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Making Russia Great Again? Vladimir Putin's Changing Sources of Legitimacy 2000–2024

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Abstract

This article analyses the changing sources of President Vladimir Putin's legitimacy during his quarter century at the apex of power in Russia. To reveal the shifting underpinnings of Putin's legitimacy, I examine the central themes of his five presidential election campaigns, from March 2000 to March 2024. Public opinion data is used to assess the relationship between these campaign themes and the priorities of Russian voters, as legitimacy rests on shared values between ruler and ruled. I argue that the main sources of Putin's legitimacy have shifted during his long tenure, especially since his 2012 return to the presidency, after four years as prime minister. Putin first won the Russian presidency by positioning himself as a soft nationalist reformer, intent on integrating with the West, and wrestling wealth from Russia's oligarchs. Twelve years later, Putin turned his ire on international enemies, claiming the role of Russia's champion against a hostile West and fifth column within—themes pursued with greater vigour following Russia's incursions in Ukraine since 2014. In addition, Putin has doubled down on conservative appeals, including support for the Orthodox Church and anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric. Appropriation of Russia's role in WW2 has also been a source of legitimacy throughout Putin's leadership, but one put to different uses over time. Putin's legitimacy has been further bolstered by his stewardship of Russia's economy, which has remained relatively stable, even in the face of sanctions, since 2014. I conclude that Putin's longevity in office rests not only on increasing state repression, but also on his success in reorientating Russian social values to suit his changing political needs.

Keywords

election campaigns; legitimacy; nationalism; Putin; Russia

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1. Introduction

On 17 March 2024, Vladimir Putin claimed a fifth presidential term with a landslide victory in a tightly stage-managed election, condemned by the West as neither free nor fair ("Amid 'repression and intimidation,'" 2024). To celebrate his win, the next day, Putin appeared before cheering crowds at an open-air concert in the Red Square marking the 10th anniversary of Russia's annexation of Crimea ("Putin greets Moscow," 2024). The choice of an election date so close to this anniversary was no coincidence. Today, Putin's popular appeal rests in large part on his mobilisation of nationalist symbols and narratives (Hutcheson & Petersson, 2016; Laruelle, 2009; March, 2012). But how genuine is Russian public support for Putin?

This article analyses the changing sources of Putin's political legitimacy over his quarter century at the apex of power in Russia. Legitimacy is defined as the common belief that an institution or leader has the right to govern (Hutcheson & Petersson, 2016, p. 1108). When this right is widely challenged, social order breaks down. This article argues that Putin's legitimacy rests predominantly on his personal charismatic leadership. Throughout his long tenure, Putin has successfully sold himself to Russian voters as the only leader with the strength to maintain order and stability at home and to defend Russia's interests abroad (Petersson, 2021, p. 22).

The vehicles used to mobilise support for Putin's leadership, however, have evolved over time. In his early campaigns for the presidency, Putin relied predominantly on populist appeals, emphasising his firmness in fighting the domestic forces undermining national stability and honour. Earthy-toned pledges to "wipe out" Chechen terrorists, crack down on unruly oligarchs, and rebuild Russia's international prestige, first won Putin the presidency in March 2000 (Burrett, 2020; Zassoursky, 2004). High levels of economic growth from 2001–2008 sustained genuinely high approval ratings for Putin (Figure 1 and Figure 2). Although Russia's economic success in this period was buoyed by global economic conditions, nonetheless, at home, Putin received the credit (Wilson, 2021). But as economic growth began to slow—owing to the falling price of oil exports on which Russia's economy depends—Putin's public support began to slip. After notionally

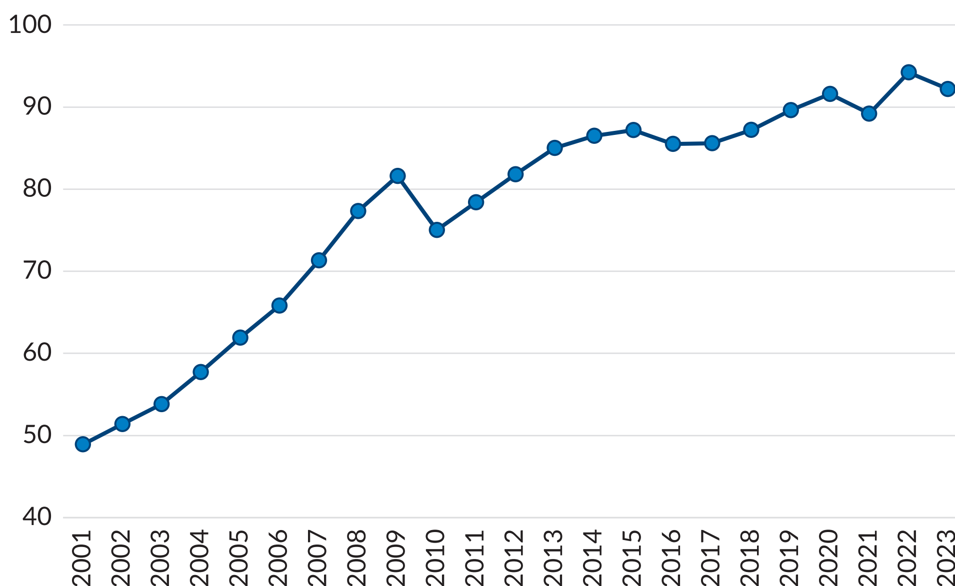

Figure 1. Russia's GDP between 2001–2023 in trillion roubles (World Bank, 2024).

