

Thief or Savior?

CONTESTING PERSONALISM IN RUSSIA'S RALLIES AND PROTESTS

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“Russia Without Putin!” Such battle cries by anti-regime protesters 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 crossed a very bright line: equating Putin with regime failings. The Kremlin countered with mass rallies, referred to as “Putings,” which were designed to insulate Putin from opposition charges and to link together regime stability and national pride to Putin’s candidacy. Dueling street actions became battlegrounds over competing political narratives, centered on Putin.

Political economists Jan Hadenius and Axel Teorell persuasively argue that personalism is best analyzed as a component of regime support in authoritarian regimes rather than a distinct analytic category. Over the last decade, Putin-era personalism has played an increasingly important role in the system that maintains regime durability. Putin’s popularity ensured elite bargains and secured votes for the regime. In turn, vote support guaranteed Kremlin dominance of key political institutions—the parliament and presidency—and through these institutions access to revenue streams, clientelist networks, and policy levers essential to maintaining power without resorting to widespread coercion. The protests aspired to weaken the state capacity to win votes through this system by undermining personalism as a mechanism of state-society linkage and regime legitimacy.

The Rhetorical Battleground: Defining Putin

The emergence of post-election protests in Russia in December 2012 marked a critical juncture for the regime. Three months earlier, the decision to replace President Dmitry Medvedev with Prime Minister Putin as the ruling party’s presidential candidate,

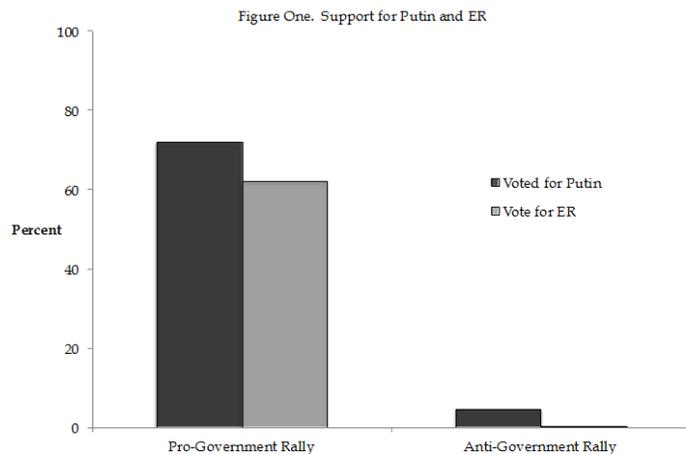
crystalized latent public dissatisfaction with an increasingly authoritarian regime built around a single man. Labeled “the castling” by the Russia press, Medvedev’s withdrawal of his candidacy in favor of Putin angered voters who saw politics as entirely determined by an elite game or strategy. A tentative opposition movement emerged, based on a narrative of fundamental respect for citizens’ rights based on free and fair elections, the end of “the party of crooks and thieves,” and, most importantly, Putin’s departure.

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.” Support for Putin was linked to a love of country and its culture. The regime evoked familiar nationalist symbols of war victories and traditional cultural symbols of national pride to activate collective identity. 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. The principal foundation for these narratives was the stability that would be delivered through Putin’s leadership.

This memo explores the impact of the rhetorical battle on mass opinion using survey data of protest and rally participants collected in early March 2012 toward the end of the cycle of state rallies.¹ The evidence drawn from the survey underscores that competing images of Putin were reflected in the attitudes and behavior of respondents on both sides of the regime divide and reveals the potency of personalist linkages for different citizens.

Putin Must Go: Stability, Reform, and Votes

The rise of this new opposition movement was particularly ill-timed for Putin. Decline in support for the Kremlin’s party, United Russia (UR), in December 2011 parliamentary elections signaled potential trouble for his return to the presidency. In response to the threat, the Kremlin unleashed a largely successful campaign, including mass rallies, to ensure overwhelming victory three months later. Yet, despite this short-term success, the Kremlin’s strategy also revealed significant weaknesses in regime support,



¹ The data were collected in face-to-face interviews at protest events in late February and early March by students affiliated with the Laboratory of Political Research at the Higher School of Economics. This analysis is based on a sample of 363 respondents from the pro-government rallies and 484 respondents from the anti-government rallies. For a complete description of our data collection strategy please see the data appendix at: <http://politlab.hse.ru/Protests>.

prompting an increased dependence on personalism to shore up crumbling electoral support.

