

# The Putin Factor: Personalism, Protest, and Regime Stability in Russia

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*Vladimir Putin remains central to regime stability in the Russian Federation. However, the role that Mr. Putin's personalist appeal—rooted in both charismatic and noncharismatic linkages—plays in maintaining regime support is undertheorized. I argue that personalism is a powerful political resource in electoral authoritarian regimes because it provides a positive logic for skeptical voters to support the leader. Personalist linkages obscure the role that electoral bias plays in shaping electoral outcomes, diminishing the impulse for mass postelection protest. When the effectiveness of personalism declines, discontented citizens are more likely to protest biased elections. This article shows that Mr. Putin's appeal as a sound steward of the economy declined by 2012 but that other sources of issue satisfaction continued to shape some respondents' trust in the president.*

**Keywords:** Personalism, Regime Stability, Russia, Comparative Politics, Charismatic Leadership, Authoritarian Regimes, Personalist Leadership, Putin, Civic Protest.

*A la fecha, Vladimir Putin continúa siendo central para la estabilidad del régimen de la Federación Rusa. Sin embargo, el papel que el atractivo de la personalidad del señor Putin juega en el mantenimiento del régimen—proveniente de cualidades carismáticas y no-carismáticas—es un área que se encuentra poco estudiada. En este estudio argumento que el personalismo es un recurso político de gran poder en los regímenes autoritarios porque brinda una narrativa positiva para que los votantes escépticos apoyen al líder. Los recursos personalistas ayudan a ocultar el efecto que prejuicios electorales tienen en los resultados electorales, a su vez disminuyendo la propensión a protestas masivas post-electorales. Cuando la efectividad del personalismo disminuye, los ciudadanos inconformes son más propensos a protestar en elecciones poco imparciales. Este estudio muestra que el uso del atractivo del señor Putin como timón de la economía comenzó a declinar en 2012 pero otros factores continuaron impactando la confianza de ciertos electores en el Presidente.*

“Russia without Putin!” Such battle cries by antiregime protesters in December 2011 took sharp aim at a pillar of Russia’s electoral authoritarian regime: Vladimir Putin’s *personalist* link to voters. With chants of “Putin-Thief” and “Putin-Leave” accompanied by derogatory posters and cartoonish effigies, Russian protesters invoked the image of the president to describe the regime’s failures and frame their demands for reform. The Kremlin countered with mass rallies, referred to as “Putings,” designed to insulate Putin from opposition charges and link regime stability and national pride to Putin’s candidacy. Dueling street actions became battlegrounds over competing political narratives centered on Putin.

Yet a closer look at individual attitudes among protest and rally participants underscores that the prime minister-*cum*-president played different roles in individual participation decisions on each side of the street. For the protesters involved in a movement called “For Free Elections,” demands focused on political reforms that would support transparency, participation, and political competition. Our evidence suggests that for these protesters, trust in Mr. Putin (or the lack of trust) was not linked to economic success or issue management, but rather was more closely tied to a rejection of personalism as a logic of vote choice and systemic support.

Among pro-Kremlin rally participants, the role of personalism is much more profound and radically different from the protests, although it is not uniform. Support for Putin was linked to an appeal that encompassed love of country and its culture. The rhetoric at rallies echoed these symbolic appeals and deified Putin through overlapping narratives of a common enemy, the moral responsibility of civil society, and challenges to national unity. For rally participants, support for Mr. Putin was very closely tied to their approval of his policies and the benefits of his rule. As voters, the manufactured outcome of manipulated elections coincided with their preferences. The rally participants endorsed the empirical outcome of the electoral authoritarian election: support for Mr. Putin as a guarantor of regime stability.

These competing narratives concerning the regime, reform, and stability that culminated in postelection protest in December 2011 raise broader questions concerning the relationship between personalism and regime stability, demanding a rethinking of our understanding of the role of personalism in electoral authoritarian regimes. On the one hand, a personalist leader can become a lightning rod or focal point for systemic failures and popular grievances emerging as a common target of blame that motivates political action. On the other hand, in the context of electoral authoritarian regimes, a significant personal vote is a powerful political resource. Support for the leader coupled with the absence of plausible alternatives can provide strong glue that binds elites and secures popular support—or at least—quiescence with the regime while retaining a great deal of leeway for the leader to adjust to political change.

Relying on original data from protests, rallies, and a comparable survey of nonparticipants, I test a tentative theory of the role of personalism in postelection

mobilization. I posit that different types of personalist appeals provide strong incentives for voters to accept the inevitable and manufactured outcomes of authoritarian elections. Similarly, the mechanisms that erode personalist ties also vary according to the type of personalism at play in these relationships. Understanding the precise nature of personalist support enables scholars to make more accurate assessments of the role of personalism in regime stability.

### **The Putin Enigma: Institutions, Issues, Images, and Presidential Trust**

The emergence of postelection protests in Russia in December 2011 marked a critical juncture for the regime. Three months earlier, the decision to replace President Dmitry Medvedev with Prime Minister Putin as United Russia (UR)'s presidential candidate crystallized latent public dissatisfaction with an increasingly authoritarian regime built around a single man. Labeled "the castling" by the Russian press, Medvedev's withdrawal from candidacy in favor of Putin angered voters who saw politics as entirely determined by an elite game. As one former Putin supporter revealed in an interview in the fall of 2011, the preordained selection of the president was "too much, even for someone like me." She was arguing that the castling revealed both the depth of the Kremlin's disdain for the electoral process as well as citizens' inability to respond to it through the political system.<sup>1</sup>

Until this point, Mr. Putin enjoyed the benefits of personalist appeal that won him high approval ratings and incredible vote totals in two rounds of Presidential voting (Colton 2000; Colton and Hale 2009, 2011; Rose and Mishler 2010). He had borrowed against his own vote support to build the sprawling national organization that emerged as UR—a state-led political party that came to back an amorphous political program called "Putin's Plan." In short, he was the sole politician in Russia who could guarantee an election victory, either for himself or by lending his name to a candidate. In 2007, as Mr. Putin faced term limits he tapped then-Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev to be the next presidential candidate. Medvedev immediately named Mr. Putin as his prime ministerial candidate, and together they announced a new form of joint rule that became known as "the tandem."