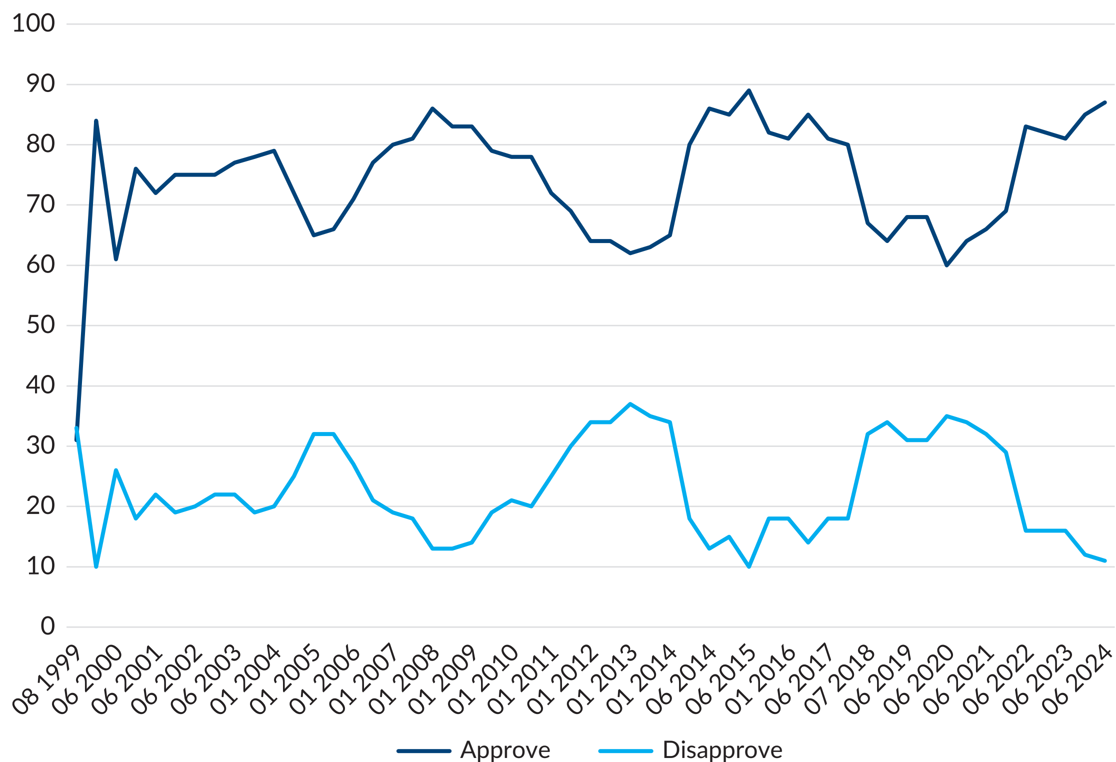

Figure 2. Putin's approval in percentage between 1999–2024 (Levada Center, 2024d).

transferring power to President Dmitry Medvedev in 2008, Putin's 2012 campaign to return to the presidency took a dark turn, focusing on nationalist themes and grievances. As Russia's constitution mandates that the president can serve no more than two terms consecutively, at the end of his second term in 2008, Putin had vacated the presidency in favour of Medvedev. Putin continued to wield ultimate power, however, by serving as Medvedev's prime minister, before controversially returning to the presidency in 2012. Reinstalled in the Kremlin since 2012, Putin has built his legitimacy on three crisscrossing nationalist narratives: glorification of the military, social conservativism, and an existential battle for survival against the West. Putin's charismatic leadership thus rests on his perceived role as the nation's defender against internal and external enemies determined to emasculate Russia.

Putin's legitimacy, however, is not sustained by charisma alone. Although Russia's economy never regained the dynamism of Putin's first two terms, nor has there been a return to the economic chaos of the 1990s. There is no doubt that Russia has become wealthier during Putin's quarter century in power. Overall, the economy has grown in 20 out of 24 years since 2000, and in terms of purchasing power parity, Russia's economy is now the fourth largest in the world ("Russia's economy surpasses," 2024; World Bank, 2024). Whether or not he deserves it, Russian voters credit Putin with Russia's economic successes, regarding him as a steady steward of the economy—especially compared to what came before (Wilson, 2021, p. 84). Since 2022, government investment in the military-industrial complex has boosted growth, translating into higher wages and lower unemployment (Rosenberg, 2024). Russia's economy has adapted quickly to the pressures of war, with sanctions thus far having a limited effect on Putin's legitimacy, despite high inflation and under-investment in non-military sectors of the economy.

Drawing on public opinion data, this article argues that Putin has persuaded many Russians to accept his version of reality, which posits Russia as a besieged fortress under attack from a hostile and hypocritical West. But survey data also suggests that many Russians would prefer a different reality, hoping for improved relations with the West and an end to the war in Ukraine. In January 2024, in a survey by the research project *Chronicles*, 51 percent of respondents said they would like to see improved relations with the West, while 40 percent said they would support withdrawal from Ukraine without Russia meeting its war aims (Chronicles Project, 2024). Although in February 2024, 68 percent of Russians reported wanting Putin to remain president beyond the upcoming election, only 18 percent followed the presidential campaign closely, with 36 percent not following it at all. Hardly a sign of enthusiasm for the incumbent president (Levada Center, 2024c). In December 2023, 54 percent of Russians reported dissatisfaction with their standard of living, with inflation as the main concern (Goncharpov, 2024). This article, therefore, finds that although Putin's charismatic leadership continues to sustain his legitimacy, many Russians have doubts about the results of his more than two decades in power.

This article is composed of four sections (excluding the introduction and conclusion): The first section discusses definitions of legitimacy and the reliability of measuring this phenomenon using public opinion surveys coming out of Russia, given the increasing authoritarianism of the Putin regime since 2012. The second section analyses Putin's personal qualities and image as sources of his charismatic legitimacy. The third section focuses on populism and economic performance as the foundations of Putin's public support during his first two presidential terms. Finally, the fourth section analyses the nationalist themes that have increasingly buttressed Putin's legitimacy since he returned to the presidency in 2012.