Figure One provides clear evidence of the dilemma faced by the regime. It illustrates the stark difference in voting behavior between protesters and pro-government rally participants. Neither UR nor Putin had any significant support among protesters in 2011-2012, suggesting that the relentless anti-Putin rhetoric captured and reinforced protesters' underlying attitudes. Their behavior was a clear rejection of personalism.

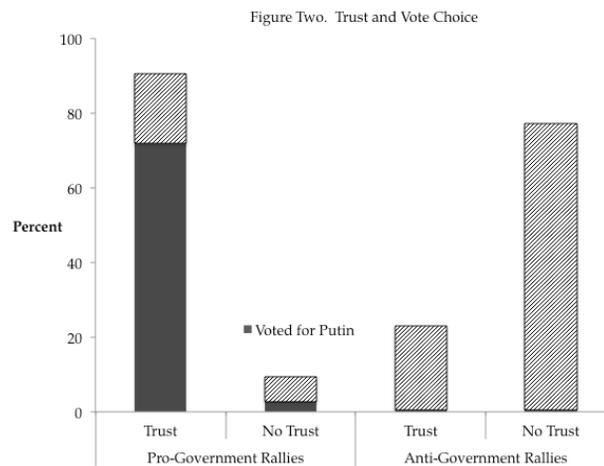
In contrast, among rally participants, vote support for the regime surpassed the national average, but it was not unanimous. Studies of voting behavior based on national surveys of voters by Colton and Hale, White and McAllister, and Rose, Munro and White demonstrate that personalism played a role in vote choice for these citizens: votes for UR have always increased on Putin's coattails. However, the 13 percent difference in vote totals in the parliamentary and presidential races demonstrates Putin's personal appeal for voters. It also suggests that the rallies activated this support with the argument that Putin would personally serve as a hedge against political instability and the potential for a new revolution.

Despite this strong support, a surprising 25 percent of rally participants did not vote for Putin and approximately a third of participants abandoned UR. Moreover, these figures most likely underrepresent the skepticism in the crowd as participants received clear instructions about 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.

Explaining Vote Support: Trust and Regime Satisfaction

An important aspect of Putin's personalist appeals is that they are differentiated, taking on different forms aimed at different constituencies. For some voters, personalism is a critical impulse determining vote choice—based on perceived interest, policy successes, or personal attributes. In the immediate pre-election period, rally rhetoric framed personalism as a hedge against upheaval, countering the message of the protests as revolutionary and dangerous as well as the direct attacks on Putin's appeal to voters. **Figure Two** provides a means to explore these nuances, focusing on the relationship between vote choice and trust in Putin.

Trust denotes a very particular relationship: the respondent perceives Putin as acting in their personal interest—delivering policy, side payments, or stability. Putin's trust levels



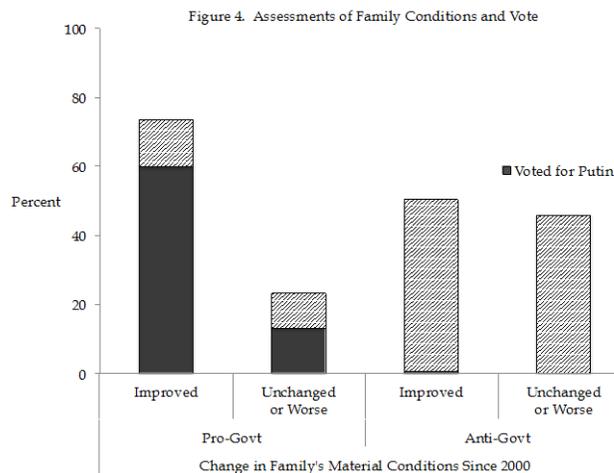
