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Behind the Ukrainian War is thirty years of post-Soviet class conflict

"Maidan revolutions" are typical contemporary urban civic revolutions, as political scientist Mark Beissinger called them. From massive statistical material, it shows that, unlike the social revolutions of the past, urban civic revolutions only temporarily weaken authoritarian rule and empower middle-class civil societies.



Since Russian forces invaded Ukraine earlier this year, analysts of all political persuasions have struggled to identify exactly what, or who, dragged us to this point. Phrases such as "Russia", "Ukraine", "West" or "the Global South" have been used as if they denote unified political actors. Even on the left, statements by Vladimir Putin, Volodymyr Zelensky, Joe Biden, and other world leaders about "security concerns," "self-determination," "choice of civilization," "sovereignty," "imperialism," or "anti-imperialism" are often taken at face value, as if they represent coherent national interests.



Specifically, the debate about Russia's — or, more precisely, the Russian ruling clique's — interests in unleashing war tends to polarize around questionable extremes. Many take literally what Putin says, without questioning whether his obsession with NATO expansion or his insistence that Ukrainians and Russians constitute "one people" represent Russian national interests or are shared by Russian society as a whole. On the other hand, many dismiss his comments as mere outright lies and strategic communication unrelated to his "real" goals in Ukraine.

In their own way, both positions serve to mythologize the Kremlin's motivations rather than clarify them. Current discussions about Russian ideology often seem like a return to the times of *The German Ideology*, written by the young Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels some 175 years ago. For some, the dominant ideology in Russian society is a true representation of the social and political order. Others believe that simply proclaiming that the emperor is naked will be enough to puncture the floating bubble of ideology.

Unfortunately, the real world is more complicated. The key to understanding "what Putin really wants" is not to choose obscure phrases from his speeches and articles that fit with the preconceived prejudices of observers, but to conduct a systematic analysis of the structurally determined material interests, political organization, and ideological legitimacy of the social class he represents.

Next, I try to identify some basic elements of such an analysis in the Russian context. That does not mean that a similar analysis of the interests of the Western or Ukrainian ruling classes in this conflict is irrelevant or inappropriate, but I concentrate on Russia partly for practical reasons, partly because it is the most controversial issue at the moment and partly

because the Russian ruling class bears the primary responsibility for this war. By understanding their material interests, we can move beyond weak explanations that take the rulers' claims at face value and move toward a more coherent picture of how war is rooted in the economic and political vacuum opened by the Soviet collapse in 1991.

¿Lo que hay en un nombre?

During the current war, most Marxists have referred to the concept of imperialism to theorize the interests of the Kremlin. Of course, it is important to tackle any analytical puzzle with all the tools available. However, it is equally important to use them correctly.

The problem here is that the concept of imperialism has experienced virtually no development in its application to the post-Soviet condition. Neither Vladimir Lenin nor any other classical Marxist theorist could have imagined the fundamentally new situation that arose with the collapse of Soviet socialism. His generation analyzed the imperialism of capitalist expansion and modernization. The post-Soviet condition, on the other hand, is a permanent crisis of contraction, demodernization and peripherization.

That does not mean that the analysis of Russian imperialism today does not make sense as such, but we need to do quite a bit of conceptual work to make it fruitful. A debate about whether contemporary Russia constitutes an imperialist country, with references to some twentieth-century textbook definitions, has only academic value. An explanatory concept, "imperialism", becomes an ahistorical and tautological descriptive label: "Russia is imperialist because it attacked a weaker neighbor"; "Russia attacked a weaker neighbor because it is imperialist," and so on.

