

Olga Malinova,
Dr. of Philosophy, Professor of HSE University
omalinova@hse.ru

The Evolving Narrative of Russia's Transition: Evidence from the Analysis of the Presidential Addresses to the Federal Assembly¹

Paper Presented at the 2021 ASN World Convention, 5-8 May 2021

Abstract: The paper follows the transformations of the official narrative about Russia's post-Soviet transition over twenty years of Putin's stay in power. To detect how the gradual evolution of political regime towards authoritarianism was legitimized, it focuses on comparison of concise narratives articulated in the Presidential Addresses to the Federal Assembly between 2000-2020. The method of research is computer-assisted qualitative content analysis. This paper is a part of the article that is currently under review. After discussing the general methodology and summarizing the results of discourse analysis of Putin's and Medvedev's descriptions of Russia's recent development in terms of stages, it focuses on some observations based on the frequency of specific codes and subcodes. It finds important alterations in articulation of the key goals of Russia's development over time. Overall, this research proves that the official narrative of Russia's post-Soviet transition transformed over time more appreciably than it is sometimes argued in the literature.

In 2000, after being for the first time elected the president of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin declared that the peaceful succession of power from Boris Yeltsin to himself “have proved that Russia is becoming a modern democratic state” (Putin 2000). Since then, he never explicitly disclaimed democracy as a declared goal, though it did not prevent Russia from moving in the opposite direction. In the recent period, its political regime is regarded either as autocratic (Gill 2015; McFaul 2018), or electoral authoritarian (Smyth 2014; Matovski 2018 etc.), or hybrid (Treisman 2011; Colton and Hale 2015; Colton 2018 etc.), or increasingly populist (Robinson & Milne 2017). The amendments to the Constitution, introduced after a national vote on 1 July 2020, leave little doubts about the direction of the regime's evolution, as they “reset” Putin's presidential term count back to zero, which gives him the opportunity to remain in power till 2036. While some scholars consider slipping to the authoritarian path a result of series of successive decisions that go back to the Yeltsin administration (Gill, 2015, p. 21; Goode, 2019), it is widely believed that Putin's policy during the last twenty years was a decisive factor of the failure of democratic transition (Taylor, 2018; McFaul, 2018). How was this gradual deviation from the declared goal represented in the discourse of Russian state officials? What was done to legitimize the creeping

¹ This article is a part of the research project “Values-based legitimation in authoritarian states: top-down versus bottom-up strategies, the case of Russia”, financed by the research Council of Norway, project number 300997.

transformation of the political regime without explicitly abandoning a commitment to democracy? How was the trajectory of modern Russia's development described in the official discourse over time?

For sure, there is no lack of literature about the ideological underpinnings of Putin's regime (including the period of the Putin-Medvedev "tandem"). In particular, much attention has been given to the concepts that signaled about remarkable shifts in official discourse, like "strong state" (Prozorov, 2005; Petrov, 2006), "sovereign democracy" (Evans, 2008; Chen, 2011; Casula, 2013), "modernization" (Liñán 2012; Urnov 2012; Wilson 2015), and "cultural / conservative turn" (Sharafutdinova 2014; Evans 2015; Robinson 2017; Melville 2018; Laruelle and Radvanyi 2019 etc.). This literature demonstrates how introducing new buzz-words helped to adopt the legitimizing narrative about Russia's transition to the changing context.

There is also a growing literature about Putinism that is often regarded not only a distinctive form of authoritarian regime (Fish 2018; Colton 2018), but also an ideational construction – a narrative (Bacon 2012), a set of ideas (Laqueur 2015), the leader's vision (Gill 2013, 48-78), a worldview (Laruelle and Radvanyi 2019), a collective mentality, or a "code" shared by Putin and those around him (Taylor 2018). This literature provides useful insights to the inner logic of Putin's regime, as well as to the modes of its legitimation in a changing context. Yet it is more interested in revealing the "mature" ideational constructions than in following their evolution. It is widely believed that the core ideas of Putinism were expressed as early as December 1999 in the famous "Millennium Manifesto", the article published under Putin's name in *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, the day before Yeltsin announced his resignation (Bacon 2012, 773; Laqueur 2015, 119; Ruutu 2017, 1154; Colton 2018, 461). More prudent accounts postpone the appearance of Putinism in "its true form" to 2003-2004, and claim that even if it has changed somewhat over time, "its core tenets have remained quite consistent" (Taylor 2018, 5-6). While emphasizing a significance of ideational factors for understanding the dynamics of the regime, this literature interprets Putinism as a more or less established set of beliefs that were explicitly used for communicating the regime's legitimacy (Bacon 2012), and probably governed decision making (Gatov 2016; Taylor 2018). Yet, I stand with those who allow the ideological underpinnings of Putin's regime a more gradual development over time (Robinson & Milne 2017). If the evolution of the political regime in Russia were an incremental process, then the political vision of what is desirable, necessary and possible, must change step by step.

To reveal how the creeping transformation of the political regime was legitimized in the official discourse, I focus not on the core principles of Putinism, but on transformations of the narrative about the transition Russia is taking / has taken after the collapse of the USSR. All political leaders tell stories that establish connections between the present day concerns, past developments, and political decisions that aim to provide a better future. Such stories play an important role in legitimizing their authority and justifying a current policy (Backon 2012; De Fina 2017). Comparing how these stories are told over time elucidates important modifications of the political vision of the ruling elite. This is particularly relevant for a country that has abandoned its former modus of existence and “moved” to a new one, as Russia did after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

To reveal how the narrative about the post-Soviet transition¹ has been transformed throughout twenty years of Putin’s stay in power, I focus on how it was articulated in the context of justification of the current political course. Using a computer-assisted qualitative content analysis of the Presidential Addresses to the Federal Assembly, delivered between 2000-2020, I follow variations of how the story about Russia’s recent past, present and future was told.

In this paper, I skip the discourse analysis of multiple descriptions of Russia’s recent development in terms of stages, that was the starting point of this research. However, it is available in the full version, that can be delivered by a request. After describing the methodological issues, I focus on some observations based on the frequency of specific codes and subcodes.