A biased set of political institutions and informal practices assisted Mr. Putin's electoral dominance. Between 1991 and 2011, Russia institutionalized an electoral authoritarian regime where electoral control coupled with limited competition blocked the evolution of mechanisms that drive democratic consolidation. From the first rounds of competitive elections in 1993 and 1995, the need to win elections in the face of very unpopular economic liberalization policies prompted sustained assaults on the auxiliary mechanism of democracy—a free press, political rights, and the formation of a competitive

<sup>1</sup> Interview with the author, October 2011, female, middle aged.

party system. Many of the informal tactics of political control deftly employed by Mr. Putin were developed in the Yeltsin era, including mechanisms of electoral fraud, the creation of friendly opposition, the channeling of state resources in to campaign coffers, and the cooptation of opposition in legislatures (Carothers 1997; Smyth 2006; Treisman and Gimpelson 2001).

Electoral manipulation increased under the Putin regime that repeatedly altered formal institutions to limit competition throughout the electoral cycle and honed mechanisms of informal control to massage vote counts. In addition, while the Kremlin only episodically cowed the opposition through violence and direct coercion, the threat of punishment—from arrest, to beatings, and the loss of a job or state contract—remained omnipresent (Easter 2008; Robertson 2010). Economic levers were also central to political control. The incomplete transition to market and the hierarchic nature of state institutions meant that transgressing the boundaries of politically acceptable action could easily be punished by denying an individual his or her job or benefits. Ironically, Mr. Putin's popularity, and the sense of inevitability that surrounded his political dominance, obscured the significant role that electoral fraud had played in vote support for UR and Mr. Medvedev in 2007-08.

Yet the absence of credible choice can only go so far in explaining overwhelming popular support—votes and ratings—for Mr. Putin. After all, it is easy to express dissent in a poll, and every election provides some competition and therefore an opportunity for voters to reject the authoritarian leader and his proxies. In the age of cell phones and electoral observation technologies, falsification is a very costly strategy to maintain office so the regime needs alternative strategies to attract popular support. From the start, the Putin regime rejected a clear programmatic linkage to its voters in favor of personalist appeals (Blank 2002; Sakwa 2008; White and McAllister 2008).

Like much of the politics of post-Soviet Russia, the Kremlin's deployment of personalist appeals is extremely complex and well adapted to the context. Putin's appeal combines a composite mixture of a charismatic myth, effective state management, and a symbolic ideology that portray Mr. Putin as the source of Russian stability and architect of Russian revival—the keeper of stability. While much has been written concerning Mr. Putin's luck in being elected at the start of economic recovery and the worldwide rise in oil prices, it is equally important that Mr. Putin came to power after the profound hardship and uncertainty of the 1990s (Goldman 2008; Hill and Gaddy 2013). For many Russians, the devastation of the 1990s remains their primary political reference point, and in comparison, life in the Putin years is vastly improved (Zubarevich 2011). While not quite a hero of national liberation, presiding over Russia's revival conveyed a great deal of legitimacy and also emotional support for the president among many citizens who want to avoid returning to the 1990s at all costs. The Kremlin has carefully curated this image of Mr. Putin as the restorer of Russian greatness in both the national and international arenas (Goode 2012; Smyth, Sobolev, and Soboleva 2013a, 2013b; Wood 2011).

The first element of the personalist appeal is the president's overwhelming PR machine—often referred to with the historical analogy, “cult of personality.” While little is actually known concerning Mr. Putin's personal life, the Kremlin's investment in the Putin image—a strong, masculine leader with the discipline and values consistent with the Russian church and a very personal sense (and embodiment) of Russian greatness—emerged as a critical element of the strategy to win social support (Kolesnichenko 2008). Mr. Putin acted out historical memory and feats of masculinity that linked him to national heroes (Cassiday and Johnson 2010; Foxall 2013; Goscilo 2012, 2013; Kolesnichenko 2008; Wood 2011). Images of the president shirtless on horseback, tagging endangered whales in Siberia, or leading migrating cranes presented an omnipresent version of Putin as an ideal Russian man. Kremlin-orchestrated youth groups such as Nashi and Putin's Army contributed to this image of the president as the idol of Russia's youth (Atwal and Bacon 2012; Hemment 2012; Horvath 2011). In 2004, a pop group released the single “I Want a Man Like Putin.” On his 60th birthday, public opinion polls reported that 20 percent of Russian women wanted to marry the president. In short, Mr. Putin is a carefully constructed image, embodying distinctly Russian values derived from the Orthodox Church and rooted in the traditions and history of his family, which survived World War II against all odds.

Yet Mr. Putin's appeals go beyond his identity as an icon. The Kremlin oversaw the construction of UR beginning with its election in 1999 (Colton and McFaul 1999; Reuter 2010; Reuter and Remington 2009; Smyth 2003). This reinvention of the Yeltsin-era party of power went far beyond the underinstitutionalized mechanisms that personalist presidents usually use to control parliamentary decision making. UR quickly became a national fixture that controlled access to electoral politics across the Federation and coordinated policy across the vast space (Gel'man 2006, 2008; Reuter 2010; Roberts 2012). Moreover, the party won vote support independent of Mr. Putin (Volkov 2012). The very presence of UR in the political system elevates Mr. Putin as an effective manager of both his party and of the state. This reputation is an indicator of what Christopher Ansell and M. Steven Fish (1999) described as noncharismatic personalism—a type of personalism that depends on the ability of the leader to mediate elite conflict. However, we might also extend this concept to encompass the leader's capacity to formulate, enact, and implement seemingly successful policies. Both conflict mediation and policy implementation demand institutions that may not constrain the leader, but do provide infrastructural capacity that can be relied on to shore up popular rule. UR effectively fit the bill.

