Challenges and promises of comparative research into post-Soviet fascism: Methodological and conceptual issues in the study of the contemporary East European extreme right

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ABSTRACT

The international study of fascism has, over the last 25 years, experienced considerable consolidation. Inspired by influential theoretical publications of Roger D. Griffin and others, a new sub-discipline, “comparative fascist studies,” has emerged that proceeds from a largely common conceptualization of fascism. It explicitly includes and particularly promotes the cross-cultural, as well as inter-epochal investigation into ultra-nationalisms outside Central and Western Europe after the year 1945. The concepts, approaches and hypotheses of this new sub-discipline are well-suited to be applied to the study of interwar and post-Soviet right-wing radicalism in Eastern Europe. However, before comprehensive classification and informative comparison becomes possible, the putative fascist phenomena of Eastern Europe need more thorough descriptive analysis, field research, and empirical investigation by researchers, in the region.

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This special issue contributes to international right-wing extremism studies by way of outlining and interpreting certain episodes in and aspects of the development of nationalist politics of Europe’s territorially largest fully European country, Ukraine, in the mid- and late-20th as well as early 21st centuries. The papers below focus on – what could be called – Ukrainophone radically right-wing ideas and groups in Ukraine, during and after the Soviet period. That means that this collection largely leaves aside Russophone, pan-Slavic, Eurasian and other pro-Moscow right-wing tendencies on the territory of today’s Ukrainian state (Umland, 2013a). The latter is, as the recent escalation in the Donets Basin illustrated, also a relevant topic for an understanding of current Ukrainian history (Mitrokhin, 2014; Kuzio, 2015; Osipian, 2015). Yet, it arguably constitutes a separate topic that, because of its close connection to developments inside Russia, is better explored within the context of Russian nationalism and extremism studies (Laruelle, 2015; Mitrokhin, 2015) – and less so within Ukrainian studies. When speaking about nationalism, the extreme right, fascism and others in Ukraine, these terms refer almost always only to the liberationist, anti-Tsarist, anti-Soviet, anti-Muscovite and often ethno-nationalist section of Ukrainian far right politics.

Such a narrow focus on the Ukraine’s radical nationalists seems to be justified as the peculiar permutations of Ukrainian right-wing radicalism of the interwar and war-time as well as post-Soviet periods have been insufficiently studied in comparative perspective so far (Umland, 2013a). More recently, these topics have become hotly debated issues in communist and post-communist studies as well as in Ukrainian public discussions (Amar et al., 2007; Himka, 2011a;
Katchanovski, 2014). In 2014, moreover, all of the various themes covered in the present paper collection – whether they regard the 1920s—1950s, or the post-Soviet period – have, in connection with Russia’s annexation of Crimea and covert intervention in the Donets Basin, also entered Russian as well as Western mass media reports, European intellectual discourse, East-West political dialogue, and even international diplomacy (Shekhovtsov and Umland, 2014; Risch, 2015).

The contributions to this special issue do not directly tackle Russia’s peculiar “war” of information, interpretation and allegation around Ukrainian nationalism that started in 2014, if not before (Fedor, 2015). Nevertheless, they should help to contextualize and rationalize the debate around Ukraine’s historic and contemporary radical right by way of adding empirical detail, comparative analysis, interpretative assessment and knowledge-based judgment to earlier important contributions by, among others, in chronological order, Armstrong (1980), Motyl (1980, 1985, 2010b, 2013), Golczewski (1993, 2003, 2010, 2011), Zaitsev (2000, 2013a,b, 2014, 2015), Kasyanov (2003), Bruder (2006), Rudling (2006a,b, 2011a,b, 2012a,b, 2013), Shekhovtsov (2007, 2011b, 2013, 2014), Himka (2010, 2011b), Likhachev (2010, 2013a,b,c,d), Rossolinski-Liebe (2011, 2014a,b, 2015), Hrytsak et al. (2013), and Polyakova (2014a,b,c, 2015a,b,c).1 There is also a large body of published further Ukrainian-language research on the Organization of Ukrainian Nationals (OUN) and Ukrainian Insurrection Army (UPA), which is partly listed in the bibliography of Zaitsev’s seminal Ukrainian Integral Nationalism (2013a). While a considerable part of this literature is neither entirely dilettante nor overtly apologetic, most of these investigations are driven not by a critical approach, but by nationalizing motives. Numerous are informed by, or even contributing to, a discursive context dominated by hagiographic attitudes to the leaders of these organizations, if not by cognitive dissonance concerning the OUN’s leaders’ documented thoughts and known acts. Many of these writings are thus, in spite of their impressive size, unsuitable as secondary sources, but could instead constitute objects of discourse-analytical explorations of the historic and political thought of Ukraine’s intellectuals and diaspora (Rudling, 2011b; Rossolinski-Liebe, 2014b).

The papers below contribute Ukrainian observations to cross-cultural research into international right-wing radicalism as well as to the historical study of the rise and fall of inter- and post-war ultra-nationalism. Setting the stage for the empirical investigations that follow, this essay is not a survey of their contents, findings and implications — something left to be assessed by future reviewers. Instead, my introduction is introductory in a more literal sense in briefly sketching out the evolution and current state of the theory and terminology on fascist ideas, movements, parties and regimes against the background of the re-emergence of the East European extreme right, after the end of the Cold War. The overview stops before the following papers were written, and provides a background for, rather than summary of, the here collected investigations.