2. Political Legitimacy and Public Opinion in Russia

Sociologist Max Weber famously argued that a regime has legitimacy when citizens are willing to obey its authority, and in so doing, lend its leaders prestige (Weber, 1964, p. 382). Weber further identifies three ideal types of legitimacy: traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational (Dreijmanis, 2007). In the latter type, legitimacy rests on adherence to constitutional rules and regularised modes of political representation (Weber, 1964, p. 215). Putin clearly does not adhere to the rule of law, as demonstrated by his frequent jailing of political opponents and emasculation of Russia's courts and independent media (Burrett, 2019). Although Putin's regime clearly flouts the spirit of Russia's constitutional order, Sakwa (2010, 2021) and Lewis (2020) argue that institutional frameworks, nonetheless, continue to impose constraints that structure the conduct of politics. Indeed, Putin takes great pains to performatively adhere to constitutional norms. Elections, although tightly managed, take place regularly at the federal, regional, and local levels—although Putin did replace elected regional governors with his own appointments from 2004 to 2012 (Campbell & Ross, 2008). While globally, abolishing presidential term limits is the most common strategy for would-be autocrats, Putin has instead retained power by installing a loyal replacement (Medvedev) and then through constitutional amendments extending and resetting his term limit—including via a national referendum in 2020 (albeit one termed by the election monitoring organisation Golos as the "most manipulative vote in the country's history") (Trudolyubov, 2020). In following the constitution in words, if not in spirit, the Putin regime seeks legal-rational legitimacy. But the regime's actions—manipulating elections, cronyism, and politically motivated prosecutions, to name but a few—undermine its own legitimating discourses.

This article, therefore, argues that Putin's leadership is closer to the charismatic than legal-rational type. Charismatic leaders are seen by supporters as possessing extraordinary characteristics, with a mission and

vision that inspires loyalty. Hutcheson and Petersson (2016) argue that charismatic elements have been features of Putin's rhetoric and political performance from the outset of his presidency, epitomised by depictions of him as a man of action. Sperling (2016) concurs, arguing that Putin's legitimacy rests on a "cult of personality" presenting him as a hypermasculine leader who will not allow Western countries to bully Russia. Indeed, recent polling data suggests Putin remains personally popular with Russian voters. A survey conducted in June 2023 found that 52 percent of Russians strongly supported Putin, while 31 percent had nothing bad to say about the president, and only 14 percent held negative opinions about his leadership (Levada Center, 2023b).

Although Russia's state-backed media gives the impression that nothing happens in the country without the president's intervention, Putin is not the only decision maker who matters in contemporary Russia. Gill (2016) and Hale (2017) contend that Putin governs via a combination of personal, institutional, and corporate networks. In what has been termed the "power vertical model," Putin's authority derives from his patronal position at the apex of these networks, which channel power towards the Kremlin (Tsygankov, 2014). The power vertical model maintains that under Putin, autonomous power centres are firmly controlled, leaving Russians with no discernible alternatives to the current regime (Treisman, 2017). An alternative paradigm takes the opposite view, highlighting the often chaotic and ineffective workings of Putin's ostensibly centralised system, the failings of which were made painfully clear by the state's bungled response to Covid-19 (Blackburn & Petersson, 2022). Although federalism has been eroded during the Putin years, regional and other horizontal forces retain enough power to complicate the policy process and inhibit the consistent application of decisions taken by the central government (Sakwa, 2020).

Most scholars rightly observe that there are elements of both chaos and control in the manner in which Russia is governed today (Monaghan, 2014; Sakwa, 2021). Sakwa (2021) uses the concept of heterarchy to explain how governance in Russia is based on a dynamic combination of organisational elements (institutional, regional, and social) with the potential to be ranked in different ways depending on the political context. Heterarchy is a counterpoint to hierarchy, which emphasises how the relative power between different elements of a system strengthens or diminishes as the dynamics of their interactions change (Sakwa, 2021 p. 226). A heterarchy approach thus rejects the idea of a static model of governance dominated either by chaos or control in favour of a viewpoint that emphasises complexity, contradiction, and flux. The heterarchic nature of Russia's governance is instrumental in sustaining Putin's charismatic leadership. The charismatic leader is ultimately perceived as a bulwark against chaos. Protecting Russia from domestic forces threatening national unity and from the dangers posed by external enemies are the performative bedrocks of Putin's charismatic legitimacy (Lewis, 2020; Sharafutdinova, 2020).

Regardless of the true nature of power distribution within the Russian system, Putin has consistently enjoyed significantly higher approval ratings than other senior government actors and institutions (Gill, 2015). Even when facing public protests against unpopular policies—such as pension reforms in 2018—Putin's personal approval ratings have slipped less than those of his government (Levada Center, 2020a; Logvinenko, 2020). In the pensions case, Putin placated public unrest by softening his reforms, and in so doing, revealed some of the weaknesses of the system constructed around his leadership. Putin's special bond with the Russian people is essential to the legitimacy of the regime as a whole. The pension's episode highlights the problem of relying on charismatic legitimacy, which is by nature transitory, as the devotion on which it is based inevitably fades in light of the transactional politics that become necessary for a leader to

sustain power in government (Dreijmanis, 2007; MacGregor Burns, 1978). During his 25 years in office, Putin has avoided fatally losing his charismatic legitimacy by knowing when to reverse tack. But Putin's legitimacy is built on more than just charisma.

Putin's legitimacy also rests on what has been termed "output" and "input" sources. Output legitimacy refers to a leader's performance in power—their ability to guarantee a minimum standard of economic well-being for a broad spectrum of society. Presiding over rapid GDP growth during his first decade in power, Putin was widely seen as "delivering the goods" on the economy, convincing the population to turn a blind eye to the weakening rule of law (Gel'man, 2010). Input legitimacy, in contrast, is more long term and builds on common values and beliefs shared between ruler and ruled (Hutcheson & Petersson, 2016, p. 1108). No longer able to deliver rapidly improving incomes and living standards, since 2012 Putin has increasingly relied on manipulating Russians' beliefs and perceptions about the world to engineer support for his leadership (Burrett, 2019). This is not to deny that "Putinism," a doctrine that advocates conservative values and the need for a strong state to protect against foreign foes and internal chaos, resonates with many Russians (Loftus, 2022, p. 2). Russia's exceptionalism and unique role in the world are important pillars of post-Soviet national identity (Laruelle, 2009). Putin's restoration of Russia's role on the world stage after the humiliation of the 1990s has boosted national self-esteem (Sakwa, 2011; Tsygankov, 2019). Yet maintaining the social consensus he embodies has become increasingly challenging for Putin.