A subsidiary to the effective manager argument is that Mr. Putin's popularity has little to do with his own appeal but is tied to the state of the economy (Treisman 2011). That is, scholars who focus on economic linkages argue that while the Kremlin may invest heavily in a Putin PR program, real popular support is generated not by the program, but through the luck of

having presided over high oil prices and economic recovery. At the same time, the economic linkage also signals that constituents give at least some credit to the president for those economic conditions, providing an alternative measure of the effective manager linkage mechanism.

Leaving aside (for the moment) the economic driver, Yuri Levada (2004) argued that these aspects of personalism—charismatic leadership and effective management—are captured in measures of trust in the president. According to Levada, weak institutionalization led Russian respondents to personalize the question by substituting Mr. Putin for “the presidency” as an institution. Yet, in an early analysis, Levada also found that trust in Mr. Putin was largely a function of charismatic appeals rather than rooted in assessments of his actions in office or policy choices. Similarly, in his study of the link between presidential approval and regime support, Richard Rose (2007) also found a tenuous relationship between issue positions and support for the president. This interpretation of the meaning of trust diverges from the general understanding where trust is a measure of expectations concerning the leader taking a particular set of actions that are consistent with the interests of the citizen (Hardin 1991). Issue-based assessments are tied to noncharismatic linkages and claims of preference congruence and effective management. However, it may also be the case that trust is conveyed by “type” and not action—linkages rooted in charismatic appeals. In this version of trust, the politician’s personal characteristics allow him or her considerable leeway to make decisions that ostensibly defy citizens’ interests but can be effectively explained by the leader (Bianco 1994). We might interpret this notion of trust as reflecting the success of the Putin myth that communicates that Mr. Putin understands and in fact is like his supporters.

These mechanisms of trust (types of personalist appeals) are neither mutually exclusive nor are they absolute for all citizens. We might think of a two-dimensional space where some citizens form trust on the basis of both mechanisms and some who reject the leader entirely. In addition, we can conceive of citizens who are not satisfied with policy or outcomes but nonetheless reward the leader because of his perception of his type. This interpretation is consistent with past findings where Levada (2004), Rose (2007), Sakwa (2008), and Treisman (2011) find that issue positions and outcomes have little to do with citizens’ evaluations of the president while economic performance and charismatic linkages do appear to drive evaluations.

To better understand the nature of personalist linkages in Russia and their role in protest mobilization, this article explores the individual relationships among charisma, noncharismatic linkages, and trust among key political groups in 2012 at the point of political protest. I argue that if we see a shift, where evaluations are linked to outcomes, it speaks to the increasing importance of effective management or noncharismatic linkages in Russian state-society relations and a profound shift in social expectations. Alternatively, the same linkage may be based on perceptions of economic well-being and Mr. Putin’s

stewardship of the economy. If the linkages between these factors remain tenuous, it speaks a rejection effective management or noncharismatic appeals and suggests that personalism is based on the less tangible charismatic or mythical qualities.

Before testing this proposition, the next section of this article proposes a model of the links among elements of personalism, citizens' trust in Putin and their political behavior, voting, and protest participation. This argument underscores the critical role for personalism in controlled electoral competition and the dangers that arise when personalist linkages are eroded. The data are then used to evaluate both the nature of personalist linkages among these three critical social groups and the influence of different types of linkages on political behavior. The analysis reveals profound differences in popular evaluations of Mr. Putin—different aspects of personalism are at play in different citizens' groups. Most importantly, the evidence demonstrates that personalist appeals are remarkably less effective among protesters compared with rally participants and nonprotesters.

### **Personalism and Control in Electoral Authoritarian Regimes**

In Russia, personalism and the institutionalization of electoral advantage coexist in a mutually reinforcing structure to ensure electoral victory (Slater 2003). Mr. Putin used his popularity to mold institutional arrangements that limited competition and enhanced electoral resources, including his personalist appeals. This mutual dependence between institutions and personalism distinguishes the Putin regime from the Yeltsin epoch. The Yeltsin administration ceded significant power to the oligarchs and regional bosses, essentially decentralizing the capacity to build personalist appeals (Hale 2007; Yavlinsky 1998). This process led to bossism and machine politics at the regional level that sapped the power and authority of the central state. In contrast, the Putin regime concentrated that power in Mr. Putin in his capacity of both president and prime minister by strengthening the power vertical (Sakwa 2008). More generally, since taking office, Mr. Putin has renovated and strengthened the institutional structures to support rather than constrain his personalist appeals.

Political economists Hadenius and Teorell (2006) persuasively argue that personalism is best analyzed as a component of regime support in authoritarian regimes rather than as a distinct regime category. They find that the presence of personalism extends the life of a regime beyond nonpersonalist regimes of the same type. Similarly, Barbara Geddes (2005) demonstrates that personalism coupled with frequent, but controlled, national elections is a common form of authoritarian rule that is more stable than other forms of authoritarianism. This finding suggests a synergy between personalism and elections that drives regime durability. Empirical evidence also suggests that regime durability is enhanced when the personalist relationship is institutionalized within the context of a

dominant political party (see the review of Kostadinova and Levitt in this symposium). Finally, scholars of electoral authoritarian regimes theorize a range of mechanisms underpinning this synergy between personalist leadership and constrained elections from information advantages, to elite coherence, efficacy of patronage, and the capacity to influence electoral outcomes (Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009; Magaloni 2006).

