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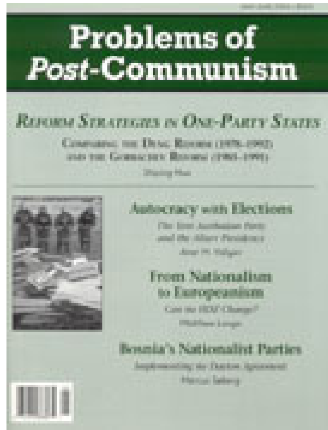

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A Well-Organized Play

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A Well-Organized Play
Symbolic Politics and the Effect of the Pro-Putin Rallies

Regina Smyth, Anton Sobolev, and Irina Soboleva

Pro-Putin rallies before the 2012 presidential elections became campaign venues in which the Kremlin used political symbols—woven into a narrative of nationalism and tradition—to define and activate core voters across the Russian Federation.

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Following the wave of color revolutions in the post-communist states, the Putin regime notoriously orchestrated progovernment rallies to intimidate opposition forces and demonstrate the regime's capacity to mobilize support.[1] While these efforts were effective in the face of limited opposition protest, they did not deter the broader electoral challenges to United Russia (UR) in December 2011 and subsequent antiregime protests throughout the winter. Scenes of competing street actions became a battleground in which the pro- and anti-Putin activists contested the political narratives that defined both the president and his supporters.

The strength of the opposition protests provoked a shift in the Kremlin's strategy of street mobilization in the period before the March 12 presidential elections. The Kremlin utilized these rallies as political theater, designed to convey an image of overwhelming support for the president and heavily reliant on its control of state media to present its point of view. Pro-Putin rallies became campaign venues in which the Kremlin used political symbols—woven into a narrative of nationalism and tradition—to define and activate core voters across the Federation. The rallies also stigmatized the opposition by defining their demands as foreign and illegitimate—claims that were subsequently codified in new laws that could be used to imprison opposition activists.

Our analysis highlights the state's use of symbolic politics—the presentation of a distinct view of politics based on communication rooted in national symbols—as

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Table 1

Strategies for Securing Mass Support for the Ruling Elite In Electoral Authoritarian Regimes

		Visibility of Strategies	
		Visible	Hidden
State strategies	Cooptive	Personalist linkages Reliance on national symbols Mass rallies Dominant campaign content State dominant party National programs/populist politics	Clientelist linkages Construction of friendly opposition Biased electoral rules
	Coercive	Military presence Harassment of opposition Voter intimidation Manipulation of registration and suffrage	Electoral falsification Vote buying Administrative exclusion of opposition Restrictive access to media Unequal access to electoral resources Ad hoc rule by law

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a tool to build support in electoral authoritarian regimes (EARs). We develop an analytic narrative that tracks the changes in the use of political symbols in Kremlin rallies between December 2011 and March 2012. Finally, we use original survey data of rally participants in Moscow to gauge the degree to which participants' opinions reflected the messages broadcast in the rallies.

We argue that while these rallies played a significant role in mobilizing voter support for Putin, their value in shoring up long-term support for the regime is less certain. The rallies revealed the weaknesses in the president's popular support and in the regime's capacity to monopolize the political agenda to persuade core constituents. As opposition leader Alexei Navalny noted in his blog, pro-Putin events, referred to in the popular press as "Putings," created the opportunity for more than a million citizens to see behind the curtain of the constructed support for the president. Russians in even greater numbers viewed blogs, YouTube videos, and reports where participants revealed that they had been paid or otherwise coerced into attending rallies. As a result, the rallies have a double-edged quality that might erode long-term support for Putin, substituting fear and dissimulation for popular agreement and genuine admiration of the leader.

Electoral Authoritarianism and the Importance of Symbolic Politics

Electoral authoritarianism is a political system that combines electoral competition with elements of coercion and manipulation to ensure regime stability (Schedler 2006; Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009). All EARs embody interdependent solutions to two collective action problems: fostering intraelite unity and bolstering mass support for the elite group in the form of votes (Langston 2006; Smyth et. al. 2007). Scholars widely agree that most EARs use a combination of coercion and cooption strategies to win vote support in carefully controlled elections. Yet few of these studies systematically explore the role that symbolic politics can play in bolstering mechanisms designed to ensure large majorities at the polls.

Electoral interference and opposition containment by EAR incumbents can be defined in terms of the violence and legality of strategies and the degree to which the activity is hidden or open. Coercive strategies involve violence or sanction from the police and military, but they also include blatantly illegal activity, such as vote fraud and capricious application of laws. In contrast, cooptive strategies rely on institutional incentives, side payments, or inducements to shape limited choice, channel debate, and marginalize potential opposition. A good example of these cooptive strategies is the granting of political jobs and contracts to potential regime opponents. These strategies also vary in the degree to which they are observable by opposition watchdogs or serve as fire alarms that signal regime transgressions (Levitsky and Way 2010). A typology of strategies is presented in Table 1.

This table describes the interactions among these dimensions and defines the range of mechanisms available to the state. This organization of strategies also highlights the potential costs of state actions. Reliance on violence against voters or opposition protesters is extremely costly and highly visible, while subtle manipulation of law

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or tax codes to prosecute opposition leaders is less so. Blatant fraud is more likely to provoke opposition action than is establishing electoral rules that create a state advantage or the barring of viable opposition from participation (Magaloni 2006). Controlling candidate entry through administrative means early in the election cycle is less likely to produce mass protest than widespread ballot fraud on election day.

In contrast to coercion and cooption, the use of symbolic politics is relatively costless. As we highlight in Table 1, symbolic politics expressed through mass rallies are important instruments for maintaining power relations. Symbolic appeals are particularly important in environments where fiscal constraints, latent social divisions, or elite recalcitrance and corruption constrain pure policy appeals to win votes (Brysk 1995). The organizational logic of many EAR regimes is rooted in hierarchical networks that reside within patronage-based parties or paternalistic regime structures that are orthogonal to straightforward policy processes and the informational and oversight infrastructure that accompany them (Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009).

In EAR regimes, projecting a regime-friendly political reality, one in which there is only one leader who can ensure national stability or in which an inviolable national unity is critical to maintaining regime support. Symbolic appeals fulfill important functions, including defining majority constituencies, mobilizing core support, generating collective identity, and defining the terms of political debate. At the most basic level, symbolic appeals to nationalism and tradition harness a set of shared preferences on the side of the incumbent regime.

Yet symbolic appeals can also have the more pernicious effect of circumscribing political demands and creating bright lines between regime opposition and support. As Schatz writes, “The cement of soft authoritarian rule is an elite’s ability to frame political debate, thereby defining the political agenda channeling political outcomes” (2009, 203). In this way, symbolic politics demonstrates to citizens how they must act and speak in public arenas (Wedeen 1998, 1999, 2002). When the state’s narrative is backed up by coercion, it forces citizens to project a collective and impregnable identity; they may not agree with the regime’s narrative, but they adopt it nonetheless to avoid persecution (Wedeen 1998, 2002). Such narratives do not activate real agreement among citizens. Rather, they trumpet messages that cannot be challenged, forging a semblance of consensus and unanimity that is difficult to challenge. They also frame a social division between loyal and disloyal citizens.