By not finding an expansionism of Russian finance capital (considering the impact of sanctions on a highly globalized Russian economy and the Western assets of Russian "oligarchs"); the conquest of new markets (in Ukraine, which has failed to attract virtually any foreign direct investment, or FDI, except the money in tax havens of its own oligarchs); control over strategic resources (whatever mineral deposits are found on Ukrainian soil, Russia would need an expanding industry to absorb them or at least the possibility of selling them to more advanced economies, which, surprisingly, is severely restricted due to Western sanctions); or any other typically imperialist cause behind the Russian invasion, some analysts claim that war may possess the autonomous rationality of a "political" or "cultural" imperialism. This is ultimately an eclectic explanation. Our task is precisely to explain how the political and ideological reasons for the invasion reflect the interests of the ruling class. Otherwise, we will inevitably end up with simplistic theories of power-for-power or ideological fanaticism. Moreover, it would mean that the Russian

ruling class has been held hostage by a power-hungry maniac and a national chauvinist obsessed with the "historical mission" of restoring Russian greatness; or suffers from an extreme form of false awareness: sharing Putin's ideas about the NATO threat and his denial of the Ukrainian state, leading to policies that are objectively contrary to his interests.

I think this is wrong. Putin is neither a power-hungry maniac, nor an ideological fanatic (this kind of political phenomenon has been marginal throughout the post-Soviet space), nor a madman. By unleashing war in Ukraine, it protects the rational collective interests of the Russian ruling class. It is not uncommon for collective class interests to overlap only partially with, or even contradict, the interests of individual representatives of that class. But what kind of class really rules Russia and what are its collective interests?

Political capitalism in Russia and beyond

When asked which class rules Russia, most people on the left probably answer almost instinctively: the capitalist. The average citizen of the post-Soviet space would probably call them thieves, swindlers, or mobsters. A slightly more intellectual answer would be "oligarchs." It is easy to dismiss such responses as the false consciousness of those who do not understand their rulers in "proper" Marxist terms. However, a more productive path of analysis would be to think about why post-Soviet citizens emphasize theft and the close interdependence between private enterprise and the state that the word "oligarch" implies.

As with the discussion of modern imperialism, we must take seriously the specificity of the post-Soviet condition. Historically, "primitive accumulation" occurred in it through the process of centrifugal disintegration of the Soviet state and economy. Political scientist Steven Solnick called this process "[stealing the state](#)." Members of the new ruling class privatized state ownership (often for pennies) or were granted abundant opportunities to divert profits from formally public entities into private hands. They took advantage of informal relationships with state officials and loopholes, often intentionally designed, for massive tax evasion and capital flight, all while carrying out hostile takeovers of companies for the sake of quick profits with a short-term horizon.

The Russian Marxist economist Ruslan Dzarasov explained these practices with the concept of "[internal income](#)", emphasizing the rental nature of the income extracted by people with influence thanks to their control over the financial flows of companies, which depended on their relations with the holders of power. Certainly, these practices can also be found in other parts of the world, but their role in the formation and reproduction of the Russian ruling class is much more important because of the nature of the post-Soviet

transformation, which began with the centrifugal collapse of state socialism and the subsequent political-economic consolidation on a clientelist basis.

Other prominent thinkers, such as the Hungarian sociologist Ivan Szelényi, describe a similar phenomenon as "[political capitalism](#)." Following Max Weber, political capitalism is characterized by the exploitation of political offices to accumulate private wealth. I would call political capitalists the fraction of the capitalist class whose main competitive advantage derives from the selective privileges of the state, as opposed to capitalists whose advantage is based on technological innovations or particularly cheap labor. Political capitalists are not exclusive to post-Soviet countries, but they can flourish precisely in those areas where the state has historically played the dominant role in the economy and has accumulated immense capital, now open to private exploitation.

The presence of political capitalism is crucial to understanding why, when the Kremlin speaks of "sovereignty" or "spheres of influence," it is in no way the product of an irrational obsession with outdated concepts. At the same time, such rhetoric is not necessarily an articulation of Russia's national interest but a direct reflection of the class interests of Russian political capitalists. If the selective profits of the state are fundamental to the accumulation of their wealth, these capitalists have no choice but to encircle the territory where they exercise monopoly control, control that should not be shared with any other fraction of the capitalist class.