Persuasion can only go so far in reinforcing his legitimacy, even if based on shared values and beliefs, when daily life reveals the reality of flawed government decision-making, declining state capacity and increasing economic hardship. Putin's fourth term from 2018–2024 was particularly challenging. The Covid-19 pandemic revealed serious limitations in the capacity and performance of Russia's state apparatus (Blackburn & Petersson, 2022). Usually omnipresent on Russian television screens—meeting ordinary people up and down the country—Putin spent the pandemic bunkered in the Kremlin. His lack of empathy for those threatened by the virus and its economic consequences pushed Putin's approval rates to new lows in 2020 (Levada Center, 2020a). Putin's reaction to his dwindling ratings was to introduce new "fake news" laws to silence the journalists and others exposing the state's chaotic pandemic response (Luxmoore, 2020; Prince, 2020). Facing societal dismay at the cost in blood and treasure of his full-scale war in Ukraine, since February 2022 Putin has resorted to all-out state repression alongside persuasion to sustain his grip on power (Mozur et al., 2023; Troianovski & Safronova, 2022).

Russia's descent into authoritarianism under Putin was at first slow and stealthy, beginning with measures to gradually curtail media freedom and to replace elected officials with appointed ones during his first two presidential terms (Burrett, 2011). When Putin returned to the presidency in 2012, state restrictions on independent media, intolerance of political opposition, and strict oversight of the courts increased in intensity. In the months following the 2022 Ukraine invasion, virtually all independent media outlets closed or moved into exile, while anyone who criticised Putin's "special military operation" was jailed. Civil society was smashed, with 14,000 protesters arrested in the weeks after the invasion began (Stoner, 2023, p. 7).

In this context of repression, is it possible to trust public opinion data coming out of Russia? Although it is challenging to conduct reliable opinion polls in today's Russia due to a lack of institutional transparency, independent Russian polling companies have gathered similar results to their Western counterparts regarding Putin's popular standing. These organisations include Gallup, Pew, the Levada Center, Russian Field, and the

Chronicles Research Project. It must be noted, however, that Putin's high approval ratings do not necessarily equate to genuine popularity, even when reported by reliable organisations. Approval can be given due to a perceived lack of viable alternatives. Furthermore, given Putin's authoritarianism, fear may limit what Russians are willing to say publicly about political topics (Pachikova & Kolobaeva, 2023). Organisations like the Levada Center, however, have been using the same methodologies and asking the same survey questions since the start of Putin's presidency—before his turn to authoritarianism. More recent findings are consistent with earlier research across a broad range of topics, suggesting the data is reliable.

3. Putin's Personal Image and Charisma

Building a cult of personality as a mode of legitimacy has been a Russian tradition from Peter the Great to Joseph Stalin. Putin is part of this tradition, mobilising support for his administration with a cult around his leadership, rather than through shared ideological positions (Burrett, 2019; Goble, 2015). Putin is a charismatic leader with a flair for drama. The PR-images of Putin presented by Russia's media are notorious: biker, hockey star, crooner, bare-chested horse rider, and, most dramatically, tamer of tigers (Burrett, 2017; Sperling, 2016, p. 137). But as Max Weber theorises, charisma is less about supply than demand. Charismatic leadership is usually found in times of turmoil, when it appears to offer a way out of crisis. For Weber, while the charismatic leader may indeed have exceptional skills, equally they may not, in reality, possess the qualities their followers perceive. Charisma is in the eye of the beholder (Bell, 2011, p. xxv). The key to the phenomenon is that followers believe their leader is extraordinary (Bell, 2011, p. xxvii). When Putin became president in 2000, after more than a decade of economic and political chaos, Russians wanted to believe that he was the hero for whom they had been waiting (Burrett, 2017).

Putin took over the Russian presidency following President Boris Yeltsin's surprise resignation on New Year's Eve 1999. As Yeltsin's prime minister, Putin became acting president, placing him in pole position to win the March 2000 presidential election. Putin's popularity was boosted by his successful execution of the second Chechen war, which was ignited by the Chechen invasion of Dagestan in August 1999. It was the outbreak of war that compelled Yeltsin to promote the little-known Putin from head of the security services to prime minister. In his new role, Putin was able to capitalise on the patriotic emotions created by the Chechen conflict, with jingoistic reporting of the war on state-backed media helping him build his public image as a strong leader (Burrett, 2020; Zassoursky, 2004).

Prior to his appointment as prime minister, Putin was a relatively unknown figure outside Russian political circles. When he came to office in August 1999, only two percent of Russian voters identified him as their preferred candidate to replace Yeltsin (Burrett, 2020, p. 195). But Putin's obscurity was an electoral asset, allowing him to create his public persona from scratch. TV images showing him planning tough action against Chechen terrorists, taking part in judo competitions, and flying fighter jets, transformed Putin from a rather dull state security officer into the strong leader Russians desired (Burrett, 2020). Basing his 2000 presidential campaign on the ambiguous slogan "Great Russia," Putin was able to satisfy the expectations and interests of diverse constituencies. In the March presidential election, Putin won by a wide margin, gaining votes from Russian nationalists, post-Soviet communists, and neoliberals alike (Burrett, 2011, 2020).

Despite being the preferred presidential candidate of the Yeltsin ruling elite, Putin established himself as a "man of the people" with displays of machismo and crude language (Sperling, 2016). When Russia was hit by

a wave of terrorist bombings in October 1999, Putin did not restrain his anger, vowing: “We’ll catch them in the toilet, we will wipe them out in the sh*thouse” (Burrett, 2020, p. 193). Since then, the Russian president has regularly laced his speeches with vulgarisms. At an international press conference in 2002, Putin bizarrely offered an inquisitive journalist a circumcision in response to a particularly pointed question (Burrett, 2020; Strauss, 2003).

Toughness has always been central to Putin’s charismatic image (Burrett, 2017). But in response to his waning popularity in his third term, masculinity and militarism became more obvious elements of Putin’s PR strategy (Burrett, 2017; Somiya, 2014). Putin is portrayed as Russia’s saviour, the embodiment of the country’s strength and its defender against Western powers seeking to emasculate Russia (Sperling, 2016). To bolster his legitimacy at home, Putin aggressively exerts power abroad. Interventions in Georgia (2008), Ukraine (2014 and 2022), and Syria (2015) demonstrate Russia’s international influence under his leadership. Hostile Western responses to Moscow’s provocations rally Russians around their president, seemingly confirming Putin’s claims that Russia is in an existential battle for survival against the West. Creating a permanent backdrop of impending crisis is thus essential to the functioning of Putin’s charismatic legitimacy. The sources of the crisis must be seen as emanating from abroad, as admitting to domestic crises would contradict Putin’s claims to have restored political order, economic stability, and the rule of law (Malinova, 2022).

