Vladimir Putin’s Enduring Popularity: Finding Answers through Cultural Factors

1. Introduction

Since 2014 the Russian economy has deteriorated so severely that some analysts describe it as being in a state of collapse.\(^1\) The symptoms of this recession include rising unemployment, a weakened ruble, and shortages of quality foodstuff; the primary causes are the disproportionately large role of oil in the Russian economy and the trade restrictions enforced by European and U.S. sanctions following the annexation of Crimea. Both causes directly relate to policies that President Vladimir Putin has promoted. Putin has enlarged the roles of the oil and gas industries by making oil one of Russia’s main exports and by using natural gas as a political tool (like in 2006 and 2009, when his administration shut off gas pipelines from Russia to Ukraine, depriving millions of Ukrainians of fuel).\(^2\) At the same time, he has failed to diversify the Russian economy beyond oil, which is sensitive to global prices. He also pursued the annexation of Crimea despite the high probability of retaliation by the West. For these reasons, Putin inarguably bears most of the responsibility for the current economic crisis.

Historically, a government’s or a president’s approval rating has reflected the economic condition of the country. As Daniel Treisman argues, “Russians are surprisingly like voters in developed democracies in how they judge their leaders. Their evaluations closely follow economic conditions.”\(^3\) Thus, when the economic situation deteriorates, the approval rating of the president also suffers, and vice versa. Nevertheless, Putin’s approval rating jumped to nearly 90 percent after

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\(^1\) See Motyl.
\(^2\) See Mehdi.
\(^3\) Treisman, 3.
the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and, according to the recent poll numbers Putin’s approval rating, remained a respectable 82 percent in January of 2016.⁴

There are some hypotheses about the unusual resiliency of Putin’s popularity. Some have attributed it to the Russian state’s control of most of the media industry and to its intimidation of opposing political parties and activists.⁵ Though the state-controlled media certainly contributes to shaping Putin’s positive image, it alone cannot account for such sweeping approval numbers. As such, the possibility remains that much of Putin’s popular support is genuine.⁶

According to Valery Fedorov, the head of Russian Public Opinion Research Center VTSIOM,⁷ Putin is “a charismatic leader of the Promethean type: a demigod, a Titan, who brought the people fire.”⁸ Russians appear to share this sentiment. One question demanding more scholarly attention, then, is: to what extent is Putin’s immunity to the economic crisis driven by cultural factors? A politician’s popularity comes not from the sum of his or her accomplishments but from the outcomes of carefully executed policies that represent and adhere to the general sentiments of the public.⁹ Recent studies of authoritarian regimes have shown a correlation between a politician’s popularity and the regime’s stability, which is measured by economic performance and social order.¹⁰ An exploration of Russian cultural and sociological characteristics reveals significant similarities between the attitudes of large segments of the Russian population and the policies pursued by Putin and his United Russia party. This provides crucial insight into the response of Russian society to the economic crisis and is an important factor in explaining Putin’s enduring

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⁴ See “Odobrenie deiatel’nosti Vladimira Putina.”
⁵ See Treisman, 96.
⁶ See Frye et al.
⁷ ВЦИОМ (Всероссийский центр изучения общественного мнения).
⁸ “Putin’s Popularity: Vladimir Unbound.”
⁹ See “Vladimir Putin’s Unshakeable Popularity.”
¹⁰ Frye et al., 5.
popularity. A leader’s approval rating is commonly believed to be tied to the economic well-being of his country, but in Putin’s case, specific cultural factors such as collectivism, paternalism, and conservatism better explain his popularity.

2. Collectivism

Collectivism is a set of beliefs and cultural norms that encourages interdependency among its members. According to Mills and Clark, “In collectivist cultures people are interdependent within their in-groups (family, tribe, nation, etc.), give priority to the goals of their in-groups, and shape their behavior primarily on the basis of in-group behavior in a communal way.” A term that is inextricably linked with communism in the USSR, collectivism places the well-being and interests of a group above those of individuals, who then view themselves more readily as part of a greater whole.

