

“United by the State: The Social Roots of Authoritarian Power in Russia”

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This paper is the first chapter of the book manuscript. Below is the general outline of the book.

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Chapter 1. Authoritarian Power in Statist and Anti-Statist Societies

Vladimir Putin's authoritarian regime is one of many dictatorships in the world, and these dictatorships differ from each other more than democracies do.¹ Following the resurgence of authoritarianism in the 21st century, scholars aimed to understand these differences to go beyond the assumption that these regimes follow one common logic. Some used the characteristics of groups seizing power to distinguish between military dictatorships, party dictatorships, and monarchies, which helped explain dictators' decisions and their political outcomes.² Others have used other criteria, such as electoral competitiveness,³ the configuration of legislative institutions and party scene,⁴ and the strength of the coercive apparatus,⁵ most of which focus on the ruling elites and organizations.

This book extends this line of inquiry by turning our attention from the rulers and governing institutions to *the social environment*, in which dictatorships operate, i.e. from the groups that seize power to the kinds of power they can seize. I argue that the power of a state ruler, as well as his strategies of consolidating and holding on to this power, are largely shaped by *how people in society view the state*. In the case of Vladimir Putin, the fluctuations of his popularity, the political decisions he makes, and the patterns of civic compliance and resistance are better explained by the statist character of the Russian society than by economic factors, nationalism, or the prevalence of non-democratic values.

This chapter will accomplish three tasks. First, it will introduce *the statist vs. anti-statist* scale, along which societies vary, as well as the concept of *group authority* whose connection to the state determines this variation. A complete blending of group authority and the state defines the statist end of the scale, while their complete separation defines the anti-statist one. Second, it will evaluate the statist character of Russian society as the explanation for Vladimir Putin's power against its alternatives, which connect his power to the personalist character of his regime, nationalism, non-democratic values of the Russian people, and economic factors. Third, it will lay out the empirical manifestations of statism and anti-statism as well as their implications for autocrats' strategies, infrastructural state power, and civil society.

Statist vs anti-statist societies

Researchers often characterize Vladimir Putin as a statist, i.e. as someone who believes in the virtue of a strong state and its supreme authority in society, which guarantees order and protection.⁶ Putin himself often addressed this issue in his speeches throughout his time in power, starting with his "Millennium message," published two days before Boris Yeltsin handed power over to him on December 31, 1999.⁷ Putin's statism allowed him to transcend political and ideological contradictions, to appeal to different constituencies simultaneously and to pursue economic policies that utilized both

¹ Geddes, Wright, and Frantz, *How Dictatorships Work*, 2–3.

² Geddes, Wright, and Frantz, *How Dictatorships Work*.

³ Diamond, "Thinking About Hybrid Regimes"; Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*.

⁴ Brownlee, *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization*; Gandhi, *Political Institutions under Dictatorship*.

⁵ Bellin, "The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective."

⁶ Sakwa, "Putin's Leadership"; Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin*.

⁷ Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin*, chap. 3.

market tools and state intervention.⁸ His public image has been deliberately built around state institutions and the role of the personal guarantor that those institutions function properly.⁹

This strategy seems to have worked, given that Putin has been in power for two decades and has been a rather popular autocrat.¹⁰ Why, however, has it worked? Being a centrist, transcending political and ideological conflicts and using flexible economic policies is not exactly the recipe for success in the world of increasingly polarized and populist politics. Many contemporary autocrats successfully build popular support using the exact opposite of this strategy, i.e. by deepening social divisions and radicalizing political discourse. Why was it that a unity rather than division strategy worked in Russia?

The statism of the Russian society

I suggest that the strategy of state-led unity was successful in Russia not only because of Putin's skill in executing it but also because it matched the expectations of the Russian people. Putin's statism, which is probably as much of a sincere value standpoint as it is a pragmatic choice, resonated with the political preferences already existing in Russian society and rooted in the centuries-long history of state dominance. This connection between the leader and the followers endowed Putin with the legitimate power to fight oligarchs, terrorists, and foreign governments in the name of the Russian state.¹¹

The main characteristic of Russian statism is that the people view the state as the primary leader of collective action, the guarantor of collective security, and the center of collective identity. For them, the state is the institution that has the obligation to protect their collective well-being and to ensure that private parties and their interests do not harm the country by tearing it apart. This vision of the state as an institution transcending the interests of individuals legitimizes state actions that restrict individual rights for the sake of the well-being of the country. In other words, for an individual citizen, the Russian state is legitimate not because it helps to defend her own interests but because it defends the collective interest of her country even if that means restricting her own individual rights.

Two caveats are important for understanding Russian statism. First, it is not merely a political preference that exists at the level of ideas, even though there are plenty of symbols and historical narratives around the strong state theme in the Russian public discourse. Statism also shapes how people think about state resources and the ways these resources should be distributed. Russian people have a strong preference for state provision of public goods, which is often interpreted by observers as a sign of pathological dependency on the state.¹² I suggest that a better interpretation would be that people think of state resources in terms of communal economy, in which the community is responsible to make sure that no individual member is left behind. Later in this chapter, I will discuss the implication of the statist view of the economy for Putin's support in more detail.

⁸ Sakwa, "Putin's Leadership"; Miller, *Putinomics*.

⁹ Wengle and Evans, "Symbolic State-Building in Contemporary Russia."

¹⁰ Greene and Robertson, *Putin v. the People*.

¹¹ On the psychology of leadership rooted in the connection between the leader and the followers, see Haslam, Reicher, and Platow, *The New Psychology of Leadership*. On the co-construction of Putin's power by Putin himself and the Russian society, see Greene and Robertson, *Putin v. the People*.

¹² Cook, *Postcommunist Welfare States: Reform Politics in Russia and Eastern Europe*, 2; Salmina, "Social Attitudes towards Welfare Policies in Russia and Other European Countries"; Хамраев, "Россияне Требуют От Государства Заботы."

Second, explaining Putin's support by the statism of the Russian society does not imply that the fundamental principles of Russian politics or the political motivations of the Russian people are unique. Rather, the opposite is true: Russian statism, while being formed by the centuries-long historical legacy, is a manifestation of the forces that drive politics in any society, be it a statist or an anti-statist one. To understand how these forces shape social environments with opposite properties, let me turn to the concept of group authority—the common denominator of statist and anti-statist societies.

Group authority

The state is not the only institution that can play the role of a collective leader. People have always lived in groups—tribes, villages, towns, ethnic or religious communities—and had an idea of who the “we” were. Living in groups has not only provided humans with increased chances of physical survival but also developed a psychological need to connect to others. Being part of a family, tribe, religion, or country associates individual life with a larger group that existed before the person was born and will exist after her demise, thus making her life meaningful.¹³ Psychological research shows that losing a sense of meaning and purpose, usually as a result of weakened social connections, devalues the physical existence of a person and may lead to suicide. This need to connect and belong is the main reason why such mechanisms of social cohesion as shame and ostracism work even in most individualistic societies.¹⁴

Group authority—the term I will use in the book—is the power of a group over an individual, which is based on the human need to belong. It is the power to set social norms and enforce compliance. When group authority is possessed by a person or an organization, they have the right to speak on behalf of the group, which is recognized and accepted by its members. Such authority induces voluntary compliance even in the situations when individuals are ordered to sacrifice their own, independent interests for the sake of the collective one. The concept of group authority is close to Weberian legitimate domination as it only applies to voluntary compliance rather than overt coercion.¹⁵ However, it also emphasizes a collective, supra-individual nature of such power, which connects to the Durkheimian understanding of social norms and social order.¹⁶

Examples of group authority can be found wherever social norms are involved. It may be a conservative religious community that denies the right for education to women on the basis that it is not part of a God-given social order. It may be a parliament speaking on behalf of the nation and demanding that citizens give up part of their individual resources in the form of taxes. It may be a leader of a workers' movement speaking on behalf of all workers and calling for her supporters to engage in political action. Or it may be the head of a radical religious organization speaking on behalf of his doctrine and motivating his followers to sacrifice their lives by becoming suicide bombers.¹⁷ In all of these cases, a legitimate

¹³ McGregor, “Zeal, Identity, and Meaning: Going to Extremes to Be One Self”; Castano, Yzerbyt, and Paladino, “Transcending Oneself through Social Identification”; Pearlman, “Moral Identity and Protest Cascades in Syria.”

¹⁴ A large body of works in existential and group psychology addresses these issues. See, for example, Baumeister and Leary, “The Need to Belong”; Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski, “The Cultural Animal: Twenty Years of Terror Management Theory and Research”; Juhl and Routledge, “Putting the Terror in Terror Management Theory”; Castano, Yzerbyt, and Paladino, “Transcending Oneself through Social Identification”; Castano et al., “Ideology, Fear of Death, and Death Anxiety”; Vigilant and Williamson, “Symbolic Immortality and Social Theory”; Case and Williams, “Ostracism: A Metaphor for Death”; Williams, “Ostracism.”

¹⁵ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 212.

¹⁶ Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, 50–53.

