Political Legitimacy in Contemporary Russia 'from below': 'Pro-Putin' Stances, the Normative Split and Imagining Two Russias.

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Abstract

This paper explores how urban Russians perceive, negotiate, challenge and reaffirm the political configuration of the country and leadership in terms of the 'imagined nation'. Based on around 100 interviews in three Russian cities, three main pillars appear to prop up the imagined 'pro-Putin' social contract: (i) the belief that 'delegating' all power into the hands of the President is the best way to discipline and mould state and society; (ii) the acceptance of Putin's carefully crafted image as a 'real man', juxtaposed against negative views of the Russian 'national character'; (iii) the internalisation of a pro-Putin mythology on a 'government of saviours' that delivers normality and redeems a 'once-ruined' nation. The paper shows that those who reject these pillars do so due to differing views on what constitutes 'normality' in politics. This normative split is examined over a number of issues, leading to a discussion of internal orientalism and the limited success of state media agitation in winning over the sceptical.

Key words

Political legitimacy – Soviet legacies – Politics of emotion – Pragmatic Politics – internal orientalism – normality in politics

Introduction

One of the central questions in Russian politics today is how, in a neo-authoritarian setting devoid of open electoral competition, the 'Putin system' is able to renew and refresh its legitimacy. As we enter Vladimir Putin's fourth term as president of the Russian Federation, presidential approval ratings have fallen from the euphoric highs of 2014.[1] Meanwhile, other polling suggests rather than sympathy or admiration, indifference towards the president is on the rise,[2] while around

[1] After peaking at 88% in 2014, approval ratings hit a low of 66% before levelling off at 70% in 2019. https://www.levada.ru/2019/11/18/vladimir-putin-7/..

[2] https://www.levada.ru/2019/11/18/vladimir-putin-7/..

40% would not like to see the President continue in his post after 2024. In addition, a 2017 poll showed only 25% thought Putin was capable of carrying out serious reform.[3] Given this polling and the diverse range often successful protest movements across Russia in 2018-2019, it would appear the Russian government is facing a new set of challenges in the quest to retain its apparently high levels of legitimacy. It has been argued that the narrative on 'making Russia great again' and standing up to the West has run its course and is wearing thin, resulting in an increased demand for a focus on domestic politics.[4] Shifts in state discourse since the 2018 elections suggest the Kremlin also sees the need to switch focus from foreign policy to domestic concerns.[5]

Moving from the macro-picture of big numbers to the micro-picture of deep narratives, this paper examines the ways ordinary people imagine the relationship between leader, state organs and people. In studying political legitimacy 'from below', I proceed from the notion that the 'Putin system' is 'co-constructed' through processes involving the leader himself, his millions of supporters and his many opponents.[6] While this system undoubtedly relies on material and coercive measures to retain power, the focus of this paper is more on the narrative and ideational sources of stability and legitimacy in the urban population.[7] These narratives are politically salient as they show not only how the system is 'normalised' and/or contested, but also how people justify inaction and inertia in their political stances.

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[3] On the number not wishing to see Putin after 2024 see: https://www.levada.ru/2019/07/30/pochti-40-rossiyan-ne-hoteli-by-videt-putina-prezidentom-posle-2024-goda/. When asked to select a capable reformer from a list of 13 prominent politicians, 61% chose none from the list as opposed to 25% for Putin https://carnegie.ru/2017/12/05/ru-pub-74906 page 21. In 2019, Putin's share dropped to 16% https://carnegie.ru/2019/11/06/ru-pub-80273 (page 10).

[4] https://carnegie.ru/2019/11/06/ru-pub-80273 (page 1).

[5] A series of targets in demographics, economic growth, reducing poverty and improving education and housing were announced in March 2018. See: https://tass.ru/politika/5182019 and http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/59863

[6] Samuel Greene and Graeme Robertson, *Putin v. the People: The Perilous Politics of a Divided Russia* (Yale University Press, 2019): 54.

[7] Paul Goode and David Stroup, Everyday Nationalism: Constructivism for the Masses, *Social Science Quarterly* 96, no 3 (2015): 725. Karine Clément, Social Imagination and Solidarity in Precarious Times: The Case of Lower Class People in Post-Soviet Russia, *Sotsiologicheskoe Obozrenie / Russian Sociological Review* 16, no 4 (2017): 65. Greene, Robertson, *Putin v. the People.*

Below, based on interviews from three of Russia's largest cities, I examine how deeply-held ideas of what is 'normal' reinforce an imagined social order in the minds of Putin supporters. In my interview data, a rather moderate, pro-regime discourse competes with more critical interpretations for the allegiance of a largely apolitical and pragmatic core group. As will be seen below, the pro-regime narrative was generally not based on strong ideological positions; the post-2012 'traditional values' discourse was not typically reproduced.[8] Instead, a pro-Putin political stance on the level of the individual appears to rest not on age or socio-economic status, but on a set of common positions regarding what constitutes a 'normal' state, a 'normal' leader and 'normal' goals for Russia. These positions are usually buttressed by (a) still-active memories of Russia's traumatic transition out of communism (1988-1998) and (b) continued use of the late Soviet period as a benchmark for 'normality' in Russian society and politics.

Conversely, the key difference among those who did not have a pro-Putin stance was in their normative frames; rather than taking the late Soviet period as 'normal' and the wild nineties as 'abnormal', they framed normality in terms of the 'modern, developed' countries of the 21st century. Such respondents at best may provisionally 'approve' of Putin in terms of indifference, pragmatism or fear that all the current alternatives to Putin are more dangerous than leaving things the way they are. Indeed, an internal orientalism was uncovered, which imagines Russia as divided into a 'cultured' minority and a pro-Putin, state-media consuming, 'unenlightened majority'. This imaginary of a passive and servile population led by a new Tsar may reinforce a sense of hopelessness and, paradoxically, reinforce the political status-quo.

[8] As the interviewees for this study are all from three large cities, and electoral data shows support for Putin is higher outside of these large cities in the countryside and smaller cities, it should be underlined that the conclusions of this paper cannot may not apply outside of Russia's largest cities.

Below, the normative split in the urban population is found across a number of issues, shedding light on the dynamics of 'exit, voice and loyalty'[9] in contemporary Russia. As I have argued elsewhere, a hegemonic narrative on geopolitics and greatpowerness has been effective at overcoming these normative splits at least over 2013-2016 (the period of my fieldwork).[10] Below, the focus is mainly on deep narratives on domestic politics which may become increasingly salient for Russian politics if the unifying discourse on geopolitics loses its potency in the next political cycle (2018-2024).

Theorising political legitimacy

Political legitimatisation is often presented as a process whereby the political domination of elites over the masses is naturalised. This paradigm has deep-rooted Marxist origins, and was developed further by Antonio Gramsci ('Hegemony')[11] and Pierre Bourdieu ('Habitas' or 'doxic' knowledge).[12] Today, Lilia Shevtsova, Lev Gudkov and Masha Gessen reproduce elements of this tradition in their analyses of Russian politics. While Gessen[13] argues democracy's failure in Russia and the success of the 'mafia state' can be explained by the persistence of 'homo Sovieticus' and a 'totalitarian society', Shevtsova presents Russians as 'an atomized people' that is 'brainwashed' and at the mercy of propagandists who believe that 'if an action is deemed necessary, ideas will be found to justify it'.[14] This kind of argument presents the great majority of Russian people as passive

[9] In other words, unpacking the motives and discourses behind political stances such as (passive) resistance and disengagement, fealty and tacit acceptance. Albert Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty. Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States.* (Harvard University Press, 1970).

[10] In my interviews overall, the discourse on foreign policy, geopolitics and Russia's role in the world appears to be reproduced regardless of the normative frames preferred by the person. Despite conflicting normative frames of reference, respondents could agree on the correctness of Putin's foreign policy. The emotional narrative on Russia's quest for rightful status on the world stage appears to act as a restraint on more anti-regime stances and encourages previously passive supporters of Putin into more active stances of support, as well as transforming the apathetic and pragmatic into passive regime supporters, and shifting those critical of the system into a more neutral or status-quo position. (Blackburn, Matthew (2018) *National Identity, Nationalist Discourse and the Imagined Nation in post-Soviet Russia.* PhD thesis, University of Glasgow).

[11] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

[12] Pierre Bourdieu, Rethinking the State: Genesis and Structure of the Bureaucratic Field. *Sociological Theory* 12, No 1 (1994): 1–18.

