

Domestic Political Legitimacy in Contemporary Russia: Uncovering Cracks within the Putin Consensus.

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Introduction

The question of how ordinary Russians view the country's political configuration, including the leadership, is undoubtedly connected to political legitimacy: Even in Russia's neo-authoritarian context, politicians and parties communicate their policies in terms of how they fit with the 'nation's' needs and, thus, show their actions to be congruent with the concerns of the 'people'. This paper uses in-depth semi-structured interviews to explore lines of consensus and fracture on those who 'lead the nation'. While the main line of consensus is on foreign policy, which I have considered in detail elsewhere (Blackburn 2019 forthcoming), the main fractures are based on normative splits, which are partially related to generational difference.

The most important normative division found in this paper is between those who do and do not take the late Soviet period as a benchmark for normality. Among the former group there is a preference for a conservative, Soviet-style, social contract: the people turn their backs on high politics, in return for a guarantee of certain minimums provided by a powerful state. Citizens 'get on' with their lives, rejecting responsibility for decisions taken from above and adopting a risk-averse stance to politics. Among the latter group, the normative point of reference is modern 'developed states' and certain traits, such as passivity, paternalism and dependence on the state, are criticized as backward and undesirable. Frames of normality play an important role in determining stances toward Putin's domestic policies. Those who 'frame' the present in reference to the 'chaos' of the nineties are far less critical than those who 'frame' it in terms of a comparison to the 'modern and developed' states of the twenty-first century.

Based on over one-hundred interviews in Moscow, St. Petersburg and Nizhny Novgorod, I examine this normative split in a ‘Russia One’ setting across four main themes¹: (i) popular renditions of ‘what Russians are like as a people’ and its relevance to the leader’s legitimacy; (ii) imaginaries of the ‘state’ and its relationship with the ‘people’; (iii) reproduction and contestation of the ‘Putin mythology’; (iv) attitudes to Russia’s ‘information war’. Before moving to this main body, however, I will elaborate on some theoretical points and link this to my methodological approach.

Theorising political legitimacy

As Valerie Sperling (2014: 3) pointed out in her study of Putin-era Russia, legitimacy is an important goal in both democratic and neo-authoritarian contexts, where a variety of forces deploy ‘culturally familiar norms’ as a resource in the construction of ‘believable arguments’ that ‘justify their ongoing power position’. There is a significant trend in the literature towards interpreting legitimatisation as a process whereby the political domination of elites over the masses is naturalised. This has deep-rooted Marxist origins, and was developed further by Pierre Bourdieu (1994) (‘Habitus’ or ‘doxic’ knowledge) and Antonio Gramsci (1975) (‘Hegemony’). Writers such as Lilia Shevtsova and Masha Gessen carry this tradition on today in their analysis of Russian politics. Gessen (2017) concluded that 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’ that renders Russians unable to act in the world or to grasp the nature of reality. Shevtsova (2015: 25) 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’.

This paper, however, follows Benno Netelenbos’s (2016: 2) point that ‘political action, from obedience to protest, from decision-making to mobilisation, can hardly be understood without paying attention to subjective orientations, interpretations, and meanings’ among larger groups in society. As Jurgen Habermas (1996: 25) argued, studying legitimacy is about explaining ‘how the validity and acceptance of a social order can be stabilised (...) in the view of the actors themselves’. Even a leader in a neo-authoritarian context does not justify a binding, final decision in terms of his or her ‘raw power’; instead this is ‘legitimated in

¹ Respondents all self-defined as *russkii*, came from a variety of occupations and education level, 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 Putinist Russia, the older cohort in the late Soviet period). ‘Russia One’ comes from Natalia Zubarevich’s ‘Four Russia’s’ framework and refers to Russia’s largest cities, which are characterised by high social mobility and the highest concentration of Russia’s middle class.

relation to argumentatively structured social reality' with narratives that 'will not necessarily resolve conflict, but can creatively emphasise shared and unproblematised assumptions and interests, absorb conflict in ambiguous symbols and solutions, or present the decision as the most reasonable solution' (Netelenbos (2016: 215).

