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The Logic of Vladimir Putin's Popular Appeal

Aleksandar Matovski

Ever since his emergence in 1999, Russia's Vladimir Putin has been perceived in the West as a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma, as Winston Churchill famously quipped about his country. Looking for clues to Putin's motives and behavior, analysts have resorted to everything from psychological profiling and deep personality analyses to esoteric interpretations of Russia's geopolitical doctrines and historical visions that he supposedly channels. However, relatively scant attention has been paid to one of the most vital and vexing aspects of his rule: the roots of his popular appeal in Russia.

Vladimir Putin's popularity has been as sudden as his rise and as steadfast as the grip he managed to establish on power. When Putin was first appointed as acting prime minister in August 1999, he was virtually unknown and had negative approval ratings. A month later, in September 1999, a string of terrorist attacks and Russia's decisive military response in the breakaway region of Chechnya turned him into an instant star. In the eyes of the crisis-weary Russian public, the brutal prosecution of the second Chechen war made Putin appear like the man who can reverse Russia's seemingly unstoppable post-Soviet decline. Unlike the other leadership alternatives at the time—the frail and erratic outgoing president, Boris Yeltsin; the leader of the unreformed Russian Communist Party, Gennady Zyuganov; and the septuagenarian presidential wannabe Yevgeny Primakov—the forty-seven-year-old Putin appeared youthful, vigorous and promising (Colton and McFaul 2003).

Putin's approval ratings, shown in Figure 9.1, jumped from practically zero to 80 percent from August to November 1999. And they stayed high ever since. Across the entire period between 2000 and 2016, Vladimir Putin's popular approval averaged at about 75 percent, hovering around this level during his two presidencies and the four-year stint as prime minister in between. In the wake of his controversial return to the presidency in 2012 and the protest wave that

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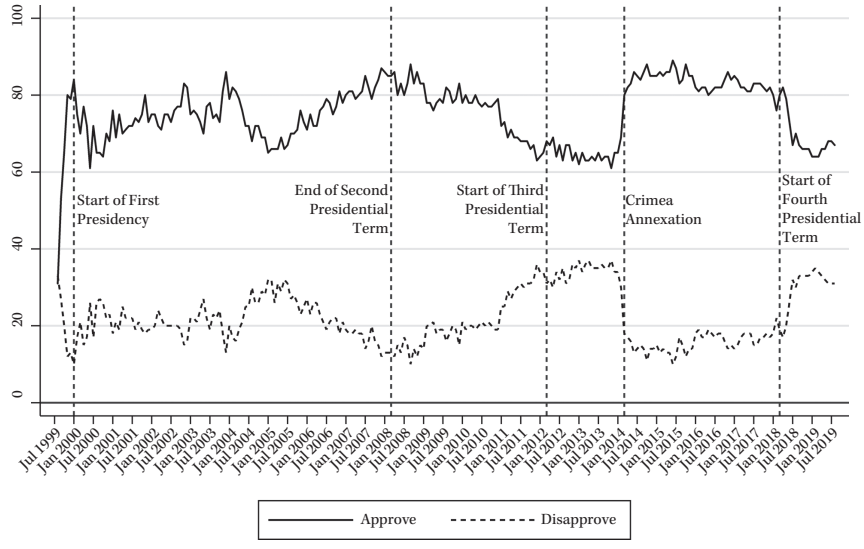

FIGURE 9.1 Percentage Approving and Disapproving of Vladimir Putin's Performance in Office

Note: Created by author using data from Levada Center Surveys.

ensued, Putin's approval ratings dropped to an all-time low of 62 percent in 2013. But it rebounded in 2014, after the war in Ukraine—reaching a peak of 89 percent and an average of 83 percent in the four years since the annexation of Crimea in February 2014.

Such consistently high approval ratings are virtually unachievable for the leaders of stable democracies. The average popular approval of the U.S. presidents since 1968, for instance, was 51 percent, and has ranged between 45 percent (for President Jimmy Carter) to 61 percent for (President George H. W. Bush). Moreover, the popularity of U.S. presidents was far more variable than Vladimir Putin's. President George W. Bush, for example, had both the highest (90 percent in September 2001) and lowest approval rating (25 percent in October 2008). The seven other presidents that served since 1968 all had lows of popular approval percentages in the 20s and 30s during their terms in office—much worse than Putin's record low approval rating of 62 percent.[1]

Democratic leaders also tend to become less popular over time. Vladimir Putin, on the other hand, did not seem to suffer from this problem for a long time. We can see this in Figure 9.2, which compares Putin's and U.S. presidential approval by months in office. While most American presidents experienced declining or relatively flat ratings over time, Putin's ratings gradually increased in both his first and second terms.[2]

It is hard to overstate just how essential this unrelenting popularity of Vladimir Putin has been for the regime he established. Above all, it allowed him to achieve towering electoral dominance without egregious vote fraud—a feature that discouraged opposition and bestowed a veneer of democratic legitimacy on his rule. Also, far more than any other resource at his disposal,

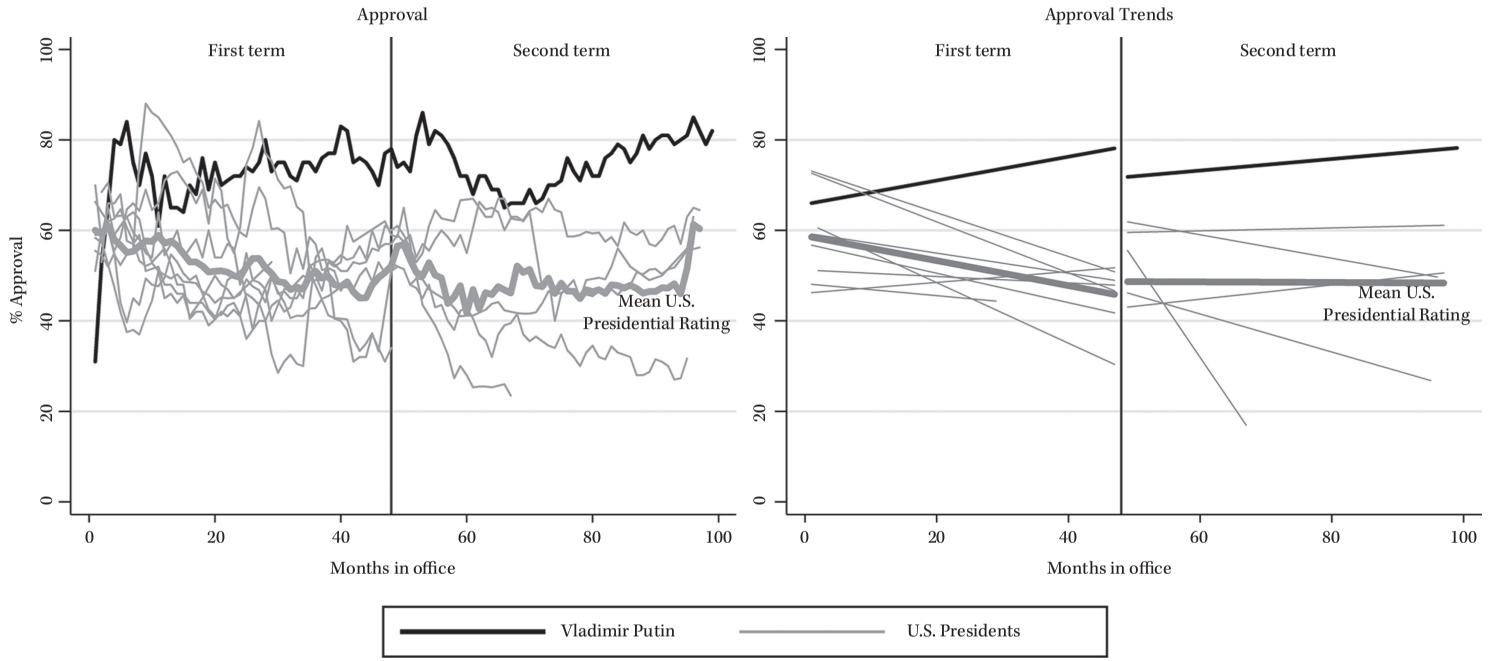

FIGURE 9.2 Presidential Approval: Vladimir Putin vs. U.S. Presidents

Note: Created by author using data from Levada Center and Gallup Surveys.

popularity enabled Putin to rein in Russia's quasi-feudal, self-serving, and notoriously capricious bureaucracy, as well as the country's political, economic and regional elites. The reason is simple: Putin's popular appeal meant that he would only emerge stronger from confrontations with any of Russia's widely despised officials, local bosses, and robber baron oligarchs, while they would essentially be destroyed. Hence, members of the Russian elite quickly learned to fall in line to avoid the fate of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Boris Berezovsky, and others who challenged Putin's authority (Rogov 2015).

Putin's popular appeal had an even deeper and more perverse effect. Russian bureaucrats, regional bosses, and oligarchs did not just fear Putin's popularity: they became utterly dependent on it. As long as Putin stayed popular and they remained in his good graces, Russia's elites could be sure that their unchecked power and ill-gotten wealth would be safe from expropriation by anyone, ranging from resurgent Communists to the angry masses rising in rebellion. Totally lacking any legitimacy of their own, Russia's unaccountable, kleptocratic officialdom and oligarchy could be sustained only by aligning themselves with someone of Putin's popular stature. This makes Putin's towering popularity essential for the day-to-day functioning of the Russian system of government. Without it, Russia's otherwise unchecked bureaucrats would have no credible signal that Putin will hold power long enough to reward their compliance, punish their transgressions, and protect them from reprisals. Without Putin's high ratings to anchor their expectations of the future, they will almost certainly become unwilling to carry out orders on a whole host of issues, ranging from mundane tasks of government to perilous assignments, like repressing the opposition or committing electoral fraud (on this dynamic, see, e.g., Rundlett and Svolik 2016; Gehlbach and Simpser 2015).

But the most sinister effect of Putin's appeal has manifested beyond Russia's borders. For its ability to command unprecedented popular support even as it transformed Russia into a bastion of authoritarianism, Putinism became a role model for authoritarian leaders and forces across the world, who sought to achieve the same in their countries. So much so that the leaders of EU and NATO member Hungary and NATO member Turkey—who have taken decidedly authoritarian turns in recent years—have openly praised Vladimir Putin's style of governing as an inspiration (Caryl 2015; Orban 2014). And amid the rising political turmoil and anti-establishment sentiments, it appears that admirers of Putinism could assume power in some of the established Western democracies (Foa and Mounk 2016; Kelemen 2016).