[13] Masha Gessen, *The Future is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia,* New York: Riverhead Books, 2017.

[14] Lilia Shevtsova, Forward to the Past in Russia. *Journal of Democracy* 26, no 2 (2015): 25.

and subservient, avoidant of politics, or as Gudkov puts it, 'paternalistically minded, authoritarian, cynical and materialistic'.[15] As a result, Russians are unable to live according to the ideals and standards of Western, liberal societies, something that facilitates the regime's efforts to control and manipulate public opinion and dooms Russia to a repeat of its totalitarian past.[16] While aspects of this domination analysis goes too far in its negative caricature of the Russian people, this view of Russian society is nonetheless influential in the Russian intelligentsia and has spilled over into everyday discourse, appearing as an important theme in my interview data.

In contrast to the domination paradigm, political legitimacy can also be studied from the point of view of group interests. This follows the social psychology principle that, while people do crave individual freedom and identities, they simultaneously desire membership of and solidarity with a larger group.[17] By successfully employing group identity to achieve legitimization, the political leadership earns the right to speak on behalf of a collective. Thus, political legitimacy emerges from: 'the creation, co-ordination and control of a shared sense of "us"'.[18] As Valerie Sperling pointed out in her study of Putin-era Russia, a variety of forces deploy 'culturally familiar norms' as a resource in the construction of 'believable arguments' that 'justify their ongoing power position'.[19]

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[15] Lev Gudkov (2013) Russian Cynicism: Symptom of a Stagnant Society. *Open Democracy*, 22 October 2013. Available at: https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/lev-gudkov/ russian-cynicism-symptom-of-stagnant-society (accessed 20 November 2017) (cited in Clément, *Social Imagination and Solidarity*, 65).

[16] This 'domination due to totalitarian legacies' paradigm is influenced by Hannah Arendt's writings and dissidents such as Alexander Zinoviev and Joseph Brodsky, and was developed further by Yuri Levada's team of sociologists from the late eighties onwards. As a form of analysis, it tends to stigmatize and castigate the retrograde Russian people rather than examining their political stances in more neutral terms. Here I would strongly agree with Gulnaz Sharafutdinova's point that 'analytical frameworks appreciating the agency, creativity, and choice as something intrinsic to individuals is more enabling and enlightening when thinking about Russia's future than those that perceive individuals and society as a product of the dominant structure (such as the totalitarian state)'. See: Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, Was There a "Simple Soviet" Person? Debating the Politics and Sociology of "Homo Sovieticus", *Slavic Review* 78, no 1 (2019): 174.

[17] Fielding, K. S., Hogg, M. A. Social Identity, Self-categorization, and Leadership: A Field Study of Small Interactive Groups. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 1 (1997): 39-51. Haslam, S. A. *Psychology in Organizations: The Social Identity Approach* (London: Sage, 2001). Turner, J. C., Oakes, P. J., Haslam, S. A., & McGarty, C. A. Self and Collective: Cognition and Social Context. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 20 (1994): 454–463.

[18] Haslam, S. A., *Psychology in Organizations,* 85.

[19] Valery Sperling, *Sex, Politics, and Putin: Political Legitimacy in Russia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014): 3.

In this paper, I take a bottom-up approach to this dynamic in examining how ordinary people discuss politics, what has been termed 'pragmatic everyday politics'.[20] These discussions link everyday life with politics and society on the national level, something that can provide the foundations of future politicization.[21] This is also known as 'vernacular knowledge'[22] in politics: common-sense 'unwritten guidelines that help communities read the landscape of strategic action'.[23] Examining the 'vernacular knowledge' of ordinary citizens from a representative slice of urban Russia, this paper offers an agent-centred view of legitimacy that is 'negotiated, mobilised, reproduced, and argumentatively validated' by groups of people in natural social settings.[24]

Methodology

This paper is based on over one-hundred interviews in Moscow, St. Petersburg and Nizhny Novgorod from May 2014 to September 2016. Given the timing of my fieldwork, I was interested in finding out how ordinary people were reacting to significant changes in state discourse. Since 2012, a new set of state discourses and policies, involving traditional values, Russia as a unique civilization and geopolitical identity, have attempted to turn passive supporters into active participants in the Putin system[25]. In 2014, events in Ukraine allowed attention to be focused on the chaos of Maidan, the euphoria of Crimea and the success in 'standing up' to the West and being recognised as a major player in the Syria crisis. Four months were spent in each city giving sufficient time to utilise the 'snowball' method of participant recruitment and build a data sample containing a representative

[20] The authors define this as 'the values or beliefs embedded in the seemingly mundane and trivial experiences of citizens in their everyday settings'. See: Karine Clément and Anna Zhelnina, Beyond Loyalty and Dissent: Pragmatic Everyday Politics in Contemporary Russia, *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society,* (2019: 2).
[21] Ibid, 3.
[22] Myron Aronoff and Jan Kubic, *Anthropology and Political Science. A Convergent Approach* (New York: Berghan Books, 2013): 240-278.
[23] Samuel Greene, *Homo Post-Sovieticus*: Reconstructing Citizenship in Russia. *Social Research: An International Quarterly 86,* no 1 (2019): 185.
[24] Benno Netelenbos, *Political Legitimacy beyond Weber* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016): 24.
[25] Greene/Robertson, *Putin v. the People,* 331.

mix of education levels, professions and income.[26] Interviews were from one hour to ninety minutes in length and explored four main aspects of the 'imagined nation': (i) representations of twentieth century history; (ii) defining Russianness (who belongs to the nation); (iii) attitudes to political system; (iv) Russia's role in the world. This paper focuses on the data emerging from part (iii), where participants discussed the basis of Putin's popularity, the 'system' in which they live and how they understand the relationship of the 'state' and the 'people'.

After the interviews were collected, they were transcribed in Russian, with care being taken to mark pauses and hesitation, as well as emotional tone.[27] With all the transcribed interviews at hand, I conducted 'open-coding'.[28] After developing a large number of open codes, I carried out 'focused coding' that, as opposed to the deconstructive nature of open coding, is a more constructive process and involves much more analysis.[29]

The methodological approach of this research has certain limitations that should be noted. Firstly, it is not always clear whether interview narratives are connected to any actual daily practices; there is some possibility of 'dissimulation': when talking with an 'outsider', participants 'simulate positions that would not ordinarily be available in daily social settings'.[30] There is also the possibility of 'social conformity': respondents may default to a pro-regime narrative given Russia's post-

[26] Respondents all self-defined as *russkii*, were born and raised in Russia and covered two main age groups (20-30) (40-55), each of which came of age in rather different systems (the younger cohort in Post-Soviet, mainly Putin-era Russia, the older cohort in the late Soviet period). All interviews were anonymised (name changed and profession made more general, specific identifying details were also not reproduced in quotes) to protect respondent privacy.

[27] This was an important aspect of coding: an interesting finding was that when topics elicited minimal emotional response the answers were often generic or non-committal. Those answers containing emotions (humour, sadness, fear, anger, glee) were often more connected to more deeply-meaningful (to the respondent) internalised narratives. This most likely reflects the agency of people and discourse: individuals decide what to consume or ignore/reject based on social reasons, such as how well such narratives go down in social settings like dinner parties, work lunches and bar room chats where more emotional and socially significant conversations take place.

[28] By open coding I mean re-examining interview notes, re-organising and deconstructing the data into discrete parts by manually searching through the textual material and coding all interesting areas of the data with as few preconceived ideas about what would emerge as possible (Welsh, E. Dealing with Data: Using NVivo in Qualitative Data Analysis. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 3, no. 2 (2002).

[29] This coding followed a three-stage process involving: '(a) noticing relevant phenomena, (b) collecting examples of those phenomena, and (c) analysing those phenomena in order to find commonalities, differences, patterns, and structures' (Coffey, A., Atkinson, P. *Making Sense of Qualitative Data*: London: SAGE Publications, 1996).

[30] Goode, Stroup, *Everyday Nationalism,* 727.

Bolotnoe context where a 'largely nonideological, nonethnic, patriotic form of authoritarianism' is encouraged.[31] While the ultimate solution of this problem is triangulation of data through focus groups and practice-orientated observation,[32] it is worth highlighting an important strength of interview narratives: they offer access to the 'informal, emotionally charged conversation of people belonging to the same ordinary world' that is often invisible in quantitative polling and top-down analyses of Russian politics.[33]

In other words, discourses of 'vernacular knowledge' reveal how politics intersects with everyday life and individual emotions, as well as suggesting which discourses reflect more deeply felt values and views.[34] Emotionally-charged discourses among ordinary people can co-exist with feelings of alienation from 'high politics' and form the basis of a 'bottom-up, populism' that may be influential in future political cycles.[35] These discourses exist and survive, regardless of state meddling, because they can be 'socialised'; the narratives have a social function when interacting with family and friends.