Most EAR regimes combine these tools to thwart the accountability mechanism of elections without appearing to usurp representation or undermining the hierarchical informal institutions that ensure stability. Regimes also alter the mix of strategies from election to election, depending on the electoral context and nature of the threat to the regime. In the course of normal EAR politics, political leaders are simultaneously able to maintain control and sustain mass belief in the efficacy of democracy because of the infrequent use of force and the appearance of choice on the ballot.

Far from being mere fig leaves of systemic legitimacy, the electoral components of EARs are critical for maintaining systemic equilibrium. When mechanisms of regime support fail, however, elections provide critical moments in which the opposition may lift the curtain on the authenticity of the regime’s claims about political conditions. Vladimir Putin’s regime encountered this challenge in December 2011, as the ruling UR party lost its constitutional majority in parliament. The loss of vote share highlighted the regime’s vulnerability while it was on the very threshold of presidential elections. The regime faced an unexpected critical juncture; conditions required quick and decisive action to shore up electoral support and suppress the growing opposition before the regime frayed. The rallies attempted to recreate the image of Putin’s silent majority of support as well as to convey the regime’s capacity to muster unassailable resources to mobilize that majority.

In the next section, we lay out the evolution of the 2012 pro-Putin rallies, highlighting the shift toward a focus on Putin’s majority and the increased reliance on national symbols and anti-Western rhetoric as the crisis deepened. The analysis highlights a strategic shift from appeals that stressed Putin’s strength and leadership to appeals that define a vision of real Russians—Putin’s core electorate—standing against Western-leaning radicals who could destroy Russia.

The Evolution of Proregime Rallies and the Putin Campaign Message

Progovernment rallies became commonplace across Russia in the period between 2005 and 2011. In the wake of the color revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, pro-Putin rallies served as insurance against potential youth-based opposition (Silitski 2010). Nashi, an organization constructed by the Kremlin to smother street-level opposition, served as the linchpin of this strategy (Schwirtz 2007; Wilson 2012). Over time, the Kremlin also formed

the Young Guard of United Russia, Mestnye, and Stal to bolster its capacity for preventive counterrevolution (Horvath 2011). Youth rallies bolstered Putin's personalist appeal, using both rhetoric and symbols, stenciling his face on T-shirts, posters, and balloons and celebrating his birthday with songs and gifts. The Kremlin engaged the younger generation to demonstrate that only Putin could effectively lead Russia.

In the year before elections, as approval ratings for both UR and Putin fell, the Kremlin added a new group to its arsenal, the Russian People's Front (RPF), one that more closely resembled Putin's diverse group of core voters. On the evening of the December 4 parliamentary elections, Nashi and the Young Guard, joined by the RPF, held a celebratory concert in central Moscow. They continued their celebrations on December 5. The next day, Nashi responded to an opposition protest at Triumfalnaia Square with drums and chants as well as significant police presence. Despite a significant number of arrests, none of these efforts deterred the opposition's street presence.

This failure provoked the Kremlin's experimentation with the rally strategy. By late December, the president's reelection committee commandeered the "anti-Orange" event organized by Essence of Time (Sut vremeni), led by the talk-show host Sergei Kurginian. Kurginian's "anti-Orange" movement aimed directly at the opposition rallies, highlighting the danger of street actions and pointing to the effects of previous revolutions in Russia, Ukraine, and Georgia. Its rhetoric walked the line between the opposition and the regime: fair elections and constitutional order delivered by strong leadership.

Buttressed by Kremlin resources, Kurginian's group countered the February 4 opposition protest at Bolotnaia Square with an "anti-Orange rally" that was well attended by veterans and state workers. Despite unexpected success, the Kremlin's reliance on the anti-Orange group was short-lived. On February 23, a second anti-Orange event at the Russian Exhibition Center (VDNKh) competed directly with the Kremlin's Luzhniki rally that featured Putin. The VDNKh rally drew only a thousand participants.[2] In contrast, the Kremlin's Luzhniki rally, "We Defend the Nation," was attended by 130,000 participants and included live music, traditional dancers, booths selling state-subsidized food and drink, and short, impassioned speeches by both politicians and celebrities.

Luzhniki marked a shift as Kremlin tacticians shaped a new type of rally explicitly tied to voter mobilization and message framing in support of Putin. As Schatz (2009) argues, a key tool in the soft authoritarian tool kit is a cadre of core supporters, the true believers. The image of Putin's overwhelming majority reflected the Kremlin's strategy to reinforce this core. Participants reflected the catchall nature of Putin's electorate, the true target audience of the spectacles. Rather than articulate a clear and coherent political message, they relied on a combination of familiar national symbols and tried-and-true rhetoric that vilified the "creative class" of opposition protesters and praised simple Russians.

Contesting with Words: The Rally Narrative

As the goal of the rallies shifted from defense to offense, the regime endeavored to project a reality of overwhelming social support for Putin, support that would be reflected at the polls. The Luzhniki rally culminated in a short speech by Putin that explicitly defined a voting block that truly loved Russia. Putin said, "There are tens of thousands and tens of millions of people like us. We want to ensure that there are more of us" ("Putin blagodaren" 2012). The candidate thanked supporters for both their moral support and their votes. Posters hammered home the message that a vote for Putin was a vote for a strong Russia, stability, and secure futures.

State media reports about the rallies reinforced this message of an overwhelming majority. Official reports systematically underestimated the size of antiregime protests and inflated proregime numbers. In an assessment of press coverage of the December 24 rallies, a report in *Kommersant* noted that Putin himself inflated the attendance at the meeting to 190,000 participants, more than 50,000 greater than official estimates (Borodina 2012).

Rally organizers also bolstered the "Putin majority" message by defining an "us versus them" social divide to illustrate the disparity between the opposition and core. The common rhetoric created mass solidarity through overlapping narratives of the common enemy, the moral responsiveness of civil society, and the challenges to national unity. The principal defense against these three threats rested on the message at the heart of the early Nashi rallies: stability resting on Putin's leadership and bolstered by the simple people. As such, these rallies extended the familiar notes of Putinism.

The slogans chanted at pro-Putin rallies were simple and clear: "We Oppose the Orange Plague," "Vladimir Putin and Nobody Else," and "Those Who Hate Putin Have No Use for a Strong Russia." On December 7, just

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days after the first antiregime protest, Putin gave a press conference in which he held U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton personally responsible for encouraging the protest. Almost two months later, at the Luzhniki rally, he again spoke of not allowing anyone to interfere in Russian affairs and cautioned citizens not to look abroad or betray the motherland. In a short speech, he argued that Russian people were genetically disposed toward victory and that Western enemies had manufactured both protests and exaggerated reports of electoral fraud.

Putin supporters, including officials and leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church, proliferated allegations that the opposition embodied a rejection of Russian culture and disloyalty to the motherland. As one pro-Putin activist wrote: "These so-called young citizens who are actually only a small segment of the youth . . . are strangers, especially to the people whose interests and values they despise and really just do not know and do not understand. This coven of cosmopolitans is not interested in the problems of our suffering motherland. They are eager to fly away to their beloved Europe if they are not allowed to make a European life here" (Akopov 2012).