The Puzzle of Putin's Popularity

How did Vladimir Putin become and stay so popular? The simplest explanation for his broad popular acclaim is that it is not real, whether because pollsters

have falsified survey results or because Russian respondents lie to pollsters that they approve of their authoritarian leader because of fear and intimidation. But these assumptions are wrong. First, there is broad consensus that Russia's most highly regarded pollsters have not tampered with their surveys to paint a rosier picture of Putin's popularity. The prime example is Russia's independent Levada Survey Center, which has been known for its professionalism since Soviet times and has been relentlessly pressured by the Putin regime because of its objective analysis (see Treisman 2013). Second, there is mounting evidence that Russians have not falsely professed adoration for their leaders (for an overview, see, e.g., Rose 2007). The most recent and methodologically sophisticated confirmation that Putin's popularity is genuine is provided by two studies conducted in 2012 and 2015 (see Colton and Hale 2014 and Frye et al. 2017). Using the list experiment technique, which allows surveyed individuals to provide anonymous responses on sensitive issues, these analyses estimate that only about 6–9 percent of survey respondents have falsely claimed they support Putin when asked a direct question—a proportion that is small relative to Putin's overall approval, and close to the estimation error for the list experiment technique.

But the most compelling indication that Russians have not held back their true feelings about Vladimir Putin is far more straightforward: their responses to other survey questions about him. Despite approving of Putin's overall conduct, Russian survey respondents have been remarkably critical of Putin's actual achievements in office. I illustrate this in Figure 9.3, which shows popular evaluations of Vladimir Putin's achievements in eight key issue areas on the eve of his reelection in 2012.[3] A clear majority (about 60 percent) say that there have been improvements in only one major issue area during Putin's reign: the global influence of Russia. On the other hand, fewer than 50 percent of respondents believed that Russia's political stability and the stability of the North Caucasus—two of Putin's most touted achievements—increased during his rule, 71 percent of the respondents found that income inequality increased under Putin, and a majority of 51 percent deemed that corruption worsened in his time in office. Only 33 percent detected improvements in the standard of living—the other showcased accomplishment of Putin's rule—as opposed to 34 percent who thought that living standards actually worsened. Yet in the end, despite these bleak evaluations, a full 66 percent of respondents in the same survey said they voted for Putin in the 2012 election.

Contrary to some interpretations (see, e.g., Pipes 2004), Russians did not harbor any inborn cultural predispositions or habituated fondness for authoritarian rule that might have explained this behavior. Indeed, Russian citizens have voiced their dislike of the Putinist system in this regard too: by accurately assessing it as semi-authoritarian, and by expressing a desire to live in a considerably more democratic society. I depict these outlooks in Figure 9.4, which records the average assessments Russians gave their actual and desired political systems on a 1–10 scale, ranging from closed authoritarianism to full

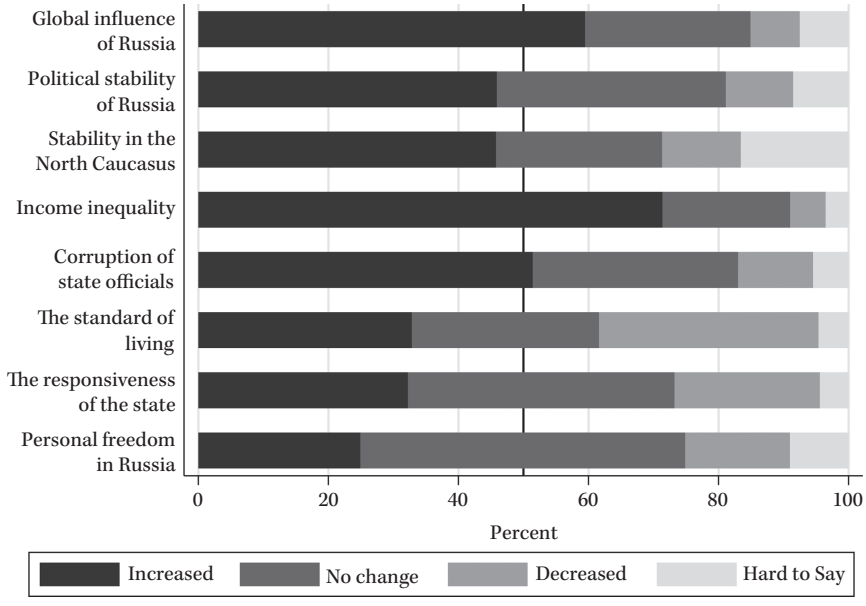

FIGURE 9.3 In the Last 12 Years Since Putin First Became President, Have the Following Things Increased, Decreased, or Remained Unchanged?

Note: Created by author using data from Russia Election Study, Colton et al. (2014).

democracy.[4] This graph shows that throughout the first ten years of Putin's rule, Russian citizens, on average, gave their current regime a remarkably accurate grade of slightly above 5 on this scale—the midpoint between democracy and full dictatorship. At the same time, they consistently expressed a desire to live in a system that is about 2 points higher on this scale—substantially closer to the Western standard of democracy.

The Logic of the Strongman Authoritarian Appeal

The real puzzle of Putin's popularity, as these sentiments suggest, is not whether it is real or faked, but how it was even possible when people had such poor evaluations of his performance and desired to live in a more democratic system than the one he maintained. The key to understanding this phenomenon, I argue, lies in Russia's cataclysmic decade of post-Communist transition and its traumatic effects on Russian mass opinion.

Following the Soviet collapse, Russia experienced what amounts to the biggest peacetime decline in history. The Russian population not only witnessed their country lose its superpower status and control of vast amounts of its territory but also endured a socioeconomic decline twice as intense as the Great Depression of the 1930s.[5] The scope of this cataclysm was so immense

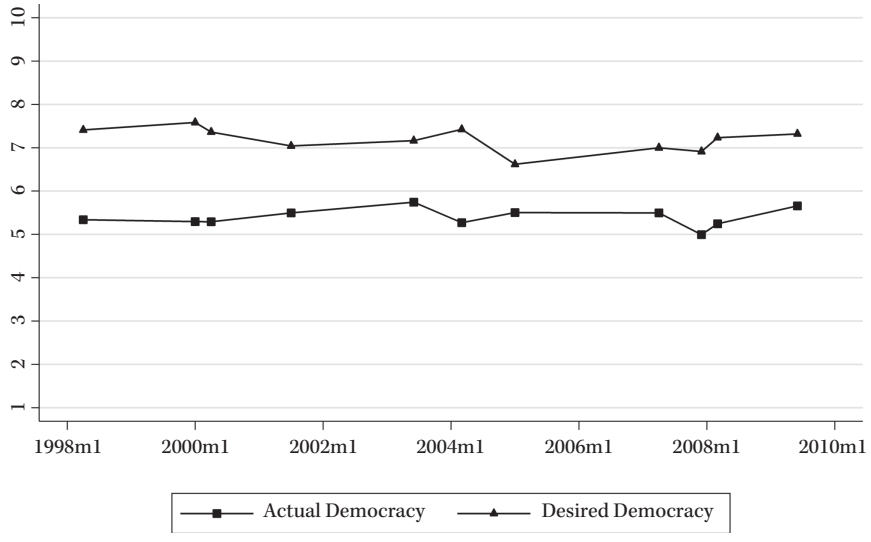

FIGURE 9.4 Current and Desired Democracy in Russia on a 1–10 Scale

Note: Created by author using data from New Russia Barometer Surveys, Rose (2010).

that it is best captured not by economic measures but by population decline—a drop of about three-quarters of a million people per year throughout the 1990s (Balzer 2002).

The reaction of the Russian public has been likened to post-traumatic stress disorder (Guillory 2014). After a brief outpouring of enthusiasm about liberalization in the late 1980s, the bulk of the Russian population adopted exceptionally gloomy and anxious outlooks. Fearing for their own and Russia's survival, people completely reversed their views about Russia should be governed. I show this in Figure 9.5. Right before the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, a solid plurality of about 45 percent of Russians held the liberal view that executive power should never be put in the hands of one person. On the other hand, a quarter of the population insisted their country always needs to be run by a strong leader, and another 15 percent believed that the current situation warrants one. This shows once again that the Russian population did not harbor any innate or habituated pro-authoritarian tendencies at the end of the Cold War, despite spending the previous seventy-one years under a totalitarian dictatorship. Quite the opposite: they seem to have demonstrated a budding enthusiasm for Russia's liberalization.

But then came the catastrophe. The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 was followed by "shock therapy" market reforms, the rise of crony capitalism, economic collapse, and a political and constitutional crisis that culminated with the shelling of Parliament in October 1993 (these events are represented by the gray vertical lines in Figure 9.5). By 1995, the Russian economy had dwindled to half its size from before the Soviet collapse. To top things off, the

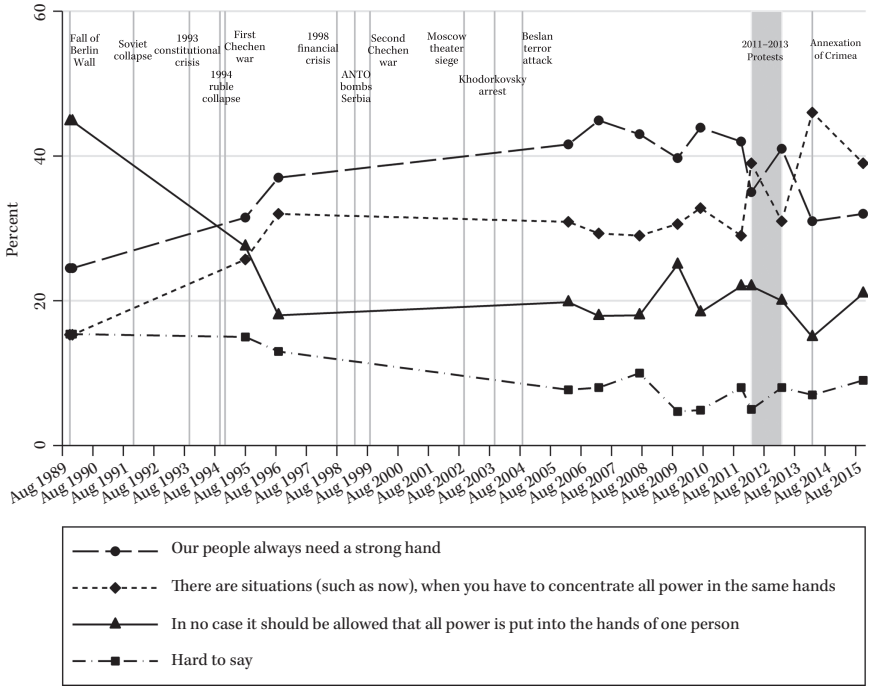

FIGURE 9.5 Are There, in Your Opinion, Situations in Our Nation When the People Need a Strong and Imperious Leader, a "Strong Hand"?