As the brief overview of the role of personalist linkages in regime stability suggests, personalism, particularly when it is coupled with controlled elections and authoritarian governance, can solve the problem of elite loyalty and mass support. Personal vote support for a single leader translates into a significant resource for ensuring elite cohesion. The leader becomes the guarantor of regime legitimacy and social peace providing a strong incentive for elites to remain a part of a sure bet rather than risk it all to challenge the leader (Smyth, Lowry, and Wilkening 2007). In Russia, as in most patrimonial states, assurances of social peace also guarantee sustained access to resource streams for high-level state officials—provide strong incentive to remain within the tent. This profound role of personalist linkages can be observed in the different dynamics of the Yeltsin and Putin regimes. Mr. Putin was able to marshal elite compliance and mass support while Mr. Yeltsin struggled with oligarchs' wars, elite defection, and very low approval ratings.

In the electoral arena, the Kremlin seems quite aware of the importance of providing carrots to obscure the degree of political control institutionalized within the Russian electoral authoritarian regime. Personal appeals provide a positive logic for voters to support the regime without highlighting the endogenous lack of competition. Many and perhaps even a majority of citizens are perfectly aware that the system presents only one choice, but they are content with that choice for a variety of overlapping reasons. When coupled with personalist appeals, manufactured electoral outcomes are consistent with voter preferences stifling both support for the opposition and the formation of grievances concerning usurped democracy or limited representation. In other words, personalist support constitutes an enormous political asset that can make even the most controlled election appear legitimate. This consistency between preordained outcomes and preferences is critical in the age of cell phones and electoral observation technologies that render election falsification a very costly strategy to maintain office.

There is significant empirical evidence for the important role of personalism in Russian elections. Colton (2000), Colton and Hale (2009), White and McAllister (2008), and Rose, Mishler, and Munro (2006) demonstrate significant personalist support for Mr. Putin and provide significant evidence that votes for UR have always increased on Putin's coattails. Yet the corollary to this argument is that when the mechanisms of personalism in voting are eroded, the likelihood for protest in support of democratic reforms increases as both the need for and popular expectations of falsification efforts also increase. This situation existed in Russia as the 2011-12 electoral cycle approached.



The insight linking personalism, vote choice, and seemingly spontaneous postelection protest echoes recent studies of colored revolutions that highlight the role of the preelection campaign period and voting process as a catalyst for opposition organization. Exploring an overlapping set of cases, Bunce and Wolchik (2011), Beissinger (2011, 2013), and my own work (Smyth and Hulsev 2013; Smyth, Sobolev, Soboleva 2013a) demonstrate that campaign activism, including citizens' electoral observation efforts, create the context where electoral falsification led to mass protest in a number of different post-communist states. It is precisely these campaign activities that sparks the information cascade that drives increasingly greater participation in street actions (Smyth, Sobolev, Soboleva 2013a). Pre-voting activism also provides important information, frames political reality, and raises awareness concerning the potential for fraud—all factors that lead to the creation of opposition organizations, coalitions, and networks that are primed to join protests when fraud is evident.

In the present analysis, I argue that in cases when the regime rests on personalist appeals, the degree to which these dominoes begin to fall rests on the components of personalism or the elements of the personal vote embedded in citizens' vote decisions. For instance, if the personal vote rests largely on notions of charismatic leadership or the leader's personal myth, then economic crisis may not be devastating for his reputation. In contrast, if the leader's personal vote is built on a direct link between patronage and votes or other forms of redistribution, then an economic crisis will quickly undermine support. However, this effect may be mitigated by effective economic management. Finally, if the leader's appeal is based on issue congruence, then a change in issue satisfaction can also undermine the regime. In cases when formal and informal rules eliminate viable rivals, the leader's appeal is likely to be more durable under any circumstances.

### **Personalism and Protest: The View of Putin from the Street**

To explore the relationships among different components of personalism in Russia, vote choice, and the decision to protest, I use unique survey data. The data were collected at the rallies and protests held near the end of the first wave of street action in late February, by a team of trained undergraduate researchers. These activist data are supplemented by a comparable survey of nonparticipants in June 2012, at the end of the second wave of Moscow's protest actions.

As with any data on mass protest, it is difficult to say with certainty that this sample is representative of the population that participated over many events in large, open spaces where the true population, and even the number of participants, remained unknown. However, two factors give grounds for some confidence in the data. First, other polling organizations such as The Levada Center also conducted surveys at the protests and got comparable samples (see

Volkov 2012). In addition, our analysis shows that while there appear to have been a large influx of casual protesters in the largest of the street actions, a core of protesters formed over the wave of events in the first wave and became fixtures at the street actions. This core is well represented in our data, suggesting that we captured a reliable sample of key protest constituencies. The nonparticipation sample is more complex. While this survey is not a representative sample of Moscow oblast (it oversamples young people), when used in regression analysis it provides a comparable sample structure to our activist samples.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the nonprotester sample is constructed to provide us with the capacity to compare across social groups within each subsample.

### **Trust and Vote in March 2012**

Our analysis begins with clear evidence of the dilemma faced by the regime when personalist support declines. A simple cross-tabulation among protest and rally attendance, trust, and vote support for President Putin illustrates the stark difference in preferences between the two groups (Table 1). Neither UR nor Putin had any significant support among protesters in 2011-12, suggesting that the relentless anti-Putin rhetoric in the wake of the castling captured and reinforced protesters' underlying attitudes. Moreover, trust and vote choice are extremely highly correlated in these data. In short, the attitudes and behavior of protesters provide a clear rejection of personalism as a logic for regime support.

In contrast, among rally participants, vote support for the regime surpassed the national average. In the national poll, UR garnered just under 50 percent of the vote, and Mr. Putin was elected with 65 percent. In our sample, support for the president was ten percentage points higher than the national poll, and support for his party was 13 percentage points higher than national results. When compared with Moscow oblast, the differences in vote totals among activists and the general population are even more striking. In Moscow, Mr. Putin won 55 percent of the vote while UR gained only 46 percent.