Based on the interview narratives of ordinary citizens from a representative slice of urban Russia, this paper examines legitimacy in terms of 'everyday normative feelings, experiences, and understandings' (ibid: 21). This approach moves the analysis away from the framework of 'legitimate domination' toward an agent-centred view of legitimacy that is 'negotiated, mobilised, reproduced, and argumentatively validated' by groups of people (ibid: 24). In my interviews, political imaginaries were expressed through two key vehicles. The first is through *myths* on 'who we are', 'where we came from' and 'where we are going'. Myths differ from mere narratives in that they possess an 'emotional underpinning' and 'add significance to the world' (Bottici and Challand: 90-92). Myths act as a 'vehicles of legitimization' (Hutcheson & Petersson 2016:1109) and 'serve to tell a story of why who governs has the right to do so and why we should obey' and 'create links between governing and its subjects' (della Salla 2010:5).

The second can be termed '*visions of normality*' in deference to the influence of Erving Goffman, who wrote on the importance of normality in buttressing social order. This concerns views on how to live, what is natural for us, which emerge from specific 'frames' of reference (Goffman 1974). The 'normality' of a political order inspires trust between rulers and ruled (Misztal 2001: 322). Here, we can expect more than one version of normality to exist in the population; generational, social and cultural differences between certain groups in society make it likely they will have differing ideas about what is 'normal' and 'natural'. Thus, 'frames of normality' are an important feature in explaining how the political nation is understood.

The Russian national character and Putin as the rectifier

The social identity approach (Fielding, Hogg 1997) argues political leadership emerges from: 'the creation, co-ordination and control of a shared sense of "us."' (Haslam 2001: 85). In other words, political leaders and parties present themselves as embodying qualities that individuals and groups see as desirable. Researchers have applied this approach to the Russian

context, revealing the performative aspects of Putin's leadership, such as hypermasculinity, playing the action hero and macho sex object, which appeal to certain audiences (Goscilo 2012; Riabov and Riabova 2014; Sperling 2016).² Here I focus on another aspect of the social identity approach: how popular views of the 'national character' legitimise the political order. Vital to this are cultural idioms describing 'what we are like as a people', which are then linked to conclusions about 'how we should be governed'. This brings us to Michael Herzfeld's concept of 'cultural intimacy': 'the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nonetheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality' (Herzfeld 1997: 3). In other words, it is 'part of cultural identity that insiders do *not* want outsiders to get to know' that provide feelings of national comfort, group solidarity and categorical unity for insiders (Herzfeld 2013: 491). Thus, sardonic and humorous representations of the national character represent one important way people 'negotiate the terrain of social identity and daily life in the (...) modern nation-state' (Herzfeld 1997: 91).

Representations of the leader, which are contrasted with those of the people (*narod*), are an important part of what may be termed the 'pro-Putin' consensus. A wide range of participants 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

² 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', something that 'meets the psychological needs of a significant part of Russian society' (Riabov and Riabova 2014: 32).

years.³ The above characterization can be contrasted with a commonly-reproduced 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 cultured, urban ‘European’ Russian is juxtaposed against the bumbling, unreliable and potentially dangerous Russian *muzhik*. In interview narratives, Russians, especially in comparison to Westerners, are 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 wily 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, and that a person with Putin’s personal qualities is a good fit: *‘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 ‘kicked into shape’: *‘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 are an Eastern country and cannot be fully Western in mentality (...) and we can’t be so for a long time’* (Julia (47) Assistant in film set production, SPB). The idealized image of Putin will ‘kick Russians into shape’ and remedy the negative elements of the Russian self-image. 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.

³ 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>

Another commonly claimed trait of Russians among participants was 'patience'. This was often rendered with the word '*terpenie*', which, beyond patience, also implies endurance, fortitude and forbearance. Thus 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 was not always explained in a negative sense but felt to be a result of Russia's tumultuous twentieth century, which was full of exhausting upheavals, leaving Russians today quite justified in seeking a 'peaceful life' without 'upheavals' (Natalya (50) Accountant, NN). Looking at political behaviour in this way, political inactivity is 'normal' and 'natural' for Russians given that, looking back at the recent past, mass protests are seen to have achieved little: *We are accustomed to enduring, it like we say "that is how things are, and let's keep it that way". (...) It might actually be a good thing we are that way.* (Katya (22) Student Politics, NN).

