

Authoritarian Legitimation and Insecure Collective Identity: Or What Connects Putin to Malcolm X?

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It was inevitable that particularistic, identity-driven politics would emerge as a reaction to the homogenizing, 'flat world' trends of the 1990s and early 2000s. The more nuanced observers of globalization processes long highlighted the turbulence and contradictions of the processes turning the world into a 'global village.'¹ Today we witness many nations embroiled in identity 'festivals' while reputable observers issue warnings about the need to return to more rationalized, interest-based politics lest the emotionally charged politics would produce more polarization and internal divisions.² The association of identity politics with growing authoritarian proclivities in countries usually associated with democracies (whether old or young) is another sign of recent political trouble.³ This association is not intrinsic to identity politics. The emotionally charged politics of recognition based on various collective identities was a force for progress and democratization for many decades since the 1960s.⁴ Why and how the politics of recognition turned from a force for progressive change to the motivation for backward-looking revisionist politics is a question that stands out and drives much of the debate in the policy-making world and the academic community.

¹ Rosenau 2003, 1995.

² Fukuyama 2018.

³ Mazzini 2019 (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/02/12/polands-historical-revisionism-is-pushing-it-into-moscows-arms-smolensk-kaczynski-pis-law-justice-holocaust-law>)

⁴ Civil rights movement is a good example. See also: Abrams 2019 (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2019-02-01/stacey-abrams-response-to-francis-fukuyama-identity-politics-article>)

International relations scholars cognizant of the significance of collective identity issues in political processes on the international scale advanced the concept of *ontological security* to capture the ideational element of security issues confronting political communities (Huysmann 1998, Mitzen 2006, Zarakol 2010). Defining ontological security in terms of the need states have to experience themselves as entities with the consistent sense of ‘self,’ they have argued that ontological security could be more important than military and economic security as motivators of state behavior (Mitzen 2006, 342; Zarakol 2010, 3). Losing one’s life in the name of the nation is not unheard of, as scholars of nationalism long observed (Brubaker 2004, Bonikowski 2016). The concept of *ontological security* underscores the significance of identity-based logics of *state* action. It extrapolates from an individual to the state level and conceives of the whole political community as a single actor that reacts (in most interpretations) to structural-level factors linked to inter-state relationships and specifically to relations of the state with significant others. Changing state hierarchies caused by war outcomes, decolonization, or other critical situations that create “radical and unpredictable disjuncture” result in the state of ontological insecurity (Ejdus 2017, Zarakol 2010).

Some scholars eschew these structuralist interpretations in favor of appreciating the power of a self-reflexive action and the ability of political communities to ‘work’ on their sense of self-identity and thereby deal with the problem of ontological insecurity from the ‘inside out’ (Steele 2006). But even this approach views ontological security through the state-as-a-single-actor perspective. The domestic political processes involved in different political agents appropriating identity-driven strategies remain outside the analysis along with the recognition

of the importance of these strategies for political legitimation purposes. The individual-level factors that shape the attractiveness of such strategies or the universality of the particular meaning of ontological security within a given political community are also not questioned.

Social identity theory that links individual and group-level analysis and brings attention to the role of leadership processes for group formation enhances the ontological security approach developed in international relations theory. Together, these theories allow for exploring the conditions that increase the potency of identity-based politics and the specific ways political entrepreneurs can mobilize this political tool. In this study, I illustrate this by looking into ‘late Putinism’ as an example of collective identity-driven politics. Specifically, I argue that Putin’s legitimation politics, especially as it evolved after 2012, has emphasized Russia’s collective identity claiming that it has become more secure since the 1990s. Putinism, in its latest format, has generated popular support relying on the sense of resentment against the West, and Western-oriented liberal policies of the 1990s, on one hand, and by the sense of pride for Russia and the widely shared perception that Russia has been ‘rising from its knees’ during the 2000s, on the other hand.⁵ This two-sided narrative articulated, nurtured and promoted by the Kremlin is the centerpiece of Vladimir Putin’s identity politics that matured as a strategy during his fourth presidential term. It has resonated with many Russian citizens, especially in the period of post-Crimea euphoria that lasted until 2018.⁶ Such resonance became reflected in Putin’s sky-high popularity ratings and, though widespread, it does not

⁵ As such, Putinism resembles Trumpism. Social psychologists Stephen Reicher and Alexander Haslam argued that the level of enthusiasm and faith expressed by Trump’s followers reflect the type of group emotions that emerges when the conditions of shame and anger these groups might have experienced get replaced by pride and hope (2016).

⁶ For an interpretation of Putin’s politics of *ressentiment*, see Medvedev 2016. For observation with regards to Putin’s popularity since 2018, see Greene and Robertson 2018.

apply universally to all Russian citizens. The narrative of Russia's insecure identity and victimhood (mainly associated with the transition in the 1990s) and the corresponding image of Putin as a savior resonates in some groups more strongly than in others. Although different versions of this argument have been widely recognized in the press and the academic community, this argument has not been put to a rigorous empirical analysis. This study is the first one (to my knowledge) to demonstrate the *extent* of the Russian society's vulnerability and receptivity to insecure identity narratives and to start exploring the potential factors responsible for a societal *differentiation* on this issue.