¹⁷ Routledge and Arndt, “Self-Sacrifice as Self-Defence.”

authority is the one that speaks on behalf of a group and demands that individuals sacrifice their own interests and resources to advance collective goals.¹⁸

The idea that individuals and organizations can speak on behalf of the group and use group authority to secure compliance has implications for the long-standing debate about power and coercion in the social sciences. The question about the nature of voluntary compliance with the authority is central to this debate: “how do the powerful secure the compliance of those they dominate” if no direct coercion is involved?¹⁹ The two answers to this question provided by the social scientists so far resolve the contradiction by disputing either the reality of compliance or its voluntary character. James Scott, for example, argues that the dominated—the peasants or the working class—are resisting the power of the nobility or the capitalists rather than complying with it, but their resistance is hidden from the public eye.²⁰ Neo-Marxists, such as Gramsci, as well as Steven Lukes make the opposite argument, saying that the dominated cannot resist because the powerful take away their agency via hegemony and creation of false consciousness.²¹ False consciousness alters how the dominated see their own interests in a way that benefits the powerful. For example, Lukes talked about women accepting and defending their traditional roles even though it reproduces their subordinate position in the patriarchal society.²²

The same contradiction between agency and compliance makes it difficult to define legitimate authority and authoritarian legitimacy. The concept of legitimate authority is paradoxical: it assumes both individual consent, as legitimacy is the recognition of the right to give orders, and suppression of individual interest, as authority means that people obey even those orders with which they disagree.²³ It is unclear how a person can accept as legitimate an authority that makes this person think and act against her interests. How can a woman, for example, regard religious authorities as legitimate if they deny her right for education, owning property, and having a say in family matters? In a similar vein, how can people living under an authoritarian regime accept its legitimacy if this regime acts in the interests of the powerful few rather than in the interests of all?²⁴ In light of the debate about power described above, one possible answer is that there is no such thing as authoritarian legitimacy. The only way to obtain legitimate authority is through the process of democratic representation, which gives people a voice in shaping the authority that may one day act against their interests.²⁵ In the absence of free and fair elections, autocrats cannot achieve true legitimacy and compliance, and as a result, always deal with preference falsification and hidden discontent.²⁶ Another possible answer is that the power of autocrats to manipulate public discourse and control information flows helps them obscure people’s true interests, thus achieving sincere compliance by stripping the population from its political agency.²⁷

¹⁸ For psychological research addressing this phenomenon, see, for example, Stellmacher and Petzel, “Authoritarianism as a Group Phenomenon”; Ent and Baumeister, “Obedience, Self-Control, and the Voice of Culture.”

¹⁹ Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 110.

²⁰ Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance. Hidden Transcripts*; Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*.

²¹ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*; Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*.

²² Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 137–44.

²³ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 212; Gilley, *The Right to Rule*, 8; Sadurski, Sevel, and Walton, *Legitimacy*.

²⁴ Gerschewski, “Legitimacy in Autocracies.”

²⁵ Fukuyama, *State-Building*, 26; Levi, *Consent, Dissent, and Patriotism*.

²⁶ Kuran, “Now Out of Never: The Element of Surprise in the East European Revolution of 1989”; Kuran, *Private Truths, Public Lies*; Dimitrov, “Understanding Communist Collapse and Resilience.”

²⁷ Treisman, *The New Autocracy*.

The concept of group authority provides a different way to understand voluntary compliance and authoritarian legitimacy, which reconciles these two answers and does not deny either the sincerity of compliance or the agency of the dominated. The theories of power discussed above assume that individuals have one set of interests that includes a mixture of material and cultural as well as individual and social needs. The more of those needs a political leader satisfies, the more legitimate she is. At the same time, the more she can restrict individual interests, the more authoritative she is. In this setup, it is difficult to combine legitimacy and authority.

Unlike these theories of power, group authority assumes that people have two sets of interests— independent needs and the need to belong to a group—which often work at cross-purposes.²⁸ The independent needs are driven by the universal psychological need for autonomy as even in most collectivist societies, people value the opportunity to make their own choices and follow social norms voluntarily rather than being forced into it.²⁹ A religious woman may sincerely want to be a part of her faith community while having a no less sincere desire to make choices about her life. Groups, however, are often intolerant of individual choices and tend to restrict individual freedom. Being the center of social connections that the person values only makes implementing such restrictions easier.³⁰

The internal conflict between the two human needs—to belong and to be free—is what makes group authority so effective and different from overt coercion. By recognizing the legitimacy of an authority—a religious, ethnic, or state leader—a person claims her membership in a group and satisfies her need to belong. At the same time, this legitimate authority may restrict the individual’s ability to make her own choices, thus playing a dual role in her life: it is both an anchor that makes her life meaningful and an institution that restricts her individual freedom. Rather than being deceived and unable to understand their own interests, individuals whose life choices, gender identities, or political preferences do not conform with the norms of their community face a difficult choice. They can either sacrifice their social belonging and risk losing a sense of larger purpose in life, or they can comply with the norms of their community and risk losing their own agency and independent self.

This tough choice explains why it is so difficult to resist group authority and why those who possess it can secure wide compliance with their orders. Resisting such authority means going against not only the group leader but also the group itself and risking ostracism. It often requires not only material resources needed to resist physical or economic coercion but also an alternative community, which would provide a sense that you are not alone. In the absence of such an alternative, many individuals will comply with group authority even when they understand that it works against them.

Group authority and the state

As group authority induces wide voluntary compliance, politics in all societies is greatly influenced by which institutions—tribes, religions, classes, racial or ethnic groups, or the state—possess such

²⁸ For similar ideas in different forms, see Feldman, “Enforcing Social Conformity”; Greenberg, Koole, and Pyszczynski, “Experimental Existential Psychology: Exploring the Human Confrontation with Reality”; Stosny, *Soar Above*.

²⁹ Kasser and Sheldon, “Autonomy Is No Illusion: Self-Determination Theory and the Empirical Study of Authenticity, Awareness, and Will.”

³⁰ Altemeyer, *Enemies of Freedom*; Feldman, “Enforcing Social Conformity”; Williams, “Ostracism”; Kuran, *Private Truths, Public Lies*; Ent and Baumeister, “Obedience, Self-Control, and the Voice of Culture”; Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*.

authority and for which parts of the population. All political leaders, whether democratic or authoritarian, must take into account the way social norms divide or unite their societies as it determines the kind of power they have over the population.³¹

Historically, the state has competed for power with other social institutions.³² In Western Europe as well as in other parts of the world, landed aristocracy competed with the early states for the right to tax the population.³³ In the Middle East, Islamic authorities represented an alternative power center, which could help shield property from state authorities.³⁴ In many colonial and postcolonial societies, the state competed with indigenous authorities, and the way it managed these relations impacted the authority the state was able to develop.³⁵ In Latin America, class divisions and regionalism both facilitated and undermined the central state formation: in some countries, the state was able to use societal cleavages to establish itself as the third party, while in other countries, the state failed to obtain autonomy and served primarily capitalist interest groups.³⁶

Autonomy is one of the aspects of state power that is especially important for understanding how the state develops in competition with other social institutions. This concept was reintroduced to the academic discourse in the late 1970s – early 1980s by Theda Skocpol and other scholars who argued with the Marxist vision of the state as being merely an instrument of the capitalist class.³⁷ Skocpol showed that the state apparatus may have its own interests, which are independent from class ones, and that state policies may work against societal elites. Along the same line of argument, other scholars emphasized the difference between state autonomy and state capacity.³⁸ Although both are related to the ability of the state to implement its policies, state capacity is associated with the resources—material and organizational—that the state possesses, while state autonomy determines whether those resources serve the state or a societal interest group. The state may have a large police force and developed organizational infrastructure, but these resources may largely serve the interests of an economic class, an ethnic group, or a religious denomination.

³¹ One example of analysis that focuses on the intersections of group trust and authority is Charles Tilly's "Trust and Rule." Some other examples: on the importance of group authority in African politics, see Pitcher, Moran, and Johnston, "Rethinking Patrimonialism and Neopatrimonialism in Africa."; on the importance of group identity and its connection to protest behavior, see Pearlman, "Moral Identity and Protest Cascades in Syria."

³² Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States*; Barkey and Parikh, "Comparative Perspectives on The State."

³³ On European cases, see, for example, Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990-1992*; Spruyt, *The Sovereign State and Its Competitors*. On lack of competition with landowners as a cause of state-driven industrialization in Asia, see Amsden, "The State and Taiwan's Economic Development."

³⁴ Blaydes, "State Building in the Middle East."

³⁵ Callaghy, *The State-Society Struggle*; Azarya and Chazan, "Disengagement from the State in Africa: Reflections on the Experience of Ghana and Guinea"; Steinmetz, *The Devil's Handwriting: Precoloniality and the German Colonial State in Qingdao, Samoa, and Southwest Africa*; Slater and Soifer, "The Indigenous Inheritance." See also the literature on communalism, for example, Cammett, *Compassionate Communalism*; Smith-Morris, *Indigenous Communalism*.

³⁶ O'Donnell, "Reflections on the Patterns of Change in the Bureaucratic-Authoritarian State"; Stepan, "State Power and the Strength of Civil Society in the Southern Cone of Latin America"; Soifer, *State Building in Latin America*. See also Slater and Soifer, "The Indigenous Inheritance," on the influence of inherited social cleavage on state building.

³⁷ Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China*; Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol, *Bringing the State Back In*; Mann, "The Autonomous Power of the State."

³⁸ Barkey and Parikh, "Comparative Perspectives on The State," 525–26.

This book builds on the tradition of researching state autonomy and takes it one step further by refocusing the attention from the rulers to the ruled. I argue that politics is influenced not only by whether the state apparatus has interests autonomous from society but also by *whether society views the state as the institution that has the right to speak on behalf of society as a whole, i.e. as a legitimate source of power*. Wherever people view the state this way, the state and group authority blend, and I will call such society *statist*. In a statist society, ethnicities, religious communities, or local clans may exist, but neither of them possesses enough authority to induce the same level of society-wide compliance as the state. If, however, people do not endow the state with such authority, non-state groups are likely to be the main political players who can mobilize the population for collective action. I will call such society *anti-statist*.

Statism vs anti-statism is a continuum rather than a binary. All state leaders presumably would prefer to deal with a statist society, which is easier to control, rather than with an anti-statist one with a high level of resistance, and they often aim to strengthen group authority of the state through providing public goods or using ideology and education.³⁹ However, because of their rivalry with other institutions, it may be difficult for states to obtain group authority: societies may resist the imposition of state power for centuries.⁴⁰ The various institutional configurations, which we observe in societies throughout history, are the result of interaction between different institutions as well as of historical contingencies. For example, in medieval Western Europe, the church possessed significant group authority along with the state, which prevented the state from consolidating absolute power.⁴¹ In Iran since 1979, religious authorities succeeded in taking over the state and worked to expand their group authority by blending in the state functions.⁴² Ethnic nationalism may help strengthen the state or weaken it, nurturing separatist movements instead.⁴³ In some cases, however, the state itself succeeds in obtaining group authority and subordinating the rival institutions to its power.