4. Putin’s Populism and Economic Performance 2000–2011

When running for the presidency in 2000 and 2004, Putin’s election campaigns focused on battling the economic chaos he inherited from Yeltsin. Russia’s oligarchs—who had accumulated billions by appropriating state assets in the 1990s—were first on Putin’s hit list. In the aftermath of Russia’s 1998 financial crisis that devastated the living standards of ordinary Russians, the oligarchs were an obvious target. At a meeting with Russia’s business elites a month before the 2000 presidential election, Putin made it clear that under his leadership there would be no more free riding (Burrett, 2020; Goldman, 2004, p. 36). In his statement—widely reported on Russian television—Putin told Russia’s tycoons that they would no longer get away with flouting government regulations. Putin warned that elites taking excessive and illegal rents out of the economy “threaten our very existence” (Putin, 2000). In an interview on *Radio Mayak* a week before voting, borrowing the language of his Soviet predecessors, Putin spoke of his aspiration to “liquidate the oligarchs as a class” (Burrett, 2020; Reddaway, 2001, p. 27).

The war against the oligarchs was again a theme of Putin’s presidential election campaign in 2004. A survey in 2003 demonstrated that 84 percent of voters believed that the oligarchs had acquired their wealth illegally (Naryshkina, 2004). To engage voters in an election that was seen as a foregone conclusion, a high-profile target was needed to demonstrate the authenticity of Putin’s pledge to end the parasitic relationship between the oligarchs and the state. Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Russia’s richest businessman and owner of the oil giant Yukos, made himself the obvious choice when he accused Putin of improprieties over the sale of another energy firm, Severnaya Neft, to state-owned Rosneft. Khodorkovsky further demonstrated his intentions to enter the political fray by buying the newspaper *Moskovskie Novosti* (Latynina, 2003). But Khodorkovsky’s foray into politics was abruptly ended when in October 2003, he was arrested at Novosibirsk airport and charged with tax evasion and fraud. The dramatic nature of Khodorkovsky’s arrest was deliberately designed to create a media frenzy that would elicit maximum support for the move among ordinary Russians. The storming of

Khodorkovsky's private jet provided footage that reminded audiences of his vast wealth and connection to the much-derided privatisation bonanza of the 1990s (Burrett, 2020).

As well as making an example of the oligarchs—albeit selectively as his cronies were allowed to keep their ill-gotten billions—Putin was helped in his first two terms by favourable economic tailwinds in the global economy (Wilson, 2021). High global oil and gas prices assisted Russia's rapid recovery from its 1998 financial crisis. Between 2000 and 2008 national GDP almost doubled, growing from 49 to 81 trillion roubles (Figure 1). Although the energy-dependent economy was hit significantly by falling global demand following the 2008 financial crash, the reserves built up during the boom years provided Russia's economy with a soft landing. Furthermore, Putin used his influence over the media to create a discourse blaming Western capitalism and globalisation for the economic downturn (Feklyunina & White, 2011).

Public perceptions of economic performance are closely correlated with levels of support for those in power, in both authoritarian and democratic systems (Burnell, 2006; Chen, 2003). Fortunately for Putin, most Russians did not feel substantially worse off as a result of the 2008 financial crash. One year after the banking crisis began in the US, 58 percent of Russians reported that their everyday economic situation had remained the same over the previous year, while 34 percent said it had got worse, and seven percent saw an improvement (Levada Center, 2016). Although a majority reported stability in their own economic situation, many more were concerned about a possible economic crisis engulfing Russia at the start of 2009 than one year before. Fear of economic crisis jumped from 22 percent in February 2008 to 59 percent in January 2009, but this number had fallen back to 30 percent by January 2011 (Levada Center, 2016). Counterintuitively, the proportion of Russians naming "improving living standards" as one of Putin's successes increased between 2008 and 2010, from 36 to 40 percent (Levada Center, 2014). As Putin began campaigning to return to the presidency in 2012, public perceptions of Russia's economic performance were stable, if not as optimistic as during his first two presidential terms.

Putin's personal ratings did not drop as a consequence of rising public concerns over the impact of the 2008 global financial crisis, with his approval hovering between 88 and 78 percent during the 12 months from August 2008 (Figure 2). Russia's military incursion into Georgia in August 2008, perhaps accounts for Putin's high approval ratings during this period, as Russians "rallied around the flag" at a time of national crisis—albeit one manufactured by the Kremlin. Despite the stable economic backdrop, Putin's announcement that he would seek a third presidential term in 2012 saw his approval tumble to a new low of 63 percent. Voters who had ignored Putin's creeping authoritarianism during his first two presidential terms could no longer pretend his intention was anything other than to build a personalistic system of power devoid of genuine institutional checks and balances. As mass protests demanding "Russia without Putin" began to attract tens of thousands of participants following fraudulent parliamentary elections in December 2011, official discourses in support of Putin's leadership shifted. Major changes included a renewed focus on domestic and international "enemies" and a growing concentration on the West as Russia's main other.

5. Putin's Nationalism and Conservatism 2012–Present

After successfully neutering the Yeltsin elite and consolidating his power during his first two terms, the biggest obstacles to Putin's return to the presidency in 2012 were voter apathy and cynicism (Burrett, 2020). High voter turnout was essential to renewing his mandate. But after more than a decade in power, Putin

could hardly campaign as the champion of the little guy battling an entrenched elite. To rally support in 2012, therefore, Putin shifted his ire to domestic and international forces supposedly bent on overturning his legacy. State-controlled media was deployed to vilify those staging protests against Putin's return to power as a privileged elite in the pocket of the US (Krastev & Holmes, 2012, p. 44). This was not the first time that Putin had invoked an American bogyman or the spectre of a "fifth column" within to rally support for his leadership (Burrett, 2020). Foreshadowing events in 2022, during Ukraine's 2004-2005 Orange Revolution, Putin had accused the US of fostering discontent by funding anti-government NGOs. He did not, however, accuse the US of encouraging regime change within Russia itself until 2012, when his government introduced a new law requiring all NGOs receiving overseas funding to register as foreign agents (Elder, 2013). In 2007, Putin made an impassioned speech at the Munich Security Conference accusing the US of "forcing its will on the world" and of threatening global security with its foreign policy actions (Yasmann, 2007). Although there are examples of Putin invoking external enemies earlier in his first two terms, however, it was not until after 2012 that hostility to the West became a consistent theme of his rhetoric (Burrett, 2020).