Note: Created by author using data from Levada Center surveys.

disastrous first invasion of Chechnya made it seem as though Russia would itself soon disintegrate in a bloody civil war. These experiences sharply reversed popular sentiments about the type of leadership most appropriate for Russia. If liberal outlooks were dominant in 1989, a solid majority of 60 percent supported temporary or permanent strong-arm rule by 1995. Only 28 percent rejected calls for concentration of power. Thus, well before the rise of Putinist propaganda and media control, extreme hardship compelled most Russians to think that only a strongman could rescue Russia.

Rising against this backdrop, Vladimir Putin became wildly popular, as he fit the image of the tough leader that Russia needed. This appeal, paradoxically, allowed him to be liked even without doing much to resolve Russia's underlying problems. Instead, Putin's popularity has been predominantly based on hope and fear, a pattern I illustrate in Figure 9.6. Asked why people trust Putin, only about 15–30 percent of Russians in the 2001–2015 period said this is because he adequately tackles the country's problems. A combined total of between 65 and 80 percent believed that people have faith in Putin either because they hope he will deal with Russia's problems in the future or because they see no other reliable alternative—a sentiment reflecting fears the country

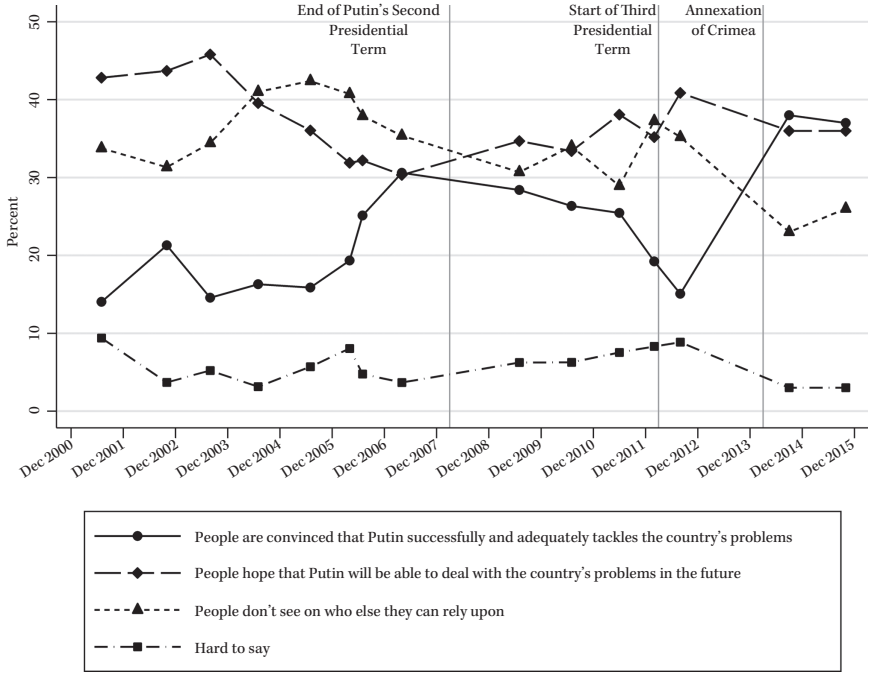

FIGURE 9.6 Why Do You Think Many People Trust Vladimir Putin?

Note: Created by author using data from Levada Center surveys.

will slip back to the chaos of the 1990s if Putin is replaced. The great majority of Russians, in other words, thought their compatriots embraced Putin not for what he achieved but for what they thought he prevents and for what they hoped he might eventually deliver.

And in responding to the question about why people trust Vladimir Putin in Figure 9.6, Russians did not simply rationalize the behavior of compatriots with whom they did not necessarily agree. Instead, they seemed to project their own reasons for supporting Putin. We see evidence of this if we examine only the responses of Russians who themselves had positive appraisals of Putin. Looking at the 2000–2013 period (for which data for cross-tabulations are available), an average of only about 27 percent of Levada Center survey respondents who approved of Vladimir Putin's performance said he was trusted because he successfully tackled Russia's problems. In turn, 41 percent on average said that people trusted him because they hoped he will do so in the future, and 29 percent of those approving his performance said Putin is trusted because people see no better alternatives. In other words, 70 percent of Russians who approved of Putin's performance said that he is trusted because of the hope he inspired or the lack of better alternatives.

This logic of delayed and suspended accountability raises a crucial question: did it allow Putin to maintain support among dissatisfied citizens who

under different circumstances might have voted him out of office? To examine this, I estimate multinomial logit models of responses to the question of why people trust Putin using data from the fifteen available Levada Center surveys that contain this question. These models account for the effects of respondent characteristics such as age, gender, social class, education, and size of the settlement where respondents live, as well as two key politically relevant outlooks—belief that things in Russia are going in the right direction, and the respondent's party sympathies.[6]

In Figure 9.7, I depict the estimated effects of these variables on the odds of a response other than the baseline category "People trust Putin because they believe he successfully and adequately tackles Russia's problems."[7] The left panel in the graph covers all fifteen surveys that contain this question in the 2001–2014 period, and the one to the right includes estimates using surveys only for 2001–2007, which also contain data on the respondents' party sympathies. The top part of each of these panels displays the estimated odds of choosing the "People trust Putin because they hope he will tackle Russia's problems in the future" response as opposed to the baseline category. The bottom part shows the relative odds of choosing the "People trust Putin because they see no one else they can depend on" response. The odds are shown with 95 percent confidence intervals derived from robust standard errors. Point estimates above 1 suggest that increases in the given variable correlate with an increase in the odds of choosing that response relative to the baseline category. The opposite is true for odds ratios estimates below 1.

If people's hopes about Putin's leadership and their perceived lack of better alternatives did indeed help him maintain the support of dissatisfied Russians, beliefs that things in Russia are going in a bad direction should significantly increase the odds of choosing these reasons for why people trust Putin. In other words, respondents with negative assessments of the general circumstances in Russia should be more likely to rationalize trust in Putin in terms of future hopes and lack of alternatives.

The estimates shown in Figure 9.7 strongly support these claims. The perception that things in Russia are going in a bad direction is the strongest predictor of responses that Putin is trusted due to hopes of future improvements or lack of alternatives, rather than actual achievements. This effect holds both for the model covering the entire 2001–2014 period in the left panel of Figure 9.7 and for the model covering 2001–2007 in the right panel, which includes controls for party sympathies. Indeed, it is striking that negative assessments of Russia's direction have an effect just as great as sympathies for the major oppositional parties. Thus, according to the estimates in the right panel of Figure 9.7, pessimistic evaluations of Russia's general direction increase the odds that respondents will ascribe Putin's popularity to hope or lack of alternatives by more than 1.5 and 2.5 times, respectively—just as much as the difference between sympathizing with the main opposition parties instead of with the

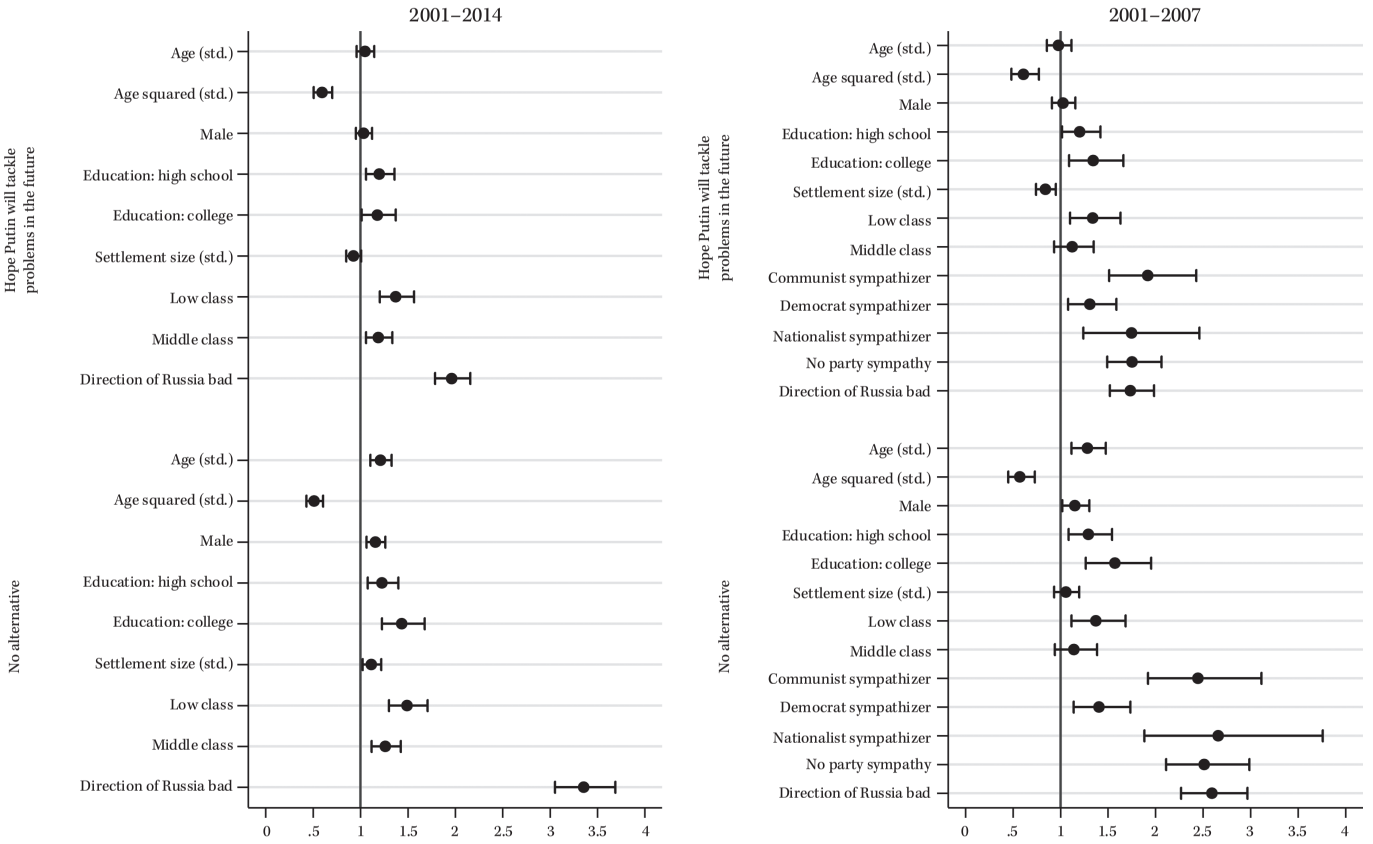

FIGURE 9.7 Odds of Choosing a Response Other than "People Trust Putin Because He Adequately Tackles the Problems of Russia"

Note: Created by author using data from Levada Center surveys.

pro-regime ones. This suggests that hope in Putin's leadership and the perceived lack of alternatives—sentiments stemming from the trauma of Russia's post-Communist crisis—allowed Putin to maintain support not only among Russia's generally dissatisfied majority but also among citizens with pro-oppositional outlooks. And as I show in Figure 9.A.1 in the appendix, negative appraisals of Russia's general direction are the best predictor of beliefs that Putin is trusted because of hope and fear even among respondents who approve of Putin's performance in office, though the effect is somewhat smaller.[8] Once again, this indicates that the estimates in Figure 9.7 largely reflect people's own reasons for trusting Putin, which they have projected onto other Russians.