Research on state formation shows that there are several factors that likely influenced whether the state obtained group authority. In agrarian societies, whose economy required collective effort in constructing complex irrigation systems, the state had more chances to establish its authority.⁴⁴ Societies, which experienced persistent external threats, might also be more likely to develop authoritative states.⁴⁵ Countries where the state consolidated before the introduction of wide suffrage tended to have states with strong norm-setting power as well.⁴⁶

One factor, however, seems to be especially important: the level of political competitiveness at the time when state rulers consolidated their control over society for the first time, possibly under

³⁹ Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution*; Harris, *A Social Revolution*; Albertus, Fenner, and Slater, *Coercive Distribution*.

⁴⁰ See, for example, Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance. Hidden Transcripts*; Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*; Belge, "STATE BUILDING AND THE LIMITS OF LEGIBILITY."

⁴¹ Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order*.

⁴² Harris, *A Social Revolution*.

⁴³ See the distinction between state-led and state-seeking nationalism in Tilly, "States and Nationalism in Europe 1492-1992."

⁴⁴ Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*.

⁴⁵ For the debate about the role of war, see Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990-1992*; Downing, *The Military Revolution and Political Change*; Hui, *War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe*; Ertman, *Birth of the Leviathan*; Dincecco and Wang, "Violent Conflict and Political Development Over the Long Run."

⁴⁶ Skowronek, *Building a New American State*; Shefter, *Political Parties and the State*.

external threats. If during that historical period, society lacked elites who could rival state rulers, bargain with them, and organize formal bodies to limit their power, the state was in a good position to become the supreme leader of the people.⁴⁷ Two examples of such scenario of state formation are the Chinese and the Russian states, which share structural similarities despite many differences in historical context. In medieval China (the 7th-9th centuries) and Russia (the 13th-14th centuries), both emperors and princes recruited bureaucrats exclusively from hereditary aristocracy, which had significant political independence. In Russia, these aristocrats owned inherited lands and had the right to change their suzerain, which provided them with bargaining power against their prince. In China, the aristocratic elites formed a coalition bound by marriage ties, which also put them in a strong position against the emperor. Both countries, however, subsequently experienced significant weakening of this hereditary aristocracy, which left the political arena to the state and many weaker, lower status players who were neither strong nor united enough to compete with the state. In China, many members of the aristocracy were killed during the Huang Chao Rebellion in the 9th century, which forced the Tang dynasty to start recruiting bureaucrats from lower status groups based on a written exam rather than pedigree. The next, Song dynasty made the system of imperial examination the primary way of recruiting state servants, which further undermined the positions of the aristocracy. In Russia, the massacre of the aristocracy was executed by Ivan the Terrible in the 16th century, after the Moscow princes gradually limited the ownership rights and the right to change one's suzerain in the 15th century. In the 17th century, Russian tsars officially began recruiting bureaucrats without regard to their aristocratic pedigree, and in the 18th century, Peter the Great took the last bits of aristocratic independence away when he abolished their formal titles and made state service the only clear way to the social elite.⁴⁸ These examples of China and Russia show one of the ways of how the state may become the strongest center of political authority.⁴⁹

As the state gradually monopolizes group authority, it shapes both the material and symbolic sides of state-society relations around the logic of *teamwork* rather than the logic of resistance and contention (see Figure 1 for a brief characteristic of political environment in statist and anti-statist societies). The team-state becomes the focus of collective identity, of people's understanding of who the "we" are. State rulers use team logic to develop social contracts, which directly connect them to the population without the brokerage of independent elites. Within this team contract, the state is the institution responsible for survival of society as a whole, for organizing social life, and for defending people's collective interests, while individual citizens are responsible for helping the state to fulfil its mission. Historically, examples of such contracts can be found in China, Prussia, the Soviet Union, Japan, or Korea.⁵⁰ Over time, such team

⁴⁷ Vu, "Studying the State through State Formation," 159–64.

⁴⁸ Crumme, *Aristocrats and Servitors*; Tackett, *The Destruction of the Medieval Chinese Aristocracy*; Wang, "China's State Development in Comparative Historical Perspective."

⁴⁹ On the Russia case, see, for example, White, *Political Culture and Soviet Politics*, 24–30. On the importance of aristocracy as the force that prevents the state from becoming too powerful, see the classic writing of Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*.

⁵⁰ Rimlinger, *Welfare Policy and Industrialization in Europe, America, and Russia*; Barkey and Parikh, "Comparative Perspectives on The State," 535; Breslauer, "On the Adaptability of Soviet Welfare-State Authoritarianism"; Beck, *The Origins of the Authoritarian Welfare State in Prussia*; Cook, *The Soviet Social Contract and Why It Failed*; Leung and Nann, *Authority and Benevolence*; Hui, *War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe*, 171–77; Mares and Carnes, "Social Policy in Developing Countries"; Cook and Dimitrov, "The Social Contract Revisited." Scholars have also used the term "social pact" in relation to some countries in the Middle East nowadays, where the state provides social safety net, jobs, and other public goods, while the citizens comply with the state's political monopoly: see Heydemann, "Social Pacts and the Persistence of Authoritarianism in the Middle

logic turns into a social norm of state leadership, which provides the state with group authority rather than only a role of contractual party.

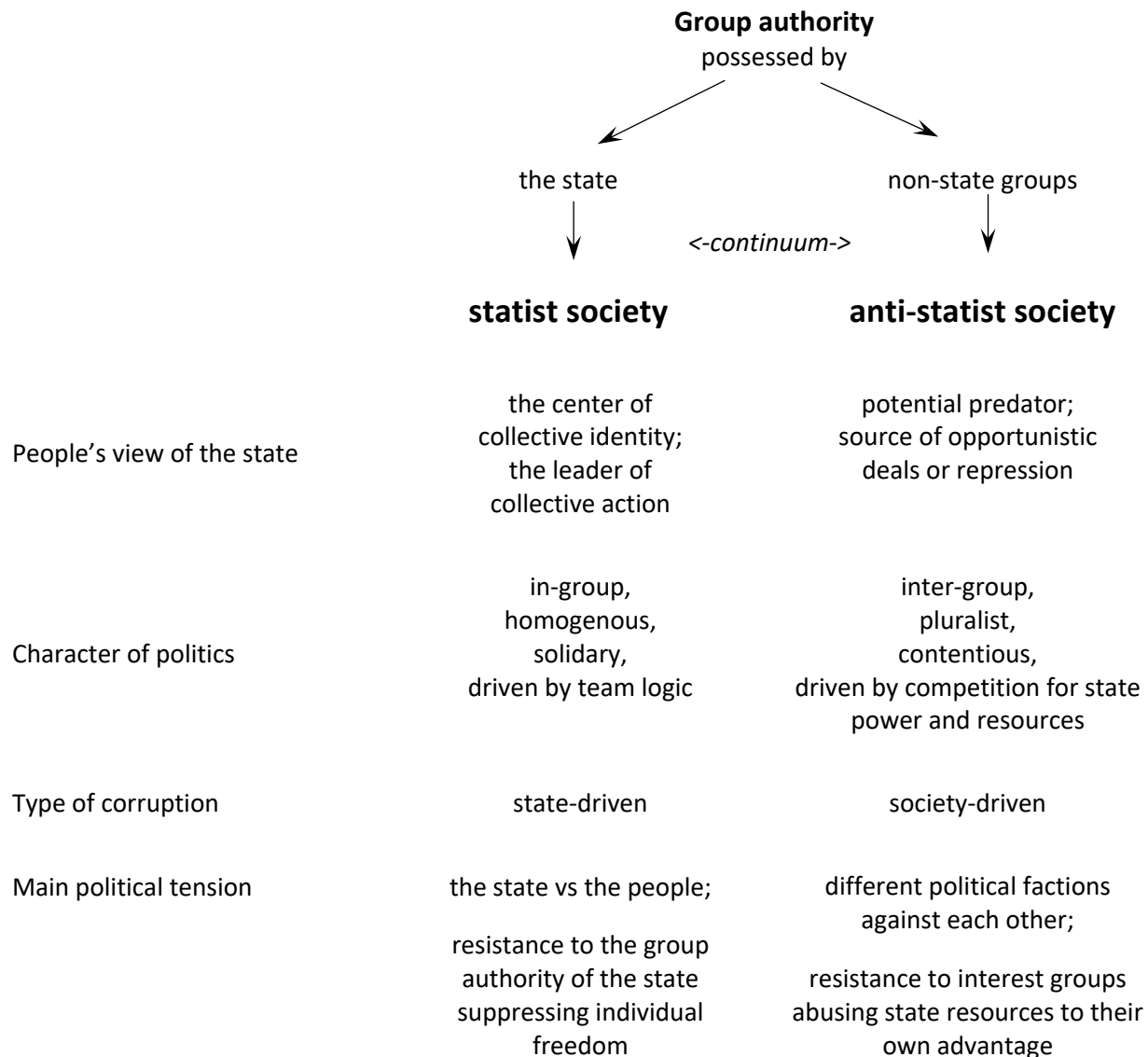


Figure 1. Political environment in statist and anti-statist societies

In statist societies, the political environment is solidary and non-competitive by default. In the absence of independent elites with their own political capital and in the presence of a wide social contract

East.” However, the social pacts in these countries seem to be based less on the authority of the state and more on the authority of religious or ethnic groups that took over the state, and they may easily turn from universal to exclusionary: see Heydemann, “Rethinking Social Contracts in the MENA Region.”. The popular vision of the state as the leader of collective action also translates into an extended role of the state in economic policies (see Dobbin, *Forging Industrial Policy: The United States, Britain, and France in the Railway Age*; Evans, *Embedded Autonomy*).

with the state, the elite status is obtained through endorsement of the state rather than through the ability to bargain with it. Being recruited by the state to fulfil a public function is an honor, which explains the strong corporate spirit of bureaucracies in statist societies.⁵¹

At the same time, the combination of state authority and lack of political competition create favorable conditions for state-driven corruption.⁵² Enjoying the prestige of state endorsement, the state officials, especially the top ones, have few barriers that would prevent them from using state posts for personal enrichment and further restriction of political competition to stay in power. Group authority of the state is crucial for this kind of corruption: the prestige of the state can be used as a justification for excessive consumption and restriction of political freedoms. The top government officials occupy such high positions in the social hierarchy that their wealth is viewed as matching these positions and their power to violate individual rights as matching the role of the state to maintain social order.⁵³