At the same time, the 13 percent difference in vote totals in the parliamentary and presidential races among rally participants demonstrates the value and limits of Putin's personal appeal. This measure gives us some sense of the difference in the president's coattail effects among different groups of voters. In national polls, there was a 25-point difference between votes for UR and votes for the president—suggesting the relative weakness of Mr. Putin's influence in dragging along support for UR. Comparison between data on rally participants and protesters suggests that Putin's coattails were longer among this group than the general population, underscoring the unique nature of political activists from rank-and-file voters.

<sup>2</sup>A detailed discussion of our sampling strategy, sample construction, respondent rates, and translation of the survey instrument is available at National Research University (2012).

**Table 1. Trust, Vote, and Protest Participation**

		Vote in Presidential Election		
		Putin	Refused to Say, Abstained, or Spoiled	Someone Else
Antigovernment protests	Trust Putin	7.4 (2)	25.9 (7)	66.7 (18)
	Distrust Putin	.52 (2)	21.4 (82)	78.1 (299)
Nonparticipants	Trust Putin	50.5 (54)	29.9 (32)	19.6 (21)
	Distrust Putin	4.9 (9)	44.6 (82)	50.5 (93)
Pro-government rallies	Trust Putin	83.2 (208)	8.2 (22)	8.0 (20)
	Distrust Putin	33.3 (15)	28.9 (13)	37.8 (17)

*Note:* Cell entries are row percentage and cell n. Trust and distrust categories include partial and full trust/distrust.

Despite this strong support, a surprising 25 percent of rally participants did not vote for Putin and approximately a third of participants abandoned UR. This evidence provides some credence to claims that rally participants were coerced or enticed to attend these events and even enticed or coerced to show up at the polls. Moreover, these figures most likely underrepresent the skepticism in the crowd as participants received clear instructions concerning how to respond to questions and were also monitored by team captains during rally events. The bottom line is that even among the alleged core, support for Putin was not uniform.

Hidden in these data is a secondary story concerning vote turnout. Nationally, 60 percent of Russian voters turned out for parliamentary elections, and 65 percent of Russian voters turned out for the presidential elections. Among protesters and rally participants, turnout rates were much higher as we would expect among political activists. Rally participants reported turnout rates of 86 percent in parliamentary elections while protesters had turnout rates of around 83 percent. In presidential elections, vote turnout among activists was even higher: 93 percent of rally participants voted, while 90 percent of protesters voted.

These data underscore both the increased importance of presidential elections but also the importance of expressing preferences for Mr. Putin's rule in the contentious atmosphere of dueling street battles. The data also underscore that trust and turnout are strongly related. In the context of

controlled election, abstaining remains a mechanism for voters who distrust Mr. Putin to express their dissatisfaction. Even among rally attenders, those who had higher levels of distrust did not turnout to vote. The exception to this observation is that strong distrust pushed protesters to turnout and vote for opposition candidates. As a whole, this group coordinated in a vote strategy that maximized the cost of falsification, heeding the call of activist leader and blogger Aleksey Navalny to vote for anyone but Mr. Putin.

In the context of our larger argument, the clear linkages among trust, turnout, and vote choice—personalism—are at work. When trust is low, citizens either do not turnout or vote for the opposition, increasing the need for election-day manipulation of vote totals to secure regime durability. Conversely, when trust is high, citizens support the ruler and the regime. To begin to untangle this relationship, the analysis turns to explore the relationship between issue satisfaction and trust among different groups of political activists.

### **Exploring the Components of Personalism in Russia's Electoral Authoritarian Regime**

While the aggregate-level evidence presented to this point underscores the link between vote choice and protest, lending partial support to a “campaign model” of protest mobilization, it cannot really tell us much concerning the motivations for voting or vote choice, or shed light on our primary mechanism of interest: personalist appeals. To untangle that relationship, we turn to examine the role of issues in shaping trust attitudes—this article’s proxy for noncharismatic personalist appeals—for all three groups.

While earlier studies of trust attitudes attribute evaluations of Mr. Putin as for the common man or as a symbol of Russian strength, we expect trust in 2011 to be linked to the noncharismatic appeals described by Ansell and Fish (1999). If trust is a function of issue satisfaction, then the respondent is endorsing the view of the President as an effective steward of both the state and the economy, and acting in the interests of the citizen. In concrete terms, my theory predicts that policy satisfaction should be correlated with trust but that the effect should be strongest for rally participants, for whom the narrative of Mr. Putin as the source of stability and strong governance is the strongest. Similarly, I expect the relationship between policy satisfaction and trust to be weaker or even nonexistent for protest participants because they loudly called for Putin’s departure on Moscow’s streets.

In this regard, the relationship between satisfaction and trust among nonparticipants is a critical indicator of leadership support and regime stability. I expect them to look similar to the rally participants, as Mr. Putin’s leadership has retained widespread appeal. However, any softening of the effectiveness of personalist appeals among this group could signal potential defections from the Putin team. In summary, if I see a close relationship between issue satisfaction

and trust, and we observe variation across the groups, then I infer that the Kremlin's investment in the stability and effective manager arguments has done its work.

To explore these relationships, I constructed a measure of respondents' satisfaction with policy decisions. This simple additive measure includes four (0-3) issue satisfaction scales, capturing positions on four questions: personal economic well-being, the direction where the country is moving, the change in the level of corruption since 1999 (over the tenure of the Putin regime), and assessments of falsification in the 2011 parliamentary election. These four questions capture the most critical issues of the election period, focusing on topics that are both salient for the population and largely discussed in the context of protest.

I used a logistic regression model to explore the determinants of respondents' trust evaluations. The dependent variable is dichotomous, capturing high and low levels of trust in Putin. The analysis tests the hypothesis that trust is concerning effective management by linking trust to policy accomplishments, measured using our policy satisfaction scale. While previous studies show a tenuous connection between policy satisfaction and presidential evaluations, the decline in Mr. Putin's ratings in 2011 opinion data suggests that this relationship has changed. In particular, I expect that protesters will be much more reluctant to reward Mr. Putin for positive policy outcomes. I am agnostic on effect for rally participants, whose attitudes may still reflect earlier tendencies to reward Mr. Putin despite low levels of issue satisfaction.