This narrative combines the themes of Western enemies and the opposition's lack of patriotism or national pride. It is imbued with the strong sense that the anti-Putin crowd was not actually anti-Putin but anti-Russian, and ill mannered to boot. It also underscores the opposition's minority status.

These new themes reinforced the long-standing focus on stability as an essential political goal. The message resonated with the rallies' primary audience: Putin's stalwart support in regions of the Federation with limited economic diversification and moderately successful economic performance (Cherniakhovskii 2012).

As Zubarevich (2011) shows, the point of reference for these citizens remains their status in the 1990s, not some absolute level of change or comparison with other Russians. This reference is critical to understanding the construction and power of the stability message, as Putin's core electorate tends to be among the most vulnerable in Russia: nonmobile, poorly qualified people.

As happens in many EARs, the Kremlin's strategy melded symbolic appeals with targeted resource redistribution. A final prong of the Kremlin's campaign strategy buttressed these images of the Putin majority with incentives aimed at critical audiences, including housewives, office workers, police officers, and other civil servants. In the thick of the protest cycle, Putin wrote a series of articles outlining his plans for economic development in his third term. In reality, these appeals were little more than guarantees of tangible benefits for groups that remained loyal in face of internal and external threats.[3]

Swamps and Heroes: Space and Time as Symbols of State Power

Kremlin officials relied on national symbols to reinforce their constructed image of Putin's majority of true Russians. These symbols were expressed in both the timing and location of individual events. This strategy further stigmatized the opposition while elevating the loyalists. The opposition initially applied for a permit to protest in Revolution Square, but officials granted them a permit for Bolotnaia Square instead. Best translated as "Swampy Square," Bolotnaia is located in an isolated corner of the city across the river from the Kremlin. This affront was so blatant that Eduard Limonov, a long-time leader of the nonsystemic opposition, called his supporters to Revolution Square in a emblematic rejection of state efforts to "pen the opposition in the swamp" (Odynova 2011).

In contrast, the large pro-Putin rallies took place on Manezh Square (in the shadow of the Kremlin), during a march on Kutuzov Avenue to Luzhniki Stadium, and on Poklonnaia Hill, best translated as Reverence Hill. All these places are symbols of Russia's great victories in war. Manezh is full of monuments to Russia's sacrifice and ultimate victory in World War II. Joseph Stalin built Kutuzov Avenue, named for Marshal Kutuzov, to connect symbols of the Napoleonic Wars and World War II. Poklonnaia Hill encompasses Victory Park, a memorial to World War II.

The timing of rallies also reflected the themes of Russian victory and national pride. The Luzhniki rally coincided with the Day of Defenders of the Motherland, which honors those who served the nation in wartime. It also overlapped with Maslenitsa, a traditional religious and cultural Slavic holiday marking winter's end. The state invoked both holidays in the ceremony of the rally. Putin gave a fiery speech that invoked war poems and songs, while organizers served hot pancakes to participants, a nod to the pre-Lenten tradition of a vegetarian diet.

The invocation of victory, tradition, and cultural symbols further strengthened the Kremlin's image of a national pro-Putin electorate. It also made for good television, as the rallies were broadcast to voters across the Federation. Yet, as was widely publicized, the Kremlin's efforts to build the crowds through state mobilization, strong incentives, and even coercion added to the theatrical element of the rallies. Before examining the political attitudes and behaviors of individual rally participants,

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we explore the nature and potential effects of state mobilization on projecting state power. We argue that the projection of state power, including state orchestration of mass mobilization, was another important element in the Kremlin's strategy to project an image of invincibility.

The Double-Edged Sword of Constructed Support

Analysts tend to dismiss participants in pro-Putin rallies as coerced or otherwise forced into attendance. We argue that this simplistic viewpoint misses a crucial opportunity to consider the impact of the rallies on broader opinion. These effects are complex. On the one hand, a categorical dismissal of the rallies ignores the important meaning conveyed by state mobilization and fails to explore the degree to which rally themes were actually reflected in the attitudes of participants and other citizens. On the other hand, as Navalny observed, state efforts to construct crowds at the rallies were a double-edged sword that revealed cracks in support for the regime.

There is no denying that employers and political leaders obliged some participants to attend the rallies. Evidence from YouTube and a plethora of reports on social media clearly shows that the state paid, enticed, or coerced many participants into attending. Organizers of the rally on Poklonnaia Hill acknowledged that some participants were forced to participate ("Miting na Poklonnoi gore" 2012). Likewise, there were press reports of "rent-a-crowds" being constructed on behalf of rally organizers (Odynova 2012; Sulimina 2012). In our sample, 6 percent of respondents reported having been asked by their employer to attend the rally, although the attendance patterns suggest that far more were coerced into attending.

It seems clear that the Putin campaign team was very aware of the potential gains from projecting state power through mobilization. Far from hiding the Kremlin's involvement, state media coverage carefully shaped the message. Popular press reports focused on the bus caravans that arrived from Russia's regions at pro-Putin events. Organizers of the Luzhniki rally in Moscow told a reporter from *Kommersant* that they expected buses from eighty regions within the Federation (Batalov 2012). Published photos of the buses themselves reveal that they also served as advertising, since they were covered with banners exclaiming, "We Are for Putin," and "Russia's Strength Is in the Regions." The evidence showed that Putin's majority was arriving in the capital to support him.

Similarly, the press services of Nashi, the Young Guard, and Stal announced that they had mobilized armies of regional youth to counter potential action against the regime. Beginning on December 4, regional members of Nashi set up camp at VDNKh and took up residence in university dormitories. These patterns were reflected in our survey data: nearly half of the respondents were from the city of Moscow, and 25 percent from Moscow oblast. Another 25 percent of the sample came from other regions or oblasts, a figure that provides a sense of the scale of regional conscription efforts.

The state's involvement in mobilization was evident in the appearance of the crowds. Photos and videos of Putin rallies showed professionally made attire, posters, balloons, and flags, as well as refreshments, sound systems, and heat lamps. There was also swag: pro-Putin participants appeared as a sea of blue, red, and white jackets, hats, and scarves, echoing both the Russian flag and UR's symbols. Organizers distributed similar goods at rallies across Russia. Alex Khitrov, a photographer, posted a photo essay on the February 18 rally in Vladivostok. These photos showed participants dressed in new jackets emblazoned "I Am for Putin" and large nylon banners in the same colors that read, "My City Is Vladivostok, My President Is Putin" (Dvoinova 2012).[4] These rallies were replicated in cities across Russia, demonstrating both the resources and reach of the regime.

While this show of state power may have mobilized voter support in a single election, it is less clear that it solved the problem of eroding support for the president and his policies. As Navalny stressed in his blog posts, the evidence of coercion in state efforts to mobilize support raised questions about the regime's image of overwhelming support. Evidence of dissenting views among rally participants heightened this effect. The analysis of individual-level data illustrates the degree to which the rally participants disavowed some of the key messages of the rallies and some of the key planks of Putin's platform. In the next section, we describe the data used to assess the opinions and behaviors of regime supporters. We then examine the coherence of views among participants, highlighting the evidence of a growing generational divide that speaks to the long-term dilemmas faced by the regime.

