instead based on rent, then the the social group whose support is decisive for political power would not even be a (contemporary) bourgeoisie. A (Neo-)Bonapartist analysis would first and foremost require an analysis of the relevant interest groups in current Russia similar to Marx's analysis in the '18th Brumaire' and 'Class Struggles in France'. I suspect that such an analysis may uncover some similarities between the conservatism of small land-owning farmers ('Parzellenbauern') and Russian rural populations as well as (and here partly overlapping) between the poor in need of some kind of existential security and Marx's lumpenproletariat. But instead of a bourgeoisie, the decisive group a Russian Napoleon would need to bind is the capitalist aristocracy. And this appears to be just what happened in Russia, a process eased by the fact that postcommunist transition enabled political leadership to actually create the oligarchs by, more or less, gifting them state property. Interestingly, once the oligarchs appeared to get too powerful and developed an interest in acquiring political power, as far as I am aware, their position within the *siloviki* was weakened by way of political intervention while the administrative and military elites in turn gained influence. In any event, understanding Putinist Neo-Bonapartism requires an analysis of these diverse groups and their relative standing.

The relative rise of non-economic elites within the *siloviki*, moreover, highlights other than economic factors relevant to explaining the current situation of Neo-Bonapartist Russia. This is where I return to the aspects of state and culture as mentioned at the outset of my comment. While Magun's analysis manifestly refers to Marxian Bonapartism, it is even more reminiscent of Critical Theory's portrayal of late capitalism, i.e. capitalism which due to its inherent crises and the process of capital concentration had brought about the interpenetration of economy and state, as structurally fascistoid. The "Russian institution of 'bandits' and 'groupirovkas'" resembles Horkheimer's concept of 'rackets', and Adorno's concept of the 'totally administered world' resonates in the belittling of "popular-vote 'democracy'" (put in quotation marks and, even its "idea", indiscriminately claimed to facilitate nationalism), the sweeping critique of human rights as a functional element within the atomized capitalist system, and a totalizing integration of the controlled masses (p.

6). But does the power of state elites (in administration and the military) within former state socialist societies not rest on grounds independent of, or at least not reducible to, economic (let alone capitalist) foundations? Is it plausible to reduce a geopolitical vision of Russian Eurasia as one of three imperial powers among whom the world is divided to economic interests (whether the Eurasian Empire had been imagined within the borders of the former USSR or even reaching all the way to the Atlantic, which may have been considered a possibility if a return of Trump to power would have put the latter's threat of the USA leaving NATO on the table again)? While such geopolitical visions should never only be taken at face-value, it seems equally implausible not to take them at face-value at all. Moreover, such visions are themselves influenced by a third factor shaping society, namely culture. On the basis of my limited knowledge of the situation, I suspect that illiberal traditions enhanced by the proliferation of a wide array of ultra-nationalist forces under the conditions of existential insecurity in postcommunist Russia, previously perpetuated in different form under Soviet rule, and possibly even reaching back further to the Tsarist past, have shaped dispositions (via intra- and extra-familial socialization as well as education programs) which are functional to stabilizing the current system. It would seem dubious to explain these traditions primarily in terms of economic conditions.

Magun does in fact mention factors shaping society which balance capitalist imperatives. Yet, again, some further conceptual elucidation would be helpful. Would it not be necessary to distinguish clearly between the idea of socialism and the 20th century dictatorships of the state socialist bloc (p. 6)? And how convincing is it to characterize the social democratic policies and institutions in the West, at least some of which having emerged as functional to the reproduction of capitalism and some to uphold authoritarian rule, as socialist forces counterbalancing capitalism? In this context a three-part model of democracy, the state, and capitalism - similar to the framework for analyzing society I referred to at the beginning of my comment - is mentioned. Instead of asking which part "can be taken as the actual essence or a substrate of the society" (p. 1), I would assume that there is a much less fixed relation between these three and further that within each part ideas and interests are in conflict. Somewhat stable figurations do emerge. Yet understanding these requires attentiveness to the potentially latent conflicts and to the architecture of the whole configuration (which obviously is further complicated by the need to also relate

different layers of local, regional, global dimensions and by the fact that these apply differently to the three parts of the model). In this sense, economic institutions may incorporate a wide range of regulations which appear to be alien to capitalist economy but the whole configuration may nonetheless constitute a capitalist society, depending on the specificities of economic structures and, most importantly, on how they are related (e.g., as functionalizing or functionalized) to democratic control and the use of state power.