This model also includes a measure of the change in the respondents' economic well-being over the tenure of the Putin regime to test the linkage between economic satisfaction and trust. The wording of the question is particularly useful for capturing the degree to which respondents credit Mr. Putin for their economic good fortune or punish him for their losses. I expect that at the margin of other variables, protesters are more likely to reject the idea that Mr. Putin is responsible for their economic condition, while rally participants would be more likely to credit him for their increased wealth.

The regression model also includes variables that account for rally and protest participation. The omitted category in this model is the nonactivists. The parameters associated with these variables capture the degree to which these activist groups hold distinct attitudes concerning Mr. Putin that are not explained by issue satisfaction or economic management—thus these variables serve as a proxy for the components of personalism discussed earlier. The parameter for protest participation captures the degree to which Mr. Putin represents the spirit of the state ruled by “crooks and thieves” who are willing to steal an election. They should have lower levels of trust. In contrast, the parameter for rally participation will capture the positive effects of charisma and leadership myths, leading to higher levels of trust. This specification also allows me to compare the nonactivists to the other two groups.

**Table 2. Correlates of Presidential Trust**

Dependent Variable: Trust in Putin (1/0)

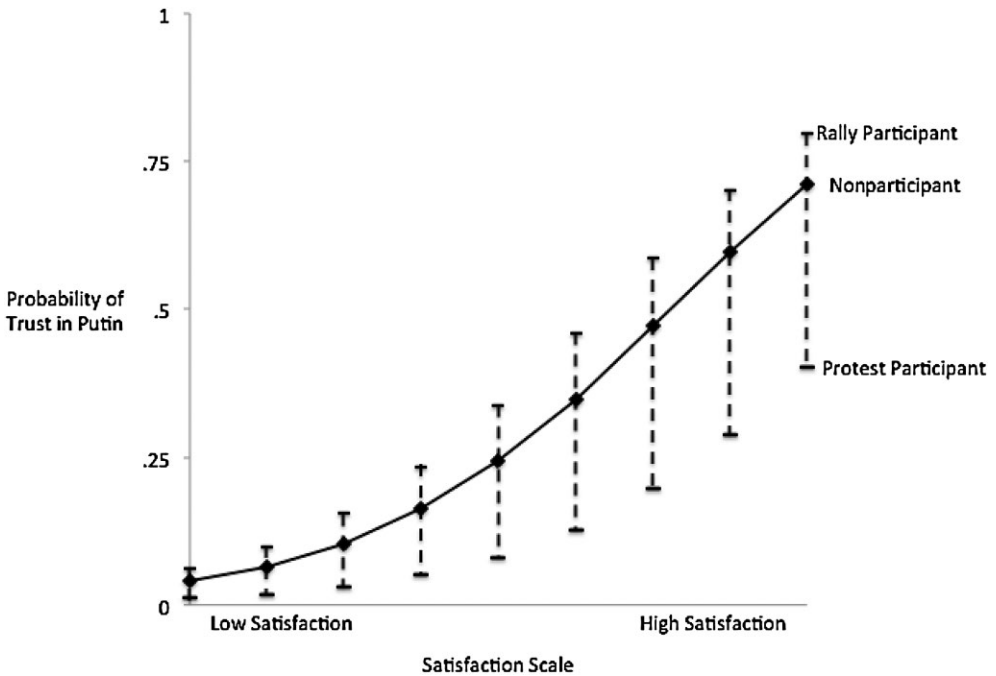
Satisfaction scale	.65*** (.06)
Pocketbook scale	-.49** (.14)
Rally participant	.46* (.24)
Protest participant	-1.33*** (.28)
Female	.06 (.21)
Government worker	-.12 (.23)
Education	-.46*** (.13)
Age <30	-.13 (.21)
Constant	-2.22 (.36)
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.50
Chi-square	652.0***
N	1,029

Note: \* p < .10; \*\* p < .05; \*\*\* p < .01; one-tailed

Finally, I include a series of control variables capturing demographic factors that may shape trust attitudes. In Russia, women have generally been more supportive of Mr. Putin than men, so I include a measure of gender, expecting it to be positive. In contrast, the more highly educated have tended to be less supportive of the president, and I expect that to be the case in this article. I also include a measure of sector of employment, as state workers are generally considered to be more supportive of the regime and the president. Finally, the model also includes a measure of age, distinguishing respondents who are under 30 from those who are older. Despite the publicity afforded pro-Putin youth groups, I do not expect age to be a critical determinant of trust attitudes in our sample. Table 2 reports the regression results.

The regression defies findings based on data gathered earlier in the Putin administration that showed a relatively weak link between issue satisfaction and trust. In our analysis, the policy satisfaction scale is both a positive and a significant determinant of trust attitudes. Likewise, the pocketbook measure is also significant, but it has an unexpected sign. The higher the respondents' changes in income since 2000, the less likely he or she is to trust the president. In the figures below, I provided a more extensive interpretation of these findings.