Organization, Symbols, and Rhetoric in the Pro-Putin Rallies

Students of political protest face two distinct problems in designing a research strategy: drawing a representative

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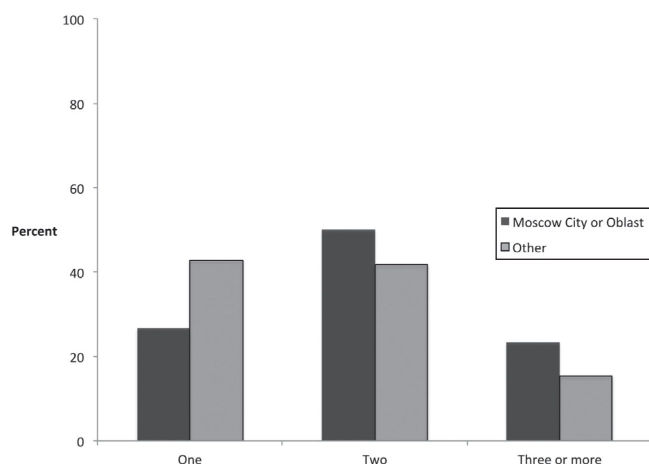

Figure 1. Protest Repertoire, 1997–2000

sample from the crowd at each protest, and ensuring that a sample drawn from a subset of meetings accurately represents the movement. The Russian case presented particular difficulties. It was difficult to determine the underlying population of rally protesters, since each event was fairly fluid—participants came and went, and many individuals participated in the marches but not the meetings. The rallies were also very large—and attendance figures were contested—making it difficult to get a general sense of the crowd.

Our response to this dilemma was to design a strategy that maximized our ability to compare attitudes and behaviors among groups of participants in both the rallies and protests.[5] This design enabled us to measure the coherence—or shared identity—of regime participants in each group.[6] Given the press reports and posted videos of rally attendees, we were also concerned that participants would be reluctant or deterred from participating by rally captains.[7] While the interviewers did experience some minor problems as their presence became known, overall they secured very high response rates.

To determine how stable rally populations were over time, we asked respondents to identify all the rallies they had attended. Figure 1 reports the frequency of rally attendance, comparing participants from Moscow oblast and those from other regions.

This evidence gives a sense of the overall pattern of participation. The most striking figure in the data is that 80 percent of our sample had participated in two or more rallies.[8] Most of these regulars were Moscow residents—75 percent of city and oblast residents attended at least two rallies. In contrast, only slightly more than half of the participants from regions beyond Moscow had taken part in a previous protest, and only about 15 percent were habitual attendees. Closer examination shows habitual attendees tended to be older workers, supporting claims of workplace coercion or incentives to bolster rally attendance. Methodologically, the overlap in participation from event to event suggests a basis for cautious claims about the generalizability of our findings in assessing the impact of the movement.

Since our goal was to understand the range of opinion and support within the rally, we began our work with a target sample that would maximize variation across social groups. Table 2 reports the demographic structure of our sample.

There are a number of striking features in the data. First, these data reflect the activist role that youth groups played in orchestrating rallies even late in the election cycle, particularly groups organized by UR and the RPF. Young participants in our sample were more likely to have been first-time participants than their older colleagues. In addition, although most respondents reported very low membership in public organizations, younger participants were twice as likely to be members of political organizations. Thus, our overrepresentation of youth in the protests in our sample makes sense in terms of the actual population of rally participants.

Similarly, despite our emphasis on identifying a targeted sample, our respondents include more men than women. This difference reflects the reality of the meetings. Men were simply more likely to protest, given the police presence at all rallies and the inherent uncertainty of street action in EAR regimes. At the pro-Putin rallies, 85 percent of respondents perceived the police presence as aggressive. This finding resonates with firsthand reports that note the difference in policing strategies at the rallies and protests. At pro-Putin events police stood in the crowd and directed the flow of participation, while at the protests they were separated from the crowd by barriers and cordons (Amerkhanov et al. 2012). In addition, the disproportionate level of men in the sample is concentrated in the under-thirty demographic, consistent with accounts of youth mobilization strategy.

Two other attributes in our sample, employment and education, also show surprising variation. Echoing the Kremlin's message, press reports characterized the differences in the pro- and antiregime rallies as a faceoff between two Russias: the urban middle class and provincial workers. The data suggests that this characterization is simplistic.[9] Our sample was evenly divided among three groups: nonworkers, those employed in the private sector, and those employed in the state sector. The pattern is distinct from national patterns of employment. Rosstat

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Table 2

The Demographic Structure of Rally Participants

Gender	Male	62.0
	Female	38.0
Age	< 20	25.6
	21–30	26.4
	31–40	11.6
	41–50	15.7
	51–60	10.2
	> 60	10.2
Education	Incomplete	2.3
	Secondary school	6.8
	Specialized secondary school	20.1
	Technical training higher ed.	26.3
	University	41.9
	Graduate school	2.0
Sector	Private	30.4
	State	39.8
	Social	3.1
	Not employed	24.7

Note: Entries are percentage of survey respondents.

(2012) reports that approximately 60 percent of the Russian population is employed by the private sector, while some 30 percent work in the public sector. Moreover, more than a third of those working in the private sector report holding supervisory positions. In contrast, in our sample, just over a quarter of participants employed in the state sector held supervisory positions. Thus, while rally participants were more likely to be employed by the state, the crowd was diverse and the private sector was well represented.

The high level of nonworking respondents reflects the significant proportion of students in the crowd; 70 percent of the nonworkers in the sample were under twenty. One-third of the under-thirty sample were students; and the working contingent was divided evenly between those who worked for the state and those who worked in the private sector. In comparison to participants over thirty, the younger cohort was much less likely to be employed by government enterprises. Similar dynamics can be seen in the statistics on education levels. Younger participations had higher levels of technical university training, four-year college degrees, or the potential for those degrees. Older participants were more likely to have had technical training in high school.

Our group-based approach allowed us to draw group comparisons as we do in the subsequent discussion of generational change and regime support. These data also allow us to probe the degree to which the Kremlin's projected image of politics were mirrored in the opinion of participants and the national audience as a means of assessing the rallies' successes in its core missions: mobilization, collective identity, movement boundaries, and agenda setting.

Boundaries Between Movements: Electoral Falsification and Foreign Involvement

There is little doubt that a secondary goal of the pro-Putin events was to define the boundaries between antiregime protests and Putin supporters. Through the pro-Putin rallies, the regime took great care to characterize the antiregime protests, including their radical nature, the overblown claims of falsification, and the level of foreign involvement in the rallies. Our data show that while some of these messages clearly shape the perceptions of participants, they are not entirely persuasive. In particular, the evidence accentuates the importance that Putin plays in defining regime support, but it also shows that this support is not universal among rally participants. In particular, the data reveal that young participants are much less likely to support the regime and articulate views consistent with the regime's message.

Mobilizing Support: Voting Behavior and Trust in Leadership

Despite evidence of coercion, we expected to find near-unanimous voter support for Putin and UR among rally participants. In fact, this was not the case. Seventy percent of respondents reported voting for (or planning to vote for) Putin, slightly higher than the inflated official support for the president, but these numbers do reflect the unity we might expect from core supporters. Of those who did not vote for Putin, most reported not voting (almost 9 percent), while others voted for Gennady Ziuganov (3 percent) and Vladimir Zhirinovsky (5 percent). Many respondents refused to answer these questions.