According to my analysis, the official narrative about modern Russia’s development transformed over time driven by reactions to significant events, such as the 9/11 Terrorist Attack, Iraq War, Orange Revolution in Ukraine, the anti-Putin protest campaign in 2011-12, or the annexation of Crimea (cf. Sharafutdinova 2014; Robinson & Milne 2017; Rak & Bäcker 2020), but also by the need to demonstrate an effective achievement of the previously declared goals. Introducing new buzz-words was not the only way of adopting the legitimizing story to the changing context. There were important alterations in articulation of the key goals of Russia’s development over time. Some of them were reinterpreted, like *democracy*, some were dissolved into minor practical tasks, like *market* or *rule of law*, some kept their salience, like *raising the people’s living standards*. I found that the official discourse stopped representing Russia as a country in transition somewhere between 2012-18, when its international status and

military strength, as well as resources for social welfare, have been declared restored. Overall, my research proves that the official narrative of Russia's post-Soviet transition transformed over time more appreciably than it is sometimes argued in the literature.

Studying the evolution of official narrative: methods and materials

Sociologists consider narratives as “an ontological condition of social life” since telling stories is a fundamental way of grasping social reality (Somers, 1994, p. 614). It stimulates a growing interest in a narrative analysis in various fields of social sciences. In studies of politics and international relations, such an interest revealed itself in development of various theoretical frameworks for the analysis of public political narratives (Shenhav, 2006; Bacon, 2012, 2014; Chatterje-Doody, 2014), strategic narratives (Rosele et. al 2014) and biographical narratives of the state (Berenskoetter 2014). The narrative approach to political analysis rests on the fact that political actors habitually employ narrative explanations in communicating with the public (Bacon, 2012, p. 768). It happens not only when politicians are trying “to shape the present in the light of lessons learnt from the past” (Shenhav, 2006, p. 246), though such a practice is an often used legitimation mode (Holmes, 2010; Von Soest & Gravogel, 2017). Actually, narrative structures are part and parcel of political rhetoric. Narrative explanations suggest some causal connection between events or situations by representing them in a time sequence. Thus, “following, not verifying the story, is essential to a successful narrative” (Griffin, 1993, p. 1099). It makes a narrative an effective tool for manipulating public opinion (Da Fina, 2017, p. 233).

There is a controversy over a proper definition of narrative (Griffin 1993; De Fina 2017). Basically, narratives are considered as analytic constructs that are based on a timeline; they unify some past or contemporaneous events, actions, or happenings into a coherent relational whole (Griffin, 1993, p. 1097). For revealing the narrative structures in texts, I adopt the minimal definition that suggests an existence of the time sequence between at least two events, actions, or happenings, and an explicit or implicit causal connection between them (Shenhav, 2006, pp. 247, 250-251; De Fina, 2017, p. 234).

Much of scholarship of political narratives is focused on what Anna De Fina calls “master”, or “grand” narratives, i.e. public dominant discourses about particular social issues that function as frames through which other discourses are interpreted (2017: 236). Being interested in studying the narratives that are typical for political

leaders or groups, political scientists tend to draw attention to the most salient samples from larger collections of texts. For example, Edwin Bacon considerably based his detailed and insightful analysis of the narrative of Putinism on the summary of “Putin’s plan” provided in the booklet composed by Alexei Chadaev and Kirill Loginov in 2005, while also referring to some original texts of Putin and Medvedev (2012). Later, he found sweeping changes in Putin’s narrative analyzing his “Crimea speech” on 18 March 2014 (Bacon, 2015). Vasily Gatov drew his remarks about Putin’s “story” from “a patchwork collection of quotes from Putin and his closest subordinates” (2016: 621). Such an approach is distinctive for this kind of research. However, even if a selection of the most salient quotations can work well for describing the “mature” form of Putinism, it does not reveal its evolution precisely enough.

My approach follows another tradition of scholarship that concerns with what De Fina describes as “narratives in the discourse of politicians” (2017: 239-240). I study storytelling as a way of claiming to legitimacy in the official rhetoric. It entails a different method of selecting material for analysis, as the latter depends on systematic observations from a relevant and feasible corpus of texts. My research is based on the computer-assisted qualitative content analysis of the Presidential Addresses to the Federal Assembly. In the course of analysis of the current tendencies, assessment of the political course and setting goals for future (Frolova 2020: 70), the Addresses time and again reproduced the official narrative about Russia’s post-Soviet transition by connecting present problems and achievements with past circumstances, and anticipating future developments. They contain a plenty of what Shaul Shenhav defines as *concise narratives*, i.e., the text segments that “capture both the earliest and the latest periods mentioned by the speaker”, which provides a good opportunity to observe “how references to day-to-day politics are framed by historical perspectives” (Shenhav, 2005, p. 316). The content analysis of hundreds of concise narratives about regime’s performance in the Addresses provides a good opportunity to follow the transformations of the “grand” narrative about Russia’s transition. Of course, a study of the Addresses do not exhaust the whole range of articulations of the official narrative about Russia’s post-Soviet transition, but the fact that these official speeches are delivered annually, cover more or less similar topics, and are widely discussed by media and experts make them particularly relevant for following its evolution².

To reveal how the official narrative about Russia's post-Soviet transition was adapted to a changing political context, I have coded the Addresses delivered by Putin and Medvedev between 2000-2020 in the MAXQDA2018 app. The coding has been done manually; the primary material was read in Russian. The units of analysis were coherent segments of texts that presented the time sequence between causally connected events, actions, or happenings. The code system included three dimensions: the temporal framing, the attribution of causality, and the articulated policy goals. As soon as calculations were performed for the presidential terms that lasted for unequal periods, all figures are provided in percent to the total number of coded units, for each period. This method of research not only facilitated comparison of relevant fragments across twenty Addresses, but also made possible some observations based on the frequency of specific codes and subcodes.