Even though statist societies are characterized by unity rather than division, they have a different kind of political tension—the tension between the unitary state that uses its group authority to restrict individual freedoms and the people who resist it. The dissident movement in the Soviet Union is an example of such resistance, which struggled to break the social conformism in the rest of society and defended individual rights and freedoms. Resistance to the state in a statist society runs into the general difficulty of resisting group authority: questioning the state ruler means questioning the social order, and the dissenters must be willing to risk not only their material well-being but also their social connections and the comfort of group belonging.⁵⁴ The state that possesses group authority widely uses the strategy of discreditation and ostracism in combination with selective overt violence against dissenters.⁵⁵ The difficulty of resisting group authority of the state does not diminish people's desire for freedom, as some may argue. Rather, it inhibits the active, organized forms of resistance as most people do not trust activists not affiliated with the state to lead collective action.⁵⁶ Instead of organized resistance, excessive state pressure breeds hypocrisy, sabotage of state policies, and learned helplessness, which was widespread in late communist regimes.⁵⁷

In contrast to statist societies, in anti-statist ones, the state possesses little to no group authority, which means that the most powerful political players are non-state groups—classes, ethnicities, races, religious groups, or any combination of them. Each of these groups has authority among its own members but not among the members of other groups. With the rare exception of some nation-states, where group

⁵¹ Evans, *Embedded Autonomy*.

⁵² For a detailed analysis of the two models of corruption, see Kupatadze, "Political Corruption in Eurasia."

⁵³ On the connection between social status and corruption, including the case when state officials are perceived as being higher status than the rest of society, see Granovetter, "The Social Construction of Corruption," 159–60. On how in-group loyalties moderate tolerance for corruption, see Solaz, De Vries, and de Geus, "In-Group Loyalty and the Punishment of Corruption."

⁵⁴ See Kharkhordin, *The Collective and the Individual in Russia* for a historical and cultural account of the collective and peer surveillance in Russia and the Soviet Union. Also, see Owen, "A Genealogy of Kontrol' in Russia: From Leninist to Neoliberal Governance."

⁵⁵ Gel'man, "The Politics of Fear."

⁵⁶ On how repression breeds anti-regime attitudes but decreases citizens' contentious behavior, see, for example, Wang, "The Political Legacy of Violence During China's Cultural Revolution."

⁵⁷ See, for example, the debate about *homo Sovieticus* in Левада, *Простой Советский Человек: Опыт Социального Портрета На Рубеже 90-х*; Гудков, "Человек в Неморальном Пространстве: К Социологии Морали в Посттоталитарном Обществе"; Sharafutdinova, "Was There a 'Simple Soviet' Person?" See also

authority belongs to an ethnically homogenous nation whose territorial boundaries exactly match the boundaries of the state, different non-state groups coexist in one polity and compete for state power. Unlike in statist societies, the competing groups in anti-statist ones can use the power of social norms and social conformism to maintain solidarity and compliance only in their own group but not in society as a whole. The tools that the group in power can use to secure compliance of other groups come down to economic concessions or overt repression, which require more material resources to achieve superficial and unstable compliance.⁵⁸ Political and economic histories of countries such as Mexico or Turkey are a good example of state attempts to impose its authority onto a highly resistant society.⁵⁹

People's view of the state in anti-statist societies matches this pluralist and competitive political environment. The state is the source of perks or punishment rather than the leader of collective action. State posts, rather than being the prestigious positions associated with group authority, are viewed as potential sources of benefits and power that can be used for the good of the individual's own ethnic, religious, or racial group as well as for cultivating clientelistic relations with other groups.⁶⁰ The leaders of the competing groups obtain prestige and support if they successfully bargain with state officials or politicians running for state posts in the interests of their group.⁶¹ They maintain their high social status whether they themselves currently occupy a state post or not; however, they would lose this status if the members of their group start doubting their commitment to the group's collective interest.

Lack of group authority possessed by the state creates a favorable environment for society-driven corruption. Unlike the state-driven corruption, it is not the result of excessive state authority and its abuse. Rather, it is driven by strong non-state group loyalties and the view of the state as a source of short-term benefits. Society-driven corruption often maps onto existing social divisions, e.g. lucrative state jobs are distributed to the members of one's own ethnic or religious group. The state here is a means to benefit one of the competing social groups. In contrast, state-driven corruption is focused on serving the interests of the state apparatus itself, which becomes a corporation with its own, autonomous interest rather than a means to satisfy someone else's interests.

As already mentioned above, statism vs anti-statism is a continuum, possibly even a spectrum, which can be used to examine the development of every society and the competition of the state with other institutions for group authority. Almost never a society would fall strictly into statist or anti-statist category. To determine its position, we need to consider who the main political players are as well as the patterns of power contestation and resistance characteristic of that society. For example, bureaucratic authoritarian states have high autonomy of their bureaucratic apparatus from societal interests, but they exist in societies ridden by social cleavages.⁶² In fact, it is exactly because of these cleavages that the state was able to play the role of the stabilizing force, and the deeper the cleavage, the more autonomy the

⁵⁸ Wintrobe, *The Political Economy of Dictatorship*. In some circumstances, the need to seek support outside of one's group and the pragmatic attitude of the outside group members may help combat group loyalties and lead to better governance: Gao, "Tribal Mobilization, Fragmented Groups, and Public Goods Provision in Jordan."

⁵⁹ Hamilton, *The Limits of State Autonomy*; Barkey, *The State and the Industrialization Crisis in Turkey*; Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy*.

⁶⁰ Granovetter, "The Social Construction of Corruption," 162–63; Prasad, Martins da Silva, and Nickow, "Approaches to Corruption."

⁶¹ Gottlieb and Kosec, "The Countervailing Effects of Competition on Public Goods Provision."

⁶² O'Donnell, "Reflections on the Patterns of Change in the Bureaucratic-Authoritarian State"; O'Donnell, *Bureaucratic Authoritarianism: Argentina, 1966-1973, in Comparative Perspective*.

state obtained.⁶³ While the autonomy of bureaucratic authoritarian states may be high, their group authority is still low. The intensity of contentious politics and overt repression in these states shows that the bureaucratic authoritarian state does not induce a high level of voluntary compliance in the population. In the future, these states may achieve group authority if they manage to weaken the competing institutions and maintain this position for a long time, which seems unlikely in the modern world. In this historical moment, though, these societies are still anti-statist, even though their state apparatus has a significant autonomy from societal interests. This example highlights the difference between state autonomy and group authority of the state: while all states that possess group authority are autonomous, not all states that are autonomous possess group authority.

Another important feature of social statism and anti-statism is that, unlike state capacity, it does not change fast. State capacity may fluctuate drastically decade to decade and sometimes even faster than that. Economic crises, wars, pandemics, or natural disasters may undermine state resources and the ability of the state apparatus to be a strong political player. Societal preferences, however, take a long time to form and change. State formation literature shows that the states with strong group authority, such as China, Korea, or Japan, took centuries to develop their norm-setting power. There is a good reason to believe that the states that did not do it before universal enfranchisement will never be able to weaken societal groups enough to monopolize the leadership role.⁶⁴ Societal statism or anti-statism is, thus, a product of the *longue durée* of history rather than the legacy of the last decades or the result of actions of current state rulers.

Finally, a very important question about statism and anti-statism is related to their relationship to political regimes. This book argues that authoritarianism is possible in both statist and anti-statist societies, but the strategies that autocrats must use to consolidate their power in these societies are different. Later in this chapter, I will explain how social statism or anti-statism influences the rulers' strategies and the character of infrastructural state capacity. Before doing that, though, let me turn back to Russia and evaluate my argument about the statism of the Russian society as the basis of Putin's political success against alternative explanations.

Vladimir Putin's popular support and statism of Russian society

The question of Putin's popularity keeps intriguing researchers and political observers. Russia has become more and more authoritarian over the last two decades, and, yet, Putin's popularity did not seem to suffer from this authoritarian turn. Why is it that the Russian people continue to support Putin despite his attacks on democracy?

One possible answer, especially common among the media commentators but also discussed by academics, is that Putin is not that popular. We judge about Putin's popularity based on public opinion polls, and, such commentators argue, in authoritarian countries, poll data cannot be trusted. People are likely to be afraid to voice their true opinions if they don't support the regime because they fear negative consequences. As appealing as this argument can be at the intuitive level, it is not confirmed by systematic

⁶³ Stepan, *The State and Society*; Stepan, "State Power and the Strength of Civil Society in the Southern Cone of Latin America." On how a similar mechanism works in Africa, see

⁶⁴ Skowronek, *Building a New American State*; Shefter, *Political Parties and the State*.

research. Multiple studies show that, at least in Russia, fear and preference falsification do not significantly distort the poll results about Putin's popular support. The opinions of the people who indicate some fear to speak freely or who refuse to answer the survey prove to be no different from the opinions of the people who are not afraid to answer questions, thus, not affecting the results.⁶⁵ List experiments and more detailed questions also reveal that Russians do not shy away from criticizing Putin when they feel so and that their answers generally follow the patterns observed in democratic countries.⁶⁶ Anecdotal, academics conducting research in Russia know that fear of political persecution is a very rare problem in the field. Most people want to voice their opinions and concerns and sometimes even charge the researchers with the mission of letting the authorities know what people truly think as they believe those authorities have lost sight of ordinary people's problems.

Provided that Putin's popularity is real, scholars advance several explanations of it. The first one is about Putin's personal charisma and the personalist character of Russian authoritarianism. The second one emphasizes Putin's control of information space together with the selective repression of the political opposition. The third one examines the idea of nationalism as the basis of Putin's popularity. The fourth one focuses on the non-democratic political culture of the Russian people. Finally, the fifth one explains Putin's popularity with economic growth in Russia in the 2000s and the performance legitimacy Putin acquired as a result.

