

# ISRG Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (ISRGJAHSS)



**ISRG PUBLISHERS**

Abbreviated Key Title: ISRG J Arts Humanit Soc Sci

**ISSN: 2583-7672 (Online)**

Journal homepage: <https://isrgpublishers.com/isrgjahss>

Volume – II Issue-V (September-October) 2024

Frequency: Bimonthly



## RUSCISM IN RUSSIAN ACADEMIC DISCOURSE

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| **Received:** 14.10.2024 | **Accepted:** 19.10.2024 | **Published:** 20.10.2024

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### Abstract

*The article examines the stance of Russian scientific circles on the concept of «ruscism», a term widely used by Ukrainian and Western scholars to describe an authoritarian and ultranationalist ideology emerging in Russia. While early critiques of Vladimir Putin's policies were common in Russia, the annexation of Crimea in 2014 marked a shift, with much of the intellectual elite increasingly aligning with nationalist views. Russian researchers largely avoid or dismiss the term «ruscism». Only a few scholars, often working outside Russia, recognize ruscism as a form of fascism and chauvinism, seeing it as a hybrid ideology blending ultranationalism, imperialism, militarism, and totalitarianism. These elements are used to legitimize Russia's aggressive foreign policy and imperial ambitions. The article highlights the denial and fear within Russia's scientific community regarding this phenomenon, contrasting it with the recognition seen among researchers outside the country.*

**Keywords:** ruscism, Russia, Putin, nazism, putinism, Russo-Ukrainian War

### Problem Statement

The collapse of the USSR and the «parade of sovereignties» instilled hope in the civilized world that the communist regime and its ideology in Russia had been finally dismantled and forgotten. Later, young second president, V. Putin, was often seen in the West as a beacon of democratic reforms, capable of guiding the country toward modernization. However, with each passing year, these hopes gradually faded, and the number of critics, both within

Russia and abroad, continued to grow. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 became a turning point, making the deformation of the Russian political regime evident.

Both Ukrainian and Western scholars observed these developments mostly from the outside, attempting to interpret the transformations in Russia's regime and ideology based on available facts and the state's aggressive policies. Meanwhile, Russian researchers had the

unique opportunity to witness these processes from within, offering them a distinct perspective on Vladimir Putin's policies. Analyzing their assessments and views is crucial for understanding the internal mechanisms that sustain the Russian regime, as well as for exploring how Russian intellectuals themselves perceive the transformation of the state ideology. **The purpose of this article** is to analyze the chronology of studying the deformation of political ideology and political regime by Russian researchers and their opinions about "ruscism".

**The analysis of recent research and publications** demonstrates that considerable attention has already been devoted to historiographical studies of the phenomenon of ruscism in Ukrainian academic circles [24], as well as in the works of Western scholars [23]. However, to date, there is an almost complete lack of research dedicated to the historiography of the study of ruscism within Russia itself.

**The main part of the research.** Before Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, ruscism as a topic for scientific research was not popular in the global scientific community. Most scientific works on the topic of ruscism before February 2022 were published by Ukrainian researchers.

The study of ruscism in Ukraine began with the examination of Putinism as its prototype. In 2009, O. Bulba and M. Tsyurupa first mentioned the term «Putinism» in Ukrainian scientific literature, characterizing it as V. Putin's style of governance with signs of modern authoritarianism [2]. In 2010, first mention of term «ruscism» as Russian indeology appeared, in article by journalist O. Kryvydyk [16]. After the beginning of Russian aggression in 2014, the term «ruscism» was finally established in Ukrainian scientific discourse. Y. Demyanchuk in 2014 already considered ruscism as a new form of Nazism [5]. In 2015, the term «ruscism» was included in the encyclopedic reference dictionary «Modern Political Lexicon» [15]. The largest number of scientific works on the topic of ruscism was published after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February of 2022. In general, the views of Ukrainian researchers on ruscism evolved from understanding it as a specific style of V. Putin's rule to interpreting it as a full-fledged ideology and political regime close to fascism, with characteristic features of imperialism, chauvinism, totalitarianism, and militarism. [24]