This brings us back to the idea of 'cultural intimacy', that an attribute that could cause some embarrassment and defensiveness if raised by an 'outsider' to the group, can function within the group to produce feelings of commonality. Here the Russian ability to 'endure' and 'to take things as they are and get on with things' is a source of pride. This tough enduring manner is part of a deeper Soviet mentality, a stance taken by generations of Soviet Russian families to survive the enormous challenges of collectivization, industrialisation, terror, war and, later, the economy of shortages and *blat*. To negotiate this people did not resort to complaints or protests, which would be ruinous to oneself and family and achieve 'nothing'. Instead they did what their parents had done in previous crisis situations: they got on with 'surviving':

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

This idea of 'living according to circumstances' reflects a view of how the Russian people have adapted to the challenging external conditions they have found themselves in throughout

the twentieth century. 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! (laughs)’* (Zakhar (29) Manager in export company, SPB).

Younger respondents also expressed admiration for their parents who, in spite of the enormous difficulties of the collapse and 1990’s, battled on stoically without complaining. Rather than criticizing this as ‘passivity’, what is emphasised is the true grit and toughness of people who faced the challenges of the reform era, and ‘made it through’:

My dad worked two jobs at the same time and on top of that managed to graduate and look after two children. I don’t know if there was some Soviet romanticism then but I never heard them complaining about any particular people or saying that someone had caused the country’s collapse. They accepted the all reforms in silence; I don’t even know how to explain it!

Marina (25) Language teacher, NN

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, a large number of 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, a manifestation of mindless and hopeless inertia:

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

The above views on the Russian national character also appear to correlate with a three-way split in my data sample on views of the current political status-quo: (i) those who defend the concentration of power into the hands of the President as a 'natural' and 'normal'; (ii) those who lament paternalism's pernicious effects and the slide to authoritarianism; (iii) those who were essentially pragmatic, apolitical and merely interested in a system that 'works'. 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 fits well with Guillermo A. O'Donnell's model of Delegative Democracy.⁴ 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 paternalistic and caring style of rule. Again the important idea is delegating 'supreme power' to Putin and 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 (verkhovnyuyu vlast') – let him be the monarch.

Oleg (49) Construction site foreman, SPB

⁴ As other authors have noted (Rogov 2015; Green 2018), this applies to the Russian case in the sense that 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 defender of its interests' (O'Donnell 1994: 60), 'a government of saviors' promises to take the bold measures required to 'save the country' (ibid: 65).

The final group (iii), tended to downplay the importance of politics to their everyday lives, portraying events such as the Bolotnaya protests as something happening ‘far away’ from them. Accusations of election rigging were dismissed as *‘United Russia and Putin would have won without this anyway. He is the most worthy 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 effectiveness over adherence to democratic norms or any ideological commitments to the ‘purity’ of a political system. One respondent, who described himself as *‘an advocate of democracy, rather than any totalitarian system’*, still defended the slide toward authoritarianism as *‘what 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 even today: *‘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 the days when 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: It’s just that we judge the system in terms of its effectiveness. (...) 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

Such sentiment reveals much about how many Russians view this current system; it is not an almighty leviathan asserting its authority in all walks of everyday life, but a system that puts things in decent order so that people can get on with life. 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, the divide on viewing 'passive' Russian political behaviour as 'normal', or 'abnormal' appears to reflect stances toward the political order as a whole. For some, *terpenie* is a 'normal' way to behave in a Russian context, while, for others, it reflects a refusal of to 'take responsibility' in politics and the continuation of an 'abnormal' paternalistic relationship with the authorities. This split on versions of 'normality' resurfaces in the different ways that antipathy to state institutions and structures were articulated.