This interest in "marking territory" is not shared, or at least not as important to other types of capitalists. A long-standing controversy in Marxist theory centered around the question of, to paraphrase Göran Therborn, "[what the ruling class really does when it rules](#)." The conundrum was that the bourgeoisie in capitalist states does not usually run the state directly. The state bureaucracy generally enjoys substantial autonomy from the capitalist class, but serves it by establishing and enforcing rules that benefit capitalist accumulation. Political capitalists, by contrast, do not require general rules but much tighter control over those who make political decisions. Alternatively, they themselves hold political office and exploit them for private enrichment.

Many icons of classical corporate capitalism have benefited from state subsidies, preferential tax regimes, or various protectionist measures. However, unlike political capitalists, their own survival and expansion in the market rarely depends on the nominal set of individuals holding specific positions, on the parties in power or on specific political regimes. Transnational capital could and would survive without the nation-states in which its headquarters are located: remember the project of business cities floating on the sea

independent of any nation-state driven by Silicon Valley tycoons like Peter Thiel. Political capitalists cannot survive in global competition without at least some territory where they can reap internal rents without outside interference.

Class conflict in the post-Soviet periphery

It remains an open question whether political capitalism will be sustainable in the long run. After all, the state needs to take resources from somewhere to redistribute them among the political capitalists. As [Branko Milanovic](#) points out, corruption is an endemic problem of political capitalism, even when it is run by an effective, technocratic and autonomous bureaucracy. Unlike the most successful case of political capitalism, China, the institutions of the Soviet Communist Party disintegrated and were replaced by regimes based on personal patronage networks that functionally hid behind a formal façade of liberal democracy. This often goes against impulses to modernize and professionalize the economy. To put it crudely, you can't steal from the same source every time. It is necessary to transform into a different capitalist model to sustain the rate of profit, either through capital investments or intensified labor exploitation, or to expand to obtain more sources to extract internal income.

But both reinvestment and labor exploitation face structural obstacles in post-Soviet political capitalism. On the one hand, many are hesitant to make long-term investments when their business model and even real estate is fundamentally dependent on specific people in power. In general, it has been more appropriate to simply move profits to accounts abroad. On the other hand, post-Soviet labor was urbanized, educated, and not cheap. The region's relatively low wages were only possible thanks to the extensive material infrastructure and welfare institutions that the Soviet Union left as a legacy. That legacy places a huge burden on the state, but it's not that easy to abandon without undermining the support of key voter groups. Seeking to put an end to the rapacious rivalry between political capitalists that characterized the 1990s, Bonapartist leaders such as Putin and other post-Soviet autocrats limited the war of all against all by prioritizing the interests of some fractions of the elite and repressing others, without altering the foundations of political capitalism.

As rapacious expansion began to run up against internal boundaries, Russian elites sought to outsource it to sustain the rent rate by increasing sources of extraction. Hence the intensification of Russian-led integration projects, such as the Eurasian Economic Union. But they faced two obstacles. One was relatively minor: the local political capitalists. In Ukraine, for example, they were interested in cheap Russian energy, but also in defending

their own sovereign right to obtain internal revenue within their territory. They were able to instrumentalize anti-Russian nationalism to legitimize their claim to the disintegrating Ukrainian part of the Soviet state, but they failed to develop a distinct national development project.

The title of the famous book by the second Ukrainian president, Leonid Kuchma, [*Ukraine is not Russia*](#), it is a good illustration of this problem. If Ukraine is not Russia, what exactly is it? The universal failure of non-Russian post-Soviet political capitalists to overcome the crisis of hegemony made their government fragile and ultimately dependent on Russian support, as we have seen recently in Belarus and Kazakhstan.