In 'vernacular knowledge' of politics in interview narratives, the empirical section is structured around three central pillars to the pro-Putin stance. In each section, I highlight the way such stances are contested, revealing the salience of a normative split on the population. After this, I examine the Two Russias Imaginary and draw some conclusions about the current status quo in Russian politics.

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[31] Samuel Greene and Graeme Robertson, Agreeable Authoritarians: Personality and Politics in Contemporary Russia, *Comparative Political Studies* 50, no 13 (2017): 1828.
[32] Goode, Stroup, *Everyday Nationalism,* 731.
[33] Karine Clément, Unlikely Mobilisations: How Ordinary Russian People Become Involved in Collective Action, *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology* 2, No 3-4 (2015): 233.
[34] Ellen Mickiewicz, *No illusions: The Voices of Russia's Future Leaders* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014: 11).
[35]Clément, Zhelnina, *Beyond Loyalty and Dissent*, 17-18.

Social imaginaries of the state-society relationship: memories of 1988-1998

Family biographical narratives on the period of reform, collapse and transition (1988-1998) are an interesting starting point for understanding social imaginaries of state and society in Russia today. Memories of politics in the late Soviet era provide a 'frame' from which to understand 'normal' political behaviour and a 'normally' functioning political system. For older respondents this was their own lived memory, while for younger respondents this was a transmitted history of family behaviour in the period. The overwhelming majority of my participants reported that, in their families at least, there was a general disengagement from the politics in the period. As has been remarked upon elsewhere, the 'atomisation' and 'estrangement' of the 1990's, as well as the loss of established forms of solidarity, led to the separation of everyday lives from political issues.[36]

This estrangement manifests itself in the idea it is 'normal' to be politically inactive and disinterested in manifestos, parties and protests: '*My parents didn't take an active political position.* (…) *They weren't active party members or participants in any demonstrations or protests. They never went to anything like that. Just a normal, peaceful family* (*obychnaya spokoynaya sem'ya*)' (**Julia (29) Chemist in State company, NN**). This sentiment ties in well with quantitative polling that suggests the vast majority of Russians today still do not want to be active in politics.[37]

Very few participants described perestroika and the end of the USSR in positive terms, such as the way some Russian liberals present the story: the Russian people *actively* came together to win their freedom and overthrow the tyranny of the Communist Party in a relatively bloodless fashion.

[36] Clément, Zhelnina, *Beyond Loyalty and Dissent*, 6.
[37] Recent polling shows that 52% are 'definitely not prepared to personally participate in politics', and 28% are 'probably not prepared'. In their attitudes to the state, 61% claimed 'to avoid with the authorities' and prefer 'to rely on themselves'. https://www.levada.ru/2017/04/13/nepoliticheskaya-natsiya/ Other polling on readiness to participate in politics found 43% are willing to vote, 21% sign a petition, 20% complain to officials, while only 16% and 8% are ready to join a political organization or a demonstration respectively https://carnegie.ru/2017/12/05/ru-pub-74906 (page 28).

Instead, respondents presented the process of political reform as alien and imposed from above by party agitators and experienced *passively*. These reforms were not demanded 'from below' as people lived in relative comfort: '*My parents, just like the rest of the population, did not understand perestroika, except that it was a kind of visible* (*political MB*) *agitation* (…) *on the TV and news* (…) *But in general people did not want any kind of changes because everyone lived well, there was enough for everyone'* (Ilia (46) Import-Export Business owner, NN). Older respondents often presented the reforms of 1985-1999 as driven by those 'those at top', without the engagement of the masses: '*people didn't particularly take part in all this, they behaved purely as observers'* (Natalya (50) Accountant. NN). Employing the metaphor of the ocean, the tranquillity of those working and living at 'the lower depths' (*kak na dne*) is contrasted to the dramatic and energetic events bubbling over at the surface:

Actually, down at the bottom, where we run around, there was no sense of being advocates of one thing or another. People lived and worked, I don't know how to say it, like we were at the lower depths. Up on top, passions boil over, there are storms in the sea. At the bottom there was a dead calm…

Olga (55) Factory worker Avtozavodsk, NN

Retrospectively looking back at lived experience of perestroika and the collapse, some older respondents did remember an exciting atmosphere where '*Russian people realised that they could change things and everyone awaited change in the country'*. This, however, faded away, and was replaced by a great sense of disempowerment, disappointment and alienation:

Over twenty years normal people (*normal'nyye lyudi*) *came to realise that we simple folk* (*prostyye*) *can't change a thing, everything stays in its place. After that people started to distance themselves – you are there, we are here. In Russia it has always been the case that the elite* (*verkhushka*) *does its own thing, it is like a separate state. Ordinary people say 'you don't bother us and we won't*

bother you'.

Oleg (49) Construction site foreman, SPB

The memory of 1988-1998 stands behind one social imaginary of relations between state power and the people, reinforcing the sense that 'nothing can be done' and 'there is no alternative'. On one hand, it would appear such sentiment has been transmitted over the generations and helps sustain apolitical stances, suggesting there is some truth to the view that Russians are passive towards and avoidant of politics. On the other hand, this can also be understood as a manifestation of what Sam Greene has called 'aggressive immobility': having survived the traumatic changes of the 1990's many Russians prefer local and informal solutions while remaining sceptical of political activism and distrustful of state initiatives promising change.[38] Rather than passivity and servility toward the state; the stance of 'aggressive immobility' expresses alienation and distrust, leading many to resist top-down initiatives. This way of thinking is also supported in the way participants described the kind of system in which they live and the quality of the Post-Soviet state.

The corrupt and venal state

A majority of participants offered critical comments about the 'abnormal' performance of the state and the political class in Russia today. This is also observed in quantitative polling[39] and focus groups[40] that shows high numbers continue to see the 'authorities' (*vlast'*) as inherently

[38] Samuel A. Greene. Running to Stand Still: Aggressive Immobility and the Limits of Power in Russia, Post-Soviet Affairs, 34, no 5 (2018): 335.
[39] Statistics from January 2014 show that when asked the question 'how would you characterize the current authorities (*vlast'*)? 35% saw them as 'acting in own interests' and 27% as 'thieving and Mafia-like'. The figures for more positive characterizations were lower, with 14% seeing them as 'democratic' and 'law-based' (*pravovaya*) and a paltry 2% describing them as 'fair and close to the people' http://msps.su/files/2014/12/Gudkov_Golizon027-11-2014.pdf Polling on who is blocking reform in Russia today blamed officials and bureaucracy (56-69%) and big business/oligarchs (52-67%). Putin and his entourage, despite the power they have concentrate in their hands, scored much lower (15-25%) https://carnegie.ru/2019/11/06/ru-pub-80273 (page 7).
[40] Focus groups conducted in 2017 in four Russian cities also showed similar distrust of the State Duma and the Government, although the President remained insulated from these criticisms. See: Elena Sirotkina and Andrei Semenov, *Ekonomicheskiy krizis i otsenka effektivnosti vlasti: kto neset otvetstvennost' za ukhudsheniye urovnya zhizni v rossii?* [The economic crisis and the assessment of public effectiveness: who bears responsibility for the economic downturn in Russia?]. *Journal of Social Policy Studies 17*, No 2 (2019): 199.

untrustworthy. While this basic sentiment cut across class, age and profession, what differentiated respondents was how they framed this 'abnormality'. While some (usually older) respondents often did this with reference to the Soviet state, other (usually but not always younger) respondents focused on how these deficiencies deviated from the idea of a 'normal' modern state in the twenty-first century. In the first case, the Soviet state apparatus and party elite were often portrayed as having good intentions, a positive force working to the benefit of the people. The Soviet system offered '*more socially orientated laws* (*sotsial'nykh zakonov*)*';* it '*let people live* (*lyudyam davali zhit'*) and '*gave lots of good things to the many'* rather than just '*to the few',* whereas today the '*state makes more money out of the people than it gives back'* (**Denis (41) Journalist, NN**).