To be sure, one could also embed the following empirical papers into the context of conceptual frameworks of social and historical science fields other than comparative fascism. Such additional areas within which it would also make sense to position the below essay collection include, among others:

- Ukrainian studies (German: Ukrainistik),
- party system studies (Parteienforschung),
- research into social movements (Bewegungsforschung),
- the history of ideas (Ideengeschichte),
- comparative nationalism (vergleichende Nationalismusforschung),
- antisemitism research (Antisemitismusforschung),
- extremism studies (Extremismusforschung),
- research into populism (Populismusforschung),
- comparative right-wing radicalism (vergleichende Rechtsradikalismusforschung),
- the political religion approach (politischer Religionsansatz),
- totalitarianism studies (Totalitarismusforschung),
- cross-cultural authoritarianism (vergleichender Autoritarismusforschung),
- racist attitudes research (Erforschung rassistischer Einstellungen),
- xenophobia research (Erforschung von Fremdenfeindlichkeit), and others.

I have chosen to focus below on some particulars of the evolution of comparative fascist studies during the last two decades. This topic can be seen as a sub-discipline of the broader field of historical and contemporary far right studies—a research area of which the exploration of historic and neo-fascism is merely one part.

Anton Shekhovtsov has recently (2015), in a succinct way, summarized the interrelationship between the various terms used in, as well as the taxonomic hierarchy of, this research realm, in the following simple graph:

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Circles from out to inside: far right; right-wing radicalism; right-wing extremism; fascism; Nazism (Shekhovtsov, 2015).

Shekhovtsov’s chart illustrates that fascism can be conceived as a classical subtype (Collier and Levitsky, 1997) of right-wing extremism. As a generic category, it comprises, among other empirical phenomena with proper names, German Nazism (as well as Italian Fascism). Generic fascism is, in this scheme, a relatively narrowly circumscribed variety of several more encompassing broader categories. Nevertheless, fascism can itself, as briefly illustrated below, also constitute a genus proximum for more specific permutations of fascism, on a lower level of abstraction (Sartori, 1970) — whether as a general type for classical subcategories, or as a starting point in the formation of diminished subtypes (Collier and Levitsky, 1997).

The below brief introduction to comparative fascist studies tries to give the reader of the following papers an impression about some critical issues and challenges of cross-cultural research into right-wing extremism via an outline of various debates on the definition and interpretation of fascism. Arguably, the controversies in, and findings of, fascist studies are especially useful for illustrating central questions of discontent in exploring the far right. Fascist ideas, groups and regimes have attracted the attention of a broader variety of scholars than the study of the party-political post-war extreme right which is dominated by a relatively small number of political scientists and a few sociologists. Cross-cultural supra-epochal research into fascism is, to be sure, also heavily done by political and social researchers including comparatists, theorists, opinion pollsters, social psychologists and area experts.

Yet, fascist studies have also attracted the attention of some of the world’s major contemporary historians, for example, Laqueur (1997), a number of eminent students of culture and literature, for example, Carroll (1995), as well as various philosophers of history, for example, Nolte (1963). Influential commentators on fascism even include famous interpreters from outside academia, such as Eco (1995). While fascist groups have, in purely numerical terms, been a relatively minor phenomenon in modern world history, they have been discussed more broadly, fervently and controversially than many other political groupings. Whereas the study of contemporary radically right-wing parties is a relatively secluded subfield of post-war international political science, the interpretation of generic fascism and especially of German Nazism has, over the last seven decades, attracted some of the finest minds in the social sciences and humanities. It has triggered a number of more or less hot debates that illuminate not only the nature of fascism as such, but the functioning of radical politics and course of contemporary European history, in general (Loh and Wippermann, 2002; Griffin et al., 2006).

Finally, fascism currently is and probably will continue to be, for better or worse, a concept central to the comparative study of the far right, as well as non-academic public discourse on extreme political phenomena. More often than not, both researchers and laypeople will ask about extremist political phenomena whether they can be classified as fascist or not. In 2014, the Kremlin propaganda machine’s domestic and world-wide disinformation campaign about Ukraine’s Euromaidan or Revolution of Dignity heavily used the term “fascism” in its attempt to discredit Kyiv’s new leadership, and justify Russia’s covert military invasion of the Crimean peninsula and Donets Basin (Fedor, 2015). For these and other reasons, “fascism” is destined to remain a — if not the — central concept of international scholarly research and of post-Soviet public debates on putatively far right permutations of post-Cold War politics.

1. Fascism: an inter-war European or supra-epochal and pan-civilizational phenomenon?

Since the emergence of Italian Fascism and German Nazism after World War I, there has been considerable disagreement over central aspects of fascist theorizing in Western and non-Western scholarship. Many Marxist theoreticians accepted a simplified notion of “fascism” as a generic concept already during the 1920s—1930s (Luks, 1984). In contrast, mainstream
West European and North American comparative fascist studies suffered over decades from confusion about how to understand its core concept. This concerned not only the particular intellectual trends, social foundations and political conditions responsible for the emergence of fascist movements in many countries of inter-war Europe. The discrepancies went so far that scholars could not agree on a basic definition of generic fascism, and on where to locate it in the political spectrum. There was even disagreement over whether there is at all such a thing as international fascism, as distinct from Italian Fascism (Allardyce, 1979). Recently, moreover, another debate has emerged evolving around the issue of whether one should use the term “neo-fascism,” within the context of the post-War era, or not (Griffin et al., 2006).