La alianza entre el capital transnacional y las clases medias profesionales en el espacio postsoviético, representada políticamente por sociedades civiles ONGizadas pro-occidentales, dio una respuesta más convincente a la pregunta de qué debería levantarse exactamente sobre las ruinas del socialismo de estado degradado y desintegrado y presentó un obstáculo mayor para la integración postsoviética liderada por Rusia. Este constituyó el principal conflicto político en el espacio postsoviético que culminó con la invasión de Ucrania.

La estabilización bonapartista impuesta por Putin y otros líderes postsoviéticos fomentó el crecimiento de la clase media profesional. Una parte de ella compartía algunos privilegios del sistema, por ejemplo, si trabajaba en la burocracia o en empresas estatales estratégicas. Sin embargo, una gran parte de ella quedó excluida del capitalismo político. Sus principales oportunidades de ingresos, carrera y desarrollo de influencia política radican en las perspectivas de intensificar las conexiones políticas, económicas y culturales con Occidente. Al mismo tiempo, eran la vanguardia del poder blando occidental. La integración en las instituciones dirigidas por la UE y los EEUU presentó para esta clase media profesional un sucedaneo del proyecto de modernización de unirse tanto al capitalismo «apropiado» como al «mundo civilizado» en general. Esto necesariamente significaba romper con las élites post-soviéticas, las instituciones y las arraigadas mentalidades del período socialista de las «atrasadas» masas plebeyas que buscaban desesperadamente algo de estabilidad en mitad del desastre de la década de 1990.

La naturaleza profundamente elitista de este proyecto es la razón por la cual nunca llegó a ser verdaderamente hegemónico en ningún país postsoviético, incluso cuando fue impulsado por el nacionalismo histórico anti-ruso, como lo fue y sigue siendo incluso ahora, en la coalición negativa movilizadora contra la invasión rusa. Pero ello no significa que los ucranianos estén unidos en torno a una agenda positiva en particular. Al mismo

tiempo, ayuda a explicar la neutralidad escéptica del Sur Global cuando se le pide que se solidarice con un aspirante a gran potencia que quiere situarse al mismo nivel que otras grandes potencias occidentales (Rusia) o con una aspirante a la periferia de esas mismas grandes potencias que busca no tanto abolir el imperialismo como unirse a uno mejor (Ucrania). Para la mayoría de los ucranianos, esta es una guerra de autodefensa. Reconociendo esto, tampoco debemos olvidarnos de la brecha entre sus intereses y los intereses de aquellos que dicen hablar en su nombre, y que presentan agendas políticas e ideológicas muy particulares como si fueran universales y representativas de toda la nación, dando forma a la “autodeterminación” de una forma muy específica de clase.

La discusión sobre el papel de Occidente a la hora de allanar el camino para la invasión rusa se centra típicamente en la postura amenazante de la OTAN hacia Rusia. Pero si se tiene en cuenta el fenómeno del capitalismo político, podemos entender el conflicto de clases detrás de la expansión occidental y por qué la integración de Rusia en Occidente sin una transformación fundamental de esta última nunca podría haber funcionado. No había forma de integrar a los capitalistas políticos postsoviéticos en las instituciones dirigidas por Occidente que buscaban explícitamente eliminarlos como clase privándolos de su principal ventaja competitiva: los beneficios y privilegios selectivos otorgados por los estados postsoviéticos. La llamada agenda “anticorrupción” ha sido una parte vital, si no la más importante, de la visión de las instituciones occidentales para el espacio postsoviético, ampliamente compartida por la clase media pro-occidental de la región.

En público, el Kremlin trata de presentar la guerra como una batalla por la supervivencia de Rusia como nación soberana. Sin embargo, lo que de verdad está en juego es la supervivencia de la clase dominante rusa y su modelo de capitalismo político. La reestructuración “multipolar” del orden mundial resolvería el problema durante algún tiempo. Esta es la razón por la que el Kremlin está tratando de vender su proyecto de clase específico a las élites del Sur Global que obtendrían su propia “esfera de influencia” soberana basada en la pretensión de representar una “civilización”.