The domestic differentiation in the degree of resonance of arguments motivated by the ontological (in)security processes in the national community reveals that identity-related debates are necessarily political and constructing collective identity is part of the leadership process. Political choices and institutional strategies adopted by the state leaders cannot be dismissed as epiphenomenal to the structural forces understood in terms of identities or cultures (whether domestic or worldwide). Political leaders take calculated decisions to promote specific ideas at particular moments in time, and their calculations undoubtedly take into account the enabling structural conditions that might help selected strategies to become the winning ones. This approach introduces the necessary recognition that identity-related processes – including those concerned with ontological security - are fluid, always in the process of emergence and driven by political actors enabled and constrained by structural factors. Therefore, we should not view ontological security imperative that political communities (or states) face as fixed but, instead, as an arena open to political contestation, even if at particular historical moments some interpretations might emerge as dominant.

The empirical basis of this study is a nation-wide survey experiment conducted by the Levada Center in November 2017 and designed to explore the political implications of the Russians' insecure collective identity. The empirical analysis reveals that activating *insecure collective identity* (i.e., endangered by the out-group/external non-recognition) shapes political preferences away from the incumbent and in favor of more nationalist and xenophobic politicians in Russia. In the context of Russia's modern politics, this finding highlights the high level of widespread receptivity to legitimation strategies based on *securing* collective identity pointing to the sources of presidential political legitimacy.

The study proceeds as follows. In the next section I lay out the central analytical approaches that bear on the issue of collective identity and state's 'ontological security' and then, in the following section, I apply the observable implications of these theories for the study of public opinion and political leadership in Russia. I argue that the perceptions of 'ontological security' of the state differ within the national community thereby creating various political opportunities for political leaders to advance different strategic narratives and foreign policies. It is, therefore, crucial to explore political strategies and take into account political agency and the processes of political construction responsible for producing political outcomes. I then discuss the methodology employed to gather the data that was collected through the survey experiment conducted in November 2017 and lay out the main results of this survey experiment in the subsequent section. The last part discusses the main findings and presents concluding observations.

The Dynamics of Structure and Agency in Ontological Security and Collective Identity

Collective identities are intrinsic and crucial to individuals, groups and even states. Social identity theory (SIT) postulates and investigates such importance from the point of view of the individual self that is seen to consist of two distinct and functionally important parts: the personal self that is driven by comparing the self to other individuals and the social self defined by belonging to a group.⁷ The SIT scholarship that has evolved over the past four decades driven by the exploration of inter-group behavior and conflict is massive and has been applied in various disciplines in social sciences.⁸ To identify and measure the effect of social identity in real life scholars have tried to identify various dimensions of social identity such as *in-group affect*, *in-group ties*, and *cognitive centrality* - as factors along which social identity and its significance could be differentiated (Cameron 2004). Others advanced categories of secure and insecure identities (Tajfel and Turner 1979, Berry 1984, Duckitt 1989, Jackson and Smith 1999, Jackson 2002) capturing the differentiation along the spectrum of identity *security*.

The discussions of *ontological security* in IR and *secure/insecure identity* in SIT follow two different visions on the sources of identity (in)security. IR scholars highlight the universal cognitive drivers, following sociologists and psychologists (Anthony Giddens and Ronald David Laing, in particular) who view the individual level self-identity as a cognitive response to the fundamental uncertainty of the real world.⁹ In it, “ontological *insecurity* refers to the deep, incapacitating state of not knowing which dangers to confront and which to ignore, i.e., how to get by in the world (Mitzen 2006, 345). People deal with uncertainty by imposing a

⁷ In this study, I refer to social self and social identity interchangeably with collective self and collective identity. Furthermore, in the context of Russian politics, these terms are used to refer specifically to national identity (also used interchangeably).

⁸ See for example Hymans 2010 for how SIT was applied in IR discipline.

⁹ In social psychology, the uncertainty-identity theory adheres to this view (Hogg 2007).

cognitive order on the environment and categorize themselves and others to make sense of the world. This individual-level, cognitive work is often unconscious, and it is important to remember that people strive for certainty not in all areas of life but in those that are important to them subjectively (Hale 2004, 470; Hogg and Mullin 1999, 253-255). Scholars of international relations transfer "the need to experience oneself as a whole, a continuous person in time – as being rather than changing – in order to realize a sense of agency" from the level of individual analysis to the level of states (Mitzen 2006; Huysmann 1998). They view the states' need in ontological security (i.e., secure identity) as one of the basic needs, just like the need for physical security.

Social identity theory, on the other hand, is more concerned with the *dynamics* of inter-group relationships. Theorists working in this tradition emphasize the importance of status and hierarchies, with groups seen to be always interested in more favorable in-group evaluations and more favorable comparisons with out-groups (Tajfel and Turner 1979). The differentiation between secure and insecure identities in SIT calls attention to the perceived stability of group status: the more stable and immutable group status is, the more secure social identities are (Tajfel and Turner 1979, Duckitt 1989).

The notion of 'secure identity' might be problematic if it is used to categorize the states into two exclusive categories: those with secure or insecure identities. Identities are always situational, and ever-evolving and we need to keep that in mind lest we want to turn these categories into labeling devices rather than helpful analytical tools (Hale 2004, Cohen 1974). The appeal of SIT view of secure/insecure identities is in that it allows for integrating

politics and leadership into the analysis of inter and intra-group dynamics.¹⁰ The states could go through different periods of more or less secure identities as they deal with various types of economic, (geo)political and social challenges. These real-world challenges provide political entrepreneurs with openings for identity-based mobilization and legitimation strategies with significant political implications in terms of foreign policy and the state's international orientation. These openings do not mean inevitable outcomes in terms of the specific type of politics and policies, as the more structuralist perspective on ontological security would imply. Political agency and the leadership process are still the inherent part of the overall equation responsible for the specific outcomes in terms of international and domestic politics. So whatever the source of identity crisis is – a large-scale historical rupture, radical domestic political changes or shifting international relationships and hierarchies – the issue of ontological security is a fluid one. Political construction that relies on cultural resources and media propaganda and occurs in the context of political contestation and negotiation over influence and legitimacy is central to arriving at specific, historically-contingent articulations of ontological security in a political community.