The weakness in core support for UR was even more significant; only 59 percent of rally participants voted for the party. Although this number tops the national figure of 49 percent reported in the official election statistics, it does not reflect unquestioning support for the regime. The majority of dissenters simply did not vote

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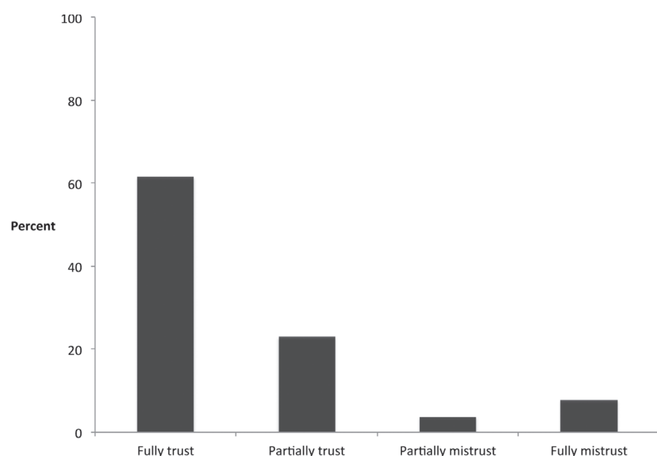

Figure 2. Trust in Putin

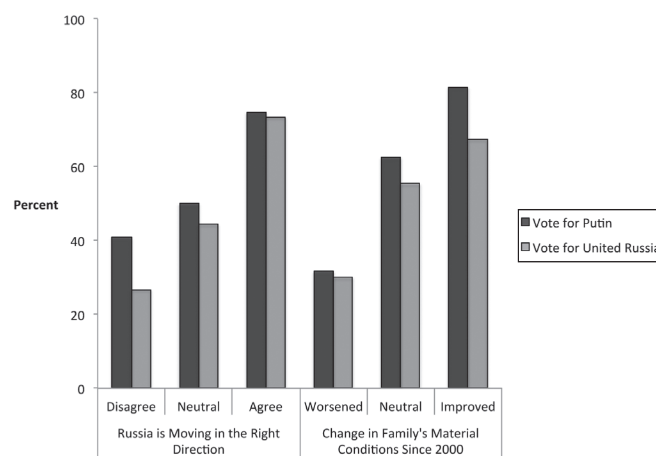

Figure 3. Regime Assessments and Vote Choice

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(31 percent), while 25 percent supported the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, and 15 percent supported the Communist Party of the Russian Federation. The remaining respondents either could not recall their vote or supported other parties on the ballot. Voter support for Putin and UR were highly correlated, suggesting that the factors that drive voters' decisions in parliamentary and presidential elections remain linked for these activists.

The demographic breakdown of those who did not support Putin and his party is also interesting. Our findings confirm national statistics that show that women are more likely to vote for Putin than men (Colton and Hale 2009). Similarly, although defectors could be found across the demographic spectrum, younger, more educated voters were far more likely to defect from both the party and the president than older participants. In contrast, employment sector did not have a significant effect on the likelihood of defection.

Consistent with previous studies of voting behavior, our data also underscore the importance of Putin himself in motivating voter support for United Russia. As illustrated in Figure 2, survey participants had substantial trust in Putin.

Trust is a difficult concept to discuss, since it often means very different things to different responders in a poll or interview. Previous studies of trust in the Russian contest demonstrate that it is distinct from performance evaluations or levels of support (Mishler and Rose 2005). Our best guess about the meaning of trust is that it reflects a particular relationship between the respondent and leader in which the respondent sees the leader as acting in his or her personal interest. Putin's trust levels over time have been relatively high, hovering between 45 and 50 percent in the last two years.[10] In comparison, the trust reported in our survey is extremely high: 61 percent expressed full trust in Putin.

A number of authors have suggested that personalism drives the high correlation between votes for Putin and votes for UR (Gudkov 2009; Ledeneva 2012; Wood 2011; Colton and Hale 2009). We find evidence of this proposition in our data: a high level of trust in the president is a strong predictor of voter support for him and for the government party. Likewise, positive assessments of the regime on both economic and political indicators were accurate predictors of vote support. This finding holds true across the generational divide. In short, Putin personally remains a critical element of regime stability, holding together disparate elements of regime support. This finding underscores the critical role that personalism plays in electoral authoritarian regimes seeking nonviolent solutions to collective-action dilemmas (Hadenius and Teorell 2007).

Yet it is also the case that Putin has a long track record of governing, most recently through a severe economic crisis. To evaluate the impact of events on the support for the president, we examine the relationship of two indicators of regime assessment—economic well-being and regime direction—and voter support for the state party and the president (Figure 3).

Figure 3 illustrates that these two assessments are highly correlated and have the same effect on voting behavior. Respondents who felt that their material well-being had improved under this regime were more likely to vote for both the state party and the president. Those convinced that the country was moving in the right direction were also more likely to vote for both entities. This evidence indicates that Putin's support at the rallies extends beyond constructed audiences. It is rooted

in real political and economic results that have improved the lives of a broad swath of Russian society.

We can also see some interesting patterns in regard to the role of personalism in these results. First, the president is consistently rewarded for the regime's successes. It is striking, however, that he also has relatively high levels of support among participants who offer negative assessments of the regime's accomplishments. This finding has two important implications for our theory. First, it again underscores the critical role that personalism plays in both protest decisions and regime support. Putin seems to get much credit and little blame for poor conditions. Second, it gives rise to a critical message reflected in the banners at the rally, "If Not Putin, Then Who?" The rallies were designed to show Putin as the only logical choice for Russian voters.

Although voter support for Putin and UR was strong among rally attendees, the evidence for a lack of unanimity was surprising and created an important opportunity for the opposition to attack the state's version of political reality. Both the formal and citizen-journalist media coverage of rally participants who did not support Putin or UR confirmed the view of manufactured support and contributed to cynicism about the rallies among those who relied on these sources of information. The photographic and video evidence will remain on the Web as the movement grows, providing a historical record.

In terms of the Kremlin's immediate goal to shore up voter support, however, it is clear that the projection of state power and the message that Putin was the only choice were fairly successful. Polling data provide indirect evidence for this conclusion. In May 2012, a Levada Center poll showed that 60 percent of respondents in a national poll were aware of the pro-Putin rallies, far higher than those who knew about the large opposition protests. In this regard, state media coverage and the monopoly of the television airwaves contributed significantly to the Kremlin's efforts to demonstrate regime strength. In the next section, our analysis of individual opinion data demonstrates the degree to which rally participants and citizens adopted the core themes of the rallies.