The corrupt state, the detached people and the leader

An interesting feature of discussions on everyday life of respondents was critical comments about the 'abnormal' performance of the state and the political class in Russia today. This is also observed in quantitative polling that shows that, with the exception of the Presidency, the army and the Orthodox Church, institutions and the state bureaucracy in general are not held in high regard in Russia.⁵ While this basic sentiment cut across class, age and profession, what differentiated respondents was how they framed this 'abnormality'. While older respondents did this with reference to the Soviet state, younger respondents focused on how these deficiencies deviated from the idea of a 'normal' modern state in the twenty-first century. With regards older respondents, 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

⁵ 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_Golizono27-11-2014.pdf
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/>

(41) Journalist, NN). The contemporary Russian state is 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 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. 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. Younger respondents picked out a variety of ways in which those working in the state apparatus violate the principles of the modern state. One referred to a central concept of the modern state – 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). One respondent, an architect working on a government contract for the Governor of Penza, 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 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, albeit with differing reference frames, portray the Russian state system and corresponding political elite/establishment in seriously negative terms, revealing a lack of trust in state officials, whose vulture-like behaviour is aimed at self-enrichment. This 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.⁶

One respondent offered an interesting characterization of life in Russia today that rather neatly summarises the way the state system (*gosudarstvennii stroi*) was perceived by many respondents. Describing Russia's socio-economic and political system (*stroj*), he employed the metaphor of an anthill with a large sugar cube at its peak:

I would say our system (stroj) 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 very highest branches of the state. This links into a widespread view of the President as genuinely committed to making a fairer and better Russia but *'no matter how he tries there is no freedom, you always come up against an apparatus of officials and ministers, that you cannot bypass'* (Eva (26) Unemployed, university graduate, NN). This idea has a long history in Russian history found in the

⁶ <http://www.levada.ru/indikatory/odobrenie-organov-vlasti/>

saying 'The Tsar is good but the Boyars are wicked'.⁷ 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. The view 'from the bottom' is rooted in lived memories and the sense that 'this is how it is always been'.

Life at the 'bottom'

Memories of politics in the late Soviet era provide a 'frame' from which to understand 'normal' political behaviour and a 'normally' functioning political system. One highly observable trend among respondents recalling personal and family/friend political positions from Perestroika to Putin was a stance of general disengagement. For older respondents this was reported as remembered lived historical memory, for younger respondents this was a transmitted history of family behaviour in the period. There was a sense that being politically inactive and disinterested in ideology, parties and protests is the normal or default position in families, while it is only the 'strange' that become fascinated with politics: *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 spokojnaya sem'ya)* (Julia (29) Chemist in State company, NN). This ties in well with quantitative polling that suggests the vast majority of Russians today still do not want to be active in politics.⁸

Among older participants, very few 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. 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-

⁷ http://mizugadro.mydns.jp/t/index.php/Царь_добрый_а_бояре_злые

⁸ 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/>

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 an 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

Thus, there is a powerful social imaginary of relations between state power, the people and the leader that reinforce the stance that ‘nothing can be done’ and ‘there is no alternative’. This kind of legitimisation is reinforced by widely reproduced myths about Putin’s great achievement: ‘raising Russia up from her knees’.

The Putin mythology and its contestation

The content of the Putin mythological framework has been carefully outlined by Bo Petersson (2013, 2016), who highlighted the consistent theme of Russia as an eternal world power (*derzhava*)⁹ that only returns to her rightful place after overcoming periods of upheaval and

⁹ A difficult term to translate into English that combines the idea of being ‘a power’ and a ‘strong state’

dislocation (*smuta*). In this context, Putin is the central actor who pulls Russia out of *smuta* and restoring her *derzhava* status. This foundational myth, which takes the ‘abnormality’ of the nineties as its starting point, clearly legitimises the political leadership and helps bond people to its goals. This myth is strongly influenced by memories of life from 1985 to 1999, which remembers the country and its population as helpless and abandoned, and in need of rescue. My participants reproduced these narratives, arguing Putin had ended the *smuta* and restored Russia as a great power (*derzhava*). In both of these, the idea of normality is central: 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/imaging 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 2000s 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 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).

It is important, however, not to take the above as suggestive of monolithic unity on the Putinist mythology; a clear division emerged in how respondents talked about this mythology. While many reproduced pro-Putin myths in the first person and presented them as their own views, many others explained Putin's popularity in third person, as a bonding between Putin and other Russians, who were often presented as from a different or lower social background.