The Dynamics of the Russian National Identity and Ontological Security

The ontological security-centered analytical approach lays the ground for conceptualizing the politics of insecure identity in Russia and for understanding the main legitimation mechanisms underlying Vladimir Putin's leadership strategy, especially prominent since 2012. In response to 2011-2012 political protests at the end of Dmitry Medvedev's presidency, the Kremlin shifted its political rhetoric and strategy rather abruptly, away from the rationalist, modernization-focused discourse towards cultural-oriented, moralistic and traditionalist

¹⁰ For SIT-based theory of leadership, see Haslam, Reicker and Platow 2010.

discourse emphasizing Russia's unique millennial civilization, exceptionalism, and own path of development different from the West's (Smyth and Soboleva 2014; Sharafutdinova 2017, 2014). Putin's fourth presidential term unfolded under the new slogans and ideas that culminated in the annexation of Crimea and Russia's isolationist and self-righteous stance vis-à-vis the West.

The Russian elites' and selected societal groups' preoccupation with the country's international status was visible all along during the 2000s and even the 1990s.¹¹ The Russian media as well as the country's political leadership during the 2000s have constructed Russia's national identity after the collapse of the Soviet Union as *insecure*, depicting Russia 'on its knees,' 'in the hands of the conspiratorial West driven by the desire to fragment and weaken the country' or 'in the hands of rapacious domestic elites who sold the country off in the 1990s'.¹² Such narratives about Russia's recent past – i.e. the mythologization of the 1990s (*likhie devyanostye*) - were, undoubtedly, politically consequential. Publicly resonant, they enhanced political entrepreneurs' ability to, first, connect with and, then, shape and manipulate public opinion by appealing to the sense of belonging to the nation and the agenda of *securing* Russia's place in the world (Malinova 2018; Sharafutdinova 2019).

The grounds for Russia's ontological insecurity might be *structural* in a sense that the Russian state underwent a historical rupture and the Russian political community had to face a profound dislocation associated with the Soviet collapse. The Russian Federation was the

¹¹ <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/01/17/russians-belief-countrys-superpower-status-reaches-20-year-high-poll-a64167>

¹² Russia's 'agitainment' industry and political talk-shows promote these messages very persistently (Tolz and Teper 2018).

main and the only successor of the Soviet Union. It inherited the Soviet seat at the UN Security Council, the Soviet nuclear weapons, foreign debts to the Soviet Union and Soviet obligations. However, these legacies came without the inheritance of the Soviet international status, the Soviet universalist ideology that has entitled the country to an expansionist foreign policy, and the Soviet recognition by the outside world. The 1990s' transition period exposed publicly the painful loss of the country's international status.¹³ The proliferation of conspiracy theories during the post-Soviet period was just one of the many symptoms of the public anxieties linked to the Soviet collapse and the social, economic and political circumstances that have transpired after (Yablokov 2018; Ortmann and Heathershaw 2012).¹⁴

Numerous studies in different disciplines have highlighted the variety of ways in which the new Russia's identity crisis unfolded in Russian society during the 1990s. The political, social and economic change in Russia after the collapse of the USSR was domestically driven. Nonetheless, the de-legitimation of the communist system and the complete devaluing of the Soviet era meant that the majority of the Russian citizens who grew up and formed their identities under the Soviet regime lost the ideational props (beliefs, ideas, dispositions) comprising their 'collective selves.' This disorientation was in many cases aggravated by the loss of jobs and social status, by economic uncertainty and the need to adapt to the radically new social and economic environment and institutions. Although for some Russian citizens

¹³ The recently declassified transcripts of phone conversations between Bill Clinton and Boris Yeltsin highlight Russia's very weak bargaining position at that moment (<https://medium.com/@thebell.io/conversations-between-yeltsin-and-clinton-made-public-today-shed-a-new-light-on-russian-u-s-7305677eba9a>)

¹⁴ For more on Russia's national identity, see Greenfeld 1990, Groys 1992, Tolz 1998, Clowes 2011.

these changes presented significant economic opportunities, for the majority it meant a new state of a 'permanent crisis' (Shevchenko 2008, Burawoy, Krotov and Lytkina 2000).

Nonetheless, these crisis conditions did not presuppose a specific type of identity politics in Russia though they did create political conditions for the emergence of political entrepreneurs who could capitalize on them. But this political outcome was not inevitable. The economic growth and the rising living standards of the 2000s could arguably have worked as a good reason for 'exonerating' the 1990s as a painful period that laid the groundwork for Russia's economic 'resurrection.' However, the Kremlin not only used the opposition to the 1990s as an electoral strategy for the 2000 presidential campaign, but it also turned this idea into a new legitimation strategy, positing Putin to be the leader who saved Russia from the ills associated with the 1990s (Malinova 2018, Pavlovsky 2018). Putin's personal background, character, and values undoubtedly had a lot to do with the Kremlin's political choices. Putin's leadership demonstrated the growing resentment against the West and particularly against the United States, starting with Putin's famous 2007 speech in Munich (Stent 2015, 135-158). Putin's focus on Russia's sovereignty and non-interference, his policies of regional integration in the post-Soviet region, and his stance vis-à-vis the United States – all reveal his very personal preoccupation with regaining Russia's lost status and securing Russia's collective identity. Five years after Crimea annexation, it is now evident that Putin's prioritization of the Russian state and its international status have come at the expense of the Russian society and its long-term prosperity and well-being (even after

accounting for the short-term public euphoria associated with the spike of national pride and hope).¹⁵