Depicting the stages of Russia's development according to the Presidential Addresses

As the program documents focused on analysis of a current state of affairs and setting goals for the future, the Presidential Addresses are particularly suited for articulating performance-based legitimacy claims. The "performance-related narratives" (Von Soest & Grauvogel 2017: 291) tend to legitimize the regime and its political course by linking the actual problems to past misfortunes and representing recent achievements as steps to some long-term goals. In the official discourse, Russia's post-Soviet transition was described by a number of goals that related to social wellbeing, economic growth, political development and international status. They were worded and prioritized in different ways in various contexts. As soon as it was hard to point out a visible progress, the presidents and their speechwriters often met the challenge by "employing claims of achievements in the absence of real improvements" (Von Soest & Grauvogel 2017: 291). The framework of narrative perfectly fitted this task, as it provided the narrator a capacity "to define and orchestrate" the story by voluntarily including "a particular series of actions in a particular temporal order for a particular purpose" (Griffin, 1993, p. 1097). Describing Russia's recent development in terms of stages was an often used way of legitimizing the current political course in the Addresses. Comparing such descriptions over time and correlating them to changing characteristics of Russia's international environment is a good starting point for following transformations of the

official narrative. The most notable shifts are mapped in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Depicting the stages of Russia’s development and its relationships with the West in the Presidential Addresses, 2000-2020



The comparison of articulations of the stages of Russia’s development, as well as their correlations with the international context, reveals both continuity and changes in how the story of its post-Soviet transition was told. On the one hand, its main plot, focused on Russia’s overcoming the difficulties it faced after the collapse of the Soviet Union and striving to the ranks of the most advanced nations, remained invariable. On the other hand, the representations of Russia’s development noticeably changed over time. While in 2000-2011 Putin and Medvedev again and again declared another “new stage”, that must lead to the desired goals in future, in 2012-18 the official discourse shifted towards representing the most important goals as mostly achieved, which implied that Russia’s transition is going to be completed. These transformations correlated with the changing representations of the international context, and particularly of the West that appeared as both an incarnation of dreams and a source of challenges.

The analysis of code combinations: Temporal framing and attribution of causality

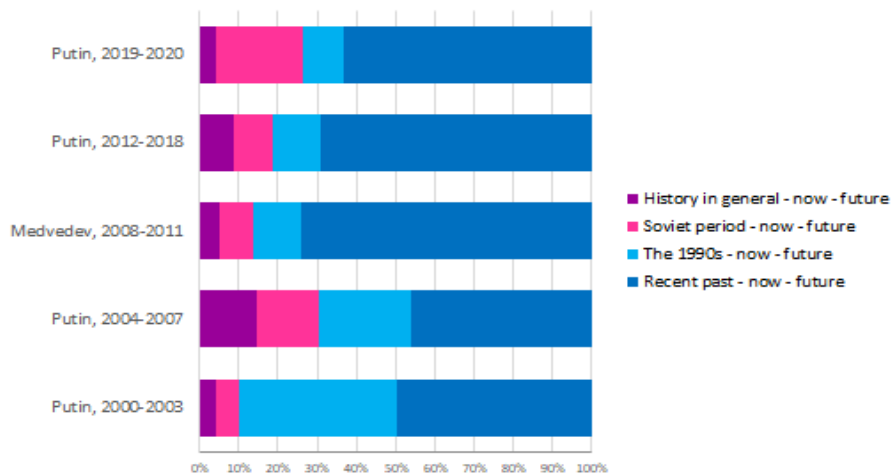
As soon as the Addresses aimed to justify the current political course and proclaim goals for future, they repeatedly reproduced the official narrative about modern Russia's development splitting it to hundreds of concise narratives about specific policy issues. These performance-related stories, typically establishing some causal connection between events or situations in the past and current policy tasks, saturated the official narrative of Russia's transition with multiple details that are important for understanding its transformations.

The analysis of frequencies of codes reveals some notable shifts in the official narrative over time. Of course, frequency is not the only indicator of salience of the topic. A single statement about the collapse of the Soviet Union as “a major geopolitical disaster of the century” (Putin 2005) could be more significant for the evolution of the official discourse than the repeated mentions of freedom and democracy. However, some variations of frequencies are rather insightful for understanding transformations of the official narrative.

In this section, I make some observations concerning the frequency of specific combinations of the temporal framing and the attributed causality. *The temporal framing* was determined by the timing of the connected events, actions, or happenings. *The attributed causality* was described by agency, where it was identifiable, and the character of outcomes (positive, neutral/ambivalent, negative). The concise narratives without a clear agency mostly fall into the category, “political responses to the challenges / urgent tasks”, which is typical for the genre of Presidential Addresses.

As one can see on figure 2, the temporal framing of the performance-related narratives in the Presidential Addresses varied from one presidential term to another.

Figure 2. Temporal framing of narratives in the Presidential Addresses to the Federal Assembly, 2000-2020.