The chronology of the evolution of the study of ruscism in Western academic circles demonstrates a gradual transition from cautious assessments to more critical views. In 1998, American political scientist A. J. Gregor [10] first drew attention to the deformation of the Russian political regime, but still avoided equating Russian nationalism with fascism. In the 2000s, researchers often used the term «Putinism» to characterize the Russian political system, avoiding more radical definitions [4]. A significant turn occurred after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, when Western scholars began to notice more signs of authoritarianism and neo-imperialism in Russian politics [28]. However, the real breakthrough in scientific discourse happened after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Then, American historian T. Snyder was one of the first to use the term «ruscism», characterizing it as a mixture of fascism and neo-imperialism [27]. After this, more and more researchers began to openly talk about the fascist features of the Russian regime, although some, like M. Laruelle, still avoided direct parallels with fascism [17][18]. In general, there is a tendency towards a more critical analysis of the Russian political system and ideology, especially among

researchers from Central and Eastern Europe, who historically had experience of Russian occupation. [23]

The earliest use of the term «ruscism» in the Russian information space was an article by Russian journalist M. Andreev titled «Ordinary Ruscism», which was published in 1990 in the magazine «Ogonyok». However, in M. Andreev's interpretation, the word «ruscism» (that is pronounced «rashism» in Russian) is not formed from the combination of the words «Russia» and «fascism», but from the surname of Karem Rash - a Russian militaristic publicist and ideologist who was known for his radical views. The author is critical of K. Rash's views. According to the author, K. Rash perceives war as a blessing and praises it, regardless of casualties and losses. He ironically mocks Rash's claims about the supposedly beneficial impact of the war in Afghanistan on Soviet society. M. Andreev denies K. Rash's assertion that the army is culture and should educate society. According to M. Andreev, glorifying war and occupation of foreign territories is not a sign of patriotism, but rather of a militaristic worldview. The author calls K. Rash's views «a crude, clumsy, cumbersome manipulation of readers» and compares his statements to the newspeak from Orwell's dystopia «1984». M. Andreev criticizes Rash for romanticizing war, exaggerating and distorting historical facts, as well as glorifying Stalinist repressions. Andreev sees in ruscism a dangerous variety of militaristic, anti-democratic, and anti-humanist worldview. He directly calls Rash's views a manifestation of «militaristic thinking», which contradicts people's aspirations for peaceful life. The author uncompromisingly rejects these ideas and emphasizes that war should be excluded as an instrument of state policy, and society should develop on humanistic, democratic principles. [1]

When V. Putin first took office as President of the Russian Federation in 2000, he was a new face both for the Russian people and for the global political and scientific community. The emergence of the new Russian leader became the subject of close attention and deep analysis among Russian and foreign researchers. Assessments of his rise to power varied significantly: some scholars saw it as optimistic signs of democratization and modernization of Russia, while others predicted a return to Soviet totalitarianism and the rolling back of democratic transformations. Some believed that Putin was a reformer capable of taking the country to a qualitatively new level of development, while others expressed concern about the curtailment of democratic freedoms and the strengthening of authoritarian tendencies. Let's analyze in chronological order the evolution of assessments of Putin's policy in Russian socio-political discourse.

In 2000, L. Shevtsova (Carnegie Moscow Center) expressed critical views on the policy of the Russian head of state in the first stage of his rule. The author points out that V. Putin strengthened the «vertical of power», limiting independent media, strengthening central control over the regions, and reinforcing the role of power structures in the state. Such a policy, in her opinion, was aimed at forming a new authoritarian regime, where all power is concentrated in the hands of the president. At the same time, L. Shevtsova notes that these actions of V. Putin met resistance from regional leaders, oligarchs, and part of the liberal intelligentsia, so the president had to resort to compromises, which undermined his idea of the «vertical of power». The author skeptically assessed V. Putin's ability to create an effective system of «drive belt», as this requires harsh measures that the head of the Russian state, in the author's opinion, is afraid to apply. Moreover, the concentration of responsibility in the hands of the president threatens the gradual

delegitimization of his power due to the inability to solve complex socio-political and economic problems. L. Shevtsova at that time (2000) was skeptical about the prospect of establishing a stable authoritarian regime in Russia, believing that this attempt would most likely end in failure [26]. As we can see, her prognostic hypothesis not only did not come true, but the characteristics of the Russian regime went beyond neo-authoritarianism towards neo-totalitarianism.