In 1963, the publication of a much-quoted book by the disputed German philosopher of history Nolte (1963), Fascism in Its Epoch, published in English under the title Three Faces of Fascism, contributed, among other important publications by Weber (1964), Mosse (1999) and Walter Laqueur (Laqueur and Mosse, 1966) of that period, to the introduction of a non-Marxist, yet explicitly comparative perspective on anti-conservative European inter-war ultra-nationalism. This approach has since gained acceptance, and a generic conceptualization of fascism has permeated much of the following English-language academic writing, on the topic. At the same time, such questions as how to clearly identify fascism, and how far the concept is applicable beyond the contexts of Europe and the inter-war period still remained unclear.

Many leading scholars sought refuge by way of avoiding the latter question, and responding to the first with list-definitions that delineated fascism through more or less long enumerations of characteristics of fascist ideology, movements and/or regimes. What was left unresolved in these list definitions, however, was which of these characteristics, on the one side, constitute necessary conditions to label a political phenomenon fascist, and are thus “ineliminable elements” (Freeden, 1994) of the definition of generic fascism, and which, on the other side, are of secondary importance and contingent. Certain ideological “anti-”-characteristics of individual fascisms (for example, anti-Semitism, anti-Americanism, anti-Slavism, and others) could, for instance, be seen as constituting not core characteristics of fascism, but rather peripheral traits that represent functional equivalents and might be present in some varieties of fascism, but not in others. They may be prominent in one program, and absent in another where they are replaced by features that can be distinct in substance, yet still have, on an abstract level, more or less similar consequences concerning the political actions, style and institution-building of their bearers.

Arguably, the most important development in recent comparative fascist historiography has been the formulation of a comprehensive hermeneutic interpretation, and related lucid definition of generic fascism by the British historian of ideas Roger D. Griffin since the 1990s (Griffin, 1991, 1993, 1995, 1998, 2007, 2011; Griffin and Feldman, 2004; Griffin et al., 2006; Feldman, 2008). Apart from providing a concise capture of the core idea of fascism, Griffin distinguished himself from other taxonomers of the extreme right in that he applied the classical mode of definition through the identification of hierarchically related general types and more specific subtypes (Sartori, 1970; Collier and Levitsky, 1997). He first established the genus proximum of fascism (namely, populist ultra-nationalism), and then identified a differentia specifica (namely, palingenetic) that makes fascism dissimilar from other varieties of the more general category of phenomena — that is, ultra-nationalisms — to which fascism belongs. According to Griffin’s definition, fascism can be conceptualized as “a genus of political ideology whose mythic core in its various permutations is a palingenetic form of populist ultra-nationalism” (Griffin, 1993: 26).

“Mythic core” refers in this context less to the extreme utopianism and anti-rationalism of fascism. Rather, Griffin argues that the core of every ideology can be understood as a fundamental myth. The simple visionary principles of myths are, in general, of an irrational kind, and constitute the inspirational power which mobilizes activists and followers of political movements driven by this or that ideology. The notion of ultra-nationalism implies an ideological monism which downplays or even denies other components of human identity, and views human beings not as individuals, but merely as cells within a national organism — however delineated. This organism is seen, in fascism, as being in an existential fight for survival, territory and dominance with other, similarly aggressive national organisms.

The term “palingenetic” is, in the humanities, mainly used in the context of religious studies and expresses the myth of rebirth and regeneration. In spite of the obscurity of the term, palingenetic ideas are, in fact, common features of human thought. They may emerge in many spheres of social life — whenever attempts are made to renew, regenerate or revolutionize some cultural or social structure.2 In politics, “palingenetic” is meant to embody the aspiration to create a new order following a period of perceived decline or decadence (Griffin, 1993: 240). That means that a “palingenesis” neither implies duplication or restoration of, nor a return or relapse to, a former era. Instead, it denotes a cleansing renovation, rejuvenation, or resurrection, on a new level. An ultra-nationalist palingenesis — though, perhaps, containing ideas also associated with ultra-conservatism, such as hierarchical and ascr iptive thinking, sexism, elitism, and others — envisages a revolutionary remake of society rather than a counterrevolutionary retrogression to a gone period. “The fascist mentality is characterized by the sense of living through an imminent turning-point in contemporary history, when the dominance of the allegedly bankrupt or degenerate forces of conservatism, individualistic liberalism and materialist socialism is finally to give way to a new era in which vitalistic nationalism will triumph” (Griffin, 1993: 44). Thus what fascist ideology comes down to is, according to Griffin, “[t]he vision of the national community rising phoenix-like after a period of encroaching decadence which all but destroyed it.” (1993: 38, emphasis in the original).

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2 Also, the term is used in biology where it means the repetition of phylogenetic stages of development during germ formation. In geology, “palingenesis” denotes reshaping of rocks through their re-melting.
Griffin’s proposal has been methodologically and pragmatically helpful as it:

(a) compresses earlier longer definitions of fascism into a short, memorable phrase (“palingenetic ultra-nationalism”) and captures its central idea (the vision of a newborn nation) in a neat terminological manner by re-introducing “palingenesis” as a central concept into the history of ideas,

(b) follows, in doing so, the standard scholarly procedure of definition according to the modus per genus et differentiam and distinguishes between a substantive genus (ultra-nationalism) and a relational differentiating characteristic of the species (palingenetic),

(c) circumvents unnecessary fuzziness emerging from an application of “fascism” to a variety of domains (for example, psychopathology, regime-typology, political style) by way of seeing it as, above all, a type of ideology,

(d) resists the inclusion of ephemeral characteristics, putative causal factors, or institutional and behavioral manifestations of fascism into its definition,

(e) opposes associating fascism with only one specific historical era (the inter-war period) or geographical region (Europe), and

(f) shuns ambivalence or elusiveness present in such formulations as “resistance to transcendence” (Nolte, 1963) and “neither right nor left” (Sternhell, 1995b).