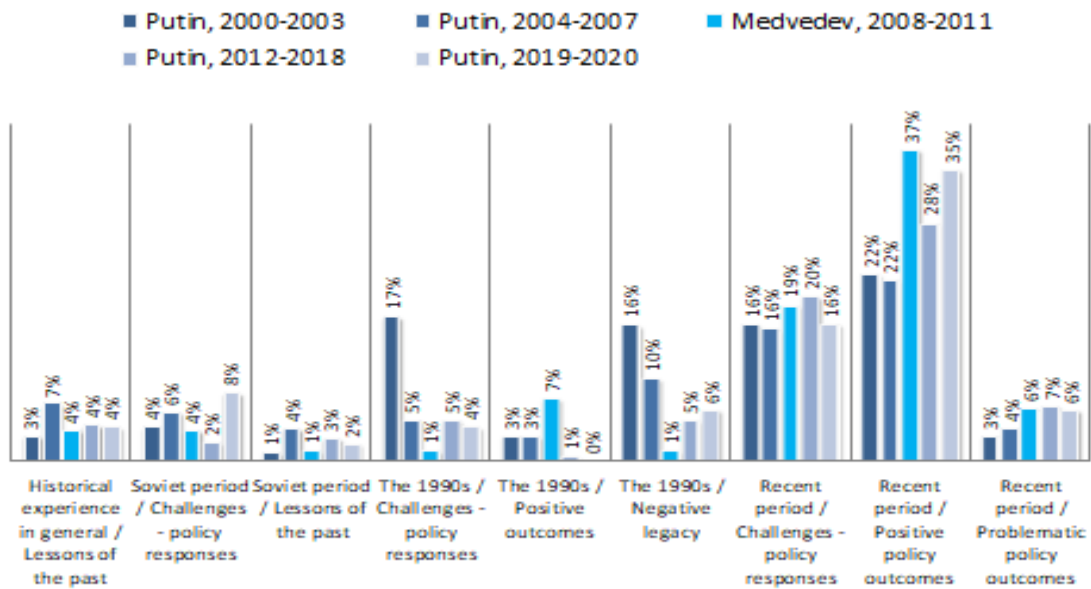


Connecting “the recent past” with “now and future” was the most typical. The proportion of fragments, representing such temporal framing, evidently raised after Putin’s second term, which pointed to a growing emphasis on the political results of the 2000s. By the same token, referring to Yeltsin’s period diminished though still remained significant. Noteworthy, that the proportion of concise narratives establishing connections with the Soviet period varied less evenly – it raised during Putin’s second and fourth terms.

As one can see in figure 3, this was not because in these periods Putin more often praised the Soviet time (the total share of the fragments that connected the present concerns with positive outcomes of that time was less than 1 per cent). Rather the Soviet period was considered as a source of contemporary problems. It was often referred to either to vindicate the present rulers by the difficult legacy they deal with, or to stress their success. In 2000-2007, while regularly referring to the Soviet past to maintain historical continuity (“lessons of the past”), Putin also pointed to the problems inherited from this period. For example, speaking about the ineffectiveness of the Russian industry, he argued: “Yes, we know that this is the legacy of the way our economy and our industry developed during the Soviet period, but it is not enough just to know. We have to take concrete steps to change the situation” (Putin 2006). In contrast, in 2019-20, references to the Soviet experience were employed not so much for reminding about the continuity, as to emphasize the recent achievements in providing social welfare and development of advanced industrial technologies. Thus, promising to provide free hot meals to all primary school students, Putin remarked that

“these benefits were not available even during the Soviet period, when there was large-scale social support for the people” (2020a). Boasting of the new weapons, he emphasized that “for the first time in the history of nuclear missile weapons, including the Soviet period and modern times, we are not catching up with anyone, but, on the contrary, other leading states have yet to create the weapons that Russia already possesses (Putin 2020a). In official discourse, the end of the transition was associated not with “returning” to the Soviet level, but with advancing it.

Figure 3. Co-appearances of codes “temporality” and “causality attribution” across the presidential terms.



Nonetheless remarkable were the representations of the 1990s (see figure 3). During his first presidential term, Putin often referred to this period’s difficult legacy. His statements concerning the 1990’s almost invariably fell into the categories of “the negative policy outcomes” or “challenges – policy responses” (the share of the concise narratives with positive characteristics of Yeltsin’s time was less than 1 per cent). This observation corrects Edwin Bacon’s claim that “the temporal framework of Putin’s narrative shifted to focus on the Yeltsin years” “by some time around the beginning of his second term in office in 2004” (2012: 776). The content analysis of Addresses, as well as the study based on a broader range of sources (Malinova, 2020) demonstrate that since Putin’s coming to the office, speaking about the “hard legacy” of the 1990s and criticism of political decisions made in this period was part and parcel of his rhetoric.

Thus, he contributed to the establishment of the myth about “*likhie devianostye*” (the hard / dashing 1990s), that became a decisive point of his narrative about Russia’s transition. One can see that framing the 1990s as the time of disaster and fallacious political decisions remained peculiar for Putin’s Addresses in 2012-20, even if Yeltsin’s time was mentioned less often than in 2000-2007 (Medvedev was noticeably more positive about this period).

Finally, the comparison of frequencies of the combinations of temporal framing and causality over presidential terms reveals a remarkable increase of the share of stories of success, associated with the recent period. It started with Medvedev, but one should remember that in his Addresses, the proportion of narratives focused on the recent past was extremely large (see picture 2). It climaxed in Putin’s Addresses in 2019-20, with 35 percent of all coded units falling into this category.

These observations confirm that representations of the causal connections between different periods in the Addresses changed over time. The only invariable thing was a predominantly negative interpretation of the 1990s. The continuity with the Soviet times could be marked positively or negatively, depending on the context. An increase of statements emphasizing a superiority of present situation over the Soviet period, as well as proliferation of stories about recent success in the Addresses of Putin’s fourth term signaled about shifts in the official narrative. Instead of describing the present moment as a decisive step to “the good times”, now it tended to emphasize the recent achievements, as a pledge of even more success in future.

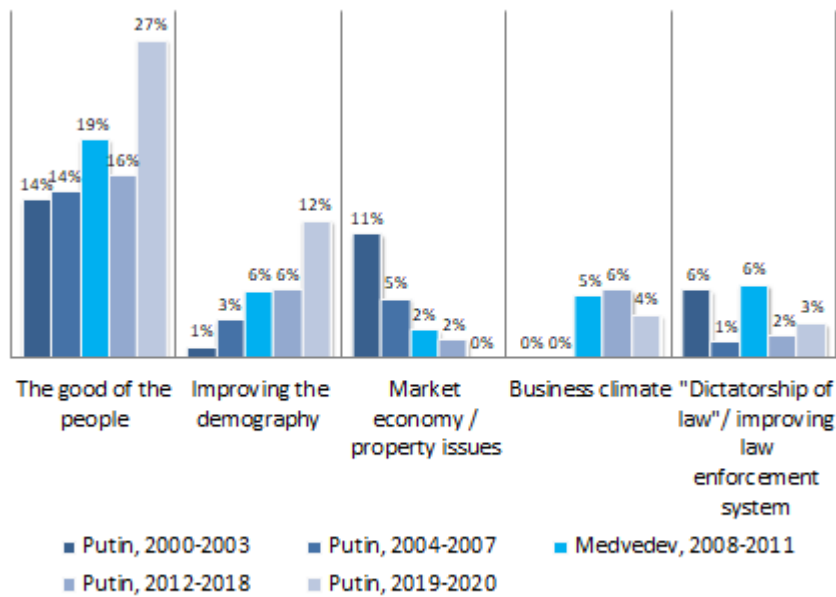
The analysis of code frequencies: Changing representations of policy goals