In St. Petersburg, a variety of respondents claimed it was provincial Russia that supports the President most. In comparison to the big cities who take a more critical view, 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). According to this view of Putinism, the rough language and macho posturing employed by the President is largely an appeal to the 'lower classes'. In other words, Putin's *'not accidental use of criminal jargon (blatnyu 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'*. These resemble the common language of *'criminal underworld jokes'* that a *'certain part of the population loves'* (Semyon (54) psychologist, SPB). It is clear that cultural, educational, regional and generational difference plays a serious role in the reception of the Putin myth and image. A large number of younger and older respondents reproduced the myths of Putin's popularity with some heavy irony. These respondents argue such myths are only accepted by 'stupid' or 'backward' Russian masses, who have reverted to the role played by the Russian peasantry of the nineteenth century: they revere the Tsar as the protector of the people and look to him to solve all the country's problems. This returns us again to the idea of the *'Tsar-father who will take care of us'* (*tsar'-batyushka, kotoryy zabotitsya obo vsekhnas*), 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 discourses; they take up the classic stance of the 19th century Westernised urban intellectual: the rest of the *narod* is the Russian peasant (*muzhik*), an object of contempt and, at times, fear.

Another means of contesting the Putin consensus was to refer to the actual state of the country that the President has ‘risen from her knees’: As the respondent below indicates, a wide number of deficiencies are clear in everyday life, ranging from corruption and uneven development to plummeting educational and healthcare standards. As we saw earlier in criticism of the Russian state, such views are far from rare. Here the respondent clearly does not look back to the nineties anymore in framing normality. Instead, Putin’s domestic policies are seen as a failure in the context of a ‘normal country in the twenty-first century’:

Putin’s foreign policy is one thing, his domestic policies are something else. I don’t like the domestic policies (...) 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

Focusing on the idea that Putin’s domestic policies have failed in terms of the standards of the modern world, this clearly contradicts the foundational myth of ‘Putin as saviour’ by claiming his attempts to ‘rescue’ Russia have not produced the desired results. For those taking the developed world as reference point, Russia is a ‘shambles’.

In stark contrast, those who frame matters in comparison ‘abnormal’ nineties, however, present ‘Putin’s achievements’ in a different light. 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 or 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:

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

Thus, differing frames of normality can lead to differing evaluations of Putin's domestic policy. Those still appraising Putin in terms of how he has regained something resembling late Soviet stability draw different conclusions from those looking out onto the wider world, where different standards of political and economic development are on display. It can be argued that this split in normative frames will be important as the years pass and generational shifts continue. As more and more Russians grow up travelling and communicating with the outside world, it may be the generational dynamic will work against the Putin consensus as the lived memory of the nineties as a frame of reference becomes less salient. Attitudes to Russia's 'information war' offer further evidence of cross-generational and cultural divisions emerging that may prove problematic for the future legitimacy of the current political *status quo*.

The Information war: The party of the internet versus the party of the television

While the explosion of state media propaganda noticeable since Maidan (2013-2014) has rallied some behind the leader, it has also provoked confusion and dismay among many who see the new media coverage style as 'abnormal'. As Richard Sakwa has pointed out, in the current climate Russians are faced by 'the constant structuring of binaries' (Sakwa 2015: 199); we have the 'good' patriots and the 'bad' fascists or nationalists; the 'normal', 'loyal' people and the 'treacherous' fifth column turncoats; the 'honest defenders' of Russia and those trying to sell her out. Attitudes shown by respondents to the Information War in this chapter contest the notion that Russians are passive victims of state propaganda; instead conflicting frames of normality exist among different social and generational groups, which is related to media consumption patterns.