While the overall frame of ontological security appears to be highly relevant from the perspective of Russian politics, there are several nuances that this perspective – driven by structural forces – omits from the analysis. Its central weakness is that the international relations literature treats ontological security to be a factor in the purview of the state seen as a single actor. But the unquestioned shift from the individual level to the state level is problematic because the state does not have the intrinsic psychological needs the way individuals have. It only makes sense to speak of the state identity as it is perceived by and internalized by the collectivities of individuals inside and outside the state borders. However, no collectivity has 'a single mind' about what that identity's content and meaning is. Diversity of perceptions and meanings, negotiation and contest over different meanings is an integral part of the identity construction process on the collective level. Even if a specific view or a narrative might come to dominate within the community, it is important to see that dominance as a product of social and political construction, open to re-interpretation once social and political conditions allow for it. This understanding prioritizes leadership and politics that appears to be left out of the equation when ontological security is seen as a phenomenon characterizing the state seen as a single actor driven by the ontological security imperative.

¹⁵ For discussions of the 'rally around the flag' and 'rally around the leader' effect in Russia after Crimea annexation, see Greene and Robertson 2014, Alexseev and Hale 2015.

The macro-structural factors are not sufficient by themselves to explain the ebbs and flows in collective identity, international relations, and attitudes when it comes to the path the Russian nation has undertaken in the twenty-eight years since the Soviet collapse. We need to look at political and even geopolitical factors. During the 2000s Russia's leadership has gradually reoriented its political strategy from the initial 'playing according to common rules' (mostly western in origin) in the direction of a more confrontational stance vis-à-vis the western countries and primarily the United States, intensely criticized for its hegemonic foreign policy. This new policy emerging around 2006-07 and consolidating during Putin's third presidential term has been very successful in terms of the political dividends that it returned to the Kremlin in the form of presidential popularity and the malleability of public opinion more generally. This shift in policies – towards confrontation with the west – undoubtedly created a context of increasing competition with the western countries and particularly the United States. The Russian citizens' national identity took a center-stage as the Russian citizens' latent insecurities became expressed openly and publicly, encouraged and led by the Kremlin's policies and rhetoric. With that, the Kremlin's capacity to change attitudes overnight has been enhanced. Former friends could quickly turn into foes and former villains turn into heroes, while the national leader turned into a symbol of the nation and national pride.¹⁶

If we take ontological security seriously, Putinism – as a political system built on the imperative of securing Russia's national identity – appears to be an over-determined outcome. If it were not for Putin, another person would have been in his place and adhered

¹⁶ The creeping return of Stalin's cult in the country is a good example in the domestic realm.

to similar imperatives. Such analysis takes away from understanding the importance of political opportunities that were present in Russia in the 2000s and the political choices made by this specific leadership over the years. Furthermore, given the diversity of opinions as to what Russia's 'secure identity' means, the structural perspective ignores the alternative interpretations and strategies for securing Russia's collective identity. Militaristic and revanchist Russia is by no means the only vision of how Russia might have responded to the ontological security imperative. Many Russian citizens disagree with this vision. Those who have the 'exit' option – often the most educated and successful group members - choose to leave the country.¹⁷ It is also important to remember that promoting such vision in Russia is only possible with the aid of the state-controlled media and massive propaganda that builds an image of Russia as a 'besieged fortress' (Oates 2016, Tolz and Teper 2018, Sharafutdinova 2019). Those who cannot or choose not to leave the country and do not buy into the state propaganda have an option of an internal 'exile' – apolitical life with the meanings found in other social spheres (religion, interest-based social networks, or other outlets). In short, a more carefully built theory of 'ontological security' that connects the individual-level collective identity imperative with the state-level political decision-making that builds on identity imperative but has a latitude in terms of how identity is defined and how the group-status enhancement is sought out would help to advance this important strand of literature and analysis.

This study takes one step in that direction by (1) revealing the effects of signaling insecure collective identity, (2) showing the diversity of individual opinions and reactions to insecure

¹⁷ <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2017/11/27/russia-suitcase-migration-putin-a59713>

collective identity; and (3) testing initial hunches on what causes the differences in the studied reactions.

Hypotheses

The main hypotheses tested in this study are based on social identity theory and the concept of ontological (in)security. The first hypothesis explores the political consequences of ontological insecurity experienced on the individual level (i.e., insecure national identity). I rely on the SIT's view of insecure collective identity as a state of mind or perception of a group status as illegitimate in the sense of not being adequately recognized by the outsiders (other groups). In other words, the insecure identity reflects a desire for the higher status recognition vis-à-vis other groups in the context of a perceived status loss. This definition fits Russian realities well. Russia's preoccupation with the 'great power' status originates at the time of the Soviet collapse. Already in the early 1990s majority of Russian citizens wanted for Russia to preserve its 'great power' status. This issue represented a shared group grievance providing the foundation for the potential mobilization of Russians' collective identity.¹⁸ This agenda intensified under Vladimir Putin, who was personally preoccupied with this issue.¹⁹ Crimea's annexation in 2014 became the culmination of Putin as a leader relying on the mobilization of Russia's collective identity – this time in a victorious scenario – something that was longed for by many Russians. Not surprisingly, Vladimir Putin's most significant achievement in public eyes is the return to Russia of its 'great power' status.²⁰

¹⁸ This logic follows classical social movements theory. For an overview, see Morris and Mueller 1992.