Collectivism in Russia expresses itself primarily through a preoccupation with national security, resulting in the emergence of a familiar “us” versus “them” rhetoric. This ideology was a defining feature of the Soviet Union, which promoted worldwide socialism and viewed the West as its main enemy. As a cultural belief, however, it reaches as far back as ninth-century Kievan Rus’, when the people, rich and poor alike, repeatedly had to unite with the common goal of protecting their lands against foreign invaders.

The history of colonialism affects contemporary popular Russian attitudes toward Ukraine. According to Len Karpinsky of *The Moscow News*, “Millions of Russians are convinced that, without Ukraine, it is impossible to speak not only of a great Russia but of any kind of Russia at

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11 Mills and Clark, quoted by Triandis, 909.
12 See Vlachoutsicos, 7.
all.” This sentiment was observed among Russians even before Ukraine tried to join the European Union. Even though some Russians distinguish between a “true” and a “false” Europe, Ukraine’s overtures toward the EU raised the perception that the “Russian collective” was about to split. Understanding this perspective is necessary in order to evaluate the impact Ukraine’s actions have had on Russians’ perceptions and to explain both the lack of sensible domestic criticism towards Putin for annexing Crimea and his immediate rise in popularity following the events of 2014.

Although Russia tends to view Ukraine as a little brother, Ukraine is of great significance to Russian collectivist sensibilities because it serves as a buffer state. Historically, Russia’s favored defensive tactic has been the expansion of its borders. National security concerns have driven this expansion; the acquisition of buffer territories represents one of the few time-tested and pragmatic methods for overcoming Russia’s unique geographical and geopolitical obstacles. Recognizing this, the Russian people have come to associate expansionism with greater collective security.

From that perspective, many post-Cold War events have been troubling for Russians and have contributed to deteriorating relations with NATO. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, many former communist countries sought NATO membership, as they feared future aggression from Russia. As NATO welcomed former countries of the Soviet Bloc, its membership and territorial reach expanded to the Russian border. A particularly unpopular event was the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, and specifically Serbia, in support of Kosovan independence. The ultimate blow to the Russian ego was the admittance of the Baltic countries—Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia—

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13 Sakwa, 213.
14 Gower, 44.
15 See Tim.
into NATO, as those countries had been republics of the Soviet Union and held a special significance for Russians.

Putin has tapped into these aspects of Russian culture and uses them to bolster his image. He exploits the fears of NATO’s growth through pointed rhetoric, recently classifying the organization and its expansion along Russia’s borders as “a threat to the national security” in an updated national security strategy document signed on December 31, 2015. The conflict with Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea have further damaged Russia-NATO relations, which Putin and Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev have decried in interviews. For example, Medvedev equates the current state of relations to that of the Cold War: “In our assessment, NATO’s policy regarding Russia has remained unfriendly and opaque. One could go as far as to say that we have slid back to a new Cold War.” Through state propaganda this threat of a new Cold War—be it real or fictitious—has become an accepted narrative that reflects the national desire for security.

Given this emphasis on collective as opposed to individual welfare, it comes as no surprise that Russians are generally willing to make significant personal sacrifices in order to protect the collective whole. According to Alexander Winning and Natalia Shurmina, “People’s willingness to accept lower wages has also helped avert social and political unrest similar to the demonstrations in large Russian cities in 2011–2012 that briefly challenged Vladimir Putin’s government.” There are hints that Putin’s administration recognizes this beneficial pattern, though it is careful not to disturb it by acknowledging it directly. A recent comment made by an unidentified senior

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16 “Putin Approves Russia’s Updated National Security Strategy.”
17 “Остается недружественной и закрытой, по нашей оценке, политическая линия НАТО в отношении России. Можно сказать и резче: мы скатились во времена новой холодной войны.” “Медведев заявил о новой холодной войне между Россией и НАТО.”
18 See Carleton, 619.
19 Winning and Shumilova.
government official during a meeting in Switzerland reveals an awareness of the collective value of sacrifice: “Russians are prepared to ‘eat less’ and endure other hardships to support President Vladimir Putin in the face of EU and U.S. economic sanctions over Moscow’s interference in Ukraine.”20 Another official, a regional representative, said, “You should remember that we are all Russians—we have endured hunger and cold and who knows what else.”21