The behavior of the other variables with significant effects in the models displayed in Figure 9.7 and Figure 9.A.1 is in line with these conclusions. In particular, low social class significantly increases the odds that a respondent would say that people trust Putin because of hope and lack of other choices rather than because of his actual achievements. The same is true for respondents with higher education—particularly college-educated individuals—and for middle-aged individuals. I depict the latter effect, captured by the significant squared age term, in Figure 9.A.2 in the appendix. These graphs suggest that the probability of responding that people trust Putin because of his achievements declines by up to one-third for respondents around the age of fifty when all other variables are held at their means. The likelihood of the "hope" and particularly the "no alternative" responses for this age group increases correspondingly.

Taken together, these results indicate that poorer, more highly educated, and middle-aged Russians, those dissatisfied with Russia's direction, and sympathizers of opposition parties were significantly more likely to justify trust in Putin in terms of hope and lack of alternatives rather than his actual performance. For this diverse group, jointly making up to two-thirds of Putin's support, hope and fear of alternatives were the psychological mechanisms that enabled what Rose, Mishler, and Munro (2004) called the "resigned acceptance" of Putinist autocracy. When the system performed well, they supported its leader. When the system performed badly, they were still willing to support Putin, however reluctantly, as the recent trauma of Russia's post-Communist decline has taught them there is little else to hope for and much to fear from change. The bulk of Putin's support, in other words, was not driven by a "What have you done for me lately?" economic voting logic, as in stable democracies. Instead, it became captive to a "Would all hope be lost and would things become worse without Putin?" outlook.

This rationale helps clarify why one of the most prominent explanations of Putin's popularity—that it was driven by Russia's economic performance under his reign (see, e.g., Treisman 2011)—has produced inconsistent results (Treisman 2014). Putin's approval ratings and popular perceptions of the economy, as I illustrate in Figure 9.8, appeared to be closely aligned

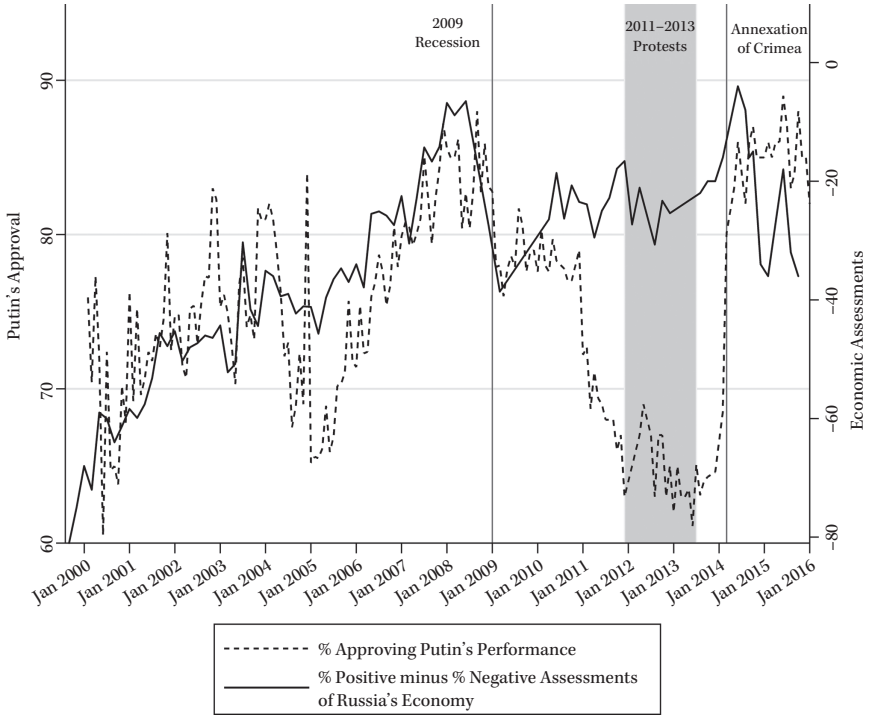

FIGURE 9.8 Vladimir Putin's Approval Ratings and Popular Assessments of Russia's Economy

Note: Created by author using data from Levada Center surveys.

throughout the 2000–2009 period. These nine years of continuous growth yielded the greatest economic success of Putin's rule: restoring Russia's real per capita GDP to the level of 1989, just before the Soviet collapse. As aggregate economic assessments shifted from very bad to almost neutral, Putin's approval ratings soared by another 15–20 percentage points from the starting level—about the same amount as perceptions that people trust Putin because of his achievements in resolving Russia's problems, depicted in Figure 9.6. Thus, the economic improvements throughout the 2000s may have justified support for Putin among Russians who endorsed him for his performance. But at best, they contributed about 20 percent to his overall ratings. At least 60 percent of Putin's approval was not directly affected by evaluations of his actual performance, economic or otherwise. Rather, it was sustained by hope that Vladimir Putin's leadership will bring future improvements, and fears that replacing him could have the same effect as letting the Soviet Union collapse.

Putin could attract such broad popular support on hope and fear alone because people believed he was uniquely qualified to complete a crucial but essentially narrow and transient mission: reversing Russia's decline. This is why Putin's popularity began to slip, ironically, right after people's perceptions of the Russian economy peaked. This process, as we can see in Figure 9.8, began after

Russia's spillover recession from the global economic crisis in 2009. At first Putin's ratings stayed relatively flat even as economic assessments recovered from this crisis. Then, in early 2011, his approval took a sharp plunge of 15–20 percentage points, foreshadowing the unprecedented wave of anti-regime protests in 2011–2013.

This highlights a key lesson for the nature of strongman popularity. Putin's popular support declined after 2011 because the mission he was endorsed to perform—reversing Russia's post-Soviet decline—was essentially completed. As the economy gradually returned to pre-transition levels, people's priorities began to shift from basic survival and consumption to resolving Russia's structural problems in areas such as healthcare, education, rule of law, and control of corruption (Belanovsky and Dmitriev 2013). These are issues that an unaccountable authoritarian system, designed to guarantee stability, could not address. To compensate, Putin initially championed the ostensibly reformist technocrat lawyer Dmitry Medvedev as his successor in the presidency, while he took the backseat as prime minister. But it quickly became apparent that this transition was a sham. Frustration seeped in and approval ratings began to drop among those who supported Putin for his performance and desired change.[9] Then, to add insult to injury, Putin announced in September 2011 that he would return to the presidency the next year, ending hopes of meaningful change in the foreseeable future. The wave of protests, dominated by reform-minded, middle-class, highly educated urbanites, erupted soon after.[10]

"Making Russia Great Again" to Survive Politically: The Path to the Ukraine War

Leaders rise and fall with the popularity of the public images they project: once they are identified with a particular role, it tends to become anchored in the collective consciousness of the nation. Thus when circumstances change, people can turn their backs on even highly revered leaders who do not seem to be cut out for the times. Winston Churchill's landslide electoral defeat in 1945—coming just after he had heroically steered Britain throughout its greatest ordeal in history—is a case in point.

Vladimir Putin faced a similar prospect in 2013, but in the much higher-stakes political environment of Russia. A decade before, by crushing Chechen rebels and unfettered oligarchs, he assumed the mantle of the competent strongman that Russia craved. But as the country stabilized from the post-Soviet crisis, the image of a bare-chested, take-charge tough-guy president toiling to "raise Russia from its knees" was becoming stale. Worse still, people began to realize that the particular brand of authoritarianism that he had created—the security-services-dominated crony capitalist system, designed to maximize loyalty and control—stood in the way of Russia's further progress.

The only reason Putin's approval did not plunge below 60 percent in the face of the 2011–2013 protest wave was because a third of the population still hoped that he could refashion himself into Russia's modernizer, and another third still feared that without him the country would slip back into chaos. For the time being, only the performance-motivated trust in Putin declined, as we can see in Figure 9.6. But over the long run, hope and fear are perishable commodities. They need to be refreshed by tangible achievements and credible threats.

And Putin's regime provided exactly the opposite signals. The shock of the 2009 recession, which despite the Kremlin's assurances to the contrary hit Russia particularly hard, shattered the regime's image as an indispensable guarantor of stability (see, e.g., Chaisty and Whitefield 2012). And as result of Russia's increasingly apparent economic stagnation and corrupt political system, hope was starting to wear thin. By 2013, about 60 percent of respondents to Levada Center surveys said they fully or mostly agreed that people have grown tired of waiting for Vladimir Putin to produce positive changes in their lives.[11] Worse still, there were early signals that such sentiments and feelings of discontent were spreading beyond the more sophisticated urban population, which formed the core of the 2011–2012 protest wave, to Russia's more conservative, blue-collar majority living in the provinces (Dmitriev and Treisman 2012).