The articulated policy goals were important indicators of the evolution of the key meanings of the official discourse. In the Addresses, they were often presented as concise narratives. Some of policy goals were associated with values (like unity, sovereignty, democracy, freedom, a respectful place in the world, security, stability), others dealt with prioritized practical issues (like economic growth / sustainability, innovative development / modernization, improving the demographic situation). The goals were attributed by their formulations in the texts.

In official discourse, democracy was never considered the only goal of post-Soviet transition. In the early 2000s, the official formulation included “the democratic development of Russia, the establishment of a civilized market and state of law”, yet the

most important point in this list was “raising the living standard of our people” (Putin 2002; cf. Putin 2000). The dynamics of representation of these goals in the Addresses is rather remarkable.

Figure 4. Representations of policy goals in the Presidential Addresses to the Federal Assembly, 2000-2020. Part 1.

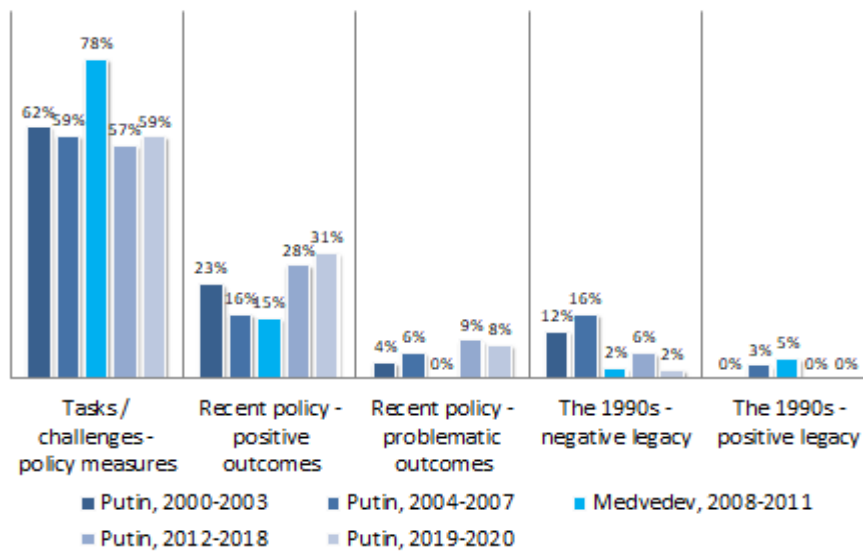


By my analysis (see figure 4), the establishment of *a civilized market* was a salient issue in the Addresses, delivered during Putin’s first and second terms, when a series of liberal economic reforms were conducted, including the flat income tax of 13 percent, and reduced profits-tax and new land and civil codes. Later it disappeared from the agenda, though the related issues were discussed under the labels of attracting investments and improving business climate.

The issues connected to *the rule of law* were typically framed as establishment of “the dictatorship of law” (during Putin’s first term) and development of the courts and law enforcement systems. These themes figured prominently in the Addresses in 2000-03, when restoring functionality of government and legal unification at the regional level were central elements of political agenda, and also during the presidency of Medvedev who paid them more attention as a professional lawyer. It might be said that over time, the market reforms and the rule of law were dropped off the agenda as special goals of transition, becoming part of the political routine.

By contrast, the goal of *raising the living standard of the people* has remained the central element of the official narrative for all twenty years. A related issue of improving the demographic situation is another long-term concern that became salient since 2009. The analysis of the combinations of the subcode “the good of the people” with various types of causality attribution reveals important changes in how this goal was represented in official discourse.

Figure 5. Co-appearances of the subcode “the good of the people” with the code “attribution of causality” across the presidential terms. Part 2.

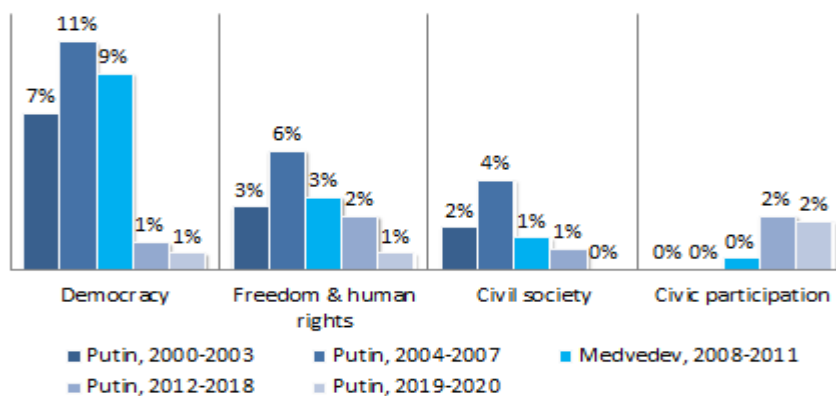


As one can see from figure 5, “the good of the people” was most often discussed as “a task that needs some policy measures”. This kind of causal linking is typical for the Addresses, as they largely focus on identifying the problems that need to be solved. Discussing “the good of the people” was often connected with assessment of the results of elites’ activity. In 2000-07, Putin often lamented the negative legacy of Yeltsin’s time, claiming that his own policy made people’s life slightly better. In 2012-20, about one third of Putin’s statements about “the good of the people” were made in the context of boasting about the positive results of recent policies. For example, introducing plans for the “national projects”, Putin stressed: “Thanks to years of common work and the results achieved, we can now direct and concentrate enormous financial resources – at least enormous for our country – on development goals” (Putin 2019). While discussing the demographic challenges, he argued: “We succeeded in overcoming the negative

demographic trends in the early 2000s, when our country faced extreme challenges. This seemed to be an impossible challenge at the time. Nevertheless, we succeeded, and I strongly believe that we can do it again...” (Putin 2019). By such framing, Putin repeatedly translated a message, that now, when the state got more resources, the misery, associated with the post-Soviet period, was over.