The contemporary Russian state was often presented as predatory in its very nature; its ultimate aim is not to support or nurture but to 'trick', 'rob' and 'cheat'. The basic equation here is that state officials plot and scheme to discover new ways of harvesting the people's resources for personal gain. As one respondent put it *'over the last fifteen years, the strategy is always the same: the state wins at the expense of the population. So, for us, in any case, it never works out well.'* (**Galina (40) Sociology department, NN**).

Thus, older Soviet-born respondents revealed alienation from the state and elite viewing the 'abnormality' of current life (a predatory state, corruption and a venal elite) through the Soviet frame of 'normality', whereby the 'normal' situation is a powerful paternalistic state that provides people with the basics they need. Such attitudes are also reflected in polling data on the Soviet and post-

Soviet state's essential qualities in comparison.[41] The respondent below articulates the powerful sense of abandonment echoed by many older respondents from the last Soviet youth generation:

I can't say anything bad about the Soviet Union. I had a happy, peaceful childhood, a whole load of possibilities in life. Everything [*was done*] *for a person* (…) *Now a person is left one on one against the elements* (*s etoy stikhiyey*), *left to the mercies of these officials, to this corruption, to face just about any kind of thing. But before we had a fine-tuned system, everything was there for a person but not anymore…*

Galina (40) Sociology department, NN

In contrast to how older respondents criticised the current political system, younger respondents focused on how this corruption and venality did not fit in with the principles of a 'normal' functioning modern state. One oft-mentioned central concept behind the modern state is that those working in the state apparatus are paid by taxpayers to do a job and they are expected to be competent: '*The state is the management and the country is the company – thus the management should not only work for its benefit, but to the benefit of its workers, to benefit ordinary people'* (**Alexander (25) Business development manager, SPB**). Another respondent, an architect working on a government contract for a regional governor, claimed most of his entourage was '*not competent, openly rude, openly greedy'* and interested only *'the goal of personal enrichment':* even if *'for appearances sake they will say a few clever words, nonetheless they take bribes all the same* (**Pyotr (29) Architect, NN**).

Another principle the current elite and state system violate is the idea of equality before the law. Instead, as the respondents below explain, there is one law for 'them', another for 'us.' This

[41] https://www.levada.ru/2019/08/05/obrazy-vlasti-sovetskoj-i-nyneshnej/

allows the state to rob the people as they wish, with no real punishment and the law playing a merely decorative role in people's lives. Thus, '*those at the top, those oligarchs and deputies, they sit about stealing loads of money, they can, but we are not allowed'*. Instead the ordinary person is at the mercy of the powerful and *'can be put in jail for any old thing'* (**Elena (29) Accountant, Dzershinsk, NN; Inna (28) factory worker, Dzershinsk, NN**). Thus, both generational groups, display low levels of trust in the state bodies but do so with reference to different normative frames. This may explain why those protesting against the pension reforms in 2018 may have little in common with those protesting against corruption or election irregularities in the same period; their critique of the state is based on different lines and this results in differing demands. Thus, patterns of loyalty, voice and exit are narrated differently according to normative frames. While the former protest to curb the deterioration of the Russian welfare state and ask for the return some of the certainties of the late Soviet situation; the latter want to modernise the Russian state and eradicate corrupt aspects that are incompatible with the standards of the developed world.

The overall picture of distrust in the Russian state system and the political elite/establishment ties in well with quantitative sociological data on the lack of trust Russians have for a variety of state institutions, with low figures for key bodies such as the courts and the state procurator's office, the State Duma and local government.[42] One respondent offered a telling characterization of life in Russia today that rather neatly summarises the way the state system (*gosudarstvennii stroi*) was perceived by the vast majority of respondents. Describing Russia's socio-

[42] The ratings of trust for Russian institutions in 2016 ranked as following: the President 74%, the army 60%, organs of state Security 46%, Church 43%. At the bottom were the regional authorities 22%, the legal system 22%, Russian banks 15%, Political parties 12% and business 11% https://www.levada.ru/2017/10/12/institutsionalnoe-doverie-3/ and http://www.levada.ru/indikatory/odobrenie-organov-vlasti/

economic and political system (*stroi*), he employed the metaphor of an anthill with a large sugar cube at its peak:

I would say our system (stroi) is like... (pause)... an anthill, on the top of which lies a little pack of sugar. There is a small hole in the little pack of sugar and sometimes grains of sugar start falling out, and then the ants run over and take bits for themselves and use them. But the at the same time there is a boy with a magnifying glass and those who take too long or go too far in taking these bits, these ants are burned alive by the sun's rays (via the magnifying glass MB). I, for example, sit at the bottom of the anthill. To be honest, I don't really feel like climbing up there for the sugar.

Stepan (22) Physics student, SPB

The respondent places himself in the above picture as at the bottom, disengaged, disconnected, with no desire to climb up and 'take a piece of the sugar'. If we turn to the 'boy with the magnifying glass', it is likely the respondent is referring to the executive branch of the state, which decides who can get access to the 'sugar'. This links into a widespread view of the President as striving to regulate the county but '*no matter how he tries there is no freedom, he always faces an apparatus of officials and ministers, that cannot be bypassed*' (**Eva (26) Unemployed, university graduate, NN**). This sentiment has deep roots in the saying 'The Tsar is good but the Boyars are wicked'.[43] In one sense, supporting Putin as leader is due to a feeling of intense alienation from the rest of the state structures and the hope that, borrowing a Trumpism, he is able to 'drain the swamp' and lead the nation to better times. Thus, the image produced is that of the long-suffering but hopeful masses at the bottom, Putin at the top, and, in the middle, venal and unreliable officials. This 'vernacular knowledge' is rooted in lived memories and the sense that 'this is how it is always been'. Having

[43] http://mizugadro.mydns.jp/t/index.php/Царь_добрый_а_бояре_злые

considered how the state-society relationship is imagined, I will turn to the next pillar of a pro-Putin stance: the relationship between the national character and the qualities of the leader.

The Russian 'national character' and the 'suitable' leader.

As has been mentioned above, central to political legitimacy is the idea that political leaders and parties present themselves as embodying qualities that individuals and groups see as desirable. A variety of researchers have examined the performative aspects of Putin's leadership, such as hypermasculinity, playing the action hero and macho sex object, which appeal to certain audiences.[44] Following the Bolotnoe protests of 2011-12, state discourse shifted in terms of identity narratives in response to the way the protests challenged its legitimacy. This built on the pre-existing masculine discourse to include traditional values and an alliance with the Church and prominent conservatives[45] in the name of protecting the 'silent majority' of 'true and good Russians' from a dangerous, radical opposition.[46]

In my interviews, I discovered a deeper narrative that was not dependent on state propaganda or current events: how popular views of the 'national character' legitimise the political order. Michael Herzfeld's concept of 'cultural intimacy' is of utility here. This concerns the elements of shared identity that may be 'a source of external embarrassment' but 'provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality'[47]. Sardonic and humorous representations of the

[44] See: Valery Sperling, Putin's Macho Personality Cult, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 49, no 1 (2016): 13-23, and Helena Goscilo, Putin's Performance of Masculinity: The action Hero and Macho Sex-Object, in Helena Goscilo ed., *Putin as Celebrity and Cultural Icon* (London: Routledge, 2012): 180-207. It has been claimed this is part of the 'remasculinization of Russia,' which emerged in response to the challenging years of 1991-1999. This presentation of Putin's is part of the 'restoration of collective male dignity' is something that 'meets the psychological needs of a significant part of Russian society' (Oleg Riabov and Tatiana Riabova, The Remasculinization of Russia? *Problems of Post-Communism* 61, no 2 (2014): 32.

[45] Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, The Pussy Riot affair and Putin's Démarche from Sovereign Democracy to Sovereign Morality, *Nationalities Papers* 42, no 4 (2014): 618.

[46] Regina Smyth, and Irina Soboleva, Looking beyond the Economy: Pussy Riot and the Kremlin's Voting Coalition, *Post-Soviet Affairs* 30, no 4 (2014): 260-61.

