Putinism and Fascism: The 11 Differences (Part I)

The 11 differences: An introduction

The question we have asked ourselves in the preceding chapters was whether Russia was developing into a fascist country. In the first part of this book we have analyzed the parallels between the situation in post-Soviet Russia and the Weimar Republic. Having analyzed 23 items, brought together under five dimensions, we came to the conclusion that the parallels were, indeed, striking. We also emphasized that this “Weimar Parallel” did not imply some kind of historical fate, predicting the inevitable establishment in Russia of a regime similar to that of Germany or Italy in the 1930s. Present-day Russia is another country with a different history, different actors, and different traditions. However, the fact that contemporary Russia shares two important characteristics with post-First World War Germany is a matter of concern. These two characteristics are, first, a lack of experience of democratic governance and, second, the sudden introduction of the institutions and procedures of a modern electoral mass democracy. From the literature on the subject (e.g. Samuel Huntington and Jack Snyder) it is known that these two characteristics generally predict political turmoil, violent power struggles, and praetorianism. The turmoil of Weimar Germany ended with the advent of Adolf Hitler and National Socialism. The turmoil of post-First World War Italy ended with the advent of Mussolini and Italian Fascism. The turmoil of “Weimar Russia” ended with the advent of Vladimir Putin and “Putinism.” All three leaders promised to bring order, to reinvigorate and modernize the economy, and to restore the national prestige of a humiliated country. This is, however, in itself no sufficient reason to compare Putin’s system with the systems of the inter-war era, because—apart from these similarities—there are also
Putinism

a number of important differences between present-day Russia and the systems of the inter-war era. There are at least 11 differences regarding:

1. the ascent to power of the leader
2. the role of the party
3. the “centrist” self-image of the presidential party
4. the absence in Russia of party militias
5. the presence in Russia of an official anti-fascist state ideology
6. the absence in Russia of state-sponsored racism
7. the absence in Russia of totalitarianism
8. the symbiotic relationship of the Russian state with the (Orthodox) Church
9. the character of Russia’s power elite
10. the role of mafias
11. the maintenance of a pluralistic democratic facade

Hereunder we will analyze these differences more in detail.

Taking power or receiving power? Putin’s successful infiltration strategy

The way in which Putin came to power is totally different from what happened in Germany and Italy in the inter-war era. Putin was neither the charismatic leader of a populist political party, who hypnotized the masses with his magnetic personality and his oratorical skills during highly emotional political rallies, nor did he gradually build up his support during election campaigns in which political rivals were harassed and attacked by a violent party militia. Putin was “the man who came in from the cold,” “the man who came from nowhere.” He was suddenly there, totally unexpected. And, even more important: he was seemingly alone, without a mass following. The fact was that Putin neither needed the support of a political party, nor of violent party militias that intimidated opponents, to reach the apex of power. Putin was appointed, not to say anointed, by the president of the country, Boris Yeltsin, who abdicated before the end of his term and put him on the throne. The way in which Putin came to power was neither Hitler’s Machtergreifung, his “seizure of power,”¹ nor Mussolini’s threatening march on Rome. It was rather a subtle process in which he gradually positioned himself and made himself indispensable for the Semya (“the Family”), the group of oligarchs and advisors around President Yeltsin and his daughter Tatyana. His rise to power was the result of a successful infiltration policy, a strategy of which