With his brand in terminal decline, Putin saw little choice but to resort to radical measures. To stay in power, he had to refocus popular attention back on issues that favored him: battling Russia's "threats" and ensuring its stability. Staged against this backdrop, the interventions in Ukraine and beyond were part of a last-ditch effort to salvage his authoritarian regime. By placing the country on a war footing, Putin effectively changed the terms of reference Russians used to evaluate the performance of their leadership. If attempts to modernize Russia exposed the weaknesses of his regime and were gradually turning Putin into a villain, the campaigns in Ukraine and Syria resurrected his strongman savior image.

They also reshuffled the perspectives and priorities of ordinary Russians in ways favorable to the Kremlin. In Russia's public consciousness, these foreign interventions essentially reset the clock back to the period before 1989. This was a time when Russians were poor but lived in a superpower that provided stability and a sense of pride. And for most Russian citizens, giving up this status in the 1990s resulted in far greater hardship and humiliation than anything they had to endure under the Soviet dictatorship. To put it differently, for ordinary people in Russia who lived through the 1990s, great-power nationalism and Soviet nostalgia are not just attractive myths; they also had tangible economic repercussions.[12] The last time that Russians traded their guns for more butter, they pretty soon lost all the butter too.

This is why the ability to restore Russia's great-power status had always been a key criterion the Russian voters used to evaluate their potential leaders. As

I show in Table 9.1, the main expectation Russian voters had from presidential candidates was to "make Russia a great, respected power again." Over 50 percent of respondents consistently chose this option in each election year since 1996, when Putin was still a provincial bureaucrat far from the Kremlin's levers of power. This was 10–20 percent more than the share of voters who demanded a fair distribution of incomes or compensation for their losses during Russia's catastrophic post-Communist transformation—issues one might expect that the degraded and impoverished Russians would hold closer to heart. Again, this was not because Russian citizens were willing to sacrifice their well-being for the Russian nation's greatness.[13] They emphasized restoring Russia's great-power status because they believed this was the best (and only) way to ensure their well-being and to guarantee order and stability in the country.

Tapping into these sentiments, Russia's interventions in Ukraine and Syria resurrected both the greatest hope and the deepest fear of post-Soviet Russia. The hope was that, having decisively pushed back against the West for the first time since 1989, Russia would finally be able to reclaim its lost stature and opportunity to pursue its own path to development. And the fear was that now that Russia was on its feet again, its citizens would risk reliving the Soviet collapse and making their lives much worse if they embraced another liberalization and rejected the Putinist authoritarian system that guaranteed a semblance of order at home and "made Russia great" abroad.

This diversionary conflict strategy has been paying off handsomely for the Kremlin in the past few years. After the Crimea annexation, Putin instantaneously reclaimed his status as the indispensable leader, "raising Russia from its knees." As we can see in Figure 9.1, his popularity bounced back to around

TABLE 9.1 } What do You Expect Most of All from a President Who You Are Prepared to Vote for? (respondents can choose multiple answers)

	Jan. 1996	Jan. 2000	Jan. 2004	Jan. 2008	Jan. 2012
Make Russia a great, respected power again	54	55	58	51	57
Strengthen law and order	58	54	45	45	51
Strengthen role of the state in the economy	37	37	39	34	37
Fair distribution of incomes for ordinary people	37	43	48	41	49
Continue reforms, but with more social protection	35	35	38	37	34
Give ordinary people the means the lost during reform	38	38	41	28	29
Finish the war in Chechnya	59	56	43	23	18
Keep Russia on the path of reform	13	12	11	15	16
Set the course for reunification with the former Soviet republics	13	10	12	9	9
Continue rapprochement with the West	6	8	7	6	5
Other	1	2	1	2	3
Don't know	5	3	2	3	3

Source: Levada Center Surveys

85 percent in early 2014 and hovered around this level until late 2018, in spite of sanctions and Russia's greatest decline in living standards since the 1990s. Even Putin's performance-based evaluations soared upward: the share of Russians who believed their leader is trusted due to his achievements rose from 15 percent in mid-2012 to a record high of almost 40 percent at the end of 2014, according to Figure 9.6. Performance-motivated support for Putin was reset from "It's the economy, stupid!" to "It's the stability, stupid!"

Crucially, Russia's newly assertive posture restored Putin's staying power in politics before his reelection to his fourth presidential term in 2018. As I illustrate in Figure 9.9, 41 percent of Russians in early 2013 said that they would like to see Vladimir Putin replaced in the next election by someone who would pursue different solutions to Russia's problems, while a combined 40 percent wished to see another Putin presidency or his replacement by someone who would continue his policies. The writing on the wall was clear: Putin's brand as an indispensable strongman was in terminal decline. After the annexation of Crimea and the war in Ukraine, these sentiments completely reversed. By June 2015, a full 66 percent wanted Putin himself to stay in power, while only 15 percent thought that he should be replaced by a president who will follow a different course. The crusade to make Russia a great power again clearly gave

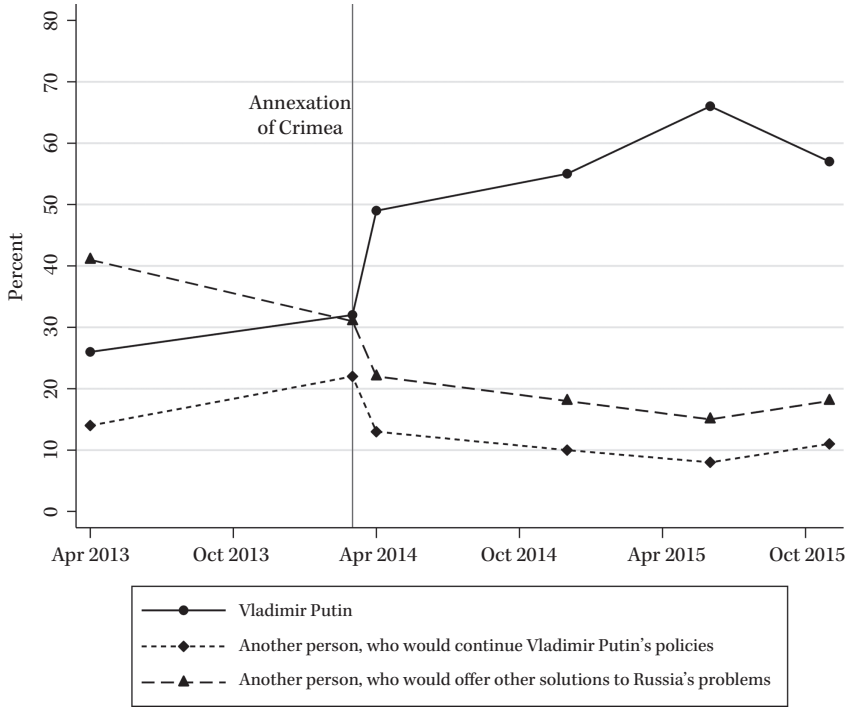

FIGURE 9.9 Who Would You Like to See as President After the Next Elections?

Note: Created by author using data from Levada Center surveys.

Putin's regime a new lease on life. But how long can this last? And how will it shape the Kremlin's behavior?

The Strategy of the Cornered Rat

Regimes that stake their legitimacy on a quest of tackling foreign threats and safeguarding stability at home, as Huntington (1991) pointed out, become redundant both if they succeed and if they fail in their mission. To survive, they must juggle two incompatible goals: they must sustain or even manufacture the crises and threats that justify their rule, while also appearing to be successful in addressing them. The proverbial dragon-slaying knight in shining armor is the undisputed hero of the realm only as long as there are dragons to slay and he appears to be good at it. Having fully committed to this role with the Ukraine intervention, Vladimir Putin has three crucial imperatives for sustaining his popular support. First, he cannot afford to suffer a humiliating defeat or a bloody quagmire while pursuing a crusade to reassert Russia's great-power status. Second, he cannot compromise and bargain away the gains of this struggle (like Crimea and other Russian-controlled parts of Ukraine) or allow further infringements into Russia's "sphere of influence" (think potential color revolutions in other countries in the former Soviet Union) without losing credibility. Finally, and most importantly, he cannot afford peace for long. Too much time off from the struggle for Russia's rightful place in the world will divert public attention from an area where Putin is perceived to be at his best (foreign affairs) back to festering domestic issues (like fixing the economy or tackling corruption and inequality), where he is bound to be seen as a failure.

The clearest indication that Putin's renewed popular support is highly dependent on the existence of a "clear and present danger" to Russia is provided by the shifts in popular attitudes toward strong-arm rule in the wake of the Crimea annexation. As we can see from Figure 9.5, between March 2013 and March 2014 the share of respondents who believed that "there are times (such as now) when it is necessary to concentrate all power in the same hands" sharply increased, from 31 to 46 percent of the total. The Ukraine war made this group of "contingent authoritarians" dominant for the first time since 1989—garnering 15 percentage points more than the unreserved authoritarian outlook ("Russia always needs to be run by a strong leader") and 30 points more than the liberal view ("Power should never be concentrated in the hands of a single person").[14]

Most important of all, the rise of Russia's "contingent authoritarians" has accounted for the bulk of Putin's post-Crimea popularity boost. Of Putin's 17 percent rise in popular approval in this period, 14 percent (or more than four-fifths) came from the swelling ranks of Russians who believed their

country needs a "strong hand" now, but not always. This attitude shift in the wake of the Ukraine conflict not only helped Putin restore his popularity but also seemed to demobilize the protest sentiments that threatened his rule. As I show in Figure 9.A.3 and Table 9.A.2 in the appendix, in March 2017 the respondents who provisionally supported strong-arm rule instead of the unconditional authoritarian view ("Our people always need a strong hand") tended to be residents of Moscow, of middle- and upper-class backgrounds, and dissatisfied with the general direction of Russia: the basic profile of the participants in the protest movement of 2011–2012. The Ukraine conflict clearly rallied these people behind the regime. But if they were to someday become convinced that the dangers Russia faces no longer require heavy-handed leadership, they could withdraw their support for Putin's rule, sending his approval ratings tumbling and raising the specter of renewed anti-regime protests. Thus, to maintain the loyalty of this new majority of contingent authoritarians, Vladimir Putin's regime will need to supply a steady stream of conflicts that will give them a credible enough reason to feel threatened.