Many respondents saw the changes in the media environment as 'abnormal' in one way or another. One way was the sense of confusion this caused, leading many to doubt all information to be lies on both sides and conclude that holding a clear political position is

untenable or pointless. The lack of ‘objectivity’ or a ‘middle road in media’ makes it ‘hard to say where the truth is’ and leaves one ‘at a loss’ (Eva (26) Unemployed, university graduate, NN). Here we find evidence of how the information war creates conditions that neutralize critical thought. After all, if one *can’t believe any sources*’ as they are understood to be ‘blatant propaganda’ then all that one is left with is a ‘total muddle (*polneyshaya nerazberikha*) in the mass media’ (Anastasia (21) Economics Student, NN). This brings us to a dividing line in terms of media consumption between the ‘party of the television’ (*partita televisora*), who rely mainly on Channel One (*Perviy Kanal*) and other state media for news, and the ‘party of the internet’ (*partiya interneta*).¹⁰

A large proportion of younger respondents claimed they did not consume state media as a matter of principle and preferred internet-based sources. One younger respondent described TV as an information space that has undergone a ‘return to a Soviet style’ where ‘they “make enemies” for us’ and announce ‘There he is guys, attack!’ In this context the respondent claims ‘you feel like closing your ears when you see the news; at least then the pictures won’t tell a lie’ (Yaroslav (23), IT Student and small businessman, NN). This view of the Information War as a return to Soviet-style propaganda is expanded on by the respondent below who has observed a common theme: the morally upright home country is contrasted with the degenerate West delivered in reports delivered with a tone of ‘malicious joy’. What is important here is that this kind of media lacks credibility for both him and his mother:

Every time I see the news (...) they show only good things happening here, while in the West it is all bad. When the riots happened in the USA between the blacks and whites (the Ferguson unrest of August 2014 MB) it was presented here as if America was about to fall apart. My mother was watching it and said ‘Hmm, this is like the 70’s and 80’s’ (...) like when the TV show ‘Vremya’ talked about party congresses, and the successes of Soviet production and, meanwhile in the West, everything in that degrading bourgeois society was bad.

Evgeny (30) sales manager construction materials, SPB

A variety of respondents viewed this kind of media reporting as something ‘not for them’. Older respondents also viewed television media as something designed for the older generation, such as their over-60 parents. This kind of thinking suggests the information war

¹⁰ One large scale poll asked the two groups to choose between two options - ‘freedom is a thing without which a person’s life loses meaning’ and ‘the main thing in life is material well-being, freedom is secondary.’ The results for the party of the internet were 75% to 25% in favour of freedom, while for the party of the television it was a 51-49 split (Gorshkov et al 2013: 120).

caters 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

Those who tend to take their news from internet often revealed their own sense of freedom and liberation from one-sided positions, receiving information on current affairs from bloggers, independent writers and other non-systemic media. This can lead to conflict in discussions between those who rely on state media:

One key feature of my circle and my generation is that we are the people of the internet, we sit at our computers, we don’t watch state-run information channels (...) I often speak with my mother and she only watches federal TV channels, therefore her views are pretty one-sided, (...) I try to explain things, to help her understand more (...) but in the end we have just started to talk less.

Alexei (23) Computer programmer, 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. Almost all of this reporting was one-way: respondents lamented the one-sided positions of their older relatives. 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

The emotions generated by this ‘brick wall’ could vary; below we find an example of sympathy and acceptance of their parents falling under the spell of one-sided aggressive propaganda. As with other respondents, she is grateful not to have ‘fallen victim’ to the information war. The implication here is that this is a misfortune that can happen to those not lucky (or educated/cultured) enough to have a healthier perspective:

I have been observing this information war for the last six months as I lived in Crimea with my parents during this time. They watch the TV 24 hours a day (...) my parents are on the side of Russia and say ‘look how Ukraine lies! Aren’t they ashamed of themselves?’ I don’t look any worse on my parents for this (...) but thank God I am not a victim of the information war because I do not believe that two kindred (blizkikh po dukhu) peoples can just start hating one another like that. I have loads of friends in Kiev. They still invite me to visit them and my relations with them have not changed.

Nadezhda (30) nanny, SPB

For other respondents, the sense of ‘losing’ one’s parents to the state media propaganda machine is vexing and hurtful. In some ways, the Information War creates a feeling of separation between ‘thinking people’ and ‘Channel One zombies’ who rely on the TV. According to this view, ‘*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. (...) People find it easier to go by the path of least resistance*’. State media like Channel One target such people and ‘*lie in brazen, cynical and disgustingly stupid ways*’ (Pyotr (29) Architect, NN).