In fact, Putin had come to office in 2000 hoping to integrate with the West as a route to Russia's modernisation, economic growth, and international revival. In an open letter published on 30 December 1999, Putin stated that democracy and market economics were the only routes to improved living standards, calling these principles "the highway by which the whole of humanity is travelling" (Putin, 1999). As part of his integration strategy, Putin successfully courted US President George W. Bush, who infamously claimed to have searched his Russian counterpart's soul and found him "straightforward and trustworthy" (Baker, 2013). At home, Kremlin strategists used his relationship with Bush to highlight Putin's growing international stature and his restoration of Russia's prestige. On the eve of the 2004 presidential election, Russian voters saw foreign policy—including improving relations with the West—as the area in which Putin had achieved the most progress in his first term, contributing to his 80 percent approval ratings (Burrett, 2019; Levada Center, 2014).

By 2012, strengthening Russia's international prestige was one of the few policy areas in which Russian voters continued to positively appraise Putin (Levada Center, 2014). Since the 2008 financial crisis, economic pessimism has steadily climbed, especially among younger Russians. Crucially, Putin's reputation for fighting corruption and reigning in the oligarchs had fallen sharply. In March 2004, 34 percent of Russians had cited combating corruption as one of Putin's main accomplishments, but by February 2012 this was down to 10 percent. Following the opposite trajectory, in July 2001 only 15 percent believed the oligarchs held sway over Putin, a decade later the number had jumped to 42 percent (Levada Center, 2014).

To help Putin reconnect with voters ahead of the 2012 election, the Kremlin stepped up its focus on nationalist themes. To be sure, patriotism had been central to Putinism from the outset of his presidency. But while in 1999, Putin stressed that pride in one's country must be "free from the tints of nationalist conceit and imperial ambitions," in 2012, his rhetoric became increasingly divisive (Putin, 1999). Already on the night of his triumphant return to the presidency, Putin was characterising his political opponents as an "enemy within" attempting to "undermine Russian statehood and usurp power" (Medvedev & Putin, 2012). Scholars thus generally concur that nationalism and the invoking of external enemies have become more important to Putin's performative legitimation strategies since 2012 (Hutcheson & Petersson, 2016; Malinova, 2022; Petersson, 2021; Sharafutdinova, 2020).

The Putin regime's attempts to bolster its legitimacy through nationalist appeals have been built on three main pillars: pride in the state, glorification of the military, and respect for traditional values, embodied in the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) (Burrett, 2019). Throughout Putin's tenure, military achievements have been deployed to promote patriotism across Russia's diverse citizenry, especially Soviet victory in WW2 (Hoffmann, 2021). When asked what events in national history make them most proud, more than 80 percent of Russians consistently cite defeating the Nazis in WW2 (Levada Center, 2020b). As a result, official ceremonies to mark national military holidays and anniversaries have become major events in Putin's Russia (Burrett, 2019; Hutchings, 2008; Hutchings & Rulyov, 2008). In the lead-up to the 2012 election, the Putin-Medvedev government turbocharged efforts to promote patriotism, passing legislation standardising history education to "create a positive image of modern Russia in the world and among Russians themselves" (Izvestia, 2012). To maximise his patriotic appeal, Putin chose Russia's annual celebrations marking victory in WW2 to make his first triumphant visit to Crimea after the territory was annexed by Russia from Ukraine in March 2014 (Burrett, 2019; Luhn & Walker, 2014).

Putin has also invoked WW2 to legitimise his 2022 invasion of Ukraine (Fedor, 2017). During his Victory Day speech in May 2022, Putin told Russian soldiers back from Ukraine that they were "fighting for the same thing their fathers and grandfathers did," for "the motherland" and the defeat of Nazism (Putin, 2022b). Putin and his Russian-media attack dogs repeatedly paint Ukraine's leaders as neo-Nazis perpetrating genocide against the country's Russian speakers ("Naryshkin Sravnil Situatsiyu," 2022). On 16 March 2022, Putin gave a long speech alleging that the "neo-Nazis" in Kyiv, with the help of NATO, were preparing nuclear and biological weapons to use against Russia (Putin, 2022a).

Putin has similarly used the ROC as a platform for boosting his legitimacy (Admiraal, 2009; Burrett, 2019). During his tenure, the ROC has increased its role in the military, schools, and national commemorations. In his 2000 Christmas address, Putin proclaimed the Orthodox faith as the "unbending spiritual core of the entire people and state" (Malykhina, 2014, p. 53). Closely identifying Orthodoxy with the Russian state helps Putin to defend his interference in other former Soviet countries—especially Ukraine which is also predominantly Orthodox (Admiraal, 2009, p. 209; Burrett, 2019). Promoting the ROC therefore serves both Putin's domestic legitimacy and foreign policy objectives. Since 2012, Putin has also increasingly promoted narratives about Russia as Europe's last defender of traditional values, including social conservatism (Tolz & Harding, 2015, p. 476). In March 2012, a homophobic law banning the promotion of homosexuality to minors was passed in Putin's home city of St. Petersburg; this added to existing laws passed in multiple Russian cities, effectively outlawing gay rights, rallies, and the distribution of literature referring to homosexuality. In January 2013, the Russian parliament passed a nationwide ban on homosexual "propaganda" by 388 to 1 (Sperling, 2014, p. 73). Despite a small but increasingly visible domestic LGBTQ+ movement, Russia's cultural soil was fertile for political legitimation strategies based on homophobia. In March 2015, 77 percent of Russians said they supported legislation banning "homosexual propaganda," while 84 percent were against equal marriage (Levada Center, 2015).