¹⁹ <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/01/17/russians-belief-countrys-superpower-status-reaches-20-year-high-poll-a64167>

²⁰ Ibid.

To analyze the role of *insecure collective identity* in shaping public opinion in Russia, I hypothesize that making national identity salient, while signaling that the in-group compares negatively with the out-groups (thereby triggering the perception of insecurity), is politically consequential. It can produce either or both of two effects: (a) increase political support for the incumbent leader reflecting the effect of the in-group bias (through enhanced support for the group leader); and (b) given the choice of various candidates for group leadership position, it can increase the support for the candidates with more nationalist views that are less tolerant towards the out-groups. These conjectures follow the SIT analysis of inter-group relationships that anticipate insecure collective identity to intensify inter-group bias and discrimination along with in-group glorification (i.e., result in more nationalist orientations). (Tajfel and Turner 1979, Berry 1984, Duckitt 1989, Jackson and Smith 1999, Jackson 2002)

In the Russian political realm, this would mean that a high level of support for Vladimir Putin derives from how the Russian citizens perceive his contribution to strengthening and securing their (the citizens') sense of collective identity. When the security of national identity is compromised, people will tend to support more nationalist leaders such as Zhirinovskiy or Zyuganov. In short, the social contexts in which collective identity is not adequately recognized (i.e., revealing ontological insecurity) produce political pull factors in the direction of greater nationalism, intolerance, and xenophobia.

The second set of hypotheses aims to capture the individual differentiation in the levels of identity insecurity triggered by the survey questions. The data I have collected allows me to test whether age, education, income and professional affiliation might be associated with the

individual-level differentiation in reacting to manipulative, collective identity-based strategies of public opinion control. The age might matter because older people watch more television, the main venue for the state propaganda in the 2000s (Oates 2006, Dubin 2009). Therefore, I expect that older people would be more reactive to prompting insecure collective identity. Income and education might be relevant as a potential bulwark against manipulation based on identity issues. Thus, people with lesser incomes and less education might be more vulnerable to identity insecurity because they might be compensating – expressed through a greater cognitive centrality of the national identity - for a personally perceived individual ‘failure’ in the society characterized by a high value accorded to material success and therefore react positively to the Kremlin’s political messages. Finally, in the Russian political context pensioners are usually viewed as the group most vulnerable to media manipulation.²¹ Therefore, I expect that the political effects of signaling insecure collective identity would be most intense among the pensioners. Finally, the survey data contains spatial information associated with the respondents’ federal district.²² Although not a fine-grained geographical indicator, it can provide insights about potential regional factors at play that might be important in a country with such a massive territory.

Methodology

To test these hypotheses, I conducted a list experiment embedded in a nationally representative survey of public opinion conducted by the Levada Center. Studying identity issues using experimental design has its pros and cons. Identity issues are notoriously driven by emotions as opposed to rational preferences (Turner 2009, Stets 2005). The key

²¹ <https://www.levada.ru/2019/02/26/na-kogo-operetsya-rejtingu/>

²² There are 8 federal districts in Russia.

advantage of the experimental design embedded in a survey is its ability to capture the political implications of the emotionally-instigated reaction, measure the intensity/size of such reaction, and reveal individual characteristics associated with the propensity to react to messages associated with a collective identity. The main concerns are associated with the issues of internal and external validity of the experiment, i.e., whether it is the ‘treatment’ that produces the effects identified and whether the findings apply beyond the experimental context. I will address these issues in the discussion section below.

The survey involved approximately 1600 respondents across Russia stratified according to region, type of settlement, sex, age, and educational level. All interviews were conducted face-to-face in late November 2017. The experiment aimed at not only activating the respondents’ sense of collective (national) identity but also at signaling the *insecurity* of that identity by suggesting that it compares unfavorably to various out-groups (including such significant, from the identity perspective, out-groups as Ukraine). As elaborated earlier, social identity theory suggests that insecure social identity negatively affects the intergroup dynamics by increasing out-group intolerance and in-group glorification. The comparison of responses of those who had their sense of ‘we-ness’ activated negatively with the responses of those who did not should give us a sense of how the dynamic of insecure identity might work in the real world. The experiment involved randomly assigning respondents to the treatment group that responded to the questionnaire with two additional questions, while the control group had a questionnaire without these additional questions. The additional question #3 went as follows:²³

²³ I thank Evgeny Finkel for a helpful brainstorming session in this regard at the 2017 ASEES meeting in Boston.

In May 2017 Ukraine was allowed visa-free travel to the European Union. What is your opinion about this issue?

The respondents could choose from the following answers: (1) rather positive (I am glad for Ukraine; perhaps Russia might also get that opportunity soon); (2) neutral (this issue concerns Ukraine and does not have any relation to Russia); (3) rather negative (this is the European Union's slap in Russia's face. The answer was coded as (9) unable to answer if the respondent could not make a choice among the proposed answers. An additional question #4 was as follows:

On December 5-7, 2017 the International Olympics Committee will be deciding on Russian athletes' participation in the Olympic games in PyeongChang (South Korea). Do you think our athletes will be allowed to compete at 2018 Olympic games?