Variations of frequency of the policy goals associated with a transition to democracy, including “democracy”, “freedom and human rights”, “development of civil society” are nonetheless noteworthy. Quite expectedly, these values were more often mentioned in 2000-11. Since 2012, they are referred to less, though have not totally disappeared from the Addresses (see figure 6). Discussion of Russia’s democratization notably correlated with representations of its international environment. It became salient with the rise of resentment towards the West, and was discarded, when the desired status of “economically advanced and influential nation” was declared achieved.

Figure 6. Representations of policy goals in the Presidential Addresses to the Federal Assembly, 2000-2020. Part 2.



At the same time, some new related issues, that the author coded as “civic participation”, have appeared. This category included a support of civic activism and development of such public institutions (or “substitutions”, by Nikolai Petrov’s term (Petrov, 2018)) as federal and regional Civic Chambers, public councils that federal and regional executive authorities were recommended to establish, a public control

exercised by the Russian Popular Front, and creating a special digital platform for entrepreneurs who would like to make public any instances of pressure on business. The establishment of such “substitutions” was presented as an important aspect of development of the “democratic society”. According to Putin’s formulation,

...we share the universal democratic principles adopted worldwide. However, Russia's democracy means the power of the Russian people with their own traditions of self-rule and not the fulfilment of standards imposed on us from the outside. (...) Democracy is not only an opportunity to elect power, it's about being able to monitor it and evaluate the results of its work. We must pay greater attention to the development of direct democracy and self-rule... (Putin 2012).

In the context of the “patriotic” mobilization, that started in 2012 and got a real boost after the annexation of Crimea, the development of civic participation was represented as Russia’s “own way” of consolidating democracy. This argument was based on a rather specific understanding of relationships between the state and citizens. According to Putin’s description,

Citizens don't have to think about where to apply for a social service: at a state, municipal or private organisation. They have the right to come to those who can provide professional assistance, with full dedication, putting their soul in their work. All the other things – including technical, organisational and legal issues concerning the provision of services – is the responsibility of the state, the responsibility to properly organise the work (2014).

By considering a “provision of services” for civic activity as the task of the state, such interpretation denied its autonomy. In official discourse, civic participation was invited to focus on the social activity and “people’s oversight” (*narodnyi kontrol'*), as distinctive from the institutionally based accountability of power. Taking part in the competition for power was also excluded from its domain. Consolidation of democracy was associated with “maturing” of the “main” parties that held seats at State Duma (Putin, 2020a). Such interpretation hardly corresponded to “the universal democratic principles adopted worldwide”; rather it resembled the concept of the “socialist democracy” that in Soviet times was contrasted to the “bourgeois” one, as a more “advanced” version.

The revealed changes in articulation of the key goals of Russia's development over time were not clearly visible. Whereas the regime evolved in counter with some of the declared goals, shifting the meaning of the words facilitated an accommodation of the official narrative about Russia's development to changing reality.

Conclusion

Politicians are not historians. They appeal to the past not for cognitive but for pragmatic purposes, among which legitimation or delegitimation of the political regime and its current policy are among the most important. The framework of narrative fits for these purposes, as it enables the narrator to represent the connection between the past, present and future in the most favorable way by selecting particular series of actions and putting them into a particular order (Griffin, 1993; Da Fina, 2017). For the ruling elite of a country that was striving to find a new modus of existence after the collapse of the Soviet Union, orchestrating the official narrative of transition was an important way for claiming legitimacy in the course of the regime's evolution in counter with some of the declared goals. This article contributes to the literature that focuses on a gradual transformation of the ideological underpinnings of Putin's regime, which are considered as a series of reactions to the changing international environment, but also to the need to present some results of effective performance and leadership.

My analysis of twenty Presidential Addresses has revealed both continuity and change in how the story of modern Russia's development was told. The main plot, based on connections between the country's misfortunes in the twentieth century, with particular focuses on the hardships in the 1990s, and the present efforts to construct a better future, remained immutable. However, representations of the achievements in process of transition, as well as of its goals changed over time.

The initial goals of establishing democracy, the market economy, and the rule of law were not discarded, but reinterpreted and partly dissolved into minor practical tasks. This is particularly evident in the case of *democracy*. In the beginning of the 2000s, it was recognized an indispensable condition for joining the club of the most advanced countries. In 2005, Russia's declared capability to develop democracy in a "sovereign" way was represented as the end of the Times of Troubles that started with the collapse of the Soviet Union. In 2012-18 democracy was reduced to the electoral competition between the "main", i.e. parliamentary parties and "civic participation" under the patronage of the state. The *good of the people* was the most persistent of the

declared goals of the transition. Since the early 2000s, in Putin's discourse, the good of the people has been framed in terms of trauma and relieving the misery caused by the reforms of the 1990s. The relative increase of budget resources in the 2010s gave the state an opportunity to expand social spending which was extensively exploited in the official rhetoric. The end of the transition period was associated with advancing the Soviet level of social wellbeing. *Restoring the lost international status* was another permanent goal that was reframed over time. In the early 2000s, it was associated with joining the club of the advanced democratic states. From 2003-04 it became more explicitly associated with retaining the great power status possessed by the Soviet Union. The annexation of Crimea, war in Donbass, and intervention in the Syrian conflict were represented as the realization of this goal. This rhetoric was facilitated by depicting the international environment as hostile to Russia, bringing back the Cold War associations.