Yudin's discussion, in addition to offering some illuminating data (not least of the effectiveness of sanctions and the development of political trust which surprisingly, however, neglects the widely reported findings on an increase in support for Putin after Russia attacked Ukraine), puts more emphasis on the relation of different aspects of the social and society. Further, it begins by arguing against the widespread delusion that the decision for the war results from irrationality. However economic, (geo)political, and cultural reasons figure in the decision-making, the expectation of Russia defeating the Ukraine quickly was not only Putin's but widely shared in the West (and explicitly expressed, for example, by leading German politicians in arguing why there was no point in supporting Ukraine militarily). Most importantly, Yudin amends an economic explanation of the war by a Foucauldian notion of neoliberalism to argue how a culture and a population with dispositions (of distrust, depoliticization, atomization, consumer materialism, social-Darwinism) conducive to hyper-competitive capitalism eventually leading to war were created (similar to the argument Weber had already put forth with regard to the creation of capitalist subjects in order to fill in the explanatory gap in Marx on the 'take-off' of capitalism). Yet, while I am not always clear on some considerations presented by Yudin and on how they match (e.g. neoliberalism and war, or its economic causes and a Hobbesian world-view, or why neoliberal depoliticization "logically" causes anti-pluralism), overall the argument again appears to underemphasize non-economic factors, and also to require further elucidation of central concepts.

The non-economic factor which I suspect to be central to an explanation of Russia's attack is the danger posed by Ukraine to the Putinist conception of Russian sovereignty. But this danger was not primarily military (in how far would the, at the time by the way rather unrealistic scenario, of a NATO expansion to the Russian border have constituted an actual military threat?). The most important issue here

rather seems to be one of political culture: a democratic, liberal society developing (with huge deficiencies, obviously, but quite quickly) at the doorstep. Having a border zone (instead of a clear-cut border) like classical empires did would not only provide for the economic benefits of a tributary region but, arguably at least as important, a buffer zone of authoritarian control and social insecurity. In this regard, imperial expansion embodies a rationality that goes beyond economic interests as well as geopolitical aspirations (the perceived humiliation of the breakdown of the USSR and the possibly even broader vision of a Russian Eurasia unlikely only being a function of economic motives). More specifically, Yudin's insightful perspective of weighing the consequences of inaction highlights the danger of a dispersion of liberal political culture and aspirations for democratic reforms beyond the border (a much more likely scenario than a military transgression of the border toward the east). This is what the Putin regime could reasonably consider a "mortal threat" (p. 6).

In this context some discussion of the concept of sovereignty would be helpful. I wonder whether "Putin's Hobbesian view of the world" might be understood too narrowly as state sovereignty and thus with a focus on military and economic aspects of the regime's power. The issue reappears in the discussion of the strategic perspective proposed by Yudin: supporting Ukraine's sovereignty as a "logically [!] necessary stage of emancipation" (p. 9) and "only [!] possible path to Russia's own liberation [...] and its transformation into a progressive society that would cherish the real achievements of the Socialist revolution [?]" (p. 9). Which kind of sovereignty is to be supported here? National state sovereignty? Or popular democratic sovereignty? Leaving aside the dubious linearity of the Marxian conception of historical development, both notions of sovereignty come with different implications. There is ample evidence for the destructive effects of nationalism and (organized) violence on political culture (e.g. current instances of increasing Russophobia) and the prospects for democratic reform. Emphasis on national sovereignty (as can be witnessed, for example, with the Eastern European EU member states) is a hindrance to building institutions of (transnational) solidarity. And traumatic experiences of war tend to last for generations.