Traditional values were also invoked to demonise the West, which has been increasingly presented as a hostile "other" since 2012. Since the outset of his presidency, Putin has blamed others for Russia's ills (Hutcheson & Petersson, 2016). In his third term, the West, and especially the US, replaced the oligarchs as the main enemy vilified by Putin to rally the nation behind his leadership. Western tolerance of LGBTQ+ rights and other forms of diversity were presented as a source of Western weakness by Putin and his

propagandists working in Russia's state-backed media. A documentary broadcast by state television entitled *The Rape of Europe* (*Pokhishcheniye Evropy*), for example, portrayed Western Europe as paralyzed by tolerance and threatened with self-induced extinction because of mass immigration and the legalization of same-sex marriage.

The Ukraine crisis that erupted in February 2014 gave Putin the perfect opportunity to further cement nationalist and anti-Western feelings as the main pillar of support for his leadership—a strategy he would turbocharge following the 2022 full-scale invasion (Kaltseis, 2023; Mykhnenko, 2022; Treisman, 2014). In a speech in January 2015, for example, Putin claimed that pro-Russian separatists in Eastern Ukraine were not only fighting the Ukrainian army but also a NATO-sponsored "foreign legion" (Burrett, 2019; Sperling, 2016, p. 17). Putin's Ukraine strategy quickly paid dividends. In March 2014, 89 percent of Russians reported approval for Putin's annexation of Crimea (Levada Center, 2024a). Thanks to his personal embodiment of a resurgent Russia, Putin improved his approval ratings during the worst economic downturn since the 1990s. Despite US-led sanctions that tipped Russia's economy into recession in 2014, Putin's approval rating remained around 80 percent (Burrett, 2019; Levada Center, 2023b).

In 2016, Russian-US relations took a further nosedive when Washington accused Russia of using social media to manipulate American perceptions of the presidential race between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. At home, Putin's media proxies portrayed Washington's accusations of Russian election interference as evidence of American paranoia, hypocrisy, and Russophobia (Burrett, 2018). Polls show that Russians do not like the US, which is seen as the least friendly country towards Russia. In May 2023, 72 percent of Russians believed the US was unfriendly, with 77 percent reporting negative feelings towards Washington (Levada Center, 2023a). Interfering in US politics, therefore, helps Putin, not only by exacerbating divisions within American society, but also by reinforcing domestic narratives of the Russian president's vital role in defending Russia's interests against a hostile West (Burrett, 2018). Furthermore, by playing on Russians' resentment toward the US, the Kremlin deflects domestic anger over the economic distress caused by Western sanctions. In March 2014, following the annexation of Crimea, 53 percent of Russians were concerned or very concerned about the impact of sanctions (Levada Center, 2023c). Attitudes towards the US, however, have not always been hostile. Back in 2000, when Putin first became president, 69 percent of Russians held a positive view of the US, while only 23 percent felt negative towards it (Levada Center, 2023a). Russian public hostility to the US has grown in line with Putin's increasingly hostile foreign policy towards Western nations. Whether public opinion about the West has been influenced by Putin's propaganda or has become more negative independent of the Kremlin's rhetoric is not important. The point is that the public and their president are united against a perceived common enemy, a bond bolstering Putin's legitimacy.

The threat of a hostile West was further employed to bolster support for Putin in the 2018 presidential election. Russian television warned voters that support for Putin was the only thing protecting the country from obliteration by the West. Social media spread rumours of Western plans to meddle in the election, while state media alleged that more than a dozen countries had launched cyberattacks against Russia (Burrett, 2021; Polyankova, 2018). Putin's presidential opponents were accused of being in the pay of foreign powers. The Russian parliament claimed those campaigning for a voting boycott were receiving funds from Western governments to spoil the election (Burrett, 2021; "V Sovfede Zayavili," 2018).

State-backed media also framed the March 2018 assassination attempt in the UK against exiled former GRU officer Sergei Skripal to support Putin's narrative of a hostile enemy at the gates. On 4 March, Skripal was found in critical condition, unconscious on a park bench in Salisbury, along with his daughter Yulia, who was visiting from Moscow. British investigators concluded that novichok, a Soviet-era military-grade nerve agent had been used to poison them. On 12 March, British Prime Minister Theresa May stated that it was "highly likely" that Putin's regime was responsible for the poisoning (Barry & Perez-Pena, 2018; Burrett, 2021). The British government was accused of using the Skripal case to spread anti-Russian propaganda to shore up its security partnerships ahead of its departure from the EU. Appearing on state-backed television, political scientist Caroline Galacteros accused the UK government of using the Skripal case to "return the UK to the European family" (Burrett, 2020, p. 199). By stoking voters' resentment towards a hostile Western government, the Kremlin achieved its desired outcome. Election turnout reached a respectable 67.5 percent, with Putin winning 76 percent of the votes cast in 2018, enough to claim a legitimate mandate. After the election, Kremlin strategists thanked Western leaders for marshalling support behind Putin. His campaign spokesman Andrei Kondrashov thanked the British government for guaranteeing "a level of turnout we weren't hoping to achieve by ourselves" (Burrett, 2020, p. 199).

Despite winning 78 percent of the vote in the March 2018 presidential election, Putin's approval ratings soon took a dive in response to widespread public anger at government plans to raise the retirement age. Anti-Putin protests broke out across the country, with 85 percent of Russians opposing pension reform (Levada Center, 2018). Putin's approval ratings dropped from 82 percent in April 2018 to 66 percent in October (Figure 2). The president's approval ratings continued to slide over the next two years, reaching a record low of 59 percent in April 2020 over his government's poor handling of Covid-19. Upbeat coverage of gleaming hospitals with plentiful supplies of protective equipment on state-backed television was contradicted by reports of death, chaos and corruption on social media and in Russia's relatively free regional media ("For Russia regional coverage," 2020). By bringing together information from across Russia, social and local media revealed the scale of the pandemic's impact, which the government was keen to downplay in order to hold the scheduled 2020 referendum that would allow Putin to reset his term limits and stay president potentially until 2036 (Luxmoore, 2020). As had become the norm by 2020, Kremlin disinformation about the origins of Covid-19, and later about the efficacy of vaccines, focused blame on the US. Conspiracy theories also centred on Ukraine, as Putin intensified his information war against Russia's neighbour in 2019 (Mozur et al., 2022).