[47] Herzfeld, M. *Cultural Intimacy Social Poetics in the Nation-state* (New York: Routledge, 1997): 3.

national character represent one important way people 'negotiate the terrain of social identity and daily life in the (…) modern nation-state'.[48]

Representations of the leader, which are contrasted with those of the people (*narod*), are an important part of a pro-Putin position. A wide range of respondents viewed Putin as embodying certain desirable qualities. Putin '*speaks sharply*' (*rezko*) and in '*concrete terms*', it is admirable that he '*does that which he promises*' (**Yegor (44) Newspaper editor, NN**). Furthermore, he is able to '*formulate goals in a clear* (*chetkii*) *manner*' and '*his goals match with our desires*' (**Artem (49) computer programmer, NN**). Putin's intelligence and sharpness means he is able to '*hold an enormous amount of information in his head'* and be an effective and competent '*boss* (*khozyain*)' (**Dmitri (28) Actor, SPB**). Putin was also commonly described by male respondents as a '*strong person*', the ideal of a '*real man*' (*nastoyashchiy muzhik*); a person with '*inner determination*' (*vnutrenniy sterzhen'*). Putin's resolute and steadfast manner contrasts from the hysterics of European leaders who '*twitter like magpies*' while Putin '*is silent and does what he does*' (**Igor, (41) Lecturer in International Relations, NN**). Putin is someone to be proud of even if '*a bit abrupt and uncompromising* (…) *at least he is ready to answer for his words.* (**Julia (47) Assistant in film set production, SPB**).

Respondents of differing genders and ages showed familiarity with this idealised image of Putin, which has been reproduced on a mass scale in the media for the best part of twenty years.[49] The above characterization can be contrasted with a view of the Russian mentality/character as 'lazy' or 'disorganised', traits that justify the rule of a 'strong leader'. This is a narrative with deep roots in Russian literature and history: the 'strong hand' is needed not only, as mentioned above, to

[48] Ibid: 91.
[49] A similar picture emerges in quantitative polling. In answer to the question 'What attracts you to President Putin', the highest scoring answer was 'He is a decisive, brave, hard, wilful, strong, calm, precise and confident person, a real man' https://www.rbc.ru/politics/20/11/2017/5a0ee7229a79473d4ad7988a

reign in corrupt boyars, but also to marshal the bumbling, unreliable and potentially dangerous Russian *muzhik* into a productive force. In interview narratives, Russians were often presented as disorganised, sloppy and less than conscientious: '*I think one of the key characteristics of the Russian* (*rossiyanina*) *is for things to be a total fucking shambles.* (*raspizdyaystvo*). *It has always been this way. It is like, "who cares", like stealing a crate of vodka to sell but then drinking half of it and passing out* (…) *stupidity'* (**Denis (41) Journalist, NN**). This kind of chaotic behaviour is the antithesis of the sober, sharp and sage Putin. Russian 'slackness' was also discussed in terms of a lack of professionalism in the workplace, such as the idea that European workers and managers *'approach things very rigorously, they try to do everything with quality'* while their Russian counterparts follow *'the principle of the "Russian Ivan", which is basically saying "yeah right, that'll do, fine"* (**Anastasia (21) Economics Student, NN**). Thus, while the '*Russian will forget about his own affairs'* and suffer from '*fecklessness* (*bezalabernost'*)*',* the '*Western person, will keep working until it is completely finished, according to what is written on the contract'.* (**Galina (40) Sociology department, NN**).

Given the prominent place of these self-images it is unsurprising to find many respondents support the idea that Russians need to be ruled by a strong hand; that a person with Putin's personal qualities is an imminently suitable leader: *'Our people are very lazy and until you actually kick them, they won't do a thing'* (**Matvei (43) Double-glazing installer, NN**). This could also be explained in terms of Russia as a semi-Asiatic country that has to be battered into working order: '*We are more-or-less an Asian country. I think we can't do things ourselves; we need to be kicked. We can't make it without a Tsar* (…) *we cannot be fully Western in mentality'* (**Julia (47) Assistant in film set production, SPB**). The 'cultural intimacy' revealed here is not necessarily related to despair; this was often related in positive terms. Putin's

qualities mirror what ordinary Russians should have: strength, stamina and vigour and a very clear and rational mind carefully tuned to achieving key objectives.

Russian 'terpenie'

Another commonly claimed trait of Russians among participants was '*terpenie*', which can be translated as patience but also implies endurance, fortitude and forbearance. A very common idea was that Russians are, by their nature, very calm and '*will endure to the very last* (*terpit do poslednego*), *right to the very final extreme, and only then will they raise a revolt* (*bunt*) (Galina (40) Sociology department, NN). This trait could be explained in positive terms as a result of Russia's tumultuous twentieth century, which was full of exhausting upheavals, leaving Russians today quite justified in seeking a 'peaceful life' today (Natalya (50) Accountant. NN). Here the Russian ability to 'endure' and 'to take things as they are and get on with things' can be a source of pride and reflects how generations of Soviet Russian families survived collectivization, industrialisation, terror, war and, later, the economy of shortages and *blat.* Instead of complaints or protests, which would be ruinous to oneself and family and achieve 'nothing', people did what their parents had done in previous crisis situations: they got on with 'surviving'. The quote below is illustrative of the 'aggressive immobility' mentioned earlier:

When Gorbachev came to power, that was all just a total scam (...) *but what could you do? All that was left was to accept things as they were.* (*Ostavalos' vse vosprinimat', kak yest'*). *You aren't going to gather people and start a rebellion. We were used to living according to the situation, according to the circumstances* (*my privykli zhit' po obstoyatel'stvam, po usloviyam*) (...) *If there was no water, we'd*

find it…. no food, we would find some. (…) when conditions changed for all of us and that meant we had to change our approach to life…

Ivan (55) Retired miner, SPB

There is an element of stoic pride in how ordinary Russians are imagined to have 'endured' these transitions. This idea of the Russians as tough and adaptable survivors was also expressed by some younger respondents in their assessment of the national character. One claimed that *'the Russian is unique in that he can adapt to any environment, to any system. Putting it crudely, he is like a cockroach that can survive any situation, I mean this type of person could even make it through a nuclear war, right?'* (**Evgeny (30) sales manager construction materials, SPB**). This sardonic humour is another part of the cultural intimacy involved in representations of national identity: *'Survival is a very telling point for Russia. We have endured everything here and take it all with humour. Because if you try and live here without a sense of humour you will just end up six fucking feet under (sdokhnesh' nakher)! (laughs)'* (**Zakhar (29) Manager in export company, SPB**).

According to this version, Russians lived through the unpredictable and traumatic years of reform, collapse and disorder with stoicism and strength. Instead of worrying, whining or protesting about politics, they simply 'rolled up their sleeves' and 'got on with it'. Thus, people had a simple choice: *Either you go and work in government and make reforms yourself or you adjust to the current situation (…) Sitting by the kitchen stove and whining (…) this is not a way out (…) What difference does it make (…) if you want to work and earn money?* (**Pavel (27) export-import business, SPB**). It appears much of this sentiment is still reproduced in Russian families today, explaining why many prefer to turn their backs on politics and 'get on with life'. The idea that participating in politics is a 'waste of time' unless you enter the 'elite' fits well with longer running narratives of family behaviour in perestroika and

the nineties.

While this positive view of endurance and stoicism is clearly endorsed by many, other respondents took a different stance. They preferred to describe this trait in terms of passivity and paternalism, something holding Russia back, a historically rooted ailment that must be remedied:

The Russian people are very patient (*terpelivyy*). *You can leech off them, you can beat them, torment them* (*iztyazat'*), *they will put up with it all* (…) *They just sigh and say: "Everything will work out" or "we will survive"* (*'Vse samo' ili 'my perezhivem'*). *My parents endured and sighed in precisely this way.*

Marina(29) Manager in Software Company, SPB

Portraying Russians as 'inert' or 'passive' was also done with reference to Soviet rule as people were forced to '*endure all these experiments on them'* and *'this endurance* (*terpenie*) *is already something on the genetic level'* making the Russians a *'very inert people'* (**Pavel, (58) IT specialist. NN**). The Soviet system created people determined to be *'layabouts*' as more '*entrepreneurial people were gotten rid of by the machine of socialism'* and those ready to '*work as a functionary in some office'* were encouraged to the top positions (**Sergei (40) Marketing Department, SPB**).