Perceptions of Protest, Fraud, and the International Scapegoat Argument

One of the central messages of the pro-Putin rallies was the radical, illegitimate nature of the opposition protests. Despite this broad-brush vilification of the opposition, even rally participants resisted the idea that street action inherently undermined the regime. Figure 4 reports

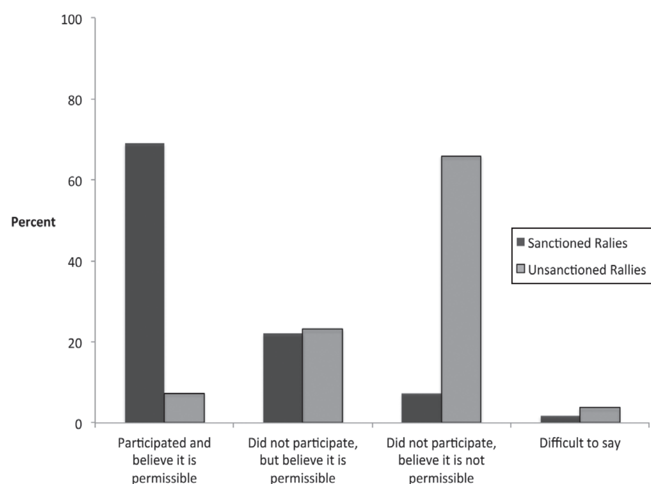

Figure 4. Attitudes Toward Protest Activity

participants' general attitudes toward sanctioned and unsanctioned protest activity.

The data show surprisingly durable support for citizens' fundamental right of assembly. Almost two-thirds of our respondents not only supported the right to protest but had also participated in protests prior to December 2012. National polls echoed our findings. On the whole, Russian society also perceived protest as an appropriate mechanism of political participation. A survey by the Russian Center for Public Opinion Research (VTsIOM) in May 2012 reported that 60 percent of Russians supported citizens' right to protest, although few respondents were prepared to participate in such events (VTsIOM 2012). The Levada Center reported that 50 percent of the population was sympathetic to the Moscow protests, while a higher percentage affirmed the abstract right to protest (Samarina 2012).

Figure 4 also highlights the limits of tolerance for street action and, in particular, unsanctioned protest. Legal requirements for government permits for any street action afford the state significant control over protest. Our evidence showed that citizens were far less supportive of unsanctioned protest. Only 19 percent of antiregime protesters supported citizens' rights to join in unsanctioned protest—a finding that foreshadowed significant national support for the May 2012 law that greatly increased penalties against such participation (Smyth 2012).

Respondents' attitudes about electoral fraud defined another important divide between pro- and antiregime attitudes. After all, postelection protests were sparked by evidence of falsification in the December parliamentary elections. While assessment of the absolute levels

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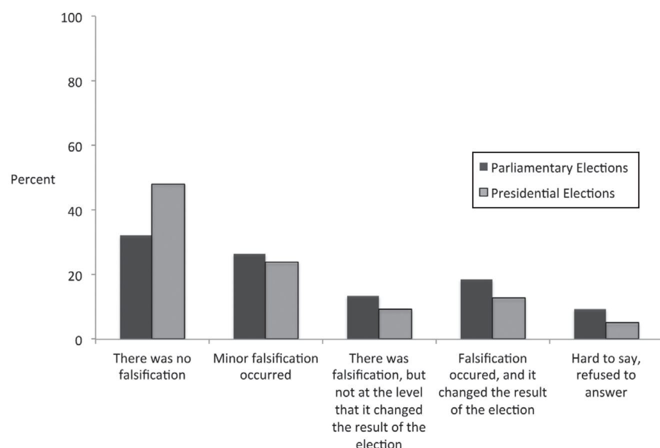

Figure 5. Participants' Assessments of Falsification

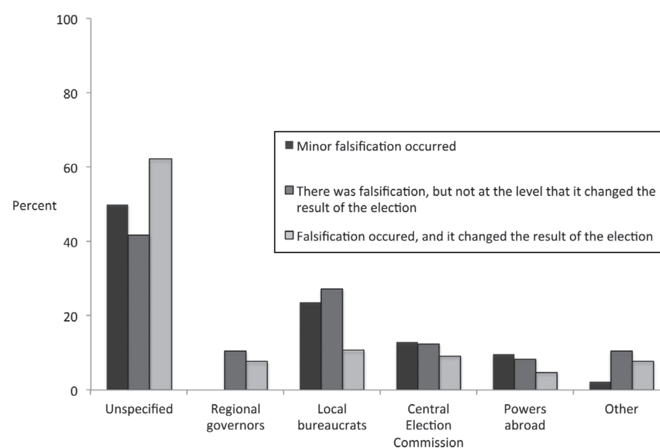

Figure 6. Blame for Falsification

of fraud are beyond the scope of this article, public organizations such as Citizen Observer in Moscow and the nongovernmental organization Golos provided undeniable evidence of vote tampering, ballot stuffing, and irregularities in vote counting. Photos and films of fraud uploaded on social media provided anecdotal support for systematic evidence of fraud.

This evidence made it impossible for the Central Election Commission (CEC) and government officials to deny it outright. Instead, they admitted unsystematic and minimal fraud that did not influence the election outcome. Moreover, officials ascribed the blame for fraud to lower-level officials and denied any government directives to fix the elections.[11] As reflected in Figure 5, this message was fairly effective in shaping the views of rally participants.

The data presented in the figure show that participants did not entirely reject evidence of falsification but also did not blame the regime for fraud. The data reveal that these perceptions were also important determinants of political behavior. Participants who perceived higher levels of falsification were much more likely to vote for opposition parties and candidates or to abstain, compared to those who perceived only minor fraud. They were also more likely to advocate participation in unsanctioned protests.

The most striking finding in Figure 5 is the change in perceptions of falsification between the parliamentary and the presidential elections. Participants identified much less fraud, with significantly fewer consequences, in the presidential contest.[12] There are two explanations for this finding. The first is that respondents were astute in recognizing that in Moscow the presidential election was relatively free of vote tampering due to a high level of organized observation. However, this explanation obscures the evidence of significant fraud across the Federation and the razor-thin margin with which Putin secured victory in the first round of competition. The second explanation for this difference focuses on narratives. Respondents learned to resist claims of widespread falsification, either because state narratives shaped their own opinion or because they were told what to say by rally organizers.

The same dynamics are at play in the attribution of blame for falsification. Figure 6 reports the difference in the attribution of blame between those who identified major falsification in the parliamentary election and those who cited minor or no falsification.

The opinion reflected in the figure also underscores the Kremlin's minimal success in convincing supporters of the guilt of their favored scapegoat, foreign influences, and in particular interference from the United States. This message, a constant drumbeat from the administration, took two forms: the attribution of blame for the perception of falsification, and the attribution of blame for the antiregime protests. Despite these efforts, only 10 percent of the respondents in our sample blamed powers abroad for encouraging electoral fraud.

The power of state intimidation is also clear in this evidence. The most striking finding in Figure 6 is the difficulty that respondents who cited high levels of falsification have in attributing blame. Over 60 percent of these respondents would not specify responsibility for fraud. Of these, 12 percent did not know who was responsible, and the remaining 88 percent refused to answer. Of the respondents who did attribute blame for falsification, very few blamed governmental authorities in Moscow, instead attributing blame to bureaucrats at the CEC and in the regions. This line of reasoning is consistent with statements by the chair of the CEC, Chu-

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rov, in his December 6 press conference, illustrating the important success the regime had in framing the nature of electoral interference.