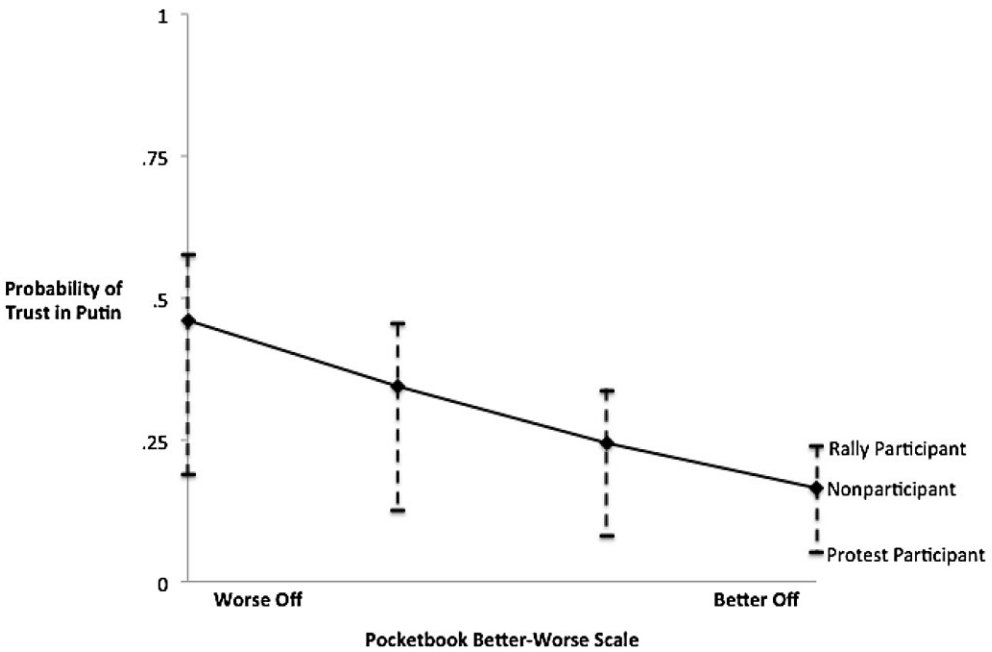
**Figure 1.**  
**Probability of Trust in Putin Given Levels of Issue Satisfaction**



Rally participation also drives trust at a significant level, although this effect is not as large as we might expect. In contrast, protest participation is both negative and significant, and the magnitude of the parameter is relatively large. In other words, the protesters exhibit a profound distrust of Mr. Putin, distinguishing them from both rally participants and nonparticipants. This finding is important because it underscores that in terms of presidential trust, nonactivists look more like rally participants than they look like the protesters. These differences become even more clear in Figures 1 and 2, illustrating the substantive effect of the pocketbook and issue satisfaction measures on presidential trust for all three subgroups in our sample.

Finally, the demographic variables are largely not significant, although they do work in the expected direction. Women are slightly more likely to have higher trust in Mr. Putin, while young people have slightly lower levels of trust. Government workers are also likely to have lower levels of trust in the president. While this finding is not consistent with broader research on presidential support in Russia's regions and single-industry cities, it is consistent with the discussion of protest in Moscow, particularly in the early stages before the state made an example of some state workers who have participated in protest. The

**Figure 2**  
**Probability of Trust in Putin Given Changes in Family’s Material Conditions**



only demographic variable that is significant in our analysis is the education variable. More highly educated citizens have lower trust in Putin. This finding echoes the well-publicized sense of protesters as the creative class of intellectuals or white-collar workers.

Figure 1 provides an interpretation of the impact of the satisfaction scale on trust evaluations. In both Figures 1 and 2, the interpretations reflect the effects of our key variables of interest for female respondents who are employed in the private sector. Because these variables are not significant in the analysis, the effects would look essentially the same even if a different set of referents were used in the interpretation of these two key variables. Education is held at median level.

The figure shows how a respondent’s level of policy satisfaction (measured on the x-axis) translates into a predicted probability of trust (measured on the y-axis), holding the other variables at the values mentioned above. Moreover, it shows how this relationship varies across our three groups: protesters, rally participants, and nonparticipants.

The dark line depicts the relationship between satisfaction and trust for nonparticipants. For this group, as policy satisfaction increases, the probably of



trust increases markedly. A very similar relationship between issue satisfaction and trust holds for rally participants, although the magnitude of this effect is slightly larger. As discussed above, this finding is important because it demonstrates that the large portion of the population who did not participate in street actions look much more like the rally participants than the protesters.

Figure 1 confirms the impact of effective management on trust assessments among protesters and nonparticipants. Consistent with the Ansell and Fish (1999) model of noncharismatic linkages, citizens who are satisfied with conditions attribute policy success to Mr. Putin directly and not to other political or structural factors, increasing the trust assessments. This finding confirms the importance of Mr. Putin's personalist ties with the population for maintaining regime support. Importantly, in the context of previous studies, this finding speaks to a change in the foundations of trust in the leader over time. Contrary to Levada's (2004) and Rose's (2007) previous studies, for some voters, particularly Putin supporters and (at least for the moment) members of his "silent majority," issue satisfaction is critical for assessments of the president.

For protest participants, the relationship between issue satisfaction and trust is positive but much weaker. Even at high levels of policy satisfaction, protest participants are unlikely to trust Mr. Putin. This finding implies that even though some protesters are better off since Mr. Putin's rise to power, they do not attribute that success to the president or his policies. The differences among the three subgroups at each point of the satisfaction scale provide an indication of the importance of the third component of personalism, charismatic appeals, or the Putin myth. Our analysis shows that this factor is far more important to nonparticipants and rally participants than it is for the protest participants.

Figure 2 provides a similar interpretation of these results for the pocketbook voting parameter. This analysis allows me to explore whether or not economic conditions are the dominant factor in trust evaluations or whether attitudes are being driven by microeconomic conditions as opposed to effective management.

In this figure, the dark line again reports the relationship between pocketbook assessments and trust for respondents who did not participate in street actions. For all of these groups, the influence of personalism—effective stewardship of the economy—is measured by whether or not the president is rewarded for policies and conditions that improve the economic well-being of citizens. Yet, in contrast to the policy scale, the relationship between our pocketbook economic indicator and presidential trust is negative for rally participants, protesters, and nonparticipants. At the highest levels of economic well-being, we see that the predicted value of trust is extremely low for protesters, but it is also low for rally participants and nonparticipants. In other words, across the board, Mr. Putin is not rewarded for improvements in respondents' personal economic conditions.