Finally, after 20 years of Putin's stay in power, the official narrative about modern Russia's development has become a story of success. It tells about overcoming the trauma of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Troubled Times of the 1990s, that finally succeeded in restoration of Russia's respectful international status, military strength, and resources for raising people's living standard. Considering by the analysis of the Presidential Addresses, Russia became represented as a country that has completed its transition between 2012-18. Of course, this observation still needs to be checked by further research.

Besides, there is no confidence that the revealed tendency will remain stable in the face of next challenges. Some important tensions within the official narrative has become apparent in the context of the recent discussions about the amendments to the Constitution. On the one hand, the need to amend the Constitution was explained by the achieved progress. On the other hand, to prove that at least in the foreseeable future, Russia was not ready for alteration of power Putin had to confess that "many things in the country have only been tacked together hastily" (2020c). At the moment it is hard to say whether the Russian official discourse will definitely abandon the idea of the completed transition and come back to the story about the prolonged Times of Troubles. It is evident that the need to legitimize the personalist political regime has revealed the many inconsistencies of the official narrative that has declared the democratization in Russia completed.

Notes

1. I use the term “transition” to capture this vague idea of a movement towards some desired social and political condition that was typical for the Russian political discourse, without a connection to some specific transitologist theory.
2. These properties of the Presidential Addresses made them an often used data for content analysis and discourse analysis (Ambrosio & Vandrovec 2013; Frolova 2020; Semenova & Winter 2020).

References

- Ambrosio, T. & Vandrovec G. (2013) Mapping the Geopolitics of the Russian Federation: The Federal Assembly Addresses of Putin and Medvedev, *Geopolitics*, 18 (2), 435–466.
- Bacon, E. (2012) Public Political Narratives: Developing a Neglected Source through the Exploratory Case of Russia in the Putin-Medvedev Era. *Political Studies* 60(4), 768-786.
- Bacon, E. (2015) Putin’s Crimea Speech, 18th March 2014. *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society*. 1(1): 13-36.
- Berenskoetter, F. (2014) Parameters of a national biography. *European Journal of International Relations* 20(1), 262–288.
- Casula, P. (2013) Sovereign Democracy, Populism, and Depoliticization in Russia: Power and Discourse During Putin’s First Presidency. *Problems of Post-Communism* 60(3), 3–15.
- Chen, C. (2011) Muddling Through the Shadow of the Past(s) Post-Communist Russia’s Search for a New Regime Ideology. *Demokratizatsiya* 19(1), 37-57.
- Colton, T.J. (2018) Regimeness, Hybridity, and Russian System Building as an Educative Project. *Comparative Politics* 50(3), 455-473.
- Colton, T.J. & Hale H.E. (2014) Putin's Uneasy Return and Hybrid Regime Stability. *Problems of Post-Communism*, 61(2), 3-22.
- De Fina, A. (2017) Narrative analysis. In: Wodak, R. & Forchtner, B. (eds.) *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Politics*. Routledge, London etc., pp. 233-246.
- Evans, A.B. Jr. (2008) Putin’s Legacy and Russia’s Identity, *Europe-Asia Studies* 60(6), 899 – 912.
- Evans A. (2015) Ideological Change under Vladimir Putin in the Perspective of Social Identity Theory, *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, 23(4), 401-426.
- Fish, S.M. (2018) What Has Russia Become? *Comparative Politics* 50(3), 327-346.
- Frolova, O.Ye. (2020) Poslanie presidenta Federal’nomu Sobraniju: zhanr, sodержanie i sredstva vyrazhenija [The Presidential Addresses to the Federal Government: genre, content and means of articulation], *Russkaia rech*, 6, 67-81.
- Gatov, V.V. (2016) Contagious Tales of Russian Origin and Putin’s Evolution. *Society* 53, 619-624.
- Gill, G. (2013) *Symbolism and Regime Change in Russia*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Gill, G. (2015) *Building an Authoritarian Polity. Russia in Post-Soviet Times*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Goode, P.J. (2019) Russia’s ministry of ambivalence: the failure of civic nation-building in post-Soviet Russia. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 35(2), 140-160.

- Griffin L.J. (1999) Narrative, Event-Structure Analysis, and Causal Interpretation in Historical Sociology. *American Journal of Sociology*, 98(5), 1094-1133.
- Holmes, L. (2010) Legitimation and Legitimacy in Russia Revisited. In: Fortescue S. (ed.) *Russian Politics from Lenin to Putin: Essays in Honour of T. H. Rigby*. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, pp. 101-126.
- Laruelle, M. & Radvanyi J. (2019) *Understanding Russia: The Challenges of Transformation*. Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham.
- Laqueur, W. (2015) *Putinism: Russia and Its Future with the West*. Thomas Dunne Books, New York.
- Liñán, M.V. (2012) Modernization and Historical Memory in Russia: Two Sides of the Same Coin. *Problems of Post-Communism* 59(6),15–26.
- Malinova, O. (2012). Russia and “the West” in the 2000s: Redefining Russian identity in official political discourse. In: Taras R. (ed.) *Russia's identity in international relations: images, perceptions, misperceptions*. Routledge, London, pp. 73-90.
- Malinova, O. (2018). Constructing the ‘Usable Past’: the Evolution of the Official Historical Narrative in Post-Soviet Russia. In: Bernsand N., Törnquist-Plewa B. (eds.) *Cultural and Political Imaginaries in Putin's Russia*. Brill, Leiden, pp. 85-104.
- Malinova, O. (2020) Framing the Collective Memory of the 1990s as a Legitimation Tool for Putin's Regime. *Problems of Post-Communism*. DOI: 10.1080/10758216.2020.1752732.
- Matovski, A. (2018) It's the Stability, Stupid! How the Quest to Restore Order After the Soviet Collapse Shaped Russian Popular Opinion. *Comparative Politics* 50(3), 347-368.
- McFaul, M. (2018) Choosing Autocracy: Actors, Institutions, and Revolution in the Erosion of Russian Democracy. *Comparative Politics* 50(3), 305-325.
- Medvedev, D. (2008) Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation. 5 November 2008. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/1968> [Accessed 13 July 2020].
- Medvedev, D. (2009a) Go Russia! 10September 2009. Available from: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/5413> [Accessed 13 July 2020].
- Medvedev, D. (2009b) Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation. 12 November 2009. Available from: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/5979> [Accessed 13 July 2020].
- Melville, A. (2018) Russian Political Ideology. In: Studin, I. (ed.) *Russia: Strategy, Policy and Administration*. Palgrave Macmillan, London, pp. 31-41.
- Petrov, K.E. (2006) Dominirivanie kontseptual'noi mnogoznachnosti: ‘sil’noe gosuderstvo’ v rossijskom politicheskom diskurse [A Domination of Conceptual Polysemy: “sil’noe gosudarstvo” in the Russian Political Discourse]. *Polis. Politicheskie issledovaniia*. 3, 159-183.
- Petrov, K. (2020) Elites and Color Revolutions: The Logic of Russia's Response. *Russian Politics*. 5, 426-453.
- Petrov, N. (2018) Putin's neo-nomenklatura system and its evolution. In: by Magyar B. (ed.) *Stubborn Structures: Study in Reconceptualizing Post-Communist Regimes*. Central European University Press, Budapest, pp. 179-215.
- Prozorov, S. (2005) Russian conservatism in the Putin presidency: The dispersion of a hegemonic discourse. *Journal of Political Ideologies*. 10(2), 121-143.
- Putin, V. (1999) Rossia na rubezhe tysiacheletij [Russia at the turn of the Milleneum], *Nezavisimaia gazeta*. 30 December 1999. Available from: http://www.ng.ru/politics/1999-12-30/4_millenum.html