The argument of this book builds on these explanations and clarifies them by identifying the often-ignored quality of the social environment—the statism of Russian society. This argument is closest to the recent scholarship on state-society relations in Russia that emphasizes the importance of the leader meeting the existing social expectations as well as the power of collective identity and conformism.⁶⁷ The explanations mentioned above capture important phenomena in Russian politics, but they often implicitly use the logic of pluralist, anti-statist societies to interpret them. By focusing on the role of the state as the center of collective identity and the leader of collective action, I will clarify below how personalism, repression, nationalism, political culture, and performance legitimacy work differently in a statist society and how this difference helps explain Russia's paradoxes.

Personalism

Putin's regime is often called personalist by academic researchers and political commentators alike. Putin's political ratings are consistently much higher than those of other politicians or political institutions in Russia. With his macho image in the media and the statement by the speaker of the Russian State Duma that "if there is no Putin, there is no Russia," it seems indeed that Putin has created a cult of personality.⁶⁸ Even though the picture of shirtless Putin is worth a thousand words, several empirical facts

⁶⁵ Rose, "Going Public with Private Opinions"; Левинсон, *Как считают рейтинг*, 51.

⁶⁶ Colton and Hale, "Putin's Uneasy Return and Hybrid Regime Stability"; Frye et al., "Is Putin's Popularity Real?"; Matovski, "The Logic of Vladimir Putin's Popular Appeal."

⁶⁷ Greene and Robertson, "Agreeable Authoritarians"; Greene and Robertson, *Putin v. the People*; Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror*; Greene and Robertson, "Affect and Autocracy."

⁶⁸ Smyth, "The Putin Factor"; Sperling, "Putin's Macho Personality Cult"; Cassiday and Johnson, "Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality"; Trudolyubov, "Drop the Corruption, Keep the Authoritarianism"; Frye, "Analysis | What's Vladimir Putin's End Game?"; Валдайский клуб убедили в безальтернативности Владимира Путина. *Коммерсантъ*. №193, October 23, 2014.

<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2595599>

and conceptual considerations should give us a pause before calling Putin's regime personalist. First, Putin is not the first personalist ruler of Russia; there seem to be a pattern of personalist rule, which existed before him. The figure of supreme leader—the tsar—has been important in Russia for centuries, and Joseph Stalin also created a cult of personality, which the Communist Party had to debunk. Second, recent research in psychology of leadership convincingly shows that successful leadership does not depend on the qualities of the leader's personality but rather on his ability to articulate the collective identity—the “we-ness”—of her followers and to become the embodiment of that collective identity.⁶⁹ Personalist leadership, thus, is rooted in group membership and group authority.

Statism of Russian society explains why Russia seems to be prone to personalist rule and why Putin was able to capitalize on that. Since Russians view the state as their group, the state leader who embraces the same identity and demonstrates that he cares about state collective interests above all else automatically resonates with such popular expectations. Putin has deliberately constructed his image as the personal guarantor of smooth functioning of state institutions inside the country and the defender of state interests outside of it.⁷⁰ His political intuition and, quite possibly, sincere belief in the supremacy of the state matched the pre-existing societal views in the same way as it happened for other personalist rulers in Russia.

Repression and censorship

The match between societal expectations and Putin's political rhetoric and actions also explains why Putin was able to establish his alleged personalist rule with relatively little overt repression. Although even one political prisoner is one too many, the relative level of overt repression in Russia remains low. Russian Human Rights Center “Memorial” keeps the records of politically motivated cases of criminal prosecution in Russia, and currently, there are 64 prisoners on the list and 336 people who have been prosecuted but are not currently in prison.⁷¹ Even though this list is likely not comprehensive, the scale of repression in Russia can hardly be compared with that, for example, in Turkey, a country with slightly over a half of Russia's population, where tens of thousands were prosecuted after the 2016 coup.⁷² Researchers agree that overt repression in Russia, even though it has recently intensified, is relatively rare, selective, targeting both the elites and the masses, and having a weak influence on the protest dynamic.⁷³

Instead of overt repression, Putin's regime prefers more sophisticated tactics of discreditation and “soft” power. People and organizations who may pose even a remote political threat are portrayed in the state-owned media as undermining social order and as the agents of external influence. Restrictive legislation puts them under intense scrutiny by state agencies and creates additional obstacles for their activities.⁷⁴ At the same time, the regime creates and supports its own organizations and social

⁶⁹ Haslam, Reicher, and Platow, *The New Psychology of Leadership*; Hogg, “A Social Identity Theory of Leadership.”

⁷⁰ Wengle and Evans, “Symbolic State-Building in Contemporary Russia”; Greene and Robertson, *Putin v. the People*; Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror*. See also Slater, “Iron Cage in an Iron Fist: Authoritarian Institutions and the Personalization of Power in Malaysia,” on the compatibility of personalized rule with strong state institutions.

⁷¹ Список политзаключенных (без преследуемых за религию). *Правозащитный центр Мемориал*. <https://memohrc.org/ru/pzk-list>. Access date August 6, 2020.

⁷² Human Rights Watch, “World Report 2019,” 589.

⁷³ Greene, *Moscow in Movement*, 90–91; Rogov, “The Art of Coercion”; Petrov and Naselli, “Understanding Methods of Elite Repression in Russia.”

⁷⁴ Lipman, “At the Turning Point to Repression.”

movements, which help channel the activists' energy into politically benign or pro-regime pursuits.⁷⁵ This is combined with sophisticated information policy in the state-controlled media that supplies positive emotions of national pride and is largely driven by self-censorship rather than by threats from the Kremlin.⁷⁶

This pattern of controlling society fits well with the idea of statism. Group authority of the state makes it easy for Putin to engage social conformism, ostracism, and the demand for collective security to prevent potential political rivals from obtaining wide popular support. In an anti-statist society, where the ruler's group authority is usually limited to her own group, the same tactics of discreditation are used inside this group, while overt repression is used to deal with outsiders.⁷⁷ In a statist society, the outsiders are nearly absent. Using brutal force against Chechen fighters in Putin's early years did not require additional justification in the public eye, as Chechens and Caucasians in general are seen as others by many Russians. Repression of internal political opponents, however, is more difficult to justify, which makes overt repression in statist societies a means of last resort.

Nationalism

Nationalism is another term often associated with Putin's regime by some scholars and, more often, political observers.⁷⁸ This association is not surprising given Putin's aggressive foreign policy and warm relationships with some far-right western politicians as well as the domestic turn to conservative family and religious values. In trying to understand these trends in Russian politics, however, few writers attempt to define and delineate the concepts of nationalism, patriotism, conservatism, and even fascism⁷⁹ or to understand whether these ideological trends are orchestrated or merely adopted by the Kremlin. Nationalism provides a simple lens for explaining multiple complicated phenomena all at once.⁸⁰

One important trend, though, that the concept of nationalism does capture when applied to Russia is the growth of national unity. Unlike Russia of the 1990s, Russia in 2010-20s is a country with a more capable state, pronounced collective identity, and widespread national pride. The growth of this national unity is the result of the collective trauma of the 1990s and the subsequent recovery of national self-worth. It both resonates with and is formed by the state-media propaganda, and it served as the basis of the post-Crimea euphoria among the Russian population.⁸¹

In many other respects, though, the term nationalism applied to Russia confuses more than it clarifies. First, authors who use it do not always distinguish Russian ethnic nationalism from the Russian official nationalism, for which the Russian language has different words: *russkiy* and *rossiyskiy*. If the Russian official nationalism is, by definition, the political agenda of the state, Russian ethnic nationalism

⁷⁵ Robertson, "Managing Society: Protest, Civil Society, and Regime in Putin's Russia."

⁷⁶ Schimpfoss and Yablokov, "Coercion or Conformism? Censorship and Self-Censorship among Russian Media Personalities and Reporters in the 2010s."

⁷⁷ Shen-Bayh, "Strategies of Repression."

⁷⁸ See, for example, Marten, "Vladimir Putin: Ethnic Russian Nationalist"; Clover, "The Return of Russian Nationalism"; Sipher, "Vladimir Putin Isn't as Russian as He Seems"; Foer, "It's Putin's World."

⁷⁹ Motyl, "Putin's Russia as a Fascist Political System."

⁸⁰ Laruelle, *Russian Nationalism*, 4, 7.

⁸¹ Галямина, "Мы-Они: Как в Дискурсе Владимира Путина Разных Лет Конструируется Идентичность"; Matovski, "The Logic of Vladimir Putin's Popular Appeal"; Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror*.

can be found both in the actions of some Russian officials and among the political opposition.⁸² Groups of ethnic Russian nationalists have been rather independent from the state and often prosecuted by it on the charges of extremism.⁸³ For a short time in 2014, Russian nationalists found themselves supporting Putin following Crimea annexation, but many of them subsequently turned away from Putin as they felt that he failed to take the nationalist agenda far enough.

In addition, the ethnic and official nationalisms in Russia often work at cross purposes since they represent competing political forces. For example, the rise of national pride in the Russian public opinion after Crimea annexation has not been accompanied by the rise of ethnic nationalism or xenophobia as one might expect. Multiple empirical studies find that ethnic nationalist attitudes and xenophobia have remained stable or declined after 2014, and, if anything, Russians came to view their national identity as more ethnically inclusive.⁸⁴

Second, and most importantly, using the concept of nationalism to capture Russian national unity may misspecify its nature depending on the exact meaning of nationalism for a reader. Historically, the rise of nationalism in Europe was a rebellion against multi-ethnic empires and was based on the idea that “people who spoke for coherent nations—and they alone—had the right to rule sovereign states.”⁸⁵ As a reaction to that, the imperial rulers tried to turn their subjects into “coherent nations” by promoting what different authors called state-led or official nationalism.⁸⁶ The term nationalism, thus, is used for both statist and anti-statist political agenda. It emphasizes the ideas of citizen equality and their belonging to the nation, but it does not imply that people must place state institutions at the center of their national identity, since it is only required for official nationalism. Contrary to that, nationalism may be successfully built in an anti-statist society through the efforts of private actors, as it happens in the United States.⁸⁷ Using the term nationalism, therefore, obscures the crucial distinction between statist and anti-statist societies advanced in this book.