Unless he is effectively challenged by the West, Putin can sustain this sort of diversionary conflict legitimation for a long time, despite Russia's severe and oft-cited limitations and weaknesses. First, to keep the fear of foreign enemies and instability at home alive—as well as the appearance of great-power status and sphere of influence in the former Soviet space—Putin does not need to occupy and control Russia's neighbors and other countries; he only needs to create enclaves and frozen conflicts that will destabilize them. Russia did this effectively when it was far weaker in the 1990s. Second, Putin's direct opponents in this campaign will be the dysfunctional and fragile former Soviet states, highly exposed to Russia's leverage. Finally, to maintain the appearance of challenging Western supremacy globally, Putin can resort to methods ranging from boastful intransigence at the UN to cyberattacks, airspace intrusions, provocative wargames, and acting as a spoiler in critical regions like the Middle East. These are essentially "trolling" tactics, designed to frustrate the West and delight Russians without much risk of open confrontation (Kornbluth 2015). Russia is quite capable of sustaining such activities for a long time.

Of course, this strategy carries a risk of unwanted escalations and failures that could damage rather than boost the regime's legitimacy. But Russia's strongman cannot back down and survive politically. The best-known story from Vladimir Putin's childhood is about a rat he chased into a corner; left with no choices, the rat jumped out at the startled young Putin, escaping in the process (Putin et al. 2000). Now, by staking his regime's credibility on the quest to restore Russia's fading glory and greatness, Putin has turned his regime into a cornered rat. It can survive only by startling the West, its neighbors, and the Russian population with aggressive audacity.

Sanctions and the economic woes they induce will not easily undermine the ability of Russia's autocracy to sustain itself in this fashion. Putin's predecessor Boris Yeltsin provides the clearest example of just how much economic ruin a Russian president can preside over and still stay in power. After leading Russia through the greatest peacetime economic decline in history, the frail and incoherent Yeltsin still managed to secure another term in 1996 with an approval rating of only 30 percent. And Yeltsin never effectively diverted attention away from economics by pursuing an aggressive confrontational policy beyond Russia's borders, as Putin did. Authoritarian regimes far less capable than Putin's Russia have sustained their rule by pursuing devastating conflicts, demobilizing domestic opposition through fear-mongering and nationalist-patriotic rhetoric, despite crippling economic circumstances, sanctions, and external pressure. The case in point is Serbia's Slobodan Milosevic, who, unlike Putin, ruled a small country with limited resources and no nuclear weapons, devastated by sanctions, and surrounded by U.S. friends and allies. Despite all this, Milosevic managed to cling to power for over a decade, with ruinous consequences for his country and the Balkans (Gagnon 2004).

In the ultimate analysis, a social and economic collapse in Russia never produced a democracy (Ioffe 2014). A sanctions-induced economic meltdown could lead not just to Putin's downfall but also to chaos and another, possibly even nastier autocracy. This leads us to one final point. When confronting the Kremlin's perilous use of aggression abroad to sustain domestic support, the West has largely assumed that it only has a "Putin problem," not a "Russia problem." But this is a dangerous assumption to make. The (dirty) truth about the image of the super-popular savior strongman, battling Russia's foreign and domestic detractors, is that it can be assumed by other ambitious politicians and bureaucrats waiting in the shadows. Putin himself is the ultimate proof: all it took to cast a complete—and initially awkward and reluctant—outsider into this role in 1999 was a deftly synchronized power transition and a small "victorious" war (in the form of the second Chechen war).

Putinism, to put things differently, is not only a supply-side problem but also a demand-side problem. As long as the specter of festering conflicts, humiliating economic cataclysms, or another collapse haunts the Russian population, majorities may be compelled to willingly—if reluctantly—support strong-arm rule as the least bad remedy. And because of this broad appeal, Putinism will also be embraced by Russia's kleptocratic, unaccountable, and widely despised political, bureaucratic, and business elites, who, as I have argued earlier, need a popular authoritarian patron to protect their ill-gotten wealth and power from expropriation. So if Putin is gone one day, Russia's elites and society might again feel compelled to support someone just like him. As Putin's own former spin doctor Gleb Pavlovsky put it: "It's impossible to say when this system will fall, but when it falls, it will fall in one day. And the one to replace it will be a copy of this one" (quoted in Ioffe 2014; see also Pavlovsky 2016).

Conclusion

This chapter examines the sources of Vladimir Putin's popularity in Russia—one of the most fundamental and distinctive features of his reign since 2000. Contrary to some existing preconceptions, the chapter argues that Russians have not supported their leader because they were bribed, brainwashed, and coerced into submission, or because they were somehow culturally predisposed to favor strong-arm authoritarian rule. Instead, I show that Russian citizens endorsed Putin's electoral authoritarian regime because they perceived it as the least bad alternative, capable of stabilizing their country after the cataclysmic post-Soviet decline. Hoping that Putin's stern leadership will eventually restore order and prosperity in Russia, and fearing that replacing it will bring back the chaos of the 1990s, ordinary Russians have also been remarkably willing to tolerate Putinist autocracy, despite its relatively poor record of achievement.

These sentiments allowed Putin to retain the bulk of his support in the wake of the protest wave against his rule in 2011–2012. But his legitimacy based on hope and fear was quickly becoming exhausted in this new context. As Russia recovered from its post-Communist decline, it became increasingly harder to hold its population captive to the belief that an authoritarian overlord is needed to prevent further instability, and more and more Russians realized that Putin's corrupt authoritarian regime stood in the way of future progress. Faced with terminal decline, Putin's strongman authoritarian regime had no other way to resuscitate its legitimacy except to push Russia toward another existential struggle by staging the interventions in Ukraine, Syria, and beyond. Tapping into the deepest traumas from the defeat in the Cold War and the subsequent Soviet collapse, these conflicts stifled appetites for liberalization and gave Putin a new lease on life. However, as popular opinion trends suggest, this newfound legitimacy is dangerously dependent on the regime's ability to supply a constant stream of threats, conflicts, and victories to justify Putin's heavy-handed rule. Lacking other sources of legitimacy and facing bleak economic prospects, Vladimir Putin has few other choices but to pursue this high-cost and high-risk diversionary conflict strategy to survive politically.

The ability of Putin's regime to maintain power in this fashion will have key implications not just for Russia and the regions most affected by it but also for other major autocracies. As a prototype of a robust post–Cold War authoritarian system, Putinist Russia and its future course will profoundly influence the behavior of non-democratic regimes across the world. In particular, the ability of Putin's regime to sustain its domestic legitimacy through diversionary conflicts could inspire other autocracies to pursue similar tactics when facing domestic challenges. In this sense, the fate of Putin's diversionary authoritarian legitimation is bound to have a crucial demonstration effect for the Chinese regime. If the objectively weaker Russian regime could get away

with a territorial grab like Crimea or the intervention in Syria to prop up its domestic standing, why shouldn't China be able to perform analogous stunts in its "sphere of influence" in Asia?

Putin's brand of strongman authoritarianism has already been influencing the legitimation strategy of the Chinese regime for some time. Indeed, one of the most striking instances of convergence between Russian and Chinese regimes in recent years—the key theme of this volume—has been in the public image and appeal of their leaders. Ever since his rise, China's Xi Jinping has mirrored Putin's strongman appeal so systematically that one might argue that Putinism may be a key role model for Xi as he takes decisive steps toward more personalized rule, unconstrained by term limits. In particular, while much of the image that Xi is attempting to project is modeled on China's homegrown strongmen, of the past like Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, Putinism has been the crucial contemporary reference point for this shift.

This becomes clear if we compare the trajectories of the two leaders. Much like Putin and in a sharp departure from his predecessors' low-key, technocratic leadership style, Xi assumed a strongman public persona from the outset of his reign. Domestically, the Chinese regime has become significantly more repressive under Xi, and doubly so after the abolishment of term limits—aggressively promoting dystopian strategies of social control, especially in troubled ethnic regions like Xinjiang province (*Economist* 2016, 2018). This, in many ways, has mirrored the tightening of domestic social control after Putin's disputed return for a third (and then fourth) presidential term, as well as his tough stance on Chechnya. Also like Putin, who consolidated power by eradicating powerful oligarchs who have become entrenched under his predecessor, Xi started his reign with an unprecedented anti-corruption purge of party elites previously deemed untouchable (Forsythe 2015).

Internationally, Xi has followed a trajectory of increasing assertiveness, reminiscent of his Russian counterpart's. Like Putin, Xi upped the ante on China's ambitious modernization of the military and has been aggressively using this buildup to project power and challenge China's neighbors and the United States (Myers 2018). Under Xi, China has yet to go as far as intervening militarily to prop up other autocracies the way Putin did in Syria, but it has heavily leveraged its economic power and initiatives like the "One Belt, One Road" to achieve much of the same throughout Asia and beyond. Most importantly, through its unprecedented expansion in the disputed waters of the South China Sea, the Chinese regime under Xi Jinping has been aggressively manufacturing a frozen conflict, which can perform a crucial regime-preserving function if necessary. Much like the frozen conflicts that Putin's regime keeps at a slow simmer in Ukraine and throughout the former Soviet space, the South China Sea standoff may be strategically escalated to rally nationalist sentiments, demobilize opposition, and divert attention from troubles at home. All of these policies are part of a nationalist domestic legitimation

strategy that mobilizes old resentments, seeking to reclaim China's "rightful role" as a global leader after two centuries of foreign subjugation (Johnson 2017). It is hard not to draw a parallel here with Putin's trademark narrative of "lifting Russia from its knees" or the personalization of these policies around the regime's leader.

The similarities with the Putinist legitimation style have also been apparent in Xi's public demeanor. Again breaking with his far more cautious predecessors, Xi has shown off his strongman credentials, Putin style, by presiding over spectacular military parades while dressed either in a military uniform or in the traditional suit preferred by China's ultimate strongman, Mao Zedong (Buckley 2015, 2017). Also in line with Putin, Xi has balanced the strongman image with an aura of the relatable everyman who stands in contrast to aloof elites. Putin perfected this maneuver throughout his tenure with the use of folksy, down-to-earth language and jokes, participating in various popular and "humanizing" activities, and regularly mingling with ordinary people in casual clothing and manner (Cassiday and Johnson 2010; Wood 2016). Xi has nurtured a similar "man of the people" impression by embracing the affectionate nickname "Uncle Xi" since the start of his rule; he also broke with the strict suit-and-tie dress code of his predecessors, boasting a much humbler zippered windbreaker as he led China's anti-corruption campaign. More recently, Xi fashioned streaks of gray hair to portray himself as a hardworking servant of the people, also in stark contrast to the previous generation of technocratic leaders, who religiously dyed their hair (Hernandez 2019). This is reminiscent of Putin's trademark image of a tireless leader, wearing himself down to secure the good of the nation.[15]

This convergence of leadership appeals has been a natural consequence not only of Xi Jinping's unprecedented personalization of authoritarian power but also of the reaction to Putin among the Chinese population. From a pragmatic standpoint, it is highly convenient for Xi Jinping to emulate Vladimir Putin's image when the latter's approval rating in China has stood at over 90 percent, biographies of Russia's strongman have far outsold those of any other world leader, and he is commonly referred to as "Putin the Great" among Chinese citizens (Caryl 2015; Page 2014).