In addition, Griffin has developed a comprehensive complementary taxonomy to his theory of fascism using various

(a) prefixes to fascism, such as “proto-,” “crypto-” and “para-,”

(b) affiliated concepts (for example, “groupuscule,” “metapolitics”), and

(c) biological metaphors as, for instance, slime-mold, rhizomic, aboreal (Griffin et al., 2006).

To be sure, the synchronic, intra-civilizational study of European inter-war fascism is still popular among, above all, 20th century historians. However, in the last quarter of a century, a diachronic and cross-civilizational approach based on Griffin’s and some other notions of generic fascism has gained prominence. Both methods complement, but also differ from, each other. The first one remains essentially idiographic insofar as it sees fascism as a temporally and locally circumscribed phenomenon, that is, as a uniquely European incidence in the fragile times between and during the two world wars. The second approach reveals a nomothetic world view leading its followers to look for similarities in human societies across time and space. Although the latter mode of thinking runs the familiar risk of over-stretching its conceptual apparatus (Sartori, 1970), it leads to a logically more sustainable procedure for the scientific study of fascism. Once one decides to employ the term as an overarching category for analogical reasoning and not merely as a proper name to label a particular Italian ideology, movement or regime, “fascism” climbs the ladder of generalization.

In fact, when applied exclusively to the interwar and World War II European contexts, fascism is already being used to interpret a relatively wide variety of phenomena. The Fasci, Nazis, Iron Guard, Falange, Arrow Cross, Ustashi, and others – while having all emerged in interwar Europe – rose under rather different circumstances, in countries with diverging cultural traditions as well as with dissimilar economic and social structures. Even if initially utilized exclusively within the comparative study of modern European history, “fascism” thus automatically transforms into a sufficiently abstract notion that can then be also applied beyond the borders of Europe and limits of 1914–1945. The moment an interwar historian decides to classify as “fascist” some non-Italian European phenomena that are not mere imitations of Mussolini’s movement, the term loses its “virginity,” as a proper name.

2. The new comparative fascist studies after the Cold War

Inspired by Griffin and other comparativists, the last two decades have seen the emergence of new cross-cultural fascist studies as a result of a consolidation of “fascism” as a generic concept. In 1991, Griffin’s monograph The Nature of Fascism had started a series of important new cross-cultural and general theoretical explorations of the varieties of fascism by a number of scholars who have devoted large parts of their lives to the study of this or that permutation of revolutionary ultra-nationalism. Among long-term students of fascism, other than Griffin, who published important new survey monographs about international fascism, in the 1990s and 2000s have been, for instance, Sternhell (1995a,b), Eatwell (1996), Payne (1996), Laqueur (1997), Kallis (2000), Reichardt (2002), Breuer (2005), Gregor (2005), Bauerkämper (2006), or Wippermann (2009).

A number of edited volumes with empirical and theoretical papers on international fascism, apart from those collected by Griffin et al., complete the picture (Larsen, 2001; Kallis, 2002; Fenner and Weitz, 2004; Nolzen and Reichardt, 2005; Blamières, 2006; Iordachi, 2009, 2010; Dietrich and Schüßler, 2011; Hrytsak et al., 2013; Schlemmer and Woller, 2014). Some — partly heated — debates between these and other researchers, in the new century, have further helped to sharpen our comprehension of the potential, problems and risks of applying “fascism” to pre-, inter- and post-war political ideas and groups, across the globe (Loh and Wippermann 2002; Griffin et al., 2006). If taken together, this new body of literature has, by now, changed the nature of fascist studies. Today the term “fascism” appears — when used by authors familiar with recent analogical reasoning, conceptual improvement and scholarly discussions in our sub-discipline — as sufficiently sharp, and heuristically useful to be broadly and productively applied in empirical analysis (Reichardt, 2004, 2007; Umland, 2005, 2009b,
It has found application within the study of extremely anti-egalitarian ideas in a number of fields including comparative politics, contemporary history, political anthropology, and cultural studies.

An increasing use of comparative methodology in fascist studies should secure scholarly progress in two ways: First, cross-cultural analysis — whether according to the Most Similar or Most Different Systems Designs — can be used to control for certain variables, in causal explanation (Przeworski and Teune, 1970; Sartori, 1970). An explicitly comparative approach should allow scholars to identify more clearly the specific combinations of social, political and cultural factors that determine the emergence, growth and decline of fascist movements. Against the background of recent innovation in the definition and conceptualization of generic fascism, it appears, moreover, possible to apply it not only in synchronic cross-cultural analysis. Within diachronic comparison, one can now also contrast classically fascist with neo-fascist groupings when analyzing, for instance, the fate of young democracies, as has been attempted in first juxtapositions of the decline of the Weimar Republic to the development of post-Soviet Russia (Shenfield, 2001; Luks, 2008; Hanson, 2010; Kailitz and Umland, 2010). Such comparison should eventually lead to a disambiguation of the current theoretical models that explain the rise of fascism in rather general terms. It should help answering the question why, when and how exactly fascism ascends and falls.