The second negative feature was paternalism. For some, Russians have a '*slave-like mentality*' and need to '*look up to the ruler*' as '*when you are told one hundred thousand times repeatedly that "Stalin is the best"* (…) *this becomes entrenched in the consciousness'* (**Olga (26) Costume designer, SPB**). For some, this paternalism is rooted in pre-revolutionary and Soviet political culture. Here this historical legacy is summed up by the point that '*the majority want some kind of father. The Tsar was a father, then Stalin was a father – they were all fathers upon which you could rely'* and that people, even today,

are still not *'ready to take responsibility for the country'* and participate in politics; they prefer to rely on a 'father' (**Timur (26) Postgraduate researcher, Moscow**). This reluctance to take more responsibility and the preference for delegating difficult choices to an 'authoritative figure' (*avtoritet*) leaves Russians submerged in a submissive, passive 'we' and unable to develop a sense of 'self' and personal responsibility:

I think that people on the inside are not morally ready to lead an independent life (...) *instead the majority are drawn to some kind of authoritative figure* (*avtoritet*) *that can decide everything and, what's more, give things. And if he doesn't give now, we will be patient* (*my poterpim*). *On the other hand we remain within a huge 'We' where, unfortunately, there is no place for 'I'*

Nikita (42) Ventilation system salesman, NN

Thus, we find some of the key elements of the arguments of Gessen, Gudkov and Shevtsova are also deployed by ordinary Russians to explain the essence of the current status quo. While for these respondents this characteristic reflects an 'abnormal' refusal of to 'take responsibility' in politics and represents the continuation of the historic pattern of paternalism, for others, *terpenie* is a 'normal' way to behave in a Russian context. As will be seen in the final part of this paper, the split over the normative implications of *terpenie* is also reflected in the different way people imagine Russian society, with some imagining a more unified patriotic society with a minority of malcontents, as opposed to those who imagined a submissive, backward pro-Putin mass alongside an isolated progressive educated segment.

Views on the nature of *terpenie* also map fairly closely on to a three-way split in this dataset on attitudes to the Bolotnoe protests of 2011-12. The first group rejected the legitimacy of the protests and defended the concentration of power into the hands of the President as a 'natural' and 'normal'.

The second group sympathised with the protestor demands and lamented the slide to authoritarianism. The third (and largest) group were indifferent to the protests and were pragmatic and apolitical, merely interested in a system that 'works'. In order to illustrate how this relates to an interpretation of *terpenie,* it is worth unpacking the main way each group justified their positions.

The moderate pro-regime narrative

The first group defended the Putin system as a natural evolution, a Russian type of democracy that is heavily infused with statist themes. This view resonates strongly with Guillermo O'Donell's model of Delegative Democracy.[50] It is 'normal' for a strong leader to bypass institutions and ensure order and stability, as it is 'normal' for Russians to want a strong leader. '*What we have here is a democracy with a strong rule* (*Eto demokratiya sil'noy vlasti*). *I mean a special kind of democracy with strengthened powers, one that develops under the influence of this state power* (**Lubov (43) Private tutor, SPB**). Thus, this democratic-authoritarian hybrid is not viewed by this group as a dictatorship as such. Instead, it is viewed as '*the democratic choice of society as a whole* (…) *the majority, especially those who feel happy living here, feel a degree of reassurance in passing their internal rights/powers* (*vnutrennikh polnomochiy*) *to the highest leadership* (**Vladislav (28) Postdoctoral researcher Middle Eastern Studies, NN**). These respondents were not embarrassed about Russia's increasing lack of resemblance to a democratic state. In fact, they openly praised the shift toward a more 'caring' and 'effective' style of rule. Again, the important idea is delegating 'supreme power' to Putin and

[50] Guillermo O'Donell, Delegative Democracy, *Journal of Democracy* 5, no 1 (1994): 55-69. Other authors have applied this to the Russian case: Paul Kubicek, Delegative Democracy in Russia and Ukraine. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 27, no 4 (1994): 423-441; Lilia Shevtsova and Mark Eckert, The Problem of Executive Power in Russia, *Journal of Democracy* 11, no 1 (2000): 32-39; Kirill Rogov, Triumphs and Crises of Plebiscitary Presidentialism, in Leon Aron ed., *Putin's Russia: How it Rose and How it is Maintained and How it Might End* (American Enterprise Institute, 2015); Samuel Greene, (2013) After Bolotnaia: Defining a 'New Normal' in Russian Public Politics, in Maria Lipman and Nikolay Petrov eds., *Russia 2025* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013): 46-66. The central way this model applies to the Russian case is in how a popular, charismatic leader emerged to win a sweeping majority at a time when confidence in public institutions (such as political parties, the courts, the press, the police) was low. Presenting itself as 'the embodiment of the nation and the main custodian and definer of its interests' (O'Donell 1994: 60), 'a government of saviors' promises to take the bold measures required to 'save the country' (ibid: 65).

leaving things for him to solve:

The population needs protection and the state must somehow take care of it. Russian people have always been pro-state (*gosudarstvennikami*). *We have always had relatively strong authorities and a monarch. Really at heart the Russian person is a monarchist. We can't have democracy in the Western understanding of the word in Russia. That is not our path. Putin is the president but Russians view him as a Tsar. I am sure that more than half of Russians would give Putin supreme power* (*verkhovnuyu vlast'*) – *let him be the monarch.*

Oleg (49) Construction site foreman, SPB

The 'sham democracy' critique

The second group, which was largely made up of younger respondents, took a positive view of the protesters and generally shared the critical views of paternalism shown above. They argued the Russian political system was no longer democratic and the concentration of power into fewer and fewer hands meant '*Russia is basically a monarchy now* (…) *as there is only one ruler'* (**Alexei (23) Computer programmer, NN**). Thus, Russia is seen as a sham democracy, as '*in Russia there are democratic institutions but not democracy'* and in important matters '*democratic principles are not respected'* (**Timur (26) Postgraduate researcher, Moscow**). The key point is that democratic procedures are subverted and manipulated to fit the prerogatives of the government. According to this version Russians live in a '*presidential republic*' with '*one- party rule*' where '*parliament only exists as a nominal thing* (…) *all the parties follow the same line with very few significant differences, we don't have an opposition as such.* (…) *and all decisions are made by the president* (**Olga (26) Costume designer, SPB**). Respondents with such views took a more positive view of the protests as an indicator people were ready to take responsibility for politics, even if they did not end with the desired results.

The real 'silent majority': pragmatic and apolitical

The final group, which was largest in size, tended to downplay the importance of politics to their everyday lives, portraying events such as the Bolotnoe protests as something happening 'far away' from them. Accusations of election rigging were dismissed: '*United Russia and Putin would have won without this anyway. He is the worthiest ruler and there is nothing better on offer. As long as everything is peaceful in the country and I have a normal and well-paid job, I won't be too worried about the State Duma'* (**Boris (22) Computer Programmer, NN**). This pragmatic sentiment prioritises the system's effectiveness and economic results over commitment to democratic principles. One respondent, who described himself as *'an advocate of democracy, rather than any totalitarian system',* still defended the slide toward authoritarianism as 'w*hat is in Russia's interests is a good standard of living, social protection and improvement in life quality. If these things are getting better, that means it* (*the system MB*) *is fine'* (**Valery (40) Business Development, NN**).

Indifference to politics is part of a 'deal': the people disengage and delegate responsibility to a political class. In return, a stable and secure living environment is created. This boils down to a basic stance that many respondents seemed to take toward political behaviour: *For us it does not matter, what kind of regime it is.* (…) *Just let us peacefully work and live well!* (**Ivan (55) Retired miner, SPB**). This is a longing for a situation where the individual could be indifferent to 'what kind of regime we have' and get on with a 'normal life'. In essence, 'democracy' is more of a background or secondary matter and not equated with 'freedom', which, for these respondents, is more about being able to live a 'normal' life in terms of education, economic growth and career opportunities, the chance to accumulate and spend money, travel abroad, buy property and plan a future. As long as these 'freedoms' are in place, politics can be safely ignored and left to the politicians. This means judging

the system by its effectiveness rather than other categories:

S: We have lived through the decades and know how bad it was and how it has gotten better.

V: The living standards here are pretty high. I mean we feel like free people, we can do things, take decisions, go abroad, start some kind of business, I mean, the point is we live in a normal way (*normal'no zhivem*)

S: You don't feel like they say there is a police state, I don't feel any pressure.

V: We are not under surveillance.

Vlad (26) Marketing, NN, Sergei (29) Business Development, NN

Respondents in this group tended to suggest that '*now people have the chance to do what they want, think how they want'* and that, comparatively speaking, there is sufficient freedom and it is only '*some extreme-minded people* (*ul'tra-nastroyennyye lyudi*) *who think that freedom of speech in Russia is suppressed, that we are under the jackboot* (…) *that there is no democracy'* (**Dmitri (28) Actor, SPB**).