The proposed answers the respondents could choose from included: (1) most likely yes (we have nothing to be afraid of); (2) most likely no (the European Union and the United States are afraid of competing with Russia and therefore discriminate against our athletes); (3) most likely no (they have deserved it; the Russian athletes were caught on doping and the Russian authorities denied it); (4) I do not care about this (I am not interested in sport). The answer was coded as (9) 'unable to answer,' if the respondent could not make a choice. The proposed responses were articulated deliberately to evoke or resonate with the views and emotions that the respondents could identify with. The aim was not to capture all existing views but to tap into some typical ones, along the positive, negative and neutral lines and evoke a reaction that could linger and potentially shape the responses to questions that followed.

Three, immediately following questions, administered to all respondents as part of the survey included a question about approval for Vladimir Putin; about the respondents' intention to vote in the upcoming presidential elections and about 'who would you vote for in these

elections?” The list of presidential candidates included eight people (Gordon, Zhirinovski, Ziuganov, Mironov, Putin, Sobchak, Titov, and Yavlinskii) as well as the options of spoiling the ballot/don’t know/won’t participate (that were not offered to the respondents but registered when selected autonomously).²⁴

The main aim of this experiment was to measure the effects of signaling *insecure* collective identity in the way outlined above on Putin's approval levels, intention to vote and a choice of whom to vote for in the upcoming presidential elections. The potential effects of such prompting could be expected to go in different ways. First, following the rally-around-the-flag effect, it could be plausibly suggested from the outset that any attempt to make collective identity salient (in either secure or insecure fashion) would result in ‘rallying’ behind the leader and hence increase Putin’s approval ratings as well as the intention of voting for his candidacy in the upcoming elections.²⁵ Making collective identity salient while suggesting the *insecurity* of such identity, however, could be associated with different emotional valence, i.e., activating collective identity along with negative emotions of anger and shame and hence diverting support from Vladimir Putin towards more nationalist political leaders such as Zhirinovskiy or Zyuganov.²⁶ In short, one could plausibly suggest that this emotional valence could play a role in shaping the respondents’ attitudes and that eliciting negative emotions linked to *insecure social identity* could dampen the widespread

²⁴ The real pool of candidates participating in 2018 presidential elections has changed slightly as the Communist Party of the Russian Federation advanced Pavel Grudinin’s candidacy instead of the usually expected Gennady Zyuganov.

²⁵ Greene and Robertson 2014.

²⁶ For an example of a study that links SIT with the appraisal theory, and explores the emotional valence of collective identity, see Feinstein 2012.

support for the incumbent leaders while increasing support for more nationalist politicians who promote more xenophobic and intolerant policies towards out-groups.

The primary treatment variable in the analysis is whether or not the respondent received the additional two questions prompting insecure national identity. The dependent variables include (1) a binary variable for Putin's approval; (2) a binary variable for intention to vote for Putin vs. other candidates. As the dependent variables are both binary variables, the experiment was estimated by the logistical regression model.²⁷ For robustness purposes, I also incorporated age, gender, and education as control variables.

Results

The results of the survey experiment reveal the dynamics of *insecure* collective identity through the display of political preferences. Table 1 presents the estimates of the logistical regression model exploring the effects of signaling insecure collective identity on Putin's approval levels. The analysis suggests that signaling insecure social identity at the moment of the survey does not noticeably change the respondents' approval level for Vladimir Putin. Whether respondents see the additional questions that might lead to doubting Russia's international status or not, Putin's approval ratings stay at the same level. Among control variables, gender emerges as a significant factor in shaping Putin's approval levels with women displaying statistically significant higher levels of approval. I will explore the possible reasons behind such unchanging approval levels in the next section.

²⁷ Probit model gives similar results.

Table 1: Approval for Vladimir Putin

	Coef.	Std. Err.	z	P>z
Treatment	0.01	0.13	0.07	0.95
Gender (male = 1)	-0.70	0.14	-5.18	0.00
Age (natural log)	-0.24	0.18	-1.36	0.17
College education (Yes = 1)	-0.20	0.15	-1.35	0.18
Constant	2.90	0.70	4.15	0.00
Number of obs	1,605			
Chi2	28.94			
Prob > chi2	0.00			
Pseudo R2	0.02			

Table 2 provides estimates for ‘who will you vote for’ in the presidential elections.²⁸ On this particular question, the experiment results suggest that, while declared levels of approval for Putin’s stay the same, the intention to vote for him declines to benefit other candidates (including the option ‘against all’). This relationship is statistically significant at 5% level of significance. The additional analysis reveals that, the potential votes Putin loses, go mostly to Zhirinovskiy and Zyuganov, both of whom are known for their nationalist views (see Table 3).

Table 2: Voting Proclivities as a Function of Treatment

	Coef.	Std. Err.	z	P>z	dy/dx
Treatment	0.21**	0.10	2.02	0.04	0.05
Constant	-0.67	0.07	-9.09	0.00	
Number of obs	1,605				
Chi2	4.07				
Prob > chi2	0.04				
Pseudo R2	0.01				

Table 3. Who Gains the Votes that Putin Loses?

²⁸ For descriptive statistics on the overall distribution of vote preferences, see Appendix A at the end of the paper.