Second, comparative analysis should help us both, to additionally refine the concept of generic fascism and to further extend its range of full as well as diminished subtypes (Collier and Levitsky, 1997) — the latter referring to instances of proto-, para- or semi-fascism. In which ways can radical interpretations of the vision of the newborn nation express itself in different historical situations, against the background of diverging cultural traditions, and in response to varying social contexts? New empirical studies may show so far unknown varieties of fascist thinking (Umland, 2008b, 2010a). Or they may disclose seemingly fascist phenomena to be pseudo-fascist or, at best, instances of only seeming or diminished subtypes of fascism (Collier and Levitsky, 1997), that is, classify them as being not fully or not at all fascist (Luks, 2009). Such findings should help us to better understand the notion, range and borders of the concept of generic fascism. When does nationalism turn fascist or become sufficiently extreme and revolutionary to be classified this way? Or, on the contrary: Which species of nationalism should be seen as remaining ultimately non-fascist, that is, as being insufficiently revolutionary or/and too moderate in substance to be covered with the same classificatory term as Italian Fascism and German Nazism?

An application of “fascism” to the post-war or/and non-European context can and often did, lead to the much lamented terminological “inflation” of the word (Griffin, 1993: 1, 2013). When, for instance, scholars like Gregor (2005) or Motyl (2007a,b, 2009, 2010a) call the current regimes of China and Russia “fascist” or “fascistoid”, this is not a problem of the ideal type of fascism per se. Rather, it is the result of the peculiar definitions of fascism that Gregor and Motyl have formulated. The problem with such applications of “fascism” is not that the notion travels outside Europe or beyond 1945. Rather, the issue here is that “fascism” is conceptualized in a way that would lead to a general augmentation of “fascisms” in contemporary history, and thus to a loss of the heuristic, classificatory and communicative value of the term. From a statistical point of view, one could argue: the more the merrier. Large-N quantitative regressions are to be preferred to small-N qualitative comparisons. Yet, if we use “fascism” to brand a broad range of nationalistic authoritarian movements and regimes: Which term would we then use to identify the relatively small class of distinctly revolutionary (“palingenetic”) permutations of populist ultra-nationalism that had been hitherto labeled “fascist”?

In the case of Gregor’s “developmental dictatorship” as a definition of fascism, many officially socialist authoritarian regimes of the post-war Second and Third Worlds would seem to qualify as “fascist.” To be sure, these regimes indeed had or have traits in common with the Italian interwar prototype. However, once the word “fascism” is used to generalize the existing commonalities between Mussolini’s and various later Second, as well as Third World states, the question emerges of how to designate equally manifest similarities between the Italian National Fascist Party (PNF), on the one side, and the National Socialist German Workers Party (NSDAP), Spanish Juntas de Ofensiva Nacional-Sindicalista (JONS), Finnish Patriotic People’s Movement (Isänmaallinen kansanliike or IKL), British Union of Fascists (BUF) and others, on the other. Since Gregor has used “fascism” already to emphasize the developmental and (pseudo-)socialist aspects of the regime fascista, which term would be, in that case, used to conceptualize those ultra-nationalist and palingenetic dimensions of Italian Fascism that made it similar to, and a model for, various extremely right-wing movements of the inter- and post-war years?3

Equally, when Motyl employs the words “fascistoid” or “fascist” to interpret, in the current Russian context, the political ideas, institutions and style of Putin’s regime: Which term would he use to cover the even more aggressive agendas of such outspokenly revolutionary ultra-nationalist as Vladimir Zhirinovskii (Morrison, 1994), Aleksandr Dugin (Luks, 2002; Höllwerth, 2007; Shekhovtsov, 2008) or Aleksandr Barkashov (Umland, 2006, 2008a)? The expansionary schemes, revisionist claims and domestic plans of these fanatics go beyond Putin’s (admittedly, aggressive) agenda of imperial restoration. If we decide to label already Russia under Putin “fascistoid” (Motyl, 2010a), or even simply “fascist” (Motyl, 2009), what political term would we then use in the unlikely case that Zhirinovskii becomes President of the Russian Federation and starts implementing his “last dash to the South,” a military campaign for creating a “new Russia” via annexing Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan to his novel empire? (Koman, 1996; Umland, 2008b) While Zhirinovskii and Putin are both irredentist, the geographical span, historical explanation and political rationale of their expansionist agendas are fundamentally different.

Motyl — one of the most prolific Western commentators on post-Soviet Russian and Ukrainian affairs — speaks about the Weimar/Russia comparison and post-Soviet Russian fascism, he misses all of the dozens of previous scholarly and publicistic discussions of these topics (Umland, 2009a). This concerns both North American and West European as well as

3 For more critique of Gregor, see: Griffin et al. (2006).
Russian studies including monographs by Ianov (1995) and Shenfield (2001), or papers by Hanson and Kopstein (1997) and Lukš (2008) — none of which would support Motyl’s argument. The latter turns the theory of totalitarianism on its head by claiming that fascist movements do not have a totalitarian aspiration. That is in spite of the fact that the term “totalitarianism” had once been introduced into political science exactly to designate a certain similarity between communist and fascist regimes (Gregor, 1969: Lukš, 2007). Motyl’s disregard for the revolutionary or palingenetic drive of fascism, as distinct from the conservative or restorationist impetus of authoritarianism, including Putin’s, is manifest throughout his texts. His few references to the literature on generic fascism do not fully reflect the recent innovation in mainstream comparative fascist studies, outlined above. He treats fascism at some points, as a sub-type of authoritarianism and at others, as being in between authoritarianism and totalitarianism. For the Russian case, he introduces the category of an “unconsolidated fascist state” and compares Russia at the end of Putin’s second presidential term to Germany in 1933 (Motyl, 2007b). He introduces the attribute “fascistoid” not disclosing whether this term is meant to denote a hybrid phenomenon or a diminished subtype (Collier and Levitsky, 1997). Motyl’s terminological-conceptual obfuscation around the attributes “fascist” and “fascistoid” makes both verification and falsification of his argument difficult.