Putin's war in Ukraine is perhaps the best example of the significance of his foreign policy achievements to his domestic legitimacy. His February 2022 full-scale invasion ended Putin's four-year approval slump, catapulting his rating back above 80 percent, where it has remained (as of September 2024). Even before his 2022 invasion, Putin framed tensions with Ukraine as a standoff with the West over NATO's Eastward expansion, demanding a veto over Kyiv ever joining the military alliance (Talmazan, 2022). Denied the quick victory he anticipated, Putin increasingly cast the Ukraine war as an epic battle for survival against the West (Dress, 2023). Psychologically, it is more palatable for Russians to think of the war as a confrontation against the global hegemon, as opposed to the invasion of a smaller neighbour—a sentiment exploited by Putin. Framing the war as a battle against the US and NATO helps the Russian president reinforce his domestic image as Russia's resolute defender. Addressing the Federal Assembly after a year of war, Putin decried that the US had "enslaved" Ukraine and claimed that Washington was clamouring for Moscow's defeat to plunder Russian resources: "Over the long centuries of colonialism, diktat and hegemony, they got used to being

allowed everything, got used to spitting on the whole world," Putin said. He added, "We are defending human lives and our common home, while the West seeks unlimited power" (Putin, 2023). Although it is hard to accurately gauge public opinion, data from independent pollsters suggests that the majority of Russians, to some degree, support Putin's Ukraine war and his contention that the US is responsible for escalating the conflict (Volkov & Kolesnikov, 2022).

Two years into the conflict, 76 percent of Russians said they still support war with Ukraine, but this headline figure is misleading (Levada Center, 2024a). Aside from the obvious fact that respondents might fear the consequences of openly opposing Putin's war, at the start of 2024, 58 percent said they would support an immediate truce with Ukraine. Furthermore, only 33 percent believed increased military spending should be the government's budget priority, while only 17 percent supported a new mobilisation (Chronicles Project, 2024). These latter figures suggest that although Russians support their country and its troops, most would prefer an end to the war.

A gap appears to be opening between Putin and the Russian people over the war in Ukraine, relations with the West, and the government's economic priorities. Despite more than a decade of anti-Western propaganda by the Kremlin, in January 2024, 51 percent of Russians said they would favour improving relations with the West (Chronicles Project, 2024). Given current Western sanctions on Russia over its aggression in Ukraine, the only way to achieve better relations would be to end the war. Although Putin appears to have convinced Russians that the West is their enemy, many appear to wish it were otherwise. On the economy, 83 percent of Russians want their government to focus on solving domestic problems such as inflation and unemployment, while only 56 percent think this is a priority for Putin (Chronicles Project, 2024). Reflecting this concern about government priorities, only 29 percent believe Putin represents the interests of ordinary Russians (Levada Center, 2023b). Despite war and sanctions, however, Russian public confidence in the domestic economy is high and has been growing steadily since Putin began his full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 (Goncharpov, 2024). Expectations of increasing unemployment, for example, fell from 52 percent in April 2022 to 16 percent in February 2024 (Levada Center, 2024b). Although sanctions initially caused a fall in Russia's GDP, increases in public spending in war-related industries, along with high oil revenues, led to a quick recovery. Furthermore, Russia is exploiting loopholes in Western sanctions to access critical technologies, banking services, and arms via third countries. The impact of sanctions on ordinary Russia is, therefore, less severe than might be expected. Putin's economic management, while not highly regarded, is good enough not to undermine his legitimacy. And for now, that is sufficient to keep him in power.

6. Conclusion

This article has argued that despite growing authoritarianism and war, Vladimir Putin has maintained his domestic political legitimacy, reflected in his high approval ratings for most of his 25 years at the top of Russian politics. Initially, Putin's popularity rested on his economic delivery, restoration of Russia's international prestige, and populist battles against Chechen terrorists and Russia's oligarchs. His decision to return to the presidency for a controversial third term, coupled with an economic slowdown, however, led to a fall in Putin's approval ratings shortly before parliamentary elections in December 2011. As the legitimacy of the power system Putin had constructed rested on maintaining his charismatic connection with Russian voters, his declining popularity threatened the future of the wider regime. To reinflate his flagging popularity, Putin increased his nationalist rhetoric and overseas adventurism, first in annexing Crimea (2014) and then

with a surprise intervention in Syria (2015). Russia's interference in the 2016 US presidential election and reaction to the assassination of Sergei Skripal in 2018 can also be read in the context of Putin's need to demonstrate Russia's international power to domestic audiences.

Framing Russia's aggression and interference as self-defence against Western threats, allows Putin to repeatedly reassert his essential role as guarantor of Russia's national survival. Controversial pension reforms in 2018 again sent Putin's popularity into decline, a malaise exacerbated by government lies and incompetence in managing the coronavirus pandemic from spring 2020. Putin's popularity only recovered following his full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, demonstrating the importance of nationalist causes to his charismatic leadership, which is the main foundation of his legitimacy.

More than two years since the war began, despite Russian casualties in the tens of thousands, Putin retains his popular support. Many Russians agree with Putin that Russia is in an existential battle for survival with the West. For those who do disagree, conformity is the safest option, given the criminalisation of dissent since 2022. Putin's fate is now tied to the outcome of his war with Ukraine which shows no sign of fast resolution. Even if Putin secures a victory in Ukraine, in the form of a permanent territorial transfer, the long-term prospects of his regime are built on shaky foundations. Lacking a clear successor, the present system is contingent on Putin's personal longevity. Beyond Putin, it is difficult to see how the system maintains its cohesion. Although a successor could inherit Putin's mantle as the nation's protector and guardian of traditional values, the inter-elite cooperation that has sustained political stability for the past quarter century rests on long-held personal connections to the current president. The elites' loyalty to Putin is based on his role as a trusted arbiter of their factional disputes, rather than on deference to his constitutional role as head of state (Burrett, 2011; Sakwa, 2021). Whoever follows Putin will likely seek to mimic his charismatic leadership—despite the caveats above—rather than constructing a genuinely legal-rational basis for legitimacy. As the regime's security relies on aggressive behaviour and the maintenance of foreign enemies, despite Russian public preferences for rapprochement, it is unlikely that Russian-state hostilities towards the West will change in the foreseeable future.

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