Overall then, attitudes on what constitutes 'normal' political behaviour in Russia are rather polarised and reflect stances toward the political order as a whole. Ultimately, there is serious disagreement on whether a more powerful state is a good thing or if Russia's divergence from democratic procedures is 'normal'. It can be argued that in conditions of more open and unrestricted political debating and electioneering, this division over what is 'normal' for Russia would quickly come to the fore. In the final section of this paper, I look at one more way the split on versions of 'normality' manifests itself: how myths on Putinism were reproduced by participants.

The Putin mythology and its discontents

The content of the Putin mythological framework, which is the third pillar of a pro-Putin

stance in this paper, is well-known. Bo Petersson (2013, 2016) highlighted the consistent theme in this mythology of Russia as an eternal world power (*derzhava*)[51] that only returns to her rightful place after overcoming periods of upheaval and dislocation (*smuta*). In this context, Putin saved Russia from the *smuta* of the nineties and restored *derzhava* status. This myth is strongly influenced by 'memories' of the nineties, either first-hand experience (older respondents) or transmitted memory (younger respondents), where the population is remembered as helpless and abandoned, and in need of rescue. The idea of normality is central to this myth: Putin '*pulled the country out of the total mess it was stuck in during the Yeltsin years'* and '*brought her into a more decent/acceptable condition* (…) *he led a huge country into a more normal condition, in comparison to what it was in up to that point'* (**Eva (26) Unemployed, university graduate, NN**).

Thus, Putin is praised not so much for 'making Russia great' but for returning 'normality' and 'decency' to everyday life. This idea of returning 'normality' has a very powerful emotional component. This involves remembering/imagining the period immediately prior to Putin's presidency as one of depression and degradation when, according to popular memory, Russian people lost face, status and dignity. This was a period when '*we were deep down at the bottom. We were poor, a destitute population, without subsistence'* and it was only by the second half of the 2000's that '*things started to smoothen out* (*vyravnivat'sya*)*'* and *'people started to live better'* (**Marta (54) retired, SPB**). The common experience or imagined sense of humiliation from the nineties crossed the generational divide; younger respondents could rely on their childhood memories to confirm this picture: *A person living in the 90's felt like an insect, humiliated and embarrassed of living in Russia. The view of other countries was like looking up, servile. But now, the generation that has grown up in the*

[51] A difficult term to translate into English that combines the idea of being 'a power' and a 'strong state'

2000's to now, they are proud of their country. (**Nadezhda (30) nanny, SPB**).

The President restored Russia's power vis-à-vis the outside world, with an independent stance: '*He doesn't cave in to anyone. Russians, in the main, think that the country has its own path of development, as we are neither Asia nor Europe. That is why Putin has won such respect from Russian people'* (**Eva (26) Unemployed, university graduate, NN**). This '*independent position*' vis-à-vis the West means Putin does '*what is best for Russia and not what the West wants*', ensuring the '*opinion of Russia is reckoned with by foreign powers*' (**Dina, (22) IR Student, NN**). In other words, even if the President *'has done nothing for me, neither good nor bad'* (…) *I am positive toward him because* (…) *he presents himself as being so powerful* (*takim mogushchestvennym*) *and* (…) *he tells the other countries that they need to reckon with us* (*s nami nado schitat'sya*) (**Katya (22) Student Politics, NN**). As mentioned above, the geopolitical status narrative had real resonance across my respondents and was only contested in a small number of interviews.

On the other hand, many respondents contested the mythology in terms of domestic politics and the actual state of the country that the President has 'risen from her knees'. The following extract is an excellent encapsulation of this sentiment:

Putin's foreign policy is one thing, his domestic policies are something else. (…) *the thieving, the patronage networks, that brotherhood* (*vorovstvo, pokrovitel'stvo, pobratimstvo*) (…) *Power is centralised, all the money is in Moscow. This is a bad thing. The regions are not developed. The villages were in a bad state and have remained so. The healthcare system is falling apart* (*Meditsina razvalivayetsya*). *Teachers used to make 10,000 a month, and they still do today. Education has hit rock bottom…* (*Obrazovaniye na nule*) (…) *Our rockets and satellites are falling from the sky. Our Lada*

factories still can't produce normal cars. (…) *In terms of technology, the country is a good fifty years behind.* (…) *we are not developing* (…) *we can't go on like this, just being addicted to the drug of oil.*

Marina(29) Manager in Software Company, SPB

The rejection of the mythology is based on a wide number of deficiencies are clear in everyday life, something we will return to in the next section on how the state-society relationship is imagined. In this case the reference point for 'normality' is not Russia in the nineties but a 'normal country in the twenty-first century'. According to these normative standards, today's Russia is a 'shambles'. Contrast this to an older respondent from Nizhny Novgorod, who does frame his views on Putinism in comparison to the 'abnormal' nineties:

Our people like stability and don't want sharp changes (*Narod lyubit stabil'nost' i ne khochet rezkikh izmeneniy*). *There have already been so many changes over the last century and they have always told us 'just hold on a bit longer and things will get better'* (*poterpite yeshche nemnogo i vse budet khorosho*). *Now our people, who remember well the Soviet past, they see something good today. They can afford more things. Some kind of social fairness has appeared, they don't withhold wage payments like in the Yeltsin years. He has established order, it is shaky and unsteady, but it is order. And the people value this.* (…) *there is pretty much still a minimal welfare state* (*minimal'noye sotsial'noye gosudarstvo*).

Leonid (45) Religious history lecturer, NN

Here Putin's domestic policies are seen to have returned normality and 'minimal' standards in areas such as pension provisions, the basic functioning of the state and the orderly payment of wages. Thus, from the point of view of someone living in the lower-income end of Russian society, Putin has returned a certain minimum in terms of living standards that corresponds to the Soviet

norm that preceded it. In doing this he has delivered, where previous reform efforts have failed. Thus, differing frames of normality lead to differing evaluations of Putin's domestic policy. This split has also been uncovered in quantitative polling: when asked to choose countries towards Russia should orientate herself in political terms, 29% said Russia should rely on her own experience, 30% chose neo-authoritarian states such as Belarus and China, while 28% chose 'western' states (Sweden, Japan, USA and Germany).[52] Those still appraising Putin in terms of how he has regained something resembling late Soviet stability often claim Russia should rely on her own experience and, as a result, draw different conclusions on politics from those looking out onto the wider world, where different standards of political and economic development are on display.

Internal orientalism: imagining two Russias

It has been argued that after 2011-12 Bolotnoe protests, the Russian authorities switched support bases: from the 'creative' and 'middle' classes toward a deal with the 'poor and state-dependent conservative groups in the provinces'[53] who were offered an even more paternalistic social contract.[54] As this paper relies on data from what Natalia Zubarevich has termed 'Russia One', major cities of over one million that make up 21% of the Russian population,[55] and lacks comparative data with Russia's industrial and rural hinterland, it cannot ascertain whether the post-2012 state discourse on patriotic unity does indeed resonate differently among different parts of the country.

[52] https://carnegie.ru/2019/11/06/ru-pub-80273 (page 11)

[53] Lev Gudkov, Resources of Putin's Conservatism, in Leon Aron ed., *Putin's Russia: How it rose, How it is Maintained and How it Might End* (American Enterprise Institute, 2015): 864.

[54] This involving promises to, on the one hand, prop up the existing dilapidated systems of free healthcare, education, state pensions and state-dependent industries, and, on the other, to achieve Russia's rebirth as great power by 'standing up' to the West in increasingly dramatic waysAndrei Kolesnikov, *Russian Ideology after Crimea*, Carnegie Moscow Center, 2015. Available at: http://carnegie.ru/2015/09/22/russian-ideology-after-crimea/ihzq

[55] Natalia Zubarevich, Four Russias: Human Potential and Social Differentiation of Russian Regions and Cities, in Maria Lipman and Nikolay Petrov eds., *Russia 2025* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013):67-85. This zone is marked by a 'post-industrial economic structure' and high levels of 'middle-class' Russians (30-40%) https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/four- russias-new-political-reality/. 'Russia One' has higher education levels, more social mobility and has proven to have more potential for political protest and dissent.

What can be asserted, however, is that, in Russia's largest cities, many imagine Russian society as divided into a 'cultured' minority and a pro-Putin, state-media consuming, 'unenlightened majority'. In interviews, this emerged in the division between those who reproduced pro-Putin myths in the first person as their own views, and those who explained Putin's popularity in the third person, as a bonding between Putin and 'other Russians', who were often presented as being from a different or lower social background.