Given these complications, I prefer to use the term statism as capturing the basis of Russian national unity more precisely than nationalism. The Russian statist unity is better understood as the successor of the Russian imperial past.⁸⁸ The inclusive character of Russian statism parallels the long imperial tradition of gathering different peoples under the umbrella of the Russian state and allowing the local cultures and institutions to exist in parallel with the Russian statist identity as long as they recognize its supremacy.⁸⁹ This inclusivity is at the core of the conflicts between Russian ethnic nationalists and

⁸² Laruelle, *Russian Nationalism*, pt. 3; Greene and Robertson, *Putin v. the People*, 59–64.

⁸³ Verkhovsky and Kozhevnikova, “The Phantom of Manezhnaya Square”; Yudina and Alperovich, “Summer 2011”; Yudina, “In the Absence of the Familiar Article. The State Against the Incitement of Hatred and the Political Participation of Nationalists in Russia in 2019”; Arnold, *Russian Nationalism and Ethnic Violence*.

⁸⁴ Alexseev and Hale, “Rallying ’round the Leader More than the Flag: Changes in Russian Nationalist Public Opinion 2013–14”; Chapman et al., “Xenophobia on the Rise?”

⁸⁵ Tilly, “States and Nationalism in Europe 1492-1992,” 133.

⁸⁶ Seton-Watson, *Nations And States*, 148; Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, chap. 6; Tilly, “States and Nationalism in Europe 1492-1992.”

⁸⁷ Clemens, *Civic Gifts*.

⁸⁸ Понарин and Комин, “Дилемма Русского Национализма: ‘Имперский’ и Этнический Национализм в Постсоветской России.”

⁸⁹ Kivelson and Suny, *Russia’s Empires*.

Putin. His interest lies in maintaining an inclusive national unity in which the state reigns supreme, while the nationalists want “Russia for (ethnic) Russians,” in which the state serves their ethnic group.

Authoritarian political culture

Another explanation of Putin’s popularity derives from the argument of authoritarian political culture in Russia. According to this explanation, Russian people have an innate preference for strong leaders and authoritarianism; they easily get behind politicians who promise order and stability, while caring less about freedom. There are various strands of research within this tradition. Some researchers turn to the Russian history to analyze the process of power consolidation by state leaders and lack of opposition to them, sometimes concluding that Russians are used to this kind of power and will not accept another political arrangement.⁹⁰ Another strand of research focuses on public opinion polls in the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia, arguing that the Soviet political culture based on hypocrisy, lack of moral values, and low level of political participation explains Russian authoritarian path.⁹¹ Yet another, more exotic tradition of research, investigates various cultural traditions and points at such practices as infant swaddling⁹² or “the bathhouse flagellation cult” as the proof of the Russian “slave soul” and masochistic nature.⁹³

The research arguing against the political culture explanation of Russian authoritarianism is probably even more extensive than the one arguing for it. Some scholars explicitly start with the assumption that there are no structural reasons of why Russia cannot democratize, arguing that many countries with no democratic traditions have been able to build democratic institutions.⁹⁴ The researchers of public opinion criticize the conclusions about Russian authoritarian culture, pointing at multiple conceptual and methodological issues, including the difference in understanding the very word “democracy” between Russia and Western countries.⁹⁵ The general theme in this research is that Russia is a normal country, and Russians’ political preferences and actions are driven by the same motives as the preferences and actions of all people in the world. These motives, which are universal and often material at its core, in combination with contingent historical circumstances, can explain the current authoritarian state of Russian politics.

The argument of this book about statism of Russian society connects to both sides of this debate and suggests looking at the issue from a different angle. Instead of focusing on whether Russian politics is

⁹⁰ See, for example, White, *Political Culture and Soviet Politics*; Pipes, *Russian Conservatism and Its Critics*; Tsygankov, *The Strong State in Russia*.

⁹¹ The most known from this body of work are the publications of Yuri Levada and some of his colleagues, for example, Левада, *Простой Советский Человек: Опыт Социального Портрета На Рубеже 90-х*; Levada, “Номо Праеvaricatus: Russian Doublethink”; Дубин, “‘Дело ЮКОСа’, Общественное Мнение, Правовая Культура Россиян”; Лёзина, “Трансформация Политической Культуры в Посттоталитарных Обществах: Постсоветская Россия и Послевоенная ФРГ в Сравнительной Перспективе”; Мухаметшина, “Три четверти россиян говорят о необходимости сильной руки в руководстве страны.” For a general overview of studies of political culture in post-Soviet Russia, see Malinova, “‘Political Culture’ in Russian Scholarly and Public Discourse.”

⁹² Mead, *Soviet Attitudes toward Authority*.

⁹³ Rancour-Laferriere, *The Slave Soul of Russia*.

⁹⁴ See, for example, Gel’man, *Authoritarian Russia*, 9–10.

⁹⁵ Reisinger, “THE RENAISSANCE OF A RUBRIC”; Colton and McFaul, “Are Russians Undemocratic?”; Hale, “The Myth of Mass Russian Support for Autocracy”; Волков and Гончаров, “Демократия в России: Установки Населения. Сводный Аналитический Отчет.”

driven by historically formed culture or universal nature, I turn my attention to the universal tension between the collective and the individual and to how it shapes both cultural and material sides of Russian political institutions. I argue that the connection of people's collective interests to the state is the key for understanding the political attitudes, the patterns of obedience and protest, and the material motivations of Russians discussed in the literature. At the basic individual level, the motivations of the Russian people are no different from the motivations of people elsewhere, but the statist institutional structure, in which these motivations turn into actions, has been shaped by Russian history.

This thesis is in line with many empirical findings on both sides of the debate about Russian political culture. For example, the historical studies analyzing the authoritarian roots of Russian politics demonstrate the process, through which the state monopolized the role of the collective leader. The research on public opinion documenting the hypocrisy and the "doublethink" of Russians shows the psychological consequences of suppressing individual autonomy by the state. At the same time, the research showing that many aspects of Russian political preferences are similar to those in other nations provides evidence that the hypothesis about some innate authoritarianism of the Russian political culture is probably ungrounded.

The idea of statism allows to rethink the empirical facts that research on Russian political culture revealed instead of interpreting Russian political culture as authoritarian outright. Most of these empirical findings focus on the strong state and assume that the preference for a strong state is a sign of authoritarianism. This assumption, however, is conceptually problematic. In many countries, it is exactly the absence of a strong state that hinders democratization, and many contemporary democracies developed their state apparatus during authoritarian periods in their history.⁹⁶ Statism, thus, does not equal authoritarianism, and while Russian political culture is certainly statist, it does not mean that it dooms Russia to authoritarianism as some authors suggest. I will address the issue of how a statist society, such as Russia, can democratize, in more detail in the last chapter and the conclusion to this book.

Performance legitimacy and the social contract

The last explanation for Putin's popularity, with which I will engage, is related to the so-called performance legitimacy. It is part of the body of research that opposes the cultural explanation. Its argument connects Putin's popularity with the rapid growth of Russia's economy during Putin's first two terms in the 2000s, which was a long-awaited relief for the Russian population after the deep economic crisis of the 1990s. This argument uses a very intuitive idea that people care about their material well-being and would support the government on whose clock the economy does well.⁹⁷

Although there is a lot of truth to this argument, especially if we look at the period between 2000 and 2009, seeing Putin's popularity as directly connected to people's pocketbook considerations would leave too many things unexplained. The dynamic of Putin's approval index has not always followed economic performance and reacted even more strongly to the second Chechen war in 1999, the benefits reform in 2005, the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the pension reform in 2018.⁹⁸ In addition to that,

⁹⁶ Fukuyama, "Why Is Democracy Performing So Poorly?"

⁹⁷ Treisman, "Presidential Popularity in a Hybrid Regime"; Treisman, "Putin's Popularity since 2010: Why Did Support for the Kremlin Plunge, Then Stabilize?"

⁹⁸ For a more detailed analysis of the dynamic of Putin's approval, see Matovski, "The Logic of Vladimir Putin's Popular Appeal," 229.

Putin's support across demographic and economic groups does not vary much, even if the justification for that support does.⁹⁹

This book's argument about statism of Russian society explains how these facts can be reconciled with the performance legitimacy argument. The Russian population views the state as the dominant collective providing the security net, and economic security is part of it. Putin was the state ruler who initially fulfilled people's expectations of not just economic growth, but security and stability. The Chechen war was a collective security issue; the public framing of Crimea annexation as the demonstration of Russian state's decisiveness in defending ethnically Russian population connected to the same theme. The benefits and pension reforms, on the other hand, were seen by the people as an attack on the collective security net, which resulted in decline of Putin's support. Economic factors, thus, are viewed within the framework of collective security rather than of individual material well-being.

This economic aspect of collective security is captured rather well by the concept of social contract, although the very term contract may be misleading. Scholars use this term to refer to an arrangement between an authoritarian political regime and the population, in which the regime provides the population with the stable employment and social security net, while the population agrees to give up their political rights and remain quiescent.¹⁰⁰ The term "contract," though, may obscure the nature of this arrangement as it is not an agreement of two independent parties, exchanging favors. Rather than being a contract, it is an institution.¹⁰¹ It involves a common identity, group belonging, social norms, and an expectation that the group will provide a security net for its members and the leader will commit to this goal on behalf of the group. Material well-being is important, but within this material well-being, the state is held responsible for the safety net rather than for the size of the income. Violation of this responsibility hurts the ruler's support stronger than declining economic performance.

All the explanations of authoritarian power in post-Soviet Russia, which I discussed above, capture important facts about Russian politics. The argument of this book about statism of Russian society provides a different lens for interpreting these facts. It allows to explain Russian authoritarianism as part of a larger theoretical scheme of how authoritarian regimes function differently in statist compared to anti-statist societies. The next section will lay out how group authority of the state shapes the strategies of autocrats as well as the place of infrastructural state power and civil society in the authoritarian toolkit.