This government official appealed to the collective history of the Great Patriotic War that has been kept alive though movies, interviews with veterans, and—most visibly—the Victory Day Parade. The 2015 celebration marked the seventieth anniversary of the victory over Nazi Germany and was used by the Kremlin to show off not only the few remaining WWII veterans but also new military equipment. In his “Development Strategy through 2020” speech, Putin addressed “a country marked by rampant violence perpetrated by ‘separatists’ and ‘terrorists’; foreigners vying to tear the country apart; an army broken and demoralized; a severely weakened government; crushing poverty and unemployment,”22 with salvation possible only from a strong central government backed by a unified people.23 Whether or not Russia faces such grave security threats, if this statement is taken at face value, it indicates that Putin relies heavily on the collectivist attitudes of the Russian people to bolster his own political agenda.

3. Paternalism

In Russia, unlike in most established democracies, government officials remain distant from and inaccessible to their constituents outside of Moscow, where all decisions are made. This discrepancy between the people and the government results in a certain mystique associated with

20 “Russians Said Ready to ‘Eat Less’ for Putin.”
21 Ibid.
22 Carleton, 630.
23 Putin.
the latter: “The state in Russia always has been seen as a protector, a referee and a guarantor of social peace; its interests were mysterious, mythical and sacred.”24 Current opinion polls show that most Russians expect the government to improve their quality of life,25 and this dependency further strengthens the people’s deference to and respect for political leaders.

The broad acceptance of state paternalism is linked to the phenomenon of high power distance. In Russia paternalism does not necessarily run contrary to the popular will or generate resentment from the people with whom it interferes. Polls indicate that Russians expect the government to involve itself in the lives of its citizens. The belief that “the state should care for all its citizens, providing them with a decent standard of living” earned a 66 percent approval rating,26 while “the state should have minimum interference in the life and economic activity of its citizens” received a 6 percent approval rating.27

Russians’ appreciation for the state’s paternalistic role increased after the 1990s, as that decade’s severe instability is attributed to the weaknesses of institutions traditionally managed by the central government. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the subsequent loss of its status as a world power shattered the Russian national identity of the previous seven decades. Some have compared the impact of the collapse to that of the 1919 Versailles Treaty on postwar Germany or to that of France’s loss of its African territories in the 1960s.28 The complete devaluation of the ruble and the loss of people’s savings further exacerbated this situation. The exchange rate of 1

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24 O’Loughlin et al.
26 “Государство должно заботиться о всех своих гражданах, обеспечивая им достойный уровень жизни.” Ibid.
27 “Государство должно как можно меньше вмешиваться в жизнь и экономическую активность своих граждан.” Ibid.
28 See Laqueur, 106.
USD to 1 RUB was 47 rubles in 1991, but by 1998 inflation had raised the cost of 1 USD to 6000 rubles. The Russian population saw dramatic increases in poverty, crime, and marginalization of the low-income class; distrust toward the system of democratic government followed. In addition to these developments, powerful ethnic and regional separatist movements arose across the country, culminating in a severe and protracted separatist war in Chechnya from 1994 to 1996. Russians consequently associate democracy with instability, scarcity, chaos, and pain. As the state proved unable to provide the modest services and quality of life that it could during Soviet times, Russians assigned blame solely to the government, lacking as they did familiarity with democratic norms and non-governmental economic actors. Today many Russians, wary of history repeating itself, do not eagerly embrace the democratic reforms of other developing states; in fact, even the mention of the word “reform” has an a priori negative meaning for Russians. In a Levada Center poll from January, 2016, almost half of survey respondents (46 percent), answered “partially, yes” when asked if there is democracy in today’s Russia, while the same amount of respondents indicated that Russia needs “a completely special kind [of democracy] that is appropriate to Russia’s national traditions and unique characteristics.” While these results suggest some nationalistic belief in Russian uniqueness, they also reflect the difficult experiences of democratization.