Nationalists (Zyuganov, Zhirinovskiy)	Coef.	Std. Err.	z	P>[z]
treatment	0.3**	0.15	1.93	0.054
constant	-2.13	0.11	-18.71	0
Number of obs	1605			
Chi2	3.75			
Prob > chi2	0.053			

Table 4 provides robustness checks and incorporates gender, age, and education, along with the variable of interest. The estimates and statistical significance of votes going to more nationalist leaders do not change considerably. This result was expected given the random sample. However, the analysis also reveals that age and gender matter in shaping support for Putin. Male and younger respondents tend to support non-Putin candidates more, supporting the results of earlier studies (Herrera 2016).²⁹

Table 4: The Impact of Gender, Age and Education on Voting Proclivities

	Coef.	Std. Err.	z	P>z	dy/dx
Treatment	0.20	0.10	1.94	0.05	0.05
Gender (male = 1)	0.36	0.11	3.38	0.00	0.08
Age (natural log)	-0.25	0.14	-1.82	0.07	-0.06
College education (Yes = 1)	0.10	0.12	0.89	0.37	0.02
Constant	0.06	0.52	0.11	0.91	
Number of obs	1,605				
Chi2	21.38				
Prob > chi2	0.00				
Pseudo R2	0.01				

With regard to the second set of hypotheses, in Table 5 I report response frequencies on the two questions intended to provoke insecure collective identity. 503 respondents (out of 793

²⁹ I do not present the break-up of the results on the specific answers to the added questions chosen by the respondents in the treatment group.

that were in the treatment group) selected a position of neutrality (second option) on Ukraine's visa-free travel to the European Union (question 3). There was a more significant division among the respondents on the issue of banning Russian athletes from the Winter Olympics in South Korea. About a third of respondents (275 out of 793) selected the first option (that the athletes have nothing to fear and will be allowed to participate) and another big group (311 out of 793) selected the second option (that the athletes will be banned because the US and the European Union were afraid of the Russian competition). Interestingly, more than 40% of those who selected the third option (that athletes will be banned because they deserve it) did not intend to vote for Putin. It appears likely that these respondents might have been from the liberal opposition camp associated with Navalny. A predictably higher proportion of less educated respondents were not able to make a choice.

Table 5. Response Frequencies to Questions 3 and 4 (breakdown by the intended voters for Putin/Non-Putin and Education Attainment)

	non-Putin		Putin		No-HiEd		HiEd		Total	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Q3										
1	11	9.24	108	90.76	91	76.47	28	23.53	119	100
2	90	17.89	413	82.11	350	69.58	153	30.42	503	100
3	29	27.62	76	72.38	81	77.14	24	22.86	105	100
9	7	10.61	59	89.39	57	86.36	9	13.64	66	100
Q4										
1	24	8.73	251	91.27	207	75.27	68	24.73	275	100
2	57	18.33	254	81.67	216	69.45	95	30.55	311	100
3	28	42.42	38	57.58	42	63.64	24	36.36	66	100
4	16	20.78	61	79.22	60	77.92	17	22.08	77	100
9	12	18.75	52	81.25	54	84.38	10	15.63	64	100
Total	137	17.28	656	82.72	579	73.01	214	26.99	793	100

These response frequencies reflect that the issue of the Olympic games and international recognition of the Russian athletes (Question 4) represented a more prominent issue for the

respondents. Based on that, I tested individual variation in response to this specific question, looking into how education, income, and professional affiliation might have affected the propensity towards insecure collective identity. Tables 6 presents the results on the effects of education and Table 7 on the effects of professional affiliations. The main finding here is that, contrary to my expectations, education does not seem to have any association with the propensity towards insecure identity. The Russian citizens with higher education are as likely to react to prompting insecure collective identity as those with lower levels of education. Professional affiliation also reveals limited results in that it only shows that pensioners more frequently choose the category ‘don’t know’ in response to Question 4 on the Russian athletes’ participation in the 2018 Winter Olympics and ‘managers’ (those in managerial positions), tended to be less optimistic in their assessments of the likelihood of Russian athletes participating in the Olympic Games.

Table 6. The Effects of Higher Education on Answers to Treatment Question 4 (Winter Olympics)

Question 4 (as a function of higher education)	Coef.	Std. Err.	z	P>z
(1) Optimists	-0.16	0.18	-.088	0.38
(2) Pessimists (competitive)	base outcome			
(3) Pessimists (realists)	0.49	0.28	1.77	0.08
(4) Not Interested	-0.38	0.29	-1.32	0.19
(9) Unable to answer	-0.84	0.35	-2.38	0.02
Number of obs	793			
Prob > chi2	0.0098			

Table 7: The Effects of Professional Affiliation on Answers to Treatment Question 4 (Winter Olympics)

	Prof. Affil.	Coef	Std. Errors	z	P>[z]
(1) optimists	Pensioners	0.3	0.19	1.52	0.13
	Business	-0.21	0.54	-0.4	0.69
	Manager	-1.06*	0.58	-1.83	0.07
	Worker	0.09	0.22	0.42	0.68
	Constant	-0.19	0.12	-1.57	0.11
(2) pessimists (competitive)	Base outcome				
(3) pessimists (realists)	Pensioners	0.04	0.34	0.13	0.9
	Business	0.5	0.7	0.72	0.47
	Manager	0.06	0.67	0.09	0.93
	Worker	0.1	0.36	0.28	0.78
	Constant	-1.06	0.2	-8.01	0
(4) not interested	Pensioners	0.54*	0.3	1.79	0.07
	Business	0.7	0.81	0.08	0.93
	Manager	-1.07	1.05	-1.01	0.31
	Worker	0.2	0.34	0.58	0.56
	Constant	-1.57	0.19	-7.95	0
(9) don't know	Pensioners	0.8	0.33	2.44	0.015
	Business	0.46	0.82	0.56	0.58
	Manager	-0.68	1.06	-0.64	0.5
	Worker	0.59	0.36	1.62	0.11
	Constant	-1.96	0.23	-8.41	0
Number of obs	793				
Prob > Chi2	0.38				