Already in the first year of V. Putin's rule, the term «Putinism» was first used by Russian political scientist A. Piontkovsky. According to him, «Putinism is the highest and final stage of bandit capitalism in Russia. The stage at which, as one half-forgotten classic (Stalin) said, the bourgeoisie throws overboard the banner of democratic freedoms and human rights. Putinism is war, it is the 'consolidation' of the nation on the basis of hatred towards some ethnic group, it is an attack on freedom of speech and information zombification, it is isolation from the outside world and further economic degradation». [22]

In the same year 2000, L. Byzov analyzes the transformation of the political regime in Russia at the turn of the millennium. In his opinion, the collapse of the «liberal project» in Russia in the 1990s opened new perspectives for the country and its elite. A demand was formed for strong and consolidated power capable of putting the country on a course of organic, systemic modernization of society and economy. This means a demand «for increasing the level of subjectivity», that is, for the formation of political forces that will represent national, rather than clan or group interests. From an ideological point of view, these forces can only be oriented towards the political center, in its slightly more left or right versions. The author notes that Putin's power, which is replacing the «Yeltsin regime», was qualitatively new and will have a different social base and priorities. Putin will rely on the union of the «people» and supreme power against the political class as a whole, which is traditional for Russian political history. Thus, the author sees in Putin's rise to power the germs of a fundamentally different political mechanism in Russia - a union of the «people» and supreme power against the oligarchic system that formed under the previous regime [3].

In 2001, Russian political scientist and historian G. Diligensky analyzes V. Putin's policy and its impact on the prospects of democratization of the Russian Federation. From the researcher's point of view, Putin is neither a consistent supporter of the authoritarian regime nor a supporter of democracy. Putin's ideology is based on two main postulates: the priority of strong state power and the need to develop a market economy. At the same time, V. Putin demonstrates the pragmatism of a bureaucrat, avoiding a decisive choice between authoritarianism and democracy. The author argues that the absence of a clear political program and value orientations in Putin, as well as the dominance of paternalistic attitudes in Russian society, create favorable conditions for strengthening authoritarian tendencies. In particular, the researcher points to V. Putin's desire to strengthen the vertical of executive power, limit media freedom, and conserve the existing party system, which, in his opinion, poses a threat to democratic institutions. At the same time, the author does not rule out the possibility of the evolution of the Russian Federation's political regime in a democratic direction, but sees extremely weak prerequisites for this in modern conditions [6].

In 2002, Russian historian T. Parkhalina, analyzing Russia's foreign policy, states that under V. Putin's presidency, this policy is

characterized by a certain ambivalence. On the one hand, it has become more pragmatic unlike the emotionality of Yeltsin's times, but this pragmatism is dictated by not always justified desire to restore the status of a great power, without taking into account the real state of the economy. The author notes that Russia is trying to restore spoiled relations with the West, while opposing Western Europe to the USA. Russia seeks to actively join international organizations such as G7, WTO, and OSCE, but at the same time establishes relations with «problematic regimes» unacceptable to these institutions. T. Parkhalina believes that Russia has not yet formed a clear strategic vision of its place in the world and Europe, which causes reactive rather than proactive response to foreign policy events. From the author's point of view, Russia's national interests should be built not on geopolitical, but on socio-economic foundations, that is, the priority should be the development of the internal «Russian house». Russia's adaptation to new foreign policy realities, in particular the expansion of NATO and the EU to the East, requires it to be more flexible and pragmatic in relations with Western partners [21].