La crisis del bonapartismo postsoviético

Los intereses contradictorios de los capitalistas políticos postsoviéticos, las clases medias profesionales y el capital transnacional estructuraron el conflicto político que finalmente dio origen a la guerra actual. Sin embargo, la crisis de organización política de los capitalistas políticos exacerbó la amenaza que pende sobre ellos.

Los regímenes bonapartistas como el de Putin o el de Alexander Lukashenko en Bielorrusia se basan en un apoyo pasivo y despolitizado y obtienen su legitimidad de la

superación del desastre del colapso postsoviético, no del tipo de consentimiento activo que asegura la hegemonía política de la clase dominante. Tal gobierno autoritario personalista es fundamentalmente frágil debido al problema de la sucesión. No existen reglas o tradiciones claras para transferir el poder, ninguna ideología articulada a la que deba adherirse un nuevo líder, ningún partido o movimiento en el que pueda socializarse un nuevo líder. La sucesión representa el punto de vulnerabilidad donde los conflictos internos dentro de la élite pueden escalar a un grado peligroso, y cuando los levantamientos desde abajo tienen mayores posibilidades de éxito.

Estos levantamientos se han acelerado en la periferia de Rusia en los últimos años, incluida no solo la revolución de Euromaidán en Ucrania en 2014, sino también las revoluciones en Armenia, la tercera revolución en Kirguistán, el fallido [levantamiento de 2020 en Bielorrusia](#) y, más recientemente, el levantamiento en Kazajstán. En los dos últimos casos, el apoyo ruso resultó crucial para asegurar la supervivencia del régimen local. Dentro de la propia Rusia, las manifestaciones “Por unas elecciones justas” que tuvieron lugar en 2011 y 2012, así como las movilizaciones posteriores inspiradas por Alexei Navalny, no fueron insignificantes. En vísperas de la invasión, el malestar de los trabajadores iba en aumento, mientras que las encuestas mostraban una disminución de la confianza en Putin y un número creciente de personas que querían que se retirara. Peligrosamente, la oposición a Putin era mayor cuanto más jóvenes eran los encuestados. Ninguna de las llamadas «revoluciones Maidan» postsoviéticas planteó una amenaza existencial para los capitalistas políticos postsoviéticos como clase en sí mismos. Solo intercambiaron fracciones de la misma clase en el poder y, por lo tanto, solo intensificaron la crisis de representación política a la que fueron una reacción en primer lugar. Por eso estas protestas se han repetido con tanta frecuencia.

Las «revoluciones Maidan» son típicas revoluciones cívicas urbanas contemporáneas, como el politólogo [Mark Beissinger](#) las llamó. A partir de un material estadístico masivo, muestra que, a diferencia de las revoluciones sociales del pasado, las revoluciones cívicas urbanas solo debilitan temporalmente el gobierno autoritario y empoderan a las sociedades civiles de clase media. No traen consigo un orden político más fuerte o más igualitario, ni cambios democráticos duraderos. Por lo general, en los países postsoviéticos, las revoluciones tipo Maidan solo debilitaron al estado e hicieron que los capitalistas políticos locales fueran más vulnerables a la presión del capital transnacional, tanto directa como indirectamente a través de las ONGs pro-occidentales. Por ejemplo, en Ucrania, después de la revolución de Euromaidán, el FMI, el G-7 y la sociedad civil han impulsado

obstinadamente un conjunto de instituciones “anticorrupción”. No han sido capaces de denunciar ningún caso importante de corrupción en los últimos ocho años. Sin embargo, han institucionalizado la supervisión de empresas estatales clave y el sistema judicial por parte de ciudadanos extranjeros y activistas anticorrupción, exprimiendo así las oportunidades de los capitalistas políticos nacionales para cosechar rentas internas. Los capitalistas políticos rufobarsos tendrían una buena razón para estar nerviosos con los problemas de los otrora poderosos oligarcas de Ucrania.