The author’s alarmism reminds of a tragic mishap in the late Weimar Republic. The early 1930s were a period of particularly inflationary usage of “fascism” by the Komintern which, among others, classified Hindenburg’s presidential dictatorship as being already “fascist.” This loose application of the fascist label was a phenomenon that eventually also played a political role. It (a) facilitated the KPD’s misunderstanding of the historical situation of 1930–1933, (b) deepened disunity in the German workers movement, and thus (c) contributed to the rise of the NSDAP (Lukš, 1984, 140–161; Lukš, 2007, 111–150). While not being a communist, the Motyl too inflates the concept of generic fascism and distracts from earlier scholarly discussions of his Russian permutations. By doing so, he is providing a disservice to an adequate understanding of the post-Soviet fascist threat (Lukš, 2009; Umland, 2009a).

### 3. The study of contemporary East European fascism

Studying fascism within particular regions makes sense from a methodological point of view, insofar as it allows scholars to control for relevant contextual factors. The logic of intra-regional comparison is that, when applying the Most Similar Systems Design to divergent explanaanda (Przeworski and Teune, 1970), we can demote the commonalities between the countries of one region as putatively crucial causal factors accounting for dissimilarities in the emergence, formation, behavior and performance of ultra-nationalist parties and circles within that region. For instance, in post-Soviet Russia there have emerged a wide range of parliamentary and extra-parliamentary radically nationalist and often revolutionary groups (Shenfield, 2001), leading numerous observers to compare post-Soviet Russia with the Weimar Republic (Ianov, 1995; Hanson and Kopstein, 1997; Lukš, 2008; Kailitz and Umland, 2010). This is in stark contrast to the post-Soviet Ukrainian ultranationalist scene which quickly emerged (Rudling, 2006b, 2012b, 2013), yet has suffered from organizational under-development as well as non-representation in the national parliament except in 2012–2014 (Umland, 2008c, 2013b; Shekhovtsov and Umland, 2013; Shekhovtsov, 2011b, 2013, 2014; Likhachev, 2013a,b,c; Polyakova, 2014a, 2015c). Why did Russian neo-Nazi skinheads kill, on average, more than one person per week in 2009 (Kozhevnikova, 2010) while their Ukrainian comrades, if we believe the relevant monitoring organizations, did not murder a single person, during the same year (Likhachev, 2010)? Both countries, Russia and Ukraine, are post-Soviet, Eastern Slavic, as well as largely Christian Orthodox, and have, since Perestroika, been going through deep and, in many ways, similar economic transformations. What does account, nevertheless, for the substantial differences in the development of the party politics, groupuscular activities, and social impacts of their right-wing extremists (Shekhovtsov and Umland, 2013)?

Different regions and countries have diverging historical traditions and will thus give birth to dissimilar permutations of fascism. In the Russian case, for instance, the obsession of many ultra-nationalists with adding some land to the, territorially, already largest country of the world is an aspect that makes these right-wingers exceptional. While it seems absurd to a non-fascist that Russia could be territorially unsated, a palingenetic ultra-nationalist’s perception of the current map of the Russian state and its surroundings may be different. By this perspective, territorial expansion might not be merely an additional element or foreign extension of the national revolution. Within a fascist outlook, it can — as in the case of Zhirinovski’s ideology (Umland, 2008b) — be also the aim and substance of the nation’s rebirth itself. The idea that Russia will be born anew via the country’s reconstitution as an empire of entirely novel territorial and political dimensions appears to be a common element within the otherwise dissimilar agendas of Zhirinovski, Dugin, and various other Russian fascists.

The study of post-Cold War East European radical right has just begun. To be sure, we have already some relevant book-size intra- and cross-regional comparative studies written or edited by, for instance, in chronological order, Ramet (1999), Mudde (2005), Thieme (2007), Minkenberg (2010, 2015), Shekhovtsov (2011a), Kopecky and Mudde (2012), Hrytsak et al. (2013), Pirro (2015), Polyakova (2015a) as well as Pytlas (forthcoming, 2016). Yet, there is still a lot of empirical groundwork and plain description to do, in varying degrees, in all of the region’s countries, but especially east of the European Union. Before we can assess whether this or that grouping is fascist or not, we need to conduct in-depth analyses of the histories, ideologies and behaviors of the various nationalist politicians, organizations and networks of the region. That is not to say that, in order to define fascism, it would be sufficient, as Angelo Tasca once claimed, “to write its history” (Wippermann, 2009). Description will not replace interpretation, comparison and conceptualization. However, before we can explain, juxtapose or classify, we need to have some elementary information on the putatively fascist movements we would like to examine. Data collection comes before data analysis.
Concerning post-communist East European right-wing extremisms, exhaustive empirical investigations of who did or said what, when and where are still often missing or incomplete. It is, for instance, remarkable that there does not seem to exist yet a single extensive academic study of one of the electorally most successful ultra-nationalist organizations ever – the Serbian Radical Party (Tomić, 2013). Post-Soviet Ukrainian ultra-nationalism was, until recently, equally and surprisingly understudied (Umland, 2013a). There seem to be no significant scholarly publications on Belarusian or Moldovan right-wing extremism whatsoever. Although Russian nationalism and its relation to fascism have always been topics intriguing comparativists (e.g. Rogger, 1964) and recently triggered increasing scholarly interest (e.g. Laruelle, 2009), neither the quantity nor the quality of the available literature does, so far, justice to the significance of the country and plethora of potential study objects there (Umland, 2009a).