In 2003, M. Rostovsky wrote in his article «Three Years with Putin» that under V. Putin, a new era of «Brezhnev stagnation» began in Russia, where the government strengthens and tries to establish total control over the media and political life. According to the researcher, the Kremlin aims to obtain a constitutional majority in the new Duma, which will allow changes to the Constitution, for example, to extend V. Putin's presidential powers. The researcher critically assesses the settlement of the situation in Chechnya, believing that the Kremlin incorrectly approaches the problem by imposing a presidential form of government on the republic contrary to local traditions. He warns that this could lead to a new escalation of the conflict. Rostovsky also criticizes V. Putin's economic policy, calling Russia a «raw material appendage and points to the country's excessive dependence on oil and gas exports. In his opinion, the government is not doing enough reforms to diversify the economy, and the course chosen by V. Putin may lead Russia to «stagnant» problems [25].

In 2004, Russian political scientist V. Fedorov argues that under V. Putin's presidency, a rather specific situation in political communication has developed in Russia. He writes that the space of political discourse was actually monopolized personally by V. Putin, which was a consequence of the rapid decline of alternative ideological projects that dominated in the 90s. As the researcher emphasizes, this was caused by the obvious inability of opposition forces to solve the country's key problems, which cleared the way for strengthening V. Putin's positions. Fedorov adheres to the opinion that today the presidential power remains the only legitimate institution in the eyes of the population, and V. Putin himself personifies the national project that enjoys the greatest public support. At the same time, within this Putin consensus, the political scientist sees significant potential for political discourse, which only the president himself is capable of realizing so far. According to Fedorov, the prospects for political communication in the era of V. Putin and in the following years will depend on whether other political forces will be able to act not contrary to, but within the framework of the Putin consensus, relying on its key elements. [8] Summarizing the interim results of V. Putin's first presidential term, we can already observe that researchers had quite ambiguous assessments of the nature of the political regime being formed. Some researchers, such as L. Shevtsova and M. Rostovsky, were skeptical about the prospects of establishing a stable authoritarian regime in Russia, but at the same time saw in

V. Putin's actions a threat to democratic institutions due to the desire to strengthen the vertical of power and limit media freedom. At the same time, others, like L. Byzov, considered V. Putin's coming to power as the beginnings of a fundamentally different political mechanism - an alliance of the people and the government against the oligarchic system formed under the previous regime. G. Diligensky also emphasized that V. Putin is not a consistent supporter of either authoritarianism or democracy, and his policy is pragmatic, which creates conditions for strengthening authoritarian tendencies. Common to most researchers was concern about the concentration of excessive power in the hands of the president, which in their opinion threatened the gradual delegitimization of his power due to the inability to solve complex socio-political and economic problems. In addition, experts drew attention to a certain inconsistency in Russia's foreign policy under V. Putin, when it sought to restore the status of a great power, but not always thoughtfully, without taking into account the real state of the economy. After V. Putin's first term, the term Putinism began to appear more frequently in Russian scientific circles. In 2004, an article by political scientist A. Migranyan titled "What is 'Putinism'?" was published. The author of the article believes that the regime established by V. Putin significantly differs from B. Yeltsin's regime, which is mentioned as unconsolidated and oligarchic. According to the researcher, V. Putin's regime is aimed at restoring the role of the state as an institution that expresses the common interests of citizens, capable of controlling state financial, administrative, and information resources, establishing unified rules for all participants in economic and political processes. The author calls this regime plebiscitary-democratic with a charismatic leader at the helm, who has direct support from the masses, is able to mobilize them and overcome bureaucratic resistance. At the same time, the author notes that such a regime creates a threat of bureaucratic authoritarianism in case of leveling conflicts between politicians, bureaucracy, and legislative power, which are necessary for the dynamic development of a democratic political system. The researcher concludes that for the further evolution of V. Putin's regime towards consolidated democracy, it is important to overcome the two-headedness of executive power, separate the state bureaucratic apparatus from business, and form an effective system of checks and balances between government institutions [20].