This break between economic assessments and outcomes for both nonparticipants and protesters is contrary to Treisman's (2011) findings. That analysis, based on aggregate economic data, cannot capture the individual-level variation observed in these data. Moreover, while I am examining trust, Treisman (2011) focused on presidential approval, which scholars suspect is a much less complex assessment. In short, my analysis does not negate earlier findings concerning the importance of the economy in shaping presidential approval, but they do suggest that these relationships are more nuanced and pliable than scholars believed. This finding suggests that Chaisty and Whitefield (2012) correctly identify a lagged change in citizens' attitudes concerning economic conditions following the global economic crisis.

Taken together, the results show that the role of personalism varies across the population. Issue satisfaction has a very strong positive influence on trust assessments of both nonparticipants and rally attenders. Issue satisfaction also has a positive influence on the trust assessments of protesters, but that effect is much smaller. Moreover, Mr. Putin does not garner credit for economic well-being when we control for other issues—in fact, the relationship between well-being and trust is negative. This finding raises a number of important questions concerning the evolving structure of state–society linkages in Putin's third term. I posit that these findings speak to a change in popular attitudes and the efficacy of personalist appeals in Russia in the lead-up to protest. The idea that something fundamental changed between the pre- and postprotest periods is supported by a national poll that shows two important trends: a growing propensity for citizens to blame Mr. Putin for Russia's problems, and a lack of recovery in Mr. Putin's approval ratings after the protests (Dmitriev and Treisman 2012). Both the causes and durability of these shifts demand fuller attention using more complete national survey data and examination of state strategies to shore up and reassert personalist linkages.

At the same time, there is clear indication in this analysis that citizens are also influenced by Mr. Putin's charismatic appeals or the Putin myth. This effect is positive for rally participants and nonparticipations, and it is strongly negative for the protesters. As indicated below, this dynamic may well foreshadow Mr. Putin's growing reliance on culture wars, international aggression, and nationalism to bolster his personalist support and, through that, regime support.

In future work, I will continue to explore the relationship among trust, issues, and other factors in the context of a vote choice model. However, the findings that emerge from the analysis presented here go a long way to untangle the underlying dynamics of protest in 2011-12. Most importantly, in the context of previous studies, this analysis begins to shed light on the ways where personalist appeals vary over time and across groups. Moreover, while not all electoral authoritarian regimes are personalist regimes, these findings show how the two constructs can work together to produce regime stability and, also, the conditions under which personalism might contribute to regime breakdown.

### Conclusions: Personalism and Regime Support

The rival images of Putin in the rallies and protests define a clear attitudinal and behavioral divide within the Russian population. Antiregime protests took direct aim at personalist appeals to undermine electoral support and deprive the regime of control over alternative levers to maintain the electoral authoritarian regime. Following this cue, protestors rejected personalism as a basis of regime support. Moreover, rather than buying into the Putin myth, protestors appear to have judged Mr. Putin responsible for undermining democracy and economic conditions in Russia. Even the minority of protestors who reported positive assessments of Putin did not vote for him, rejecting all notions that he deserved credit for policy successes.

The regime responded to the opposition with a series of state-sponsored rallies based on slogans designed to show their loyalty to Putin: “Putin Loves Us All,” “Vladimir Putin and Nobody Else,” and “Those Who Hate Putin Hate a Strong Russia.” Among rally participants, popular attitudes toward Putin were much more positive and formed the basis of strong trust. For these citizens, personalism remains a pillar of regime stability. Yet the basis for these evaluations appears to have shifted over time. This analysis underscores that citizens who experienced economic success during the Putin years do not give him credit for that success in 2012. This fact presents a danger to a regime that is facing slow economic recovery, challenges to energy sector revenues, and the need for structural economic reforms. At the same time, there is significant evidence that both noncharismatic and charismatic linkages remain important mechanisms driving presidential support and, through that, regime support or at least popular quiescence. It also suggests that if personalist linkages are based on policy success, then the regime is much more constrained than it was in the era of good economic conditions.

The Putin rallies and subsequent culture wars appear to be an effort to return to a mode of personalist linkage that focuses on the leader’s type rather than policy effectiveness or economic management. As Mr. Putin argued at his largest rally in the Luzhniki stadium, “There are tens of thousands and tens of millions of people like us. We want to ensure that there are more of us” (*Grani.ru* 2012). In other work, Soboleva and I (Smyth and Soboleva 2013) argue that the intensification of the cultural wars in the wake of the 2011-12 protests was designed to shore up this element of personalist support and preclude a cross-class protest movement that linked economic and political discontent. President Putin’s aggressive international stance and the annexation of the Crimea, together with renewed reliance on nationalist appeals to secure social support, looks like the next step in redefining and bolstering Mr. Putin’s personalist appeals.

More importantly, the other elements of this appeal—moral living based on Russian Orthodoxy, family values, nationalism, and a distinct interpretation of history—are being supplied to the Russian population as a symbolic ideology

that guides their identity as Russian citizens and suggests appropriate political activity. Coupled with efforts to define a core constituency through shared national identities rooted in Orthodox values, common history, tradition, and family ties, Mr. Putin appears to be working to reassert the charismatic linkages of the earlier period to take advantage of the trust and leeway it affords.

The nonparticipant group is the clear target of the Kremlin's efforts to build a new type of personalist linkages. Clearly the largest segment of the population, the nonactivists, emerge as key political actors. Their continued quiescence and vote support is critical for regime stability. In our survey, the trust assessments of the nonparticipants resembled those of the rally participants suggesting that personalist ties shaped their decisions to stay home. Their loyalty is critical to limiting the magnitude of any future protest actions.

### About the Author

**Regina Smyth** is an associate professor of political science at Indiana University. Her current project explores the social response to the Kremlin's strategy to secure popular support through a mix of institutional manipulation, symbolic appeals, and coercion, focusing on the ways in which the 2011-12 protest cycle altered the relative distribution of these factors in that strategy.

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