However one may assess the current state of the empirical study of the East European extreme right, the degree to which fascism is a useful concept in understanding various post-communist political phenomena in post-communist Europe remains to be seen. Two of the issues are going to be whether the agendas of putatively fascist movements can be classified, in Griffin’s terms (1993), as simultaneously

(a) truly palingenetic, that is, as indeed aiming at a social transformation which would amount to a political, cultural and anthropological revolution, and

(b) fully ultra-nationalist, that is, as envisioning a society where a purely nationalist doctrine — and not some combination of nationalism with anthropocentric ideas (liberalism, individualism, egalitarianism and others) — would frame nation-building, state—society relations, as well as foreign and domestic policies.

To decide whether that is the case constitues not a trivial task, as it may seem at first glance. Like in Western Europe, many of the relevant parties and other groupings have front- and back-stage agendas, public and private images, as well as external and internal discourses which partly differ significantly from each other.

4. Classifying inter-war, war-time and post-Soviet Ukrainian radical nationalism

Thus, for instance, the name and appearance of the All-Ukrainian Association “Svoboda” (Freedom), the strongest ultra-nationalist party in today’s Ukraine, is the result of a purposeful makeover of the public appearance of the former Social-National Party of Ukraine (SNPU) in 2004 (Shekhovtsov, 2011b, 2013, 2014; Likhachev, 2013b; Belitsa, 2014; Polyakova, 2014a, 2015c). Like other Ukrainian ultra-nationalist groups (Polyakova, 2014c; Bezruk and Umland, 2015), the SNPU had, until 2004, been using a mirror-image of the well-known SS symbol Wolfsangel (wolf’s hook) as its party symbol claiming that this emblem merely combines the letters “N” and “I” that mean “The Idea of Nation.” As a result of the adaptation of the party’s official profile to the reigning political correctness of democratic Ukraine in 2004 and because of other factors, “Svoboda” representatives became, in 2010–2014, fully accepted participants of mainstream public discourse and frequent interviewees in daily mass media reporting (Shekhovtsov, 2013). The SNP of the 1990s was symbolically and ideologically, to large degree, indebted to Ukrainian inter-war fascism and had a para-military outlook — characteristics that seem to suggest an application of the fascist label. Yet, one would still have to check whether the SNP ideology, as expressed in its leaders’ writings and speeches of this period, was sufficiently ultra-nationalistic and palingenetic to make such a categorization justified. If one ended up with classifying the SNPU as fascist, the question would arise, whether its 2004 rhetoric and symbolic transmutation into “Svoboda” has also led to an ideological and political transformation making it “merely” ethno-nationalist, but not fascist any longer.

In post-Soviet Ukraine, there is a staggeringly escapist debate about the issue of how the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, especially Stepan Bandera’s faction in the late 1930s and early 1940s, should be assessed and categorized (Marples, 2006; Amar et al., 2007; Himka, 2011a; Hrytsak et al., 2013; Katchanovski, 2014). The fascist label for the early OUN(B) continuous to be, in spite of more and more affirmative research results, rejected by many Ukrainian hobby historians in- and outside Ukraine. This is done in spite of such facts that

(a) the Union of Ukrainian Fascists was one of the predecessor organizations of the OUN,

(b) prominent representatives of both factions of the OUN, to one degree or another, collaborated with Nazi Germany (although some of them, including Stepan Bandera himself, were also imprisoned by the Nazis),

(c) there were a number of ideologists inside the OUN, like Yevhen Onatskyi, or outside of, but with influence on, the OUN, like Dmytro Dontsov, who made no secret of their keen interest in, if not considerable sympathies for Italian Fascist and, partly, even German Nazi ideology (Berkhoff and Carynnyk, 1999; Zaitsev, 2014; Rossolinski-Liebe, 2015).4

Most importantly, as Grzegorz Rossolinski-Liebe has demonstrated (2011, 2014a, 2015), the OUN(B) ideology itself was, at least during the first years of World War II, thoroughly fascist, and had a peculiarly Ukrainian revolutionary as well as ultra-

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4 The latter was accompanied by a bizarre disregard for the Nazi’s contradictory, yet manifest and murderous antislavism (Berkhoff, 2004; Borejsza, 1988; Burleigh, 1988; Connelly, 1999; Schaller, 2002; Wippermann, 1996).
nationalist agenda, in its own right. Like in other European countries, Ukraine's originally leftist mainstream nationalism underwent a consequential “turn to the right,” during the inter-war period (Motyl, 1980, 1985; Ursprung, 2006; Himka, 2010). It changed from being a primarily emancipatory idea to a more and more palingenic ideology where the aim of a purposeful re-creation and not mere liberation of the Ukrainian nation became dominant (Golczewski, 2011; Carynnyk, 2011; Kurylo, 2013). As expressed in the title of the radicalized Ukrainian nationalism's main theoretical journal “Rozbudova natsii” (Nation Building), Ukraine was not only to be freed from foreign oppression. The Ukrainians were also to be born anew as a thoroughly cleansed, violently exclusive and organically integrated ethno-national community controlled by a totalitarian one-party state.