In 2008, Russian historian Y. Igritsky analyzes the phenomenon of Putinism in the Russian Federation and its connection with the previous Yeltsinism. The author concludes that Putinism largely became a continuation of the system that developed during B. Yeltsin's presidency. The main feature of this phenomenon, according to the researcher's assessment, is the close intertwining of the political elite, bureaucracy, and business, which led to the formation of a strong symbiosis of power and capital. This symbiosis proved to be stronger than any attempts by V. Putin to overcome Yeltsinism and form a new system of socio-political relations. Y. Igritsky emphasizes that the central government plays a leading role in this system, as the political elite and business largely depend on it, unlike the previous period. The article notes that Putinism is characterized by the preservation and even strengthening of the vertical of power, corruption, nepotism, and abuse of state resources, which indicates the inability of the ruling elite to offer adequate responses to the challenges of the time and ensure sustainable socio-economic development of the country [13].

In 2009, Russian sociologist L. Gudkov examined the nature and features of the political regime in Russia, which he denotes by the term Putinism. In his conviction, this regime does not fit into traditional concepts of totalitarianism or classical authoritarianism, but is a new phenomenon that at that time had not yet received an adequate conceptual definition in political science. Examining its characteristic features in detail, the author emphasizes that Putinism is based not on traditional institutions of power, but on informal mechanisms of influence, in particular on the dominance of special services, which actually subordinated formal state institutions to themselves. This system of power is not interested in modernization and changes, but instead is aimed at maintaining control and protecting the narrow corporate interests of the ruling elites. Thus, according to L. Gudkov, Putinism is a system of decentralized use of power resources of the state apparatus to ensure private, clan-group interests, which makes it impossible to carry out genuine democratic transformations in the Russian Federation. The author emphasizes that the legitimacy of this regime remains quite problematic and mostly inertial, which in perspective calls into question its stability and the possibility of peaceful transfer of power [11].

The annexation of Crimea in 2014 became a turning point in the assessment of V. Putin's regime both in the international arena and among scientific circles. Most of the world's political and scientific community condemned these actions, recognizing them as a violation of international law norms, while Russia insisted on the legitimacy of its actions, justifying them with historical justice and protection of the rights of the Russian-speaking population. The annexation acted as a catalyst for Ukrainian and Western researchers in reassessing Russian foreign policy and ideology, which began to be perceived as aggressive, revisionist, and aimed at restoring imperial ambitions. At the same time, in Russia, the annexation of Crimea received significant support both among the population and among the academic environment, which mostly approved the actions of the country's leadership and strengthened its positions in ultranationalist ideas, which became an important element of state ideology. This contributed to further polarization of views in the world and strengthening of the authoritarian-conservative course within Russia.

In 2014, Russian philosopher and political scientist Alexander Dugin, one of the leading ideologists of modern Russian nationalism and neo-Eurasianism, characterized the annexation of Crimea as a positive phenomenon for the Russian people, calling this process the Russian spring. He argued that the events in Crimea had symbolic significance, designed to awaken the Russian spirit and restore historical justice. Dugin saw the annexation of Crimea as the first step towards Russia's geopolitical revival and the formation of a new world order in which Russia plays a central, sacred role. Already in 2014, A. Dugin called for preparing for the final battle with Ukraine. [7]

In the same year, Russian political scientist, Doctor of Historical Sciences S. Karaganov considers the annexation of Crimea as a key moment in Russia's foreign policy, marking the end of the post-Cold War era. He believes that this step was a response to the long-term ignoring of Russian interests by the West, in particular the expansion of NATO and sanctions, which Russia perceived as a threat to national security. Karaganov justifies the annexation as part of the strategy to protect the Russian world and strengthen Russia's sovereignty, seeing it as an act of restoring historical justice and geopolitical balance. [14]