The claim of foreign interference was also a cornerstone of the Kremlin's explanation for opposition street protests. This argument gained a little more traction among voters. As Figure 7 shows, rally participants were more susceptible to the argument that foreign intervention shaped opposition street protest than they were to the argument that it perpetrated fraud.

Given Kremlin efforts to shape this message, the finding of low levels of support for the message among rally participants is surprising. Again, these findings reflect support for the external interference argument uncovered in national polls. A Pew Charitable Trust survey conducted in the spring of 2012 reported that 25 percent of a national sample attributed the protests to interference by Western powers, while 58 percent said that they were a response to Russian dissatisfaction, and the remaining 17 percent was unable to assign blame (Pew Research Center 2012).

Although the external enemy argument was not convincing, the figure highlights the regime's success in framing public perceptions of the antiregime protests. Just 14 percent of our sample named Putin as a cause of the protests; of these respondents, only 40 percent chose this as their sole response. Another 20 percent selected "tyranny of power" as the major cause of antiregime protest, avoiding any mention of the president. Most respondents either did not specify a cause or attributed antiregime action to economic conditions or falsification.

This general perception that street actions were not directly tied to attitudes about Putin or even dissatisfaction with the regime is the most successful element of the strategy to frame events so that they reflected positively on the former/future president. A June 2012 poll conducted by VTsIOM (2012) demonstrated that Russians largely did not cite Putin's decision to return to power as a catalyst for protest. Only 7 percent of respondents cited Putin's policies as the cause of antiregime protests, instead attributing the protests to declining living standards and economic crisis.

In this sense, the Kremlin succeeded in constructing an alternative political reality. The rallies and accompanying media coverage established a significant distance between Putin and the protest movement, despite the strong anti-Putin messages evident in the slogans, posters, and speeches associated with those events. Given our data, we cannot say if this consensus resulted from framing or simply a clear understanding that tying Putin

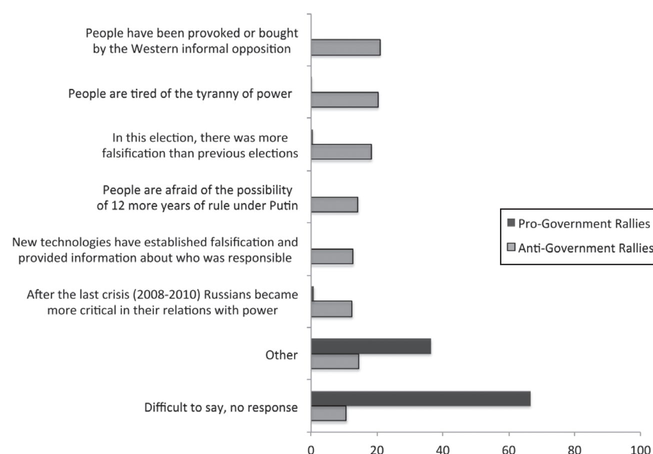

Figure 7. Explanations for Anti-Regime Protest

to the rallies would violate rhetorical boundaries. Our findings emphasize, however, the success of strategies that defined movement boundaries and drew bright lines around acceptable explanations for political behavior and regime responsibility.

Both our evidence of the structure of opinion among rally participants and national opinion polls showed mixed results from the Kremlin's efforts to shape popular opinion during the December–March protest cycle. On the whole, efforts to invoke the foreign enemy as the primary cause of Russia's problems were limited, but the goal of absolving Putin of responsibility for those problems was met. This finding portends problems for the regime as President Putin ages. As the regime takes on the stagnant effect of the late-Soviet-era gerontocracy, it will also be forced either to reform or to rely increasingly on the cooptive and coercive elements of EAR governance. To explore the likelihood of pressures for reform from below, we conclude our empirical analysis by exploring popular opinions on crucial political issues, highlighting the generational divide among Putin supporters. This analysis underscores the potential for growing pressure on a regime facing economic constraints.

Assessing the Impact of the Rallies: Regime Responsibility and Successes

The regime's efforts to define the boundaries of protest shaded into a more general bid to dominate the political debate and create a single language to discuss or criticize the regime. As we describe above, the stability/strong-leadership theme became the dominant discourse for Putin supporters, but this focus undermined attempts to forge consensus around shared political values or program-

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Table 3

Opinions of Participants at Pro-Putin Rallies

Question	Answer	% strong positive	% positive
Why participate in rally?	Demonstrate support for Putin's candidacy	55.7	76.4
	Avoid Orange Revolution	42.7	67.6
	Demonstrate support for regime	37.0	66.0
Policy preferences	State should support declining industries	39.9	63.1
	Migrants who come to Moscow do more good than harm	10.2	38.0
	Levels of government corruption have improved in the last 12 years	11.1	34.3
	Favor increased spending for both military and health care	39.6	

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matic issue competition. Moreover, the state's attempts to dominate loyalist themes left no room for the spontaneous generation of consensus from the supporters themselves. Table 3 presents specific motivations and issue positions, illustrating disagreement in both the salience and positions among rally participants.

Table 3 reports both the percentage of respondents who evaluated each item as highly important or very positive and the total who gave a positive response. The first column shows some variance in opinion that is largely washed out when we look at total positive responses. Hence there is some variation in the salience of motivations for joining the rally as well as the intensity of assessment on key issues among Putin supporters. Whether these distinctions will widen in the future remains an open question, but it points to the potential for future challenges.

In terms of motivations for attending the pro-Putin rallies, our respondents stressed the importance of supporting the president over the regime, underlining the growing role of personalism in regime stability. The gap between Putin and his regime remains noteworthy for his supporters, enhancing his capacity to avoid blame for government policy and missteps. Likewise, while preventing an Orange Revolution in Russia is an important reason for attending the rallies, it does not rise to the level of support for the president. Perhaps more important, the evidence shows that about a third of the participants at the rally did not ascribe to the pro-Putin, antirevolution messages. The lack of unanimity is both striking and potentially exploitable by the opposition.

The data also reveal interesting disagreement over issue positions. By and large, rally participants demanded an activist government but disagreed about the level and priorities of government involvement. These beliefs resonate with the economic appeals in Putin's rhetoric and suggest the degree to which government support rests on its capacity to maintain state subsidies and services that may be vulnerable in the face of a new economic crisis.

Most important, these data point to issues that are likely to produce strong challenges in the president's current term. The first is corruption, an issue that has plagued the Putin–Medvedev tandem since the early 2000s. Given these findings, it is no surprise that immediately after reelection, Putin announced renewed efforts to curb all types of corruption and created an ombudsman for business activity. The most notable failure of the president's campaign rhetoric was his inability to redefine mass perceptions of the role of economic migration in the economy, as rally participants continued to see migration as a drag on the economy and an intrusion in their lives.

The clear age divide in our sample affords us an opportunity to explore the dynamic of generational change that has been so crucial to the development of post-Soviet politics. Divergent patterns of education and employment underscore that these data capture different stages of the life cycle that we might expect to influence attitudes and behavior. In the first instance, we would expect older participants to be more risk-averse in the face of uncertainty and therefore more receptive to the general antirevolutionary message of the rally.