Grassroots politics in statist and anti-statist societies

The different traits of political environment in statist and anti-statist societies shape the challenges that autocrats face and the strategies they use to consolidate power. The main challenge of an autocrat in an anti-statist society is the competition with the leaders of other societal groups for state

⁹⁹ Matovski, "The Logic of Vladimir Putin's Popular Appeal"; Левинсон, "Внуки против бабушек"; Гудков, "Доверие политикам и президентское голосование."

¹⁰⁰ See, for example, Cook, *The Soviet Social Contract and Why It Failed*.

¹⁰¹ For a discussion of this term along the same lines, see Heydemann, "Social Pacts and the Persistence of Authoritarianism in the Middle East," 25.

power.¹⁰² Reducing this competition and consolidating power usually requires either economic concessions that would buy the loyalty of these other groups or repression of those groups and their leaders.¹⁰³ In statist societies, however, political competition happens within the same group that shares an identity and a collective interest. It is the competition not just for economic resources but for the right to speak on behalf of the whole society, i.e. to be its legitimate leader and to control society through group authority. To reduce the chance that someone challenges the autocrat, she must develop the means to maintain her legitimacy and control grassroots politics, through which potential challengers may arise. Further in this section, I will focus on these two authoritarian strategies: (1) a combination of economic concessions with repression in anti-statist societies and (2) maintenance of ruler's legitimacy and control of grassroots politics in statist ones.

To implement any political strategy, a ruler needs organizational infrastructure. In this section, I will show how statist and anti-statist societies grow different infrastructures of public organizations—both state and non-state ones—which help autocrats implement their strategies of staying in power. The state organizations in question include state bureaucracies and the public sector, i.e. the organizations that researchers see as contributing to infrastructural state power; the non-state organizations are the ones usually labeled civil society. Although researchers study them separately, I will show below that in statist societies they are best considered together as parts of a larger system of public organizations controlled by the state.

The autocrats' strategies and the organizational models of the public sphere described in this section are theoretical ideal types. The value of distinguishing them lies in spelling out the internal logic of the two different mechanisms of how autocrats can consolidate and hold on to power. In empirical data, however, these models will never be observed in their pure form. No existing state has absolute monopoly on group authority and no existing state has no group authority at all. All empirical cases will be a mixture of these logics, although in different proportion in every case. The theoretical separation, however, is necessary as it allows to trace the two different mechanisms and disentangle them in the empirical data.

Infrastructural state power and civil society. The concept of infrastructural power refers to the organizational development of modern states.¹⁰⁴ Unlike those relying on despotic power, states with infrastructural power have permanent bureaucratic apparatuses that cover the territory of the state and allow it to control various spheres of people's lives. Initially developed for the purposes of taxation, the state apparatus gradually took on the functions of regulation, law enforcement as well as provision of education, healthcare, welfare, and other public goods.

The territorial spread of bureaucracy not only provided the state with tighter control of society but also increased state's dependence on it. The work of the state apparatus has always been greatly influenced by how cooperative or resistant the population was, which, in its turn, depended on how much group authority the state accumulated over the course of its history on a given territory. I argue here that cooperation or resistance of the population leads to the differences not only in bureaucratic efficiency but also in the structure of the ecosystem of state and non-state public organizations. These different

¹⁰² Way, *Pluralism by Default*.

¹⁰³ Wintrobe, *The Political Economy of Dictatorship*.

¹⁰⁴ Mann, "The Autonomous Power of the State"; Mann, "Infrastructural Power Revisited"; Soifer and vom Hau, "Unpacking the Strength of the State: The Utility of State Infrastructural Power."

structures of public organizations provide autocrats with the tools they need to consolidate and hold on to power (see Figure 2).

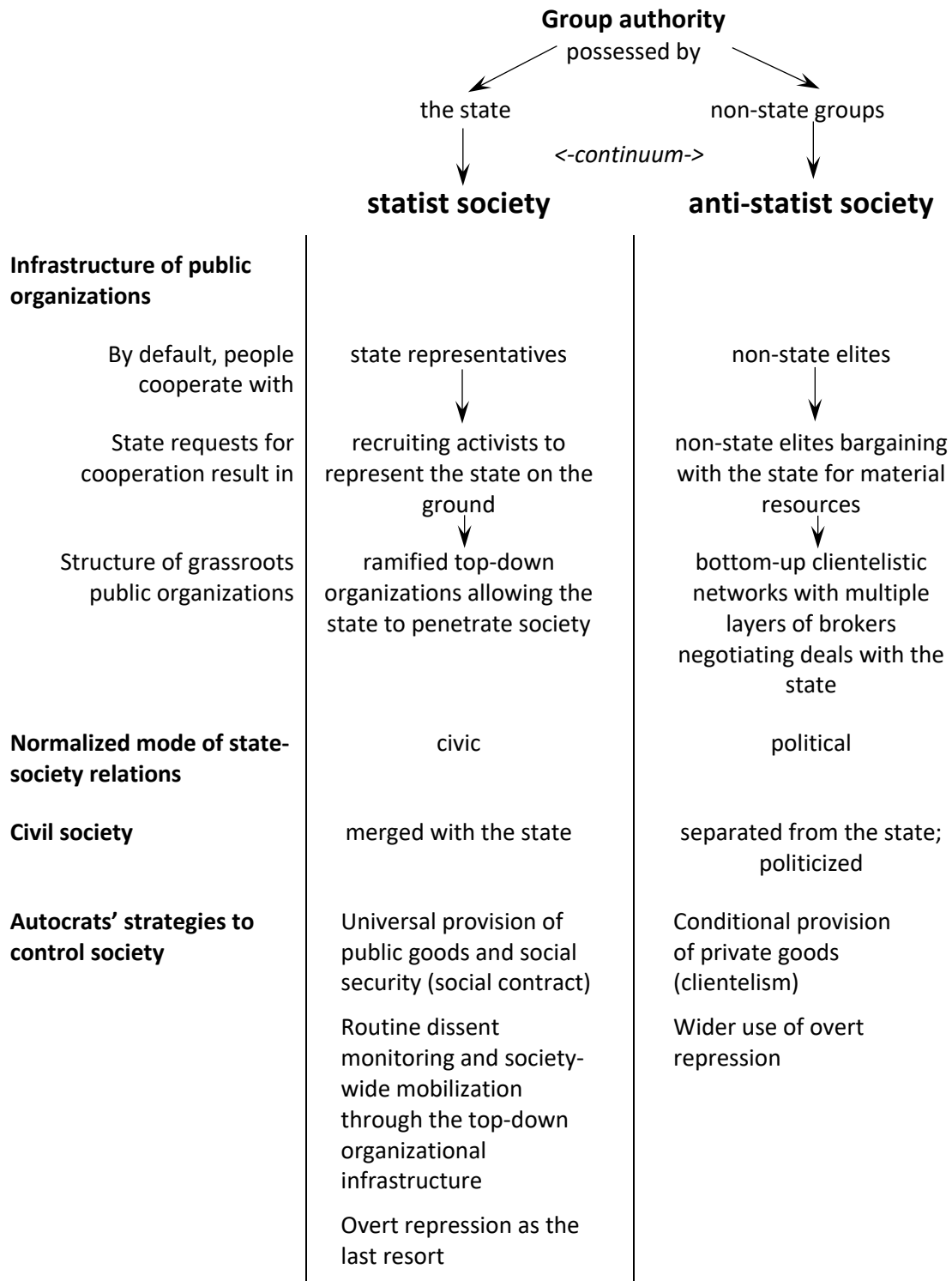


Figure 2. Public organizations, civil society, and autocrats' strategies in statist and anti-statist societies

In statist societies, where the state speaks on behalf of the group and is associated with social order, people easily cooperate with the state. Being recruited and trusted by the state is an honor; association with the state elevates one's social status. A good example of that is the prestige of state service in such statist societies as the Chinese or Russian ones, where it has been the way to social elites for centuries. The Chinese civil service examination ensures that civil servants are selected and promoted based on merit, which reaffirms the role of the state as maintaining social order, harmony, and solidarity.

In contrast to that, in anti-statist societies, the state is associated not with social order but rather with an intrusion into it. Non-state institutions and elites—ethnic, religious, business, or even mafia—bear the primary responsibility for organizing social life, and people cooperate with them unconditionally. The interactions with the state, on the other hand, are viewed with default suspicion and are conditional on the prospect of material gain or avoidance of punishment. As a result, the state seeking cooperation with the population must negotiate with the non-state elites who effectively control society.¹⁰⁵ The history of empires and colonialism provides numerous relevant examples of how states had to negotiate with local elites to ensure compliance of the population.

This difference in how people view the state and interact with it results in the different structure of state and non-state public organizations. In statist societies, state officials easily recruit local activists who represent the state on the ground and build ramified top-down organizational structures that penetrate society and greatly increase infrastructural state power. The state bureaucracy is part of this centralized system, and so are the public sector and a big part of civil society. As I will show in subsequent chapters, bureaucracies in statist societies work together with the public sector—educational, healthcare, and social security organizations—and with non-state grassroots organizations that the state supports. The non-state organizations may vary from youth clubs to neighborhood councils to organizations helping people with disabilities. These organizational connections significantly increase the presence of the state in people's lives, placing state agents near almost every person in the community.

Such highly integrated structure of public organizations blurs the boundary between the state and civil society. Many civil society organizations in statist societies are created by the state and included in the organizational network controlled by it. Researchers often call them GONGOs—government-organized non-governmental organization—for lack of a better term.¹⁰⁶ The Soviet Union, for example, was filled with such organizations that united people by profession, hobbies, local activities, sports, etc.¹⁰⁷ GONGOs are often considered “quasi-civil society” since they are not independent from the state. However, empirical evidence also suggests that these organizations were not operated by top-down orders. They were often run by local volunteers motivated by the desire to serve the public, and they provided a significant amount of public goods. They may not have been independent from the state, but they were fueled by the grassroots energy of civic-minded individuals.¹⁰⁸

This difficulty of understanding GONGOs highlights an important characteristic of state-society relations in statist societies: people view their interactions with the state through the lens of teamwork

¹⁰⁵ See, for example, Baldwin, *The Paradox of Traditional Chiefs in Democratic Africa*.