In 2017, Russian Doctor of Philosophical Sciences A. Timoshchuk denied the definition of the term ruscism as any specific phenomenon or ideology, and considered it only in the context of geopolitical accusations directed against Russia. The researcher notes that this term is used by critics of Russia to describe the state's aggressive foreign policy, especially in the context of the Ukrainian-Russian conflict. A. Timoshchuk emphasizes that Russia is the victor over fascism, and this victory has moral and political weight that opposes accusations of fascism. [9]

In June 2022, Russian culturologist and literary scholar, Professor M. Lipovetsky gave a lecture on ruscism and its origins. Among the features he distinguishes in ruscism is etatism - the sacred significance given to the state and, surprisingly, to institutions of violence. This is manifested in the dominance on Russian television of images of law enforcement officers, who appear not only as victims but also as heroes who evoke admiration. Such ideology, according to Lipovetsky, is specific and contradictory - it is able to simultaneously hold incompatible statements in consciousness. An important element of ruscism is also elements of Soviet nationalism, nostalgia for the USSR and imperial greatness, conservatism and idealization of the Soviet era, in particular the cult of the Great Patriotic War. This nostalgia for the past often takes aestheticized and commercialized forms, creating the impression that good is in the past, and the present should only imitate it. In addition, ruscism absorbs the resentment of left forces, longing for Soviet equality and empire, represented, in particular, by E. Limonov and Z. Prilepin. All these elements form a complex ideological system that often masquerades as irony and humor, but transmits very dangerous ideas. Thus, in the researcher's interpretation, ruscism is a multi-layered manifestation of Russian culture, which combines elements of state authoritarianism, the Soviet past, aggressive nationalism and is disguised as an ironic form of presentation, but at the same time justifies the most odious manifestations of Russian aggression [19].

In 2023, Russian Doctor of Philological Sciences G. Huseynov analyzed the concepts of Putinism and ruscism. The author defines Putinism as a personalized name for V. Putin's regime, which does not cover all aspects of modern Russian ideology and social support for the regime. Putinism describes a power system built on authoritarianism, but is not a unique product of one leader. Citing the example of the term Stalinism, the author notes that the personification of regimes is inaccurate, as it places responsibility on specific leaders, ignoring systemic flaws. Therefore, the use of the term Putinism is not a full description of the ideology and social processes taking place in Russia. Instead, the author prefers the term ruscism, which more accurately reflects the mass support for the ideology of the Russian world, which manifested itself in the war against Ukraine and other aggressive actions of Russia. Huseynov emphasizes that ruscism is a hybrid ideology that combines nationalism, imperialism and militant rhetoric aimed at justifying aggression against other states. [12]

## Conclusions

The position of Russian researchers regarding the phenomenon of ruscism is much less defined compared to Ukrainian and Western colleagues. While in the early 2000s, Vladimir Putin's policy was often criticized in Russian scientific circles, after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, a significant part of the population and intellectual elite began to support his actions, gradually inclining towards ultranationalist ideas. It is important to note that Russian scientists almost completely ignore or avoid using the term ruscism, refusing

to recognize it as a separate phenomenon. For example, A. Timoshchuk considers this term only as a geopolitical accusation from the West, not giving it independent meaning. He defines ruscism as a rhetorical tool aimed at discrediting Russia, which demonstrates a deep ideological alienation from Western discourse.

Those few Russian researchers who dare to call ruscism a form of fascism and chauvinistic ideology usually work outside of Russia. In the Russian scientific environment itself, there is either complete denial of the existence of this phenomenon, or fear of openly discussing it. In those few works where ruscism is recognized, researchers describe it as a hybrid ideology that combines elements of ultranationalism, imperialism, militarism, and totalitarianism. Ruscism is formed on the basis of the cult of the state and its power structures, the heroization of war, as well as nostalgia for the Soviet past, which leads to the militarization of public consciousness and justification of aggressive policy.

Thus, among those Russian researchers who recognize ruscism as a phenomenon, there is a consensus that it is an ideology that combines features of authoritarianism, nationalism, militarism, and chauvinism, and serves as a tool for legitimizing Russia's aggressive foreign policy and its imperial ambitions.

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