These basic tendencies are reinforced by political behaviors. Predictably, there is a clear division in how these two groups acquire information. Younger respondents were more likely to use the Internet and, in particular, social media: 75 percent of young respondents used Vkontakte, the Russian equivalent of Facebook, versus 21 percent of older respondents. The same gap was apparent in the use of blogging sites, Twitter, and Facebook. Consistent with Winston Churchill's famous dictum, younger respondents were more likely to iden-

tify themselves as democrats or liberals as opposed to communists, nationalists, or conservatives.

Yet despite their access to information and patterns of political self-identification, younger respondents were more conservative on salient issues. They were less likely to see immigration in positive terms despite Putin's consistent appeals for immigration reform. They were more likely to support government subsidies for failing industries—a finding orthogonal to economic modernization. At the same time, rally attendees under age thirty supported increased spending on health care at the expense of the military. These issue positions highlight the problems that the regime has in building issue-based support, since action on these issues are likely to split President Putin's base. Young people's attitudes suggest that support for the regime will continue to depend on its capacity to provide benefits in the form of side payments for showing up, career advancement, or redistribution in the form of social spending.

The generational divide is one example of latent fissures in the collective identity of pro-Putin supporters. Together with the voting patterns reported above, the generational division suggests potential problems for the regime in the near future. Perhaps most important is that these young rally attendees look very much like the aspiring middle class that has been identified as the core group of anti-regime protesters.[13] While more work needs to be done to understand the divisions within this Russian middle class, the behavioral and attitudinal profile of the younger generation suggests that social, economic, and political modernization is likely to increase youth alienation.

Conclusion

Our analysis illustrates the Kremlin's agility in response to opposition protests and the debacle of the December 2011 parliamentary elections. It also underscores the evolution of Kremlin strategies from a reliance on cooption to more coercive strategies—a trend that continued after Putin's election in March.[14] These strategies were successful in mobilizing core voters, creating a common identity among participants, and containing the electoral effects of the opposition protests. The Kremlin's strategy also, however, introduced significant costs that are likely to have long-term effects.

The lack of unanimous support among rally participants accentuated the coercive elements of the regime and its inability to rest comfortably on stable popular support. In addition, a look at intergroup analysis revealed potential schisms within an electorate that is held together by its fear of crisis rather than its positive support for Putin. If crisis comes during Putin's term, there will be significant consequences.

Similarly, our analysis of critical issues, in highlighting the generational differences, accentuates some of the long-term challenges to the regime. Continued support from young voters appears to be tied to the state's capacity to redistribute wealth and preserve the perks and revenue streams associated with state employment. Further work needs to be done to explore whether this generation will emerge as a new privileged class, one similar to the old Communist Party, which protected the ossified regime in order to preserve its personal benefits, or whether it will evolve into a middle class focused on greater autonomy and personal freedom.

The Kremlin had somewhat more success in defining the boundaries of the antiregime opposition and enhancing the potency of its message that revolution would be catastrophic. These efforts not only contained the impact of the antiprotests but also served to mobilize Putin's latent supporters around the message of stability through strong leadership. Yet even here, there was not complete unanimity among protestors about the salience of the challenge and the threat it posed to Russian stability. The theme of external enemies did not create even a semblance of popular agreement among either rally participants or the general public.

The mobilization around Putin himself was the most successful element of the effort to frame a common language for discussing politics. Most striking was the success of the "Putin as the only alternative" message. Our respondents reported voting for the president even when they distrusted him, disagreed with his policy positions, or had suffered economic decline. Thus, the data stress the continued importance of personalism in Russian electoral politics. Similarly, rally participants did not hold Putin responsible for falsification or for the opposition unrest. This points to another potential vulnerability for the regime if Putin's popularity continues to decline or is tarnished by scandal, ill health, or crisis.

Overall, the regime's heavy-handed tactics were successful in mobilizing votes but less successful in forging a substantive agenda or policy program. The tactics also did little to build a true movement of regime loyalists. The Kremlin's rigid definition of both the symbols and rhetoric of Putinism left little room for participants to participate in the production of those symbols. While the narratives imposed from above help Putin's supporters to participate in political life in limited ways, they remain

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unable to formulate and articulate independent political positions. As a result, supporters remain highly dependent on the state. Deprived of the benefit of hearing supporters' demands, this strategy also leaves the state in peril of further losing touch with its political base.

Notes

1. The title reflects a comment made by a pro-Putin participant, "If we talk about impressions of the rally, I experienced a sort of delight—as from a well-organized play in which people surprisingly participated, guided by their own convictions" (Luzhniki, February 23, 2012), reported in Amerkhanov et. al. 2012.

2. The anti-Orange Web site can be found at www.anti-orange.ru, accessed May 29, 2012.

3. The series consisted of five articles that covered challenges, immigration and nationality, economic development, governance, and social policy. The lack of a sound economic foundation at the heart of the promises is discussed in several critical articles cited here.

4. In addition to the discussion of the event in the cited article, Khitrov's photos can be found on LiveJournal at http://alexhitrov.livejournal.com/131805.html, accessed June 22, 2012.

5. A description of our data collection procedures and survey instrument is available at www.hse.ru/data/2012/08/27/1242904584/APPENDIX%20ON%20DATA%20COLLECTION.pdf.

6. The data presented here are drawn from a sample of protesters at two events: a pilot study of 45 respondents on February 23 at Luzhniki, and a full sample of 318 respondents on March 5 in Manezh Square. These events were held toward the end of the initial wave of the protest cycle, in the series of events explicitly organized by pro-Putin organizations such as the RPF, UR, and the youth organizations.

7. We anticipated response problems and were prepared to conduct a snowball sample based on contacts identified in initial face-to-face interviews at the rally. This precaution proved unnecessary as respondents willingly completed their interviews at the rally.

8. It is important that only 20 percent of rally attendees participated in three or more rallies. In a separate paper, we contrast core supporters at the rallies and protests, showing that the core at the protests was much larger and more coherent than the pro-Putin core.

9. This observation is confirmed by exit poll data from the Levada Center, which shows that Putin wins support both among workers and rural residents and among students and white-collar workers. See www.levada.ru/27-03-2012/vybory-prezidenta-kak-golosovali-sotsialnye-gruppy, accessed April 7, 2013.

10. This distinction in levels of approval and levels of trust are persistent over time. The Levada Center reports evaluations of trust in Putin on its Web site, www.levada.ru/indeksy, accessed July 6, 2012. Russia Votes provides evidence of the gap between approval rating and trust evaluations at www.russiavotes.org/president/presidency_performance_trends.php#190, accessed July 6, 2012.

11. For a discussion of the importance of blame on opposition protest activity, see Javeline 2003 and Tucker 2007.

12. This finding is consistent across rally and protest participants. It is also consistent across the samples of rally participants who we sampled before the actual election (in which they were asked about their expectations of fraud) and those who responded at rallies celebrating the election victory, who were asked about the event of fraud.

13. We adopt Thomas Remington's (2011) definition of the middle class as aspirational: a syndrome of values and behaviors that can serve as the foundation of civil society. A critical question for future research is whether or not these pro-Putin activists remain closely tied to the state and therefore disavow the values of independence and autonomy that makes the middle class a force for political change.

14. Since May 2012, the regime has used police harassment of opposition leaders, manipulation of court procedures, and the passage of new legislation to intimidate the opposition without relying on overt violence.

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