Las consecuencias no deseadas de la consolidación de la clase dominante

Varios factores ayudan a explicar el momento de la invasión, así como el error de cálculo de Putin de una victoria rápida y fácil, como la ventaja temporal de Rusia en armas hipersónicas, la dependencia de Europa de la energía rusa, la represión de la llamada oposición pro-rusa en Ucrania, el estancamiento de los acuerdos de Minsk de 2015 tras la Guerra del Donbás, o el fracaso de los servicios de información rusos en Ucrania. Intento ahora esbozar a grandes rasgos el conflicto de clases detrás de la invasión, a saber, entre los capitalistas políticos interesados en la expansión territorial para sostener la tasa de renta, por un lado, y el capital transnacional aliado con las clases medias profesionales, que fueron excluidas del capitalismo político, por el otro.

El concepto marxista de imperialismo solo se puede aplicar de manera útil a la guerra actual si podemos identificar los intereses materiales detrás de ella. Al mismo tiempo, el conflicto va más allá del imperialismo ruso. El conflicto que ahora se resuelve en Ucrania con tanques, artillería y cohetes es el mismo conflicto que las porras policiales han reprimido en Bielorrusia y en la propia Rusia. La intensificación de la crisis de hegemonía postsoviética —la incapacidad de la clase dominante para desarrollar un liderazgo político, moral e intelectual sostenido— es la causa fundamental de la escalada de violencia.

La clase dominante rusa es diversa. Algunos sectores están sufriendo grandes pérdidas como resultado de las sanciones occidentales. Sin embargo, la autonomía parcial del régimen ruso respecto de la clase dominante le permite perseguir intereses colectivos a largo plazo independientemente de las pérdidas de representantes individuales o de grupos. Al mismo tiempo, la crisis de regímenes similares en la periferia rusa está exacerbando la amenaza existencial para la clase dominante rusa en su conjunto. Las fracciones más soberanistas de los capitalistas políticos rusos están tomando la delantera sobre los más «compradores», pero incluso estos últimos probablemente entiendan que, con la caída del régimen, todos ellos saldrían perdiendo.

In launching the war, the Kremlin sought to mitigate that threat for the foreseeable future, with the ultimate goal of "multipolar" restructuring of the world order. As [Branko Milanovic](#) suggests, the war lends legitimacy to Russia's disengagement from the West, despite the high costs, and at the same time makes it extremely difficult to reverse it after the annexation of even more Ukrainian territory. At the same time, the Russian ruling clique elevates the political organization and ideological legitimization of the ruling class to a higher level. There are already signs of a transformation towards a more consolidated, ideological and mobilizing authoritarian political regime in Russia, with explicit indications of China's more effective political capitalism as a model to follow. For Putin, this is essentially another stage in the post-Soviet consolidation process that began in the early 2000s by taming Russia's oligarchs. The ambiguous narrative about the need to prevent disaster and restore the "stability" of the first phase is now followed by the articulation of a conservative nationalism in the second phase (against the Ukrainians and the West, but also against the cosmopolitan "traitors" in Russia) as the only ideological narrative generally available in the context of the post-Soviet ideology crisis.

Some authors, such as sociologist Dylan John Riley, argue that a stronger hegemonic policy from above can help foster the growth of a stronger counter-hegemonic policy from below. If this is true, the Kremlin's shift towards a more ideological and mobilisational policy may create the conditions for a more organized, conscious and entrenched mass political opposition in the popular classes than any post-Soviet country has seen and ultimately favour a new revolutionary social wave. Such a development could, in turn, fundamentally change the balance of social and political forces in this part of the world, which could end the vicious circle in which it has been bogged down since the collapse of the Soviet Union some three decades ago.

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