¹⁰⁶ See, for example, Hsu and Hasmath, *The Chinese Corporatist State*; Hasmath and Hsu, *NGO Governance and Management in China*.

¹⁰⁷ Friedgut, *Political Participation in the USSR*; Leitch, “Society in Motion.”

¹⁰⁸ Friedgut, *Political Participation in the USSR*; Bahry and Silver, “Soviet Citizen Participation on the Eve of Democratization”; Frolic, “State-Led Civil Society.”

and civic duty rather than through the lens of political competition. The state for them is a necessary part of the civic,¹⁰⁹ while the opposition to the state is associated with selfishness and greed. The fact that the bureaucracy, the public sector, civil society, and the population easily cooperate with each other reflects this civic unity and social norms rather than direct coercion by the state.¹¹⁰

In contrast, in anti-statist societies, the state is unable to build a well-integrated system of public organizations because the population refuses to cooperate with the state directly. Instead, state officials must turn to non-state leaders, who start bargaining with the state on behalf of their groups. As a result, state's attempts to obtain population's cooperation results in growth of bottom-up clientelistic networks with multiple layers of brokers, who compete for state resources and power. If these non-state leaders obtain official posts in the bureaucratic hierarchy, it gives them even more access to state resources and the opportunities to increase their own political capital.

In this political environment, the mode of state-society relations habituated and normalized in people's minds is political competition for state resources and power, not teamwork to achieve collective goals. Because of this mindset, the bureaucracy, the public sector, and civil society organizations tend to pursue their narrow goals and closely watch their boundaries. Civil society in such anti-statist environment is independent from the state, but at the same time it is often politicized through its involvement in electoral campaigns and other forms of political competition.¹¹¹

Political functions of public organizations. History shows that authoritarianism can thrive in both the unified statist environment and the pluralist anti-statist environment one. The most vivid examples of statist authoritarian regimes are the USSR and contemporary China, and a good example of a non-statist authoritarian regime is Mexico in 1929-2000. All of them were formally single-party dictatorships, but the social basis of their power was different. If in the USSR and China the power of the party was based on social consensus and the legitimacy of state leadership, in Mexico the party served as the institutional mechanism of bargains with the different parts of a highly fragmented society.¹¹²

The characteristics of public organizations I described above help understand the mechanisms through which authoritarian regimes maintain their political monopolies in statist and anti-statist societies. They do it by exploiting the opposite qualities of these political environments: in statist societies, they mask their political interests under the veil of civic unity, while in anti-statist societies, they exploit the existing social divisions to their own political advantage.

In statist societies, the unified infrastructure of public organizations helps autocrats to hold on to their power because it serves two functions simultaneously. First, it provides a large amount of public goods in many spheres of everyday life: from education and healthcare to public safety to community building and hobby clubs. People's living environments are shaped by these public organizations, and the vast majority of these activities have clear benefits for communities and are politically benign. The same organizations and communication channels, though, are used by the authoritarian regime for political purposes. For example, residential councils initially created to manage the neighborhood infrastructure

¹⁰⁹ Hale, "Civil Society from Above? Statist and Liberal Models of State-Building in Russia."

¹¹⁰ Frolic, "State-Led Civil Society."

¹¹¹ See, for example, Marchetti and Tocci, *Civil Society, Conflicts and the Politicization of Human Rights*; Sarkissian and Özler, "Democratization and the Politicization of Religious Civil Society in Turkey."

¹¹² Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy*.

and organize community events for children may be used for electoral agitation and mobilization, or educational institutions may serve as a platform for recruiting young activists to the ruling party. Political and civic activities mix within the same organizations and are performed by the same people, which makes it easy to misrepresent political as civic, especially to the population that strongly favors teamwork, views the state as its collective leader, and dislikes competition for power.

In the subsequent chapters, I will show how the infrastructure of public organizations in statist societies is used for at least three political purposes. First, these organizations help mobilize the population and to coopt the civic-minded activists. This mobilization and cooptation machine is used for both non-political causes, such as a campaign for road safety, and strictly political ones, such as elections. Second, state-controlled public organizations help monitor and manage population's discontent. Being closely involved with individual citizens and their lives, they serve as the ears of the state and the first point of contact for the citizens who seek help from the state and their community. This information helps the autocrat to alleviate causes of discontent with policy changes before they become the basis for the anti-regime mobilization and prevent the growth of the opposition through the early identification of its potential leaders. Third, state-controlled public organizations help the authoritarian regime to control the public space—both physical and informational. They occupy the rooms and buildings, which would be suitable for opposition gatherings, control the neighborhood territory, where electoral agitation may take place, and produce benign, civic-minded contents that fills the informational space and helps stigmatize opposition leaders and political competition.

In anti-statist environment, the political functions of the public sector and civil society organizations are driven by the opposite logic. Since the population views the interactions with the state through the prism of rewards and punishments, the various public organizations serve as an organizational platform for negotiating the rewards, punishments, and political coalitions. Be it a school, a teachers' labor union, a village council, a church, or a youth NGO, they may all participate in negotiating political deals with the regime. These negotiations may take the form of pork-barrel politics, individual vote-buying, or other forms of clientelistic exchange of material rewards for political support. Although these practices are not exclusive to the regime classified as authoritarian in the literature, they also play a crucial role in maintaining authoritarian power in anti-statist societies.¹¹³

Overt repression will not be examined in detail in this book, but the logic of the two political environments can be extended to think about the role of overt repression in statist and anti-statist societies. Overt repression in statist societies is usually used as a means of last resort since maintaining legitimacy and controlling grassroots politics remains the optimal strategy for an autocrat. Before using overt repression, the autocrat would try to discredit publicly the opposition, emphasizing their greed and lack of civic commitment, for example, by accusing them in collaborating with foreign governments, or coopt them into the existing state apparatus. In rare cases, though, an autocrat in a statist society may use repression indiscriminately and randomly. He may cultivate the feeling of collective threat and use repression of alleged internal traitors to strengthen his image of the guarantor of collective security. In statist societies, the feeling of collective threat makes people seek protection from the state. It increases both people's desire to help identify the internal traitors and the stakes of confronting the group for those

¹¹³ Magaloni. Quasi-democratic institutions, such as the parliament, can be used to manage the requests from different groups and negotiate the loyalty contracts (see Gandhi, *Political Institutions under Dictatorship*).

individuals who might want to resist such repression.¹¹⁴ This may result in a society-wide witch-hunt powered by the state repressive machine with virtually no organized resistance, such as, for examples, Stalin's Great Purge in the Soviet Union in the 1930s.

In a pluralist anti-statist society, repression is the only tool an autocrat has left if economic concessions fail to buy loyalty of her political opponents. Repression of the disloyal out-groups helps increase the consolidation of the autocrat's own social base. Such repression can be carried out not only by the coercive state apparatus but also by the members of autocrat's own group, which in extreme cases may turn into genocide. Disloyal members of the autocrat's own group may be repressed too, but the autocrat must portray these people as having betrayed the group's interest.¹¹⁵

The empirical strategy of the book

To show how the theory of social statism helps explain social and political phenomena, this book will employ *two empirical study designs*, both of which use data from Russia (see ***The subnational comparison***). Using the subnational comparison, I will show that social statism and anti-statism is the best explanation of why it was easier for Vladimir Putin to maintain high electoral percentage in some regions but not others during the critical presidential election in 2012. In statist regions, political machines were based on social conformism and group solidarity and operated through the existing networks of public organizations, such as schools, neighborhood associations, or youth clubs, controlled by the state. These organizations, which routinely worked under the state leadership, helped mobilize even non-enthusiastic voters and falsify a significant number of votes when Putin needed it most. In contrast, in anti-statist regions, political machines relied on clientelism and brokers, each of which looked to maximize the gain from the election for themselves and their own groups. These machines performed well when supplied with abundant economic resources but failed to deliver enough of either real or fake votes when the regime's ability to serve their individual interests declined.

To demonstrate the contrast between the two types of political machines, I will use four case studies of Russian regions: two regions with high electoral resilience of Putin's electoral performance—the Kemerovo region and Tatarstan—and two with low resilience—the Rostov region and Altai. An earlier study, which helped to choose these cases, showed that the regional variation of Putin's electoral resilience in 2012 depended on infrastructural state power rather than on economic voting. The case studies, in their turn, demonstrated that the state infrastructure was particularly effective in statist regions and underperformed in anti-statist ones.

Russia as a case. The last chapter of the book will turn from subnational comparison to discussing Russia as a whole. It will argue that, on average, Russian society leans towards social statism, and this quality can explain the political dynamic of Russian authoritarianism, including the democratic period of the 1990s and the subsequent consolidation of Putin's regime. The chapter will engage with existing theories of state-society relations in Russia and show how many existing findings can be reconciled using the idea of social statism.

¹¹⁴ Hannah Arendt pointed at the terror directed at the whole society rather than a particular group as the key feature of a totalitarian regime (see Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*).

¹¹⁵ Shen-Bayh, "Strategies of Repression."

Table 1). The first study design uses multiple observations—Russian regions—to show that statist and anti-statist social environments produce different political outcomes. The second study design treats Russia as a single case and demonstrates that viewing this case as a statist society helps to make sense of Russia’s political trajectory.

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Table 1. The empirical strategy of the book

	Empirical study designs	
	Sub-national comparison (chapters 2-4)	Russia as a case (chapter 5)
Theoretical argument	Authoritarianism is built and reproduced <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • in statist societies through in-group mechanisms, e.g. group conformity and loyalty to the state. • in anti-statist societies through inter-group mechanisms, e.g. clientelistic exchanges with individuals and non-state groups. 	

Empirical arguments

Vladimir Putin's electoral performance was more resilient in Russian regions with statist societies than in those with anti-statist societies.

Statism of Russian society allowed Vladimir Putin to restore the authoritarian rule after the democratic period of the 1990s.

Unit of analysis

a Russian region

Russia as a country case

Research methods

- Case studies of four Russian regions;
- quantitative analysis of regional-level statistics.

- Historical research of secondary sources;
- analysis of recent events in Russian domestic politics at the national level.