The idea that provincial Russia supports the President most of all was found among participants in all three cities of this research. According to this view, rather than those living in the big cities, it is the *'hinterland* (*glubinka*) *that really loves Putin'* as people there '*don't really appreciate the delights of democracy'* and *'pretty much still live as they did in the USSR'* (Julia (47) Assistant in film set production, SPB). Furthermore, the president's rough language and macho posturing appeals to the 'lower classes': '*criminal jargon* (*blatnuyu leksiku*)*'* such as *'snuff them out in the latrines'* (*'mochit' v sortire'*) or *'hang them by the balls'* (*'povesit' za yaytsa'*) caters to the '*most base emotions that exist in the people'* (Semyon (54) psychologist, SPB).

Thus, a significant number of respondents view Putin myths as fodder for the 'backward' Russian masses. Putin is the '*Tsar-father who will take care of us*' (*tsar'-batyushka, kotoryy zabotitsya obo vsekh nas*), the '*tough', 'demanding' and 'severe'* Tsar, who '*who frowns and speaks in a confident tone'* ensures that '*the well-being of the people will continue to grow.* (*laughs*) (Mikhail (24), IT support, SPB). In abstracting the Russian people in this way, these respondents replay pre-revolutionary 'internal orientalising' discourses; they take up a stance reminiscent of many nineteenth century Westernised Russian intellectuals towards the peasant (*muzhik*) masses, an object of contempt and, at times,

fear.[56] Interestingly, these attitudes re-emerged in another section of my interviews when participants discussed the so-called 'Information War'.[57]

Interestingly, a significant proportion viewed state media as something designed 'not for them' but the older generation. This occurred in both age cohorts: younger respondents commented on parents, uncles and aunts; older respondents on how state television media catered to the over-60 demographic. A common point made was that the new style in state media appeals to a particular type of person in Russian society: those who, are happy (as they were in the Soviet period) to believe what they are told. Here the simple binaries of 'we are good and they are bad' are viewed as soothing for the older generation:

Lots of people live like this. Take, for example, my mother. She is old now, 72. She is a Soviet person. She is used to believe what they say on the television and what is printed in certain newspapers. The television propaganda pushes one line – 'we are Russians (*rossiyanine*) *and we are all correct, but the Ukrainians are shits* (*kozly*) *They've done this and that to us, but we are good people.' And they believe that.*

Denis (41) Journalist, NN

Many respondents offered anecdotes of intergenerational conflict in the immediate family, reporting the frustration and discord bred by state media, which creates a rift between parents and children. Indeed, this is backed up by quantitative polling that show around a 25% drop in trust

[56] Alexander Etkind, *Internal Colonization. Russia's Imperial Experience* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011).
[57] While much of the literature on 'information war' concerns security studies and the question of hybrid warfare in the current period, in the Russian context, the term *'informatsionnaya voyna',* often mentioned in state media, official documents and speeches, refers to new features of the informational space from 2008 onwards as Western media turned to increasingly negative portrayals of Russia while Russian media, in response, ramped up its informational campaigns. This term was familiar to all respondents in the study, each of which was asked to give their opinion on this new direction.

ratings for state media, with those above the age of 35 retaining the highest levels of trust.[58] Almost all of this reporting was one-way: respondents lamented the one-sided positions of their older relatives who were hooked on state media. One respondent described how, on coming home to visit her parents in the midst of escalating media rhetoric in the Maidan crisis, she 'hit a brick wall' when trying to communicate with her father:

I saw my father watching television non-stop. And my arguments (…) just hit some kind of brick wall. He totally believed what was being said on TV and wouldn't believe anything I said about there being other information available from other sources. He said 'they are all lying to you on that internet of yours, look at the horrible things happening on TV!'

Sasha (28), University Lecturer in History, SPB

Many participants described the symptoms of those watching state media as those who have fallen under the spell of one-sided aggressive propaganda, the Channel-One zombies: '*people who watch TV, get dumb, and that is hard to take because it means they lose their critical faculties, lose any inclination to analytical thought* (**Pyotr (29) Architect, NN**). Negative representations of 'Channel One zombies' ties in with the social category of *vatnik:* a slang term describing the masses of Russian people who are easily pleased, as long as the fridge is stocked with pickles, vodka and bread. The idea here is '*the Russian person needs little other than something to eat, some beer and a colour TV'* and *'As long as they have these things they won't care who is in power and will do as they are told'* (**Arseny (41) Business development, NN**). Elaborating on his own life experience, the respondent describes a friend from a working-class district (*avtozavodskii raion*) who is easily offended and, as a result, he has stopped

[58] https://www.levada.ru/2019/08/01/chetvert-rossiyan-poteryali-doverie-k-televideniyu-za-desyat-let/

talking about politics with her. The absorption of state media propaganda has rendered her rigid and dogmatic in her views:

I have a friend, she lives in the avtozavodsk region. She is smart but she has an avtozavodsk mentality. I wouldn't bother discussing politics with her – when I do she gets annoyed. Because everything is so black and white to her. (…) *it is a formula forced upon her everyday by the television.*

Arseny (41) Business development, NN

Attitudes to the Information War in this paper lend credence to the idea that the intensification of state media propaganda is not successful at winning over the sceptical and critically-minded; at best it is able to 'further convince and radicalize the faithful, building their sense of identity and community and marginalizing and delegitimizing everyone else'.[59] A significant number view paternalism as harmful, are uneasy with the slide to authoritarianism and have contempt for state propaganda. In conditions of more open debate and political plurality such views would surely offer stiff competition to pro-Putin narratives.

Conclusion

In exploring how respondents (mis)trust and support/contest the legitimacy of the current political order, a complex equilibrium is in place. On the one hand, the three pillars of a pro-Putin stance outlined in this paper are informed by discourses containing Soviet-inspired frames of normality and myths reflecting lived and transmitted memory of 1988-1998. This leads to a preference for a small-c conservative, Soviet-style, social contract in which the people turn their backs on high politics, in return for a guarantee of certain minimums provided by a powerful state.

[59] Greene/Robertson, *Putin v. the People,* 2611.

Citizens 'get on' with their lives, rejecting responsibility for decisions taken from above and adopting a risk-averse stance to politics. Some clearly continue to long for a return to the standards of the Soviet state, which they remember as guarantors of a safe and stable life. Whether we classify this as 'passivity' or 'aggressive immobility', such stances are not imposed 'from above'; they reflect lived/transmitted memory and identity that reflects Russian social reality for many people.

On the other hand, the contestation of these three pillars revolves around several themes. Firstly, there is the 'framing' of normality not in terms of the 'normal' late Soviet period and the 'abnormal' nineties but in terms of 'modern and developed' states of the twenty-first century. Secondly, certain traits, such as passivity, paternalism and dependence on the state, are criticized as backward and undesirable. Finally, Russia's 'sham democracy' and increasing concentration of power in fewer and fewer hands is presented as a regressive development for the country. The reliance on a 'Tsar' to solve Russia's problems and having a citizenry with a 'slave-like mentality' stops Russia from achieving 'normality'. On the other hand, this Two Russias Imaginary encourages a feeling of hopelessness, that nothing can be done to change things. The two poles, with their contrasting values, myths and visions of normality, coexist uneasily in the population and reflect contrasting positions on what is 'normal' – the 'paternalistic' Soviet state of the late Brezhnev era or the 'prosperous', 'democratic' societies of the contemporary developed world.

This brings me to a final point: many respondents seem to interpret the Information War in terms of a drive to consolidate the *sovok*, the *vatnik* and, perhaps even, the *gopnik* behind the regime, while turning away from the middle classes and the intelligentsia. It appears that state propaganda only heightens the sense of polarisation along generational and social lines: older respondents lamented losing their (over sixty) relatives and 'less educated' friends to state media

channels, while younger respondents often claimed to have totally turned their backs on state media and stopped communicating with the 'victims of state propaganda'. A question for further investigation is whether the intensification of state propaganda has only consolidated a certain type of Putin supporter and alienated those who are younger, educated in a post-Soviet environment and able to access alternative media sources. A larger data set, including quantitative polling, expanding out from 'Russia One' to the industrial and rural hinterlands of 'Russia Two' and 'Russia Three', would also allow a more systematic examination of how generational and socio-economic difference, media consumption and regional dynamics affect the reception and reproduction of competing narratives on the 'imagined' nation and the legitimacy of the current political order.