Discussion and Concluding Thoughts

The survey experiment conducted in this study inquired into the political implications of making the Russian citizens' collective identity salient and insecure (at the same time) by suggesting that Russia is not adequately recognized by its international partners. As expected by the social identity theory, such trigger revealed that the issues related to collective identity in Russia are very 'touchy.' The results demonstrate that prompting 'ontological insecurity' affects the respondents' declared voting preferences by noticeably privileging political candidates that express more nationalist positions (i.e., Zhirinovskiy and Zyuganov in the Russian context), thereby corroborating social identity theory. Intriguingly, Putin's approval

ratings remained the same, raising questions such as, why the ‘treatment’ worked to shift voting preferences away from Putin but did not affect his approval ratings. Arguably, these results convey the importance of the ‘absence of political alternatives’ signaled by the question about Putin’s approval ratings. The Kremlin has long communicated to the public the idea that there are no alternatives to Vladimir Putin. Putin’s deputy chief of staff, Vyacheslav Volodin, vocalized it most succinctly and openly in October 2014: “There is no Russia today if there is no Putin.”³⁰ Putin's approval level, therefore, has not been affected by the increased salience of insecure collective identity. However, when the political choice was present (as in the question about voting in the upcoming presidential elections), respondents have reacted accordingly: those whose collective identity was made insecure shifted their political preferences towards more nationalist and less tolerant politicians.

The comparison of response distribution on two questions (visa-free travel for Ukrainians and participation in the Olympic Games) reveals that the second question might have worked better as a signaling tool. Almost two-thirds of the respondents (503 out of 793) selected the more neutral response on this question. Given the continuing media coverage and emphasis on the conflict in Ukraine, the responses could be expected to be more polarizing. One potential explanation for this outcome could be derived from the identity theory notion that groups measure themselves up to ‘significant others’ and not to any other group. Ukraine is not Russia’s ‘significant other.’ At the moment, that role is played by the West (as a whole) and the United States in particular. Therefore, the question about the Olympics that hints at the ‘western powers’ evidently worked better to produce more

³⁰ <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/10/23/no-putin-no-russia-says-kremlin-deputy-chief-of-staff-a40702>

polarizing emotions and more differentiated opinions among the respondents. Ultimately, in the context of this experiment, it does not matter which of these two additional questions produced the effects; so this should not be problematic for the internal validity of the experiment. Relying on more than one question and providing proposed responses that went beyond 'yes' and 'no' answers were important for raising the salience of collective identity in the context of a brief survey. The fact that the results corroborated the expectations derived from the social identity theory provides additional support that they are not spurious.

The analysis of individual differentiation in the degree of sensitivity to insecure identity prompts did not, at this point, produce significant results. Against my expectations, higher education is not associated with greater resilience on this issue. And the professional affiliations, at least as measured through this survey, did not matter either. More research is needed to tackle this issue. One, arguably important factor is the individual level media consumption, and the primary sources of information people rely upon. Given the Kremlin's political communication machine, the propensity towards and the effects of insecure collective identity are more likely to be expressed in people who rely on state-controlled media that has been promoting these issues very intensely since 2014.

Overall, these findings appear worrisome because they demonstrate the degree of manipulability of public opinion in Russia. If the expressed political preferences change as a result of two additional questions in the survey questionnaire, the effects of the Kremlin-controlled propaganda machine could be expected to reach very far. Another interpretation of such effects is, however, that they *reflect* the propaganda work done by the Kremlin media machine already in relations to Russia's collective identity. Respondents primed on these

issues through their daily TV news and shows would, arguably, demonstrate a higher degree of sensitivity to treatment.

These findings arguably point to the roots of Putin's political success found in his promotion of the idea of Russia as a 'besieged fortress' suffering from bad intentions of the west culpable in all of Russia's troubles. The Kremlin made a bet on the politics of *ontological insecurity* and the high degree of manipulability of public opinion in such context shows the attractiveness of such politics not only for Putin's legitimation but also, arguably, as a mechanism for political legitimation in the post-Putin era. These findings raise the challenge of exploring more deeply the reasons behind the increased manipulability of Russian society and the potency of collective identity-based thinking and feeling. Exploring 'groupthink' at the national level – including its drivers, dynamic and antidote as well as its universal and nationally specific features – appears as one of the critical direction in the research agenda of Russia scholars. Looking further into individual-level factors that make people more or less likely to fall under the spell of such politics is another politically important avenue for future research.

The findings in this study suggest that the international policy-making community faces a challenge of articulating a vision and a policy response to conditions that activate the political potential of insecure national identity at the expense of all other interests and collective identities. Given Russia's growing polarization with the west, this policy challenge appears rather acutely in today's international politics. The same policy challenge – responding to the conditions that make specific types of appeals to collective identities resonate with the public – is present when thinking about the politics of Trumpism in the

United States or Orbunism in Hungary. Understanding the underlying reasons for the success of such identity politics might provide clues about the more effective approaches to deal with undesirable political outcomes.

Appendix A.

Candidates	Frequency	Percent
Gordon	13	0.81
Zhirinovsky	119	7.41
Zyuganov	76	4.74
Mironov	24	1.5
Putin	1025	63.86
Sobchak	16	1
Titov	4	0.25
Yavlinsky	16	1
Ballot Spoilers	19	1.18
Won't participate	133	8.29
Don't Know	160	9.97

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