But what are the limits of this convergence in leadership legitimation strategies of the Russian and Chinese authoritarianism? How far can Xi push the strongman act in China? There are certainly significant historical, cultural, structural, and institutional constraints that prevent Xi Jinping from becoming a carbon copy of Vladimir Putin. However, even a partial shift toward the Putinist legitimation strategy can have significant consequences. Over the long run, Xi's embrace of the strongman formula threatens to put the Chinese regime into the same behavioral straitjacket as its Russian counterpart. A strongman autocracy, as the Russian case clearly demonstrates, is a prisoner of its self-appointed mission of national salvation and glory. It must

never be seen as weak and conciliatory, and it must constantly produce the enemies that justify its existence.

For the time being, the Chinese regime can opt out of the strongman straitjacket because it has a major alternative source of legitimacy: its (still) relatively robust economic performance (see, e.g., Wright 2010). This is a luxury that Vladimir Putin has not had for quite a while, and never to such an extent. As result, his credibility as a strongman ruler was always underwritten by the use of force—starting with the brutal second war in Chechnya in 1999 and continuing with the current interventions in Ukraine and Syria. Seen from this perspective, the crucial test of Xi's strongman shift will come if there is a significant slowdown of the Chinese economy or a major rise in domestic discontent. It remains to be seen whether circumstances like these will compel Xi—or a successor in his mold—to behave like the cornered rat from Putin's childhood and to lash out against China's minorities, its neighbors, or the West. But the urge and the incentives to do so may be strong.

Notes

1. Data drawn from Gallup presidential ratings surveys at www.gallup.com/poll/116677/presidential-approval-ratings-gallup-historical-statistics-trends.aspx.

2. And as depicted in Figure 9.1, after sixteen years of effectively holding power—the equivalent of four U.S. presidential terms—Putin's approval skyrocketed again in the wake of the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and then remained steady at over 80 percent until late 2018.

3. This data is from the Russia Electoral Study in 2012 (see Colton et al. 2014).

4. The data in Figure 9.4 are drawn from the New Russia Barometer surveys (Rose 2010) carried out by the Levada Center for the 2000–2009 period.

5. As Kotkin (2016, 3) illustrates: "With the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, Moscow lost some two million square miles of sovereign territory—more than the equivalent of the entire European Union (1.7 million square miles) or India (1.3 million). Russia forfeited the share of Germany it had conquered in World War II and its other satellites in Eastern Europe—all of which are now inside the Western military alliance."

6. In all models, I also include a squared term for age to capture the non-linear effect of this variable. For social class, I use low, middle, and upper class dummies (the low class dummy is left out of the models to serve as a reference category), derived from respondents' self-reported ability to purchase various goods. The party affiliation variable I use for the analysis records sympathies not for specific parties but for the most relevant party groups in Russia—the "Communists," "democrats," "patriots" (denoting nationalists), and "party of power" (i.e., incumbent). I leave out the dummy for "party of power" sympathizers in all models, so the effects of the other party affiliation dummies should be interpreted in relation to this category.

7. Table 9.A.1 in the appendix provides the full results from pooled multinomial logit models using all fifteen Levada center surveys that contain the question about why people trust Putin. The pooled model contains survey fixed effects to account for potential differences across the surveys that contain this question, and also employ robust standard

errors. As an additional robustness check, I also estimate these models separately for each survey, to check whether the size and direction of these variables' effects differ over time. The results from this analysis (available on demand) are virtually identical to the ones presented in the paper.

8. In particular, the results in the right panel of Figure 9.A.1 suggest that the belief that Russia is headed in the wrong direction increases odds of responding that people support Putin because of a lack of better alternatives instead of his ability to tackle Russia's problems by 1.9 times among respondents who approved Putin's performance and by 3.4 times among all respondents. This discrepancy reduces considerably in the right panel of Figure 9.A.1, which includes controls for party sympathies.

9. We can see the performance-related nature of the decline in Putin's popular support by comparing Figures 9.6 and 9.8. The size and timing of the 15 percent drop in Putin's approval between early 2011 and early 2012 closely corresponds to the decline in the share of respondents who believed that people trust Putin because of his performance.

10. For the profile of the participants in the 2011–2012 protest movements, see the results of protest participant surveys conducted by the Levada Center (Levada Center 2011, 2012a, 2012b).

11. Calculated using Levada Center surveys downloaded from the Joint Economic and Social Data Archive at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow (http://sophist.hse.ru).

12. In this sense, opinion research has consistently shown that the economic consequences of the Soviet collapse were among the key drivers of Russian nostalgia for the former empire. Thus, the top response Russian citizens have consistently given as to why they regret the collapse of the USSR was "destruction of the common economic system," with "loss of a sense of belonging to a great power" as a close second (see Levada Center 2016b). Also, nostalgia for the USSR was considerably more pronounced among poorer Russian citizens, who suffered the most in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse. Thus, 77 percent of the poor respondents to Levada Center surveys in 2014 declared they regret the collapse of the USSR—almost 20 and 35 percent more than middle-class and upper-class respondents (see Levada Center 2014).

13. Quite the contrary; issues like price increases, poverty, unemployment and inequality consistently topped the list of concerns of Russian citizens in Levada surveys, far ahead of foreign policy and security concerns (see, e.g., Levada Center 2016a).

14. This shift in Russian attitudes about the propriety of heavy-handed rule actually began during the 2011–2012 protest wave, when the share of unconditional supporters of authoritarianism ("Our people always need a strong hand") began to decline. At the same time, the regime's efforts to portray the protests as an externally concocted threat to Russia's stability has created a general sense of crisis, which has induced more Russians to think the country needs emergency management for now. However, while negative propaganda against activists and protest actions like the Pussy Riot case slowed down the spread of anti-regime sentiments (Smyth and Soboleva 2014), these campaigns could not serve as a credible existential threat to rally the majority of increasingly skeptical citizens behind the regime, even conditionally. Only the conflicts in Ukraine and Syria and the ongoing confrontation with the West provided a tangible enough threat to justify the regime's claims that strong-armed rule is necessary for the time being (on this mechanism of authoritarian support, see also Slater 2010).

15. In this sense, Putin once famously described himself as working as a "galley slave" to ensure the security and prosperity of Russia (Myers 2015, 339).

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Appendix

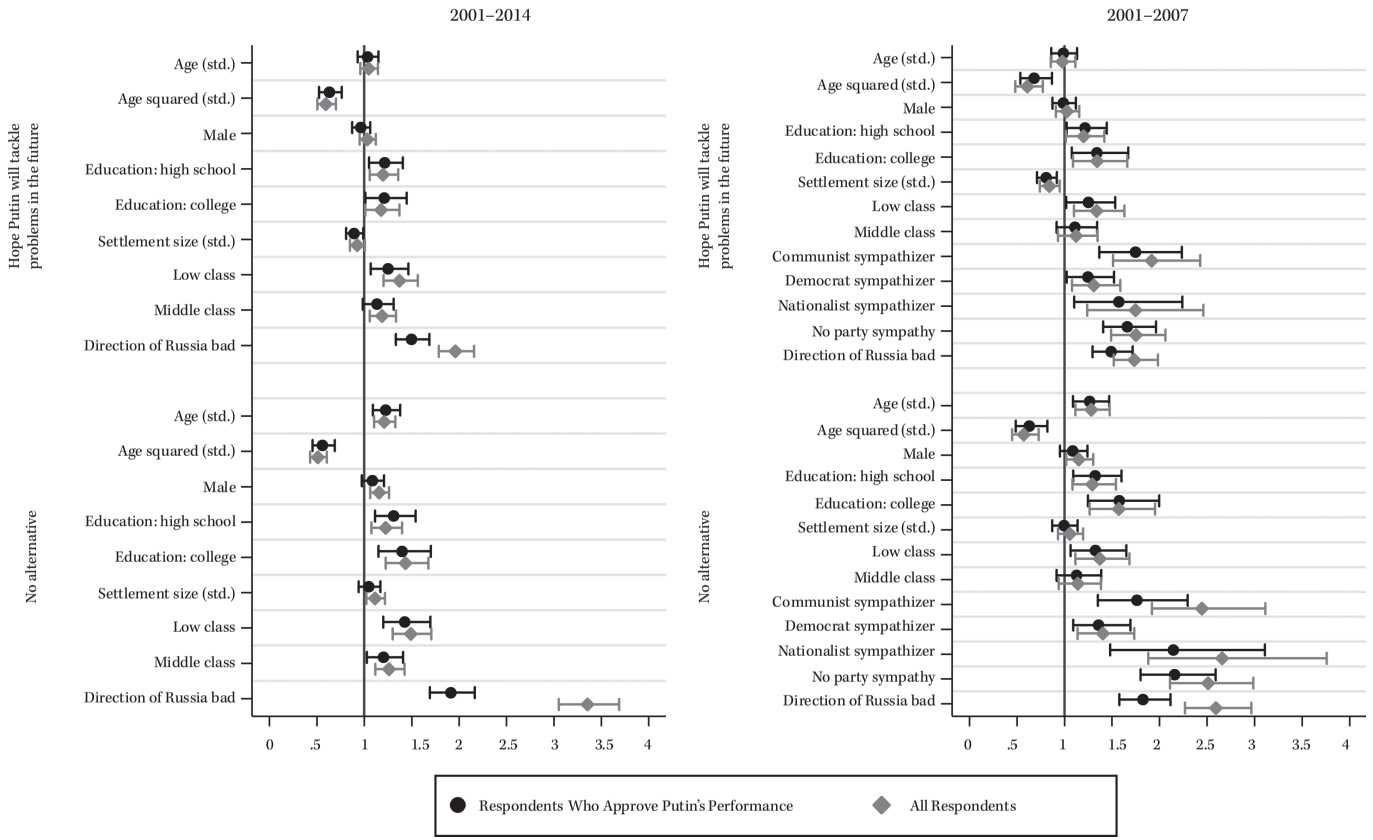

FIGURE 9.A.1 Odds of Choosing a Response Other than "People Trust Putin Because He Adequately Tackles the Problems of Russia" (Respondents Who Approve of Putin's Performance vs. All Respondents)

Note: Created by author using data from Levada Center surveys.