At the turn of the century, Vladimir Putin emerged as a promising alternative to Boris Yeltsin’s maligned government. This notion was intensified by the stark contrast between the

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29 See D’Amora.
30 See Gower, 58.
31 “Democracy in Today’s Russia.”
32 Ibid.
young, athletic, and laconic Putin, and Yeltsin, who frequently appeared drunk on national television.\(^{33}\) By the time Yeltsin left office in 1999, his approval ratings had sunk to 8 percent, with a 4 percent margin of error.\(^{34}\) Toward the beginning of Putin’s presidency, a study concluded that “the popularity of the president [Putin] is connected first of all with the fact that at the time of his political emergence he created an image that almost completely met the expectations of Russians.”\(^{35}\) Putin has fulfilled a paternalistic role throughout his tenures as president and prime minister, and his supporters maintain that he alone is capable of restoring order to the country.

The cultural tendency toward paternalism has existed throughout Russian history, as indicated by Putin’s repeated references to Stalin in many of his speeches. Although the West habitually draws parallels between Stalin and Hitler, the Soviet leader’s legacy among Russians is ambiguous. Despite his atrocities, he remains fondly remembered for delivering the world from the evils of fascism and elevating the Soviet Union to a global power in the process. Stalin’s approval rating has steadily increased in recent decades; in 1994, when asked to evaluate the Stalin era within the context of Russian history, only 18 percent of respondents answered, “There was more good than bad.” Recent poll numbers indicate that this number has increased to 40 percent. The cult of personality surrounding Stalin continues to spread; for example, in 2016 a cultural center commemorating the Stalin Era opened in Penza.\(^{36}\) Moreover, many history textbooks have been updated with a new conceptualization of Russian history that euphemistically refers to Stalin’s

\(^{33}\) See Treisman, 7.
\(^{34}\) See ibid., 1.
\(^{35}\) “Популярность президента связана прежде всего с тем, что на момент выхода на политическую арену политику удалось создать имидж, почти полностью отвечающий ожиданиям россиян.” Shipov, 233.
\(^{36}\) See “Stalin Center Opens in Central Russia.”
Great Terror as a necessary step in “Soviet Modernization.” Stalin was and still is the embodiment of a strong paternalistic head of state, and Putin often invokes his name or image when warning of external threats against the Russian way of life, implying that an effective defense of “Mother Russia” requires unified support of its leader. Today, Putin and Stalin benefit from the same narrative: the sacrifice of certain rights and comforts by the individual and the collective are necessary to ensure the effective development of the state and national security.

Although Russians expect the state to improve their quality of life, they also respect the state’s requests to spend less and endure some austerity. While such requests would constitute a political blunder in many other cultural settings, poll numbers indicate that Putin enjoys a popular acceptance of state interference and influence on economic life. Studies of Putin’s popularity after his first term as president, when the economy recovered, showed that “satisfaction with the economic situation and the lack of visible alternatives to the regime reinforce its apprehensive support, despite awareness of its undemocratic nature.” The polls conducted in November of 2015, during the latest economic crisis, revealed that 65 percent of respondents answered “definitely yes” or “probably yes” when asked whether Russia is a “superpower.” Furthermore, 46 percent responded, “It is better for me to be a Russian citizen than to be a citizen of any other country in the world.”

Putin has achieved popularity by reestablishing a model of government familiar to Russians, namely statism, a system in which a centralized government relieves citizens of political

37 Ryzhkov.
38 Thoburn.
39 “Удовлетворенность экономическим положением и отсутствие видимых альтернатив существующему режиму усиливают его вынужденную поддержку, несмотря на осознание его недемократического характера.” Shipov, 233.
40 “Pride & Patriotism.”
responsibility and devises imaginary foreign enemies in order to forge artificial unity.\textsuperscript{41} As one justification for the annexation of Crimea, for example, Putin promulgated the narrative that ethnic Russians in Ukraine were being terrorized by neo-nazis and required protection.\textsuperscript{42} The Levada Center, an independent Russian polling organization, found that 71 percent of survey respondents viewed the West’s sanctions against Russia as a way to weaken Russia, while only 4 percent supported the sanctions as a way to resolve the war in Ukraine.\textsuperscript{43}