None of this is meant to claim that there is a better alternative than supporting Ukraine's defense also by military means (which, as Yudin rightly highlights, can't be devalued by whataboutisms which, however, are not exclusive to the left but

arguably even more pronounced on the right). It does, however, imply that thinking in a sequential framework of state sovereignty first and democratic sovereignty only thereafter is flawed. Instead, all measures supporting Ukraine's state sovereignty would already have to be shaped by the perspective of democratic sovereignty, i.e., by taking into account their consequences for the prospects of a liberal civil society (and education, media, solidarity) as the foundation of democratic integration. In this sense, supporting emancipation does imply supporting Ukraine, yet supporting Ukraine does not mean uncritically supporting the Ukrainian state but, first and foremost, the "oppressed" (p. 8). These include those who choose to resist imperial aggression (and whose perspective, contrary to p. 8, is central to Western proclamations) but also those who by illiberal measures are prevented from fleeing a war zone as well as those who are forced to become Russian casualties (not mentioned on p. 10). All of this does not boil down to resisting neoliberalism (even if, contrary to my argument, the Putin regime would in fact be neoliberal primarily, such a claim would be even less convincing with regard to rising forces like Prigozhin). Moreover, delineating a progressive outlook from a critical perspective primarily means pointing out the paradoxes, unintended consequences, and problems resulting from strategies deemed progressive. Arguably, this is a defining aspect of critical theory.

Paul Passavant⁴

Both papers describe a depoliticization of Russian society, and in Yudin's paper, this internal depoliticization is accompanied by an intensification of the political in terms of Russia's external relations. Is there a risk that such an intensified external politicization might "boomerang" and return as an emergent and intensely politicized set of relations domestically in Russia?

Relatedly: As described by Yudin's and Magun's insightful papers, the erosion or decimation of potential mediating institutions in Russia as Putin solidified his grip on political power likewise erodes a potential institutional basis for producing political legitimacy. The result is that tools for responding to, or resolving, political difference

⁴ Paul Passavant is Professor of Political Science at Hobbart and William Smith Colleges

or antagonism are reduced to force and violence. If the modern state, according to Marx, functions to manage the collective interests of the bourgeoisie, and if legitimizing an order of capitalist exploitation has historically been a key task for the state, then your accounts suggest that the state is either giving up on the task of producing legitimacy (at least in modern terms) or it has lost this capacity altogether, under the conditions of neoliberalism. Would you agree? Should we then see the war between Russia and the Ukraine, on the one hand, and the forceful repression of domestic dissent by Putin, on the other, as symptoms of this broader tendency of the neoliberal state?

Darin Barney⁵

War, what is it good for? It's good for business.⁶ How could one who has never lived in a country at war, nor in Russia, have any idea what is happening there, or comment seriously on the considered reflections of two comrades who are currently enduring the agony of their country at war?

Here is what Russia's, or Vladimir Putin's, war in Ukraine looks like in my country (courtesy of the *Wall Street Journal*):

"Among advanced economies, Australia and Canada look set to be the biggest beneficiaries of the squeeze on commodities from both Russia and Ukraine. Both countries export energy, wheat and metals, while Canada is also a major producer of potash, a fertilizer, and canola oil and seed, used to make animal feed and vegetable alternatives to sunflower oil.

'Canada is in a very good position,' said Benjamin Tal, an economist with CIBC Capital Markets, a Toronto-based investment bank. Consulting firm Capital Economics predicts rising commodity prices will help push Canada's goods trade surplus to its widest on record in March, of around 5 billion Canadian dollars (\$3.9 billion)."⁷

Canada is not alone. Many rich bastards inside and outside of Russia are getting even richer on account of the war.

⁵ Darin Barney is Professor in Communication Studies at Mc Gill University

⁶ Billy Bragg, "North Sea Bubble," *Don't Try This at Home* (1991).