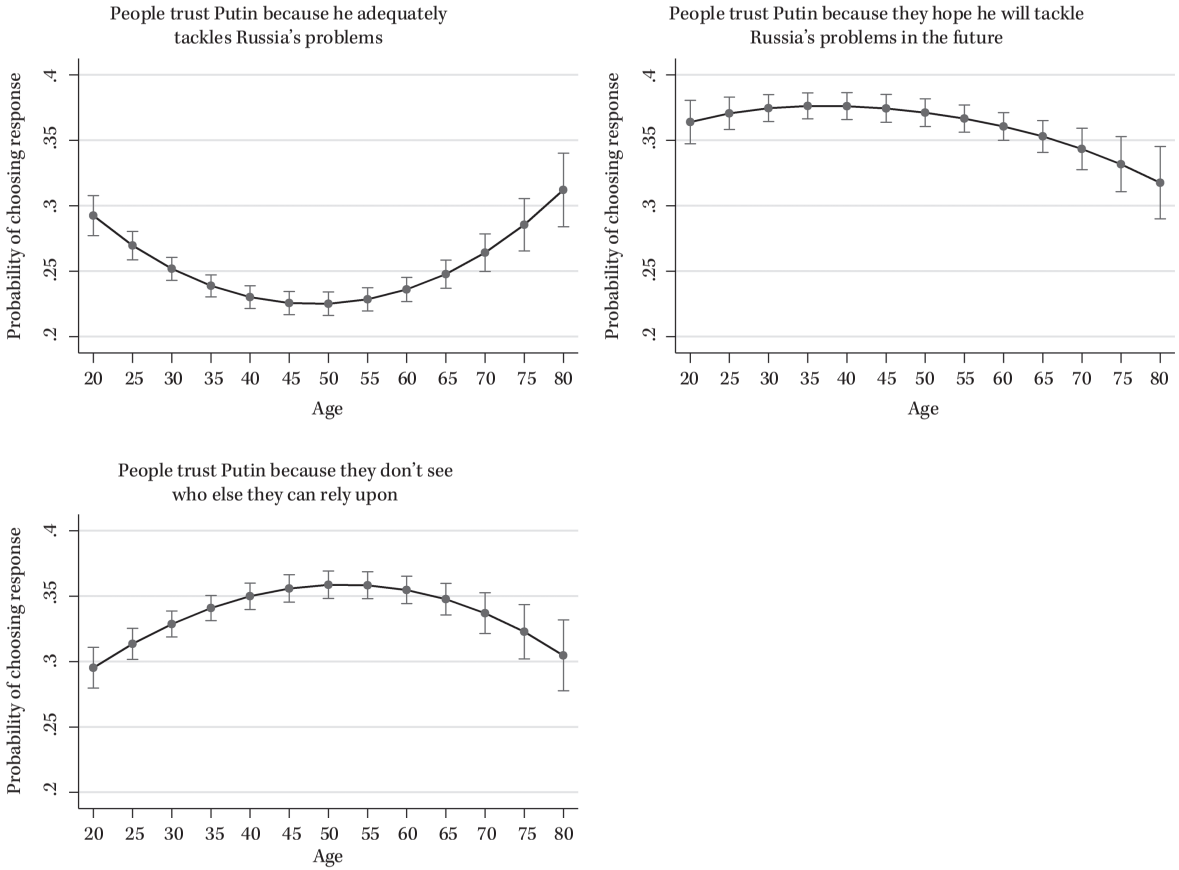

FIGURE 9.A.2 Predicted Probability of Choosing a Response to the "Why People Trust Putin" Question, by Age

Note: Created by author using data from Levada Center surveys.

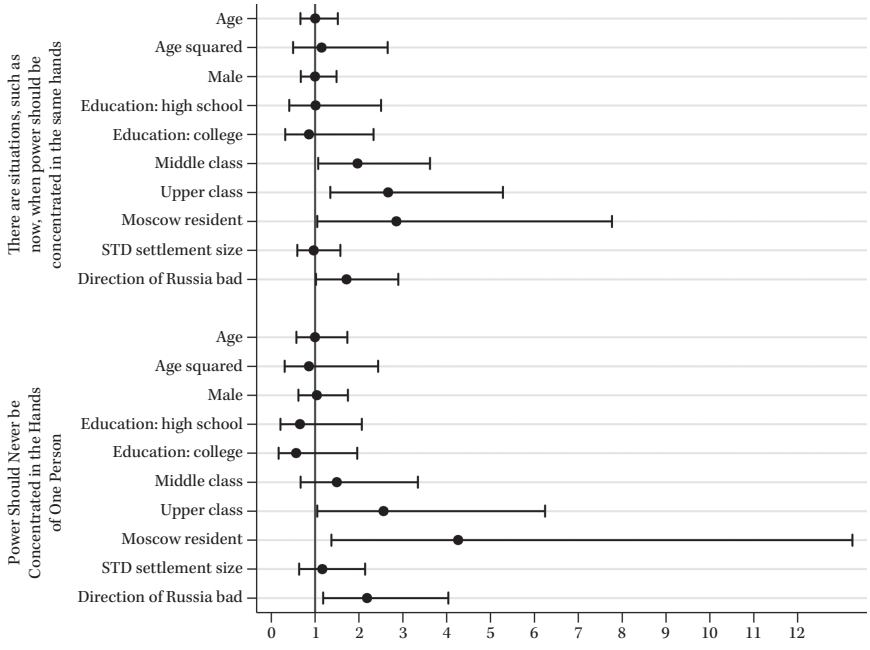

FIGURE 9.A.3 Odds of Choosing a Response Other than "Our People Always Need a Strong Hand" (March 2014)

Note: Created by author using data from Levada Center surveys.

TABLE 9.A.1 } Multinomial Logit Estimates of Responses About Why People Trust Putin ("People Trust Putin Because He Adequately Tackles Russia's Problems" Response as Base Category)

	2001–2014			2001–2007		
	Hope he will tackle in the future	No alternative	Don't know	Hope he will tackle in the future	No alternative	Don't know
Age (std.)	0.05 (0.05)	0.19 (0.05)**	0.17 (0.09)*	-0.02 (0.07)	0.25 (0.07)**	0.23 (0.17)
Age squared (std.)	-0.52 (0.08)**	-0.67 (0.09)**	-0.15 (0.16)	-0.49 (0.12)**	-0.56 (0.12)**	-0.46 (0.27)+
Male	0.03 (0.04)	0.15 (0.04)**	0.38 (0.08)**	0.03 (0.06)	0.14 (0.06)*	0.36 (0.14)*
Education: high school	0.18 (0.06)**	0.20 (0.07)**	-0.10 (0.12)	0.18 (0.08)*	0.26 (0.09)**	-0.22 (0.18)
Education: college	0.16 (0.08)*	0.36 (0.08)**	0.07 (0.14)	0.30 (0.11)**	0.45 (0.11)**	-0.03 (0.24)
Larger settlement (std.)	-0.08 (0.04)+	0.11 (0.04)*	-0.02 (0.08)	-0.17 (0.06)**	0.06 (0.06)	-0.02 (0.15)
Lower class	0.32 (0.07)**	0.40 (0.07)**	0.45 (0.13)**	0.29 (0.10)**	0.32 (0.10)**	0.38 (0.25)
Middle class	0.17 (0.06)**	0.23 (0.06)**	0.14 (0.12)	0.12 (0.09)	0.13 (0.10)	-0.05 (0.25)
Direction of Russia bad	0.67 (0.05)**	1.21 (0.05)**	1.34 (0.08)**	0.55 (0.07)**	0.95 (0.07)**	1.03 (0.14)**
Communist sympathizer				0.65 (0.12)**	0.89 (0.12)**	2.42 (0.34)**
Democrat sympathizer				0.27 (0.10)**	0.34 (0.11)**	0.64 (0.41)
Nationalist sympathizer				0.56 (0.18)**	0.98 (0.18)**	2.16 (0.43)**
Sympathizer of other centrist party				0.09 (0.27)	0.49 (0.27)+	1.30 (0.70)+
Sympathizer of other party				0.20 (0.24)	0.88 (0.23)**	0.16 (1.06)
No party sympathy				0.56 (0.08)**	0.92 (0.09)**	1.78 (0.33)**
Constant	-0.41 (0.12)**	-1.10 (0.13)**	-3.13 (0.27)**	-0.79 (0.15)**	-1.23 (0.16)**	-4.22 (0.45)**
Survey fixed effects	YES			YES		
Observations	16306			7965		
Log-likelihood	-19212.8			-9030.3		

Note: Logit coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses
+ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

TABLE 9.A.2 } Multinomial Logit Estimates of Responses to the Question "Are There, in Your Opinion, Situations in Our Nation When the People Need a Strong and Imperious Leader, a 'Strong Hand'?" ("Our People Always Need a Strong Hand" Response as Base Category)

	"There are situations (such as now), when you have to concentrate all power in the same hands"	**"In no case it should be allowed that all power is put into the hands of one person"**	**"Hard to say"**
Age (std.)	0.01 (0.21)	-0.00 (0.28)	-0.87 (0.39)*
Age squared (std.)	0.14 (0.43)	-0.15 (0.53)	-0.14 (0.84)
Male	0.00 (0.20)	0.04 (0.26)	-0.45 (0.35)
Education: high school	0.01 (0.46)	-0.42 (0.58)	-0.49 (0.70)
Education: college	-0.15 (0.51)	-0.56 (0.63)	-0.47 (0.75)
Middle class	0.68 (0.31)*	0.40 (0.41)	1.31 (0.63)*
Upper class	0.98 (0.35)**	0.94 (0.45)*	1.78 (0.70)*
Moscow resident	1.05 (0.51)*	1.45 (0.58)*	-0.83 (1.15)
Larger settlement (std.)	-0.03 (0.25)	0.15 (0.31)	-0.58 (0.40)
Direction of Russia bad	0.54 (0.27)*	0.78 (0.31)*	0.30 (0.49)
Constant	-0.48 (0.55)	-1.12 (0.57)+	-2.29 (0.87)**
Observations	791		
Log-likelihood	-911.8		

Note: Logit coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses
+ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$