- Putin, V. (2000) Inauguration Ceremony. 7 May 2000. Available from: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21410> [Accessed 13 July 2020].
- Putin, V. (2001) Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation. 3 April 2001. Available from: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21216> [Accessed 13 July 2020].
- Putin, V. (2002) Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation. 18 April 2002. Available from: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21567> [Accessed 13 July 2020].
- Putin, V. (2003) Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation. 16 May 2003. Available from: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21998> [Accessed 13 July 2020].
- Putin, V. (2004). Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation. 26 May 2004. Available from: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22494> [Accessed 13 July 2020].
- Putin, V. (2005). Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation. 25 April 2005. Available from: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931> [Accessed 13 July 2020].
- Putin, V. (2007) Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation. 26 April 2007. Available from: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24203> [Accessed 13 July 2020].
- Putin, V. (2012) Address to the Federal Assembly. 12 December 2012. Available from: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/messages/17118> [Accessed 13 July 2020].
- Putin, V. (2014). Address to the Federal Assembly. 4 December 2014. Available from: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/47173> [Accessed 13 July 2020].
- Putin, V. (2016) Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly. 1 December 2016. Available from: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53379> [Accessed 13 July 2020].
- Putin, V. (2018) Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly. 1 March 2018. Available from: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/56957> [Accessed 13 July 2020].
- Putin, V. (2019) Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly. 20 February 2019. Available from: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/59863> [Accessed 13 July 2020].
- Putin, V. (2020a). Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly. 15 January 2020. Available from: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/62582> [Accessed 13 July 2020].
- Putin, V. (2020b). Meeting with members of the public in Ivanovo Region. 6 March 2020. Available from: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/62953> [Accessed 13 July 2020].
- Rak, J. & Bäcker R. (2020) Theory behind Russian Quest for Totalitarianism. Analysis of Discursive Swing in Putin's Speeches. *CPCS*, 53(1), 13-26.
- Robinson, N. (2017) Russian Neo-patrimonialism and Putin's 'Cultural Turn'. *Europe-Asia Studies*. 69(2), 348–366.
- Robinson, N. & Milne S. (2017) Populism and political development in hybrid regimes: Russia and the development of official populism. *International Political Science Review*. 38(4), 412– 425.
- Roselle, L., Miskimmon A. & O'Loughlin B. (2014) Strategic narrative: A new means to understand soft power. *Media, War & Conflict*. 7(1), 70–84.

- Ruutu, K. (2017) The Concepts of State and Society in Defining Russia's Domestic Political Unity: A Research Note. *Europe-Asia Studies*. 69(8), 1153–1162.
- Semenova E. & Winter D.G. (2020) A Motivational Analysis of Russian Presidents, 1994–2018, *Political Psychology*, 41 (4), 813-834.
- Sharafutdinova, G. (2014) The Pussy Riot affair and Putin's démarche from sovereign democracy to sovereign morality. *Nationalities Papers*. 42(4), 615–621.
- Shenhav, S.R. (2006) Political Narratives and Political Reality. *International Political Science Review / Revue internationale de science politique*. 27(3), 245-262.
- Smyth, R. (2014) The Putin Factor: Personalism, Protest, and Regime Stability in Russia. *Politics & Policy*. 42(4), 567-592.
- Somers, M.R. (1994) The narrative constitution of identity: A relational and network approach. *Theory and Society*. 23(5), 605-649.
- Taylor, B.D. (2018) *The Code of Putinism*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Treisman, D. (2011) Presidential Popularity in a Hybrid Regime: Russia under Yeltsin and Putin. *American Journal of Political Science*. 55(3), 590-609.
- Urnov, M. (2012) Russian Modernization Doctrines under Debate. In: Jonson L. & White S. (eds.) *Waiting for Reform under Putin and Medvedev*. Palgrave Macmillan, London, pp. 38-58.
- Von Haldenwang, C. (2017) The relevance of legitimation – a new framework for analysis. *Contemporary Politics*. 23(3), 269-286.
- Von Soest, C. & Grauvogel J. (2017) Identity, procedures and performance: how authoritarian regimes legitimize their rule. *Contemporary Politics*. 23(3), 287-305.
- Wilson, K. 2015. Modernization or More of the Same in Russia Was There a 'Thaw' Under Medvedev? *Problems of Post-Communism*. 62(3),145–158.