⁷ Alistair MacDonald, et al., "For Some Countries, Economic Ripples of Ukraine War Bring Windfall," *Wall Street Journal*, 12 March 2022.

Recent data from the Observatory of Economic Complexity show that while sanctions decreased the level of imports into Russia after the invasion of Ukraine, the value of exports from Russia grew significantly, with dance partners extending beyond China (+98%) India (+430%) and Turkey (+213%) to include Belgium (+130%), Netherlands (+79%), Spain (+112%), Germany (+38%), Japan (+40%) and South Africa (+34%). Gazprom posted record profits in the first half of 2022. Impending bans on the purchase of Russian oil and gas will make a dent, but the International Monetary Fund has been revising its quarterly predictions of the anticipated contraction of the Russian economy steadily downward, from 8.5% in April 2022, to 6% in July, to 3.4% in October.⁸

Beyond Russia, global firms in coal production, offshore drilling services, alternative fuels, fertilizers and crude oil production enjoyed average increases in their market valuation of between twenty and forty-two percent. According to Joseph Baines, "Aside from those involved in the extraction, processing and distribution of fossil fuels – which, remarkably, directly relate to seven of the 20 highest performing sectors – arms manufacturers are, predictably, the other major beneficiaries."⁹

What does capitalism have to do with (the) war?

At the Eurosatory arms bazaar in Villepinte, France, in June 2022, an eastern European weapons manufacturer "speaking on condition of anonymity" said: "This year is all about Ukraine. War is good for business, but it's not something I am happy about."¹⁰ Okay, but not exactly sad, either.

Gal Kirn¹¹

⁸ Lazaro Gamio and Ana Swanson, "How Russia Pays for War," *New York Times*, 30 October 2022

⁹ Joseph Baines, "Fossil fuel firms and agricultural traders cash in on the war in Ukraine," *openDemocracy* 6 May 2022.

¹⁰ John Irish, "'War is good for business' as drive to arm Ukraine looms over French expo," *The Globe and Mail* 13 June 2022.

¹¹ Gal Kirn is Assistant Professor of Sociology of Culture at the University of Ljubljana

I would like to - especially since Greg Yudin's paper also opens that important question – probe both positions in view of implications for the future of the left. There is a striking absence of a serious left position today, internationally, on the question of war (in Ukraine and more generally). If the left's thinking is to be constrained by the choice between the greater evil (big Putin Russia) and the lesser evil (EU/US reglemented Ukraine), we have already lost in advance the ideological struggle. Where is the anti-war position? As Rosa Luxemburg and the communists before WW stated, the only real emancipatory position is critique, and rejection of intra-imperialist war. We have no war - with the exception of the Rojava and Zapatista struggles - in the last decades that could be seen in the light of the 'socialism or barbarism' dichotomy (in Lenin's words); we have nothing resembling the revolutionary war that at the time developed in the situation of intense crisis and revolt. (See also Lazzarato and Alliez's book *Class and War* with a clear class analysis of war and financialisation). This is not the case for the war in Ukraine, as it was not in recent wars against "terror". Evidently, any such war needs to immediately stop, there needs to be a coordinated international pressure to stop the war, rather than succumbing to war hysteria. The more war goes on, the less the chances and historical options for any kind of left and emancipatory movements in Russia or Ukraine there are.

The case of my own "home" country, Yugoslavia, evidences that. For decades after the Yugoslav wars the ideological, political, and economical space for left critique has only been shrinking. Dispossession and destruction have been reloaded all over the former East. Artemy Magun is right to point out to the so-called "primitive accumulation of capital" as a context propitious to aggression. In a similar vein, Volodymyr Ishchenko also [recently](#) (in the *Jacobin*) claimed that capitalism in Russia has increasingly developed into military control - thus a war cannot be understood without the expansion of capitalism. On the horizon of this debate is a terrible geopolitical countdown, pointing to a possibility of a serious world war, and amassing of forces around US and China. This is a prelude to a systemic turmoil, which has been - with some more hopeful exceptions, e.g. Latin America – taking increasingly nationalist, neofascist forms.