Generalized negative representations of such ‘Channel One zombies’, ties in with a phrase that has seen increased recent usage in spoken Russia – *vatnik* – which translates literally as a ‘quilted coat’ but is slang for the masses of 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 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

This image of a passive and zombie-like Russian mass that cannot be reasoned with also ties in with the sections above on views of paternalism and what kind of people the Russians are and why the current system suits them. What we have seen is how people react to and negotiate the political nation 'from below'. They do this in ways that do not show them to be 'brainwashed' or 'controlled' by the state propaganda. In fact there are a variety of ways that Russians negotiate the Information War in everyday life and find it to cause polarisation and the poisoning of political debate.

Conclusion

This paper has explored how argumentation is vital to political legitimacy, in part because it explains social reality and helps legitimate and justify the policies and directions of the political leadership (Netelenbos (2016: 215). 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 key elements of the pro-Putin consensus position include: (i) accepting Putin's carefully crafted image as a 'real man', which is juxtaposed next to widely held views of Russians being 'lazy', 'unrealisable' or 'inactive'; (ii) the internalisation of Putinist mythology and the emotional language of redemption for a 'ruined nation' by a 'government of saviors' that delivers normality; (iii) the belief in 'delegating' all power into the hands of the President in the hope he will discipline the state and society, moulding this to fit the needs of the people. In all three components, Soviet-inspired frames of normality help justify these positions.

Thus, this paper has also offered a more empirically sound examination of Masha Gessen's claim that *homo sovieticus* is still alive and well in Russian society. There is indeed continuity between the late Soviet period and today's Russia: the sense of distance between people and the state that claims to rule in their name, people's lack of confidence that anything they do can affect change, a feeling that political inactivity and disengagement is 'normal', the preference to turn ones' backs on politics. This is supported by common memory of the reform processes as started from above and alien to ordinary people. Yet, it is important to

note that respondents with pro-Putin stances did not paint a rosy picture of life in Russia. They highlighted stagnating living standards, poor public services and the venality, corruption and incompetence of the Russian state. They long for a return to the standards of the Soviet state, which they remember as guarantors of a safe and stable life.

Furthermore, it must be emphasised that these Soviet-style stances are contested: whether one prefers to interpret this as ‘stoic endurance’ or ‘servile passivity’ reflects a position on what is ‘normal’ – the paternalistic Soviet state of the late Brezhnev era or the prosperous, democratic societies of the contemporary developed world. The latter group views political passivity and paternalism in negative terms: reliance on a ‘Tsar’ to solve Russia’s problems and having a citizenry with a ‘slave-like mentality’ stops Russia from achieving ‘normality’. For this section of respondents, Soviet legacies in political behaviour are not seen as good or something to be replicated; they crave a new, ‘normal’, relationship between the state and people.

This brings me to a final point: the conclusions of this paper partially substantiate the thesis, offered in slightly different terms by Lev Gudkov (2015) and Alexei Kolesnikov (2015), that the Putin-era social contract has been redrafted in since 2012.¹¹ The sense that people have of Putin targeting people of a lower cultural and educational level as the bedrock of his support was clearly mentioned. Many respondents clearly interpreted the Information War in these terms, as a drive to consolidate the *sovok*, the *vatnik* and the *gopnik* behind the regime, while turning away from the middle classes and the intelligentsia. It appears that state propaganda only heightens 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

¹¹ Lev Gudkov (2015) argued the first version of this contract, running from 2000 to 2011, was based on the idea the people would stay out of politics and, in return, the state would provide economic prosperity and growth. This was particularly attractive to Russia’s emerging middle-class. The economic crisis of 2008 and the Bolotnaya protest put an end to this configuration. In 2012 the social contract was redrafted in response to these unexpected protests: the authorities moved away from the ‘creative’ and ‘middle’ classes toward a deal with the ‘poor and state-dependent conservative groups in the provinces’ (Gudkov 2015: 864). Thus, an even more paternalistic version of the social contract came into place, involving state 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 even more dramatic ways, such intervention in Crimea (Kolesnikov 2015).

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 allow a more systematic examination of how generational and socio-economic difference affects reception and reproduction of narratives on the 'imagined' nation and the legitimacy of the current political order.

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