The one serious scholarly questioning of an unequivocal fascist labeling of the OUN(B) has, over the last years, been developed by Oleksandr Zaitsev — Ukraine’s leading student of Ukrainian inter-war and war-time ultra-nationalism (Zaitsev, 2013a; Radchenko, 2014). Zaitsev has proposed a sophisticated reconsideration of the OUN and similar phenomena in inter-war Europe arguing that revolutionary ultra-nationalisms of nations that already have their nation-states should be conceptually and terminologically distinguished from those without an own nation-state — a differentiation that led Zaitsev (2013a) to introduce the neologism “Ustashism,” for the latter. But should “Ustashism” be seen as a classical or diminished subtype of fascism? (Collier and Levitsky, 1997) Or is “Ustashism” sufficiently distinct from fascism suggesting its establishment as a separate subtype of ultra-nationalism? How far and in which ways, in general, are the more specific concepts, approaches and theories developed in the study of the 20th West European far right scene applicable to the varieties of Soviet-era and post-Soviet right-wing extremism, in Eastern Europe? What can be gained and learned from a transposition of these terms and frameworks to the East of Europe? Or should we rather purposefully develop new typologies and subtypes, like “Ustashism,” to capture the peculiarities of the East European radical right? The following papers should help to clarify the answers to these and similar issues indicated above.

5. Towards an integration of East European into international fascist studies

With the possible exception of Russia, the post-Soviet East and West European right-wing extremisms are becoming increasingly similar, in terms of their ideological stances and political roles. In view of the still significant socio-economic gap between Western and Eastern Europe, one increasingly wonders how much the specifically Leninist historical legacies or post-communist transformations (Minkenberg, 2010) are needed for an explanation of the recent electoral performance of such parties as Jobbik in Hungary, or Ataka in Bulgaria. The surprising aspect of the emerging post-communist radical right has, so far, mostly been its relative weakness, in both historically contextualized and cross-European comparative terms (e.g. Wilson, 1997). In spite of the considerable depth of the recent East European social transformations and economic crises, ultra-nationalists have not done as well in national elections as one would have expected, with the notable exceptions of Serbia and Russia.

In the post-Soviet realm, like in other regions of the world, the generic term “fascism” is, on the one side, used in an inflationary manner to label all sorts of political opponents. On the other side, in the post-communist world, “fascism” is often associated with Nazism rather than Italian Fascism and other varieties of inter-war European revolutionary ultra-nationalism like the Spanish Falange, Hungarian Arrow Cross or Romanian Iron Guard. In yet another tradition, “fascism” is seen, by some post-Soviet historians, as only the proper name of a particular Italian phenomenon, and not as a generic term for classifying a variety of, at the same time, ultra-nationalist and revolutionary ideologies (Umland, 2005; Pufelska, 2011). Given the dearth of knowledge in the post-communist realm of the most relevant journal papers and book chapters in fascist historiography, such as those re-printed in important collected volumes composed by Griffin (1998), Kallis (2002), Roger Griffin in collaboration with Matthew Feldman (2004), Neiberg (2006), Feldman (2008), and Iordachi (2009), it is difficult to conduct an informative public and scholarly debate on putative permutations of historic and neo-fascism. Post-Soviet historical and political sciences still largely operate either with the propagandistic Soviet definition used in the 1920s–1980s, or with by now dated Western conceptualizations of the term “fascism” used in the West, in the 1950s–1980s, that is, before comparative fascist studies became a consolidated sub-discipline.

Frequent points of reference in Eastern Europe are some ground-breaking earlier studies by the Berlin historians Nolte (1963) and Wippermann (1983). Both scholars are influential experts in Germany and beyond and have, in the sixties and eighties respectively, played important roles in the emergence of non-Marxist cross-cultural analysis of fascism, especially in Germany where this approach is still only gaining prominence (Nolzen and Reichardt, 2005; Schlemmer and Woller, 2014). Yet, neither Nolte nor Wippermann have provided an unambiguous definition of fascism. Nolte’s considerations of fascism’s nature are philosophical, if not cryptic, rather than conceptual. In contrast, Wippermann proceeds from the real type of Italian Fascism. Eventually, his many publications — as Nolte’s enigmatic deliberations — leave open which traits of fascism are to be seen as ineliminable and which as peripheral (Freeden, 1994). They have thus helped only little to theoretically direct and conceptually discipline fascist studies, including those in Eastern Europe.

The far-reaching advances in the study of international fascism that started with the publication of the first edition of Roger Griffin’s The Nature of Fascism in 1991 are still awaiting a full reception in the epistemic communities of the post-communist area. The repercussions of this omission are compounded by the various gaps in the chronological description, empirical analysis and country-specific interpretation of the ultra-nationalist intellectuals, parties and militias of the inter-war period, and, in particular, the new groupings composing the post-Soviet radical right, in Eastern Europe. The following papers should make a contribution to closing this gap, for the particular case of contemporary Ukraine.
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