4. Conservatism

Conservatism in Russia is manifest in cultural attitudes toward the roles of religion, family, and gender and is a symptom of the revitalization of Orthodox Christianity—the country’s predominant religion. The Forum for Public Opinion found that the majority of Russians identify as Orthodox (64 percent),\textsuperscript{44} an impressive rebound following seven decades of suppression by an atheistic regime. Economic and political reforms of the 1990s ended the institutional suppression of religion, and since then the Russian Orthodox Church has resumed its traditional societal role. Putin’s ascent to power has augmented the prominence of the Russian Orthodox Church, which he exploits as an institution perceived as righteous and morally authoritative, with deep historical and cultural roots. His political party, United Russia, has even proclaimed “Russian Conservatism” its party ideology.\textsuperscript{45} Associating so closely with a church influential to millions of people both within Russia and around the world is a key component of Putin’s strategy to regain Russia’s global standing.\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{41} See Pipes, 15.  
\textsuperscript{42} See Thoburn.  
\textsuperscript{43} See “Sanktsii i kontrasanktsii.”  
\textsuperscript{44} See Kojevina.  
\textsuperscript{45} White, 362.  
\textsuperscript{46} See Thomas.
According to the World Values Survey, Russia is one of six countries (all ex-Communist) experiencing the greatest gains in religious faith.\footnote{See Trudolyubov.} This can be credited to effective promotion of Orthodox values by both the church and the state. A National Security document signed by Putin in 2000 states the following:

Ensuring the national security of the Russian Federation also includes the protection of our cultural, spiritual and moral legacy, historical traditions and the norms of social life, the preservation of the cultural wealth of all the peoples of Russia, the formation of government policy in the field of the spiritual and moral education of the population, and the imposition of a ban on use of air time in electronic mass media for distribution of programs propagandizing violence and exploiting low instincts, along with counteraction against the negative influence of foreign religious organizations and missionaries.\footnote{“Обеспечение национальной безопасности Российской Федерации включает в себя также защиту культурного, духовно-нравственного наследия, исторических традиций и норм общественной жизни, сохранение культурного достояния всех народов России, формирование государственной политики в области духовного и нравственного воспитания населения, введение запрета на использование эфирного времени в электронных средствах массовой информации для проката программ, пропагандирующих насилие, эксплуатирующих низменные проявления, а также включает в себя противодействие негативному влиянию иностранных религиозных организаций и миссионеров.” “National Security Concept of the Russian Federation.”}

One way in which Russia’s “spiritual legacy” is preserved is through a movement known as votserkovlenie\footnote{See Burgess, 55.} (in-churching), which aims to shape national identity through religious education, memorialization of martyrs, and social outreach.\footnote{See ibid., 58.} The program does not actively pursue the conversion of secular Russians; it seeks to convince them that they are inherently Christian by virtue of being Russian.\footnote{See ibid., 58.}

The Church itself has been exceedingly cooperative with the president’s mission. Patriarch Kirill regularly appears in the company of Putin during important announcements and events. He
also frequently addresses the politicians in the State Duma, telling them in March of 2016, “The absolute majority of the citizens want the MPs to be kind. Not weak but kind! This means that the laws should not only come from your mind but also from your heart.” Tellingly, he directs these comments not toward Putin, but toward the representatives in the Duma, who often serve as scapegoats—with the possible exception of Dmitry Medvedev. Overall, these interactions have helped Putin position himself as a moral pillar of nearly equal standing with the Church.

Another prominent expression of conservativism in Russia is the ongoing suppression of the feminist movement. Upholding socially-prescribed gender norms, Russians generally regard women as the mothers or caretakers and men as the decisive leaders of the family unit. Such attitudes are prevalent regardless of political and social settings, but their most vocal proponents are found among Russia’s conservative groups. In her book *Sex, Politics, & Putin: Political Legitimacy in Russia*, Valerie Sperling argues that the presidency, the Russian Orthodox Church, and the army are the country’s most trusted institutions:

> Strong gender stereotypes pervade and are associated with each of these institutions, lending them credibility with the traditional conservative sector of Russia’s population from which Putin’s regime is hoping to draw support: the macho presidency, the masculinized army, and the Russian Orthodox Church, which excludes women from its hierarchy and embraces conservative and mutually exclusive notions of masculinity and femininity and ties them to a sex-based biological determinism.\(^{52}\)

Patriarchal language saturates Russian politics, and the treatment of women as second-class citizens across all social and political institutions begins at birth. Sperling succinctly sums up her argument with the following observation: “At baptism, male infants are triumphantly borne aloft

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\(^{51}\) “Абсолютное большинство горожан хочет, чтобы депутаты были добрыми. Не слабыми, а добрыми! Это означает, что законы должны проходить не только через ваш ум, но и через ваше сердце.” Patriarch Kirill.

\(^{52}\) Sperling, 35.
by the priest behind the iconostasis into the altar, whereas baby girls are placed on the floor in front of the royal doors, because access to the altar space is off limits to their sex.”

Putin expresses his personal conservatism through religious practice and self-presentation. He revealed that he was secretly christened in the Soviet era, and he regularly makes appearances at church services on major Orthodox holidays. In general, however, Putin remains an intensely private man, a quality that appeals to conservative Russians on a psychological level. Throughout his presidency he has baffled foreign political leaders by remaining a mysterious closed book with a calm and quiet demeanor—a persona consistent with the popular perception of masculinity. Putin’s promotion of a macho image furthers those perceptions, as photographs appear at opportune times to show off his prowess in horse riding, scuba diving, fishing, and even teaching a flock of cranes migration patterns. By embodying these religious and gender norms, Putin earns respect from the majority culture that believes in conservative ideals.

5. Conclusion

Russia, the hegemonic political and cultural force of the USSR, had regressed in the 1990s from being a superpower to a crippled and chaotic state with little regional influence, but now it appears to be a resurgent regional power. Soviet nostalgia remains a powerful force in part because the USSR offered Russians a holistic, integrated national identity compatible with its cultural inclinations toward collectivism, paternalism, and conservatism. That era boasted a robust industry for cultural productions, a universalist political and economic ideology, relative internal stability,

53 Ibid., 234.
54 See “Putin Tells of Secret Christening at Orthodox Christmas.”
55 See Shestopal, 72.
56 See Amos.
and a global economic and military presence to back up the nation’s ideological and cultural assertions, all of which supported an integrated identity that the events of the 1990s shattered to pieces. One must weigh these experiences when considering the popular approval in Russia of Putin’s aggressive response to the crisis in Ukraine.

Essentially, Putin returned to the people some of the pride that was lost during the years of perestroika and Yeltsin. Putin’s actions respond to the public desire for self-respect and have restored the cultural values that resonate with the Russian people. In a recent paper published in the Russian Journal of Political Studies examining Putin’s fifteen years in power and the people’s attitude towards his legacy, Elena Shestopal posits that 2014 was a year that marked a new beginning, a new phase in Russian history and in the public’s perception of the president. She argues that the nation has rallied behind Putin in a show of national solidarity with the government, a phenomenon absent not only from the history of modern Russia, but also from that of the late Soviet era. A national identity lacking in the 1990s and 2000s is finally beginning to emerge as a result of Putin inspiring pride among the Russian people. This narrative remains absent from most Western political analyses of the current situation in Russia.

A recent article published by Business Insider, for example, predicts three possible scenarios facing Putin in 2017, each of which end with him either relinquishing power or making concessions to the West. This is a conventional approach to assessing the current state of Putin’s government—determining that it is in crisis and will have to make radical changes within a short timeframe. Yet the author ignores Putin’s strong approval ratings and assumes that the economic recession portends a total collapse. The fall of Putin would have to begin with popular disapproval,
which currently shows no substantial signs of developing. Even if Putin hypothetically were to retain power but make significant concessions to the United States and Europe, in doing so he would violate conventional Russian attitudes toward Ukraine and consequently lose face, which would itself precipitate a loss of approval. In spite of present economic conditions, the attitudes and values of the population play a significant and under-appreciated role in shaping the current political situation in Russia.

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