Albena Azmanova¹²

I wonder whether there might be an important link between the shifts in the economy and the foreign policy orientation, with Primakov's tenure as Prime Minister of Russia in 1998-1999 being the watershed. Is it correct to portray the Russian economy as a straightforward extension of Yeltsin's shock therapy in the 1990s and the massive destabilization that ensued? There is a world of difference between the way Russia has been run since the late 1990s and the catastrophe of the earlier decade. Even though there are still large oligarchic elements in Russia, changes were made, compromises were found, business regulations were developed, re-industrialization and industrial recovery occurred; some of Russian industry has been effectively 're-socialized' (with the buy-out of BP by the state-owned Rosneft in 2017 Russian decidedly brought the oil industry under state control). Basically, the state of anomie ended by the late 1990s. As both Yudin and Magun note, the disciplining of the big oligarchs was part of the process of returning Russia to a state of governability; a partial retreat from extreme neoliberalism. Is capitalism in Russia before and after 1999 to be described then with the same term (radical neoliberalism) while there are these important differences?

The post-1999 economic stabilization is the likely socio-economic source of Putin's domestic legitimacy – and I mean here legitimacy not in the normative sense but in the sociological sense of endorsement by the population. It is in this context that the Primakov foreign policy doctrine prevailed: the idea that the Russian Federation's security is predicated on its superpower status, on its supremacy in the former Soviet Sphere of influence, and foreign policy turning Eastwards (towards China and India), rather than seeking a cooperation with the West. Could we say that, while the destabilization in the early 1990s enabled the de-politicization of Russian society (precarity deprives people of a sense of agency), the economic stabilization since the late 1990s consolidated the extant de-politicization through the well-known mechanisms of consumer society and the systematic suppression of dissidence? This brings us back to the issue of state-economy and state-society relations in contemporary capitalism – with an activist state in the management of

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these relations, that is, the active political engineering of the economy and society under ‘political capitalism’ which we see also in the West. This is, indeed, in the logic of neoliberalism, as Foucault traced its emergence already under the bureaucratic post-war welfare state. And how different is, I wonder, the state capture by the oligarchic mafia in the post-Soviet space (Russia, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Romania), from what James Galbraith has described as the ‘predator state’ in the U.S. (the state being run by corporate interests for their private gain). Maybe there is a common feature whose emergence we might expect to see also in Europe (what I have described as the ‘rich uncle’ state under precarity capitalism in *Capitalism on Edge*).

With reference to Gal Kirn’s observation about the conspicuous absence of a revolutionary potency in this context, the lack of a ‘revolutionary war’ trajectory: is this really the case in Russia? Is the revolutionary legacy of the Soviet regime completely erased? Putin’s contempt of Lenin suggests this to be the case among the ruling elites, however is this the case for Russian society more broadly? It seems that the gap between the ruling elite and young people is growing fast, if this were the basis of a revolutionary upheaval, what direction is this likely to take?

To the issue of ‘primitive accumulation’ Paul Apostolidis raised: In the post-Soviet space primitive accumulation took the form of personalization (not privatization) of public assets, as persons trusted by the ruling bureaucracy were given the mandate to manage the large public companies or oversee their privatisation in the first decade of the transition. The methods of personalization of public property were two: either the management used vouchers for privileged privatization (buying cheaply shares of the company), or pronounced the company bankrupt (typically, on grounds of technical obsolescence), sold the assets and cashed in the proceeds. (Gazprom is the textbook example of insider privatization carried out by Viktor Chernomyrdin, Prime Minister from 1992-1998). Hungarian sociologist Iván Szelényi has called this ‘political capitalism’: the use of political office to accumulate private wealth. (Mind you, the process had begun already under the old regime). In all cases, the process enabled the emergence of mafia-type oligarchs connected to the central power with bonds of personal loyalties and dependencies. In this sense, post-communist capitalism acquired features of a feudalistic polity – personal dependencies, not abstract-contractual relations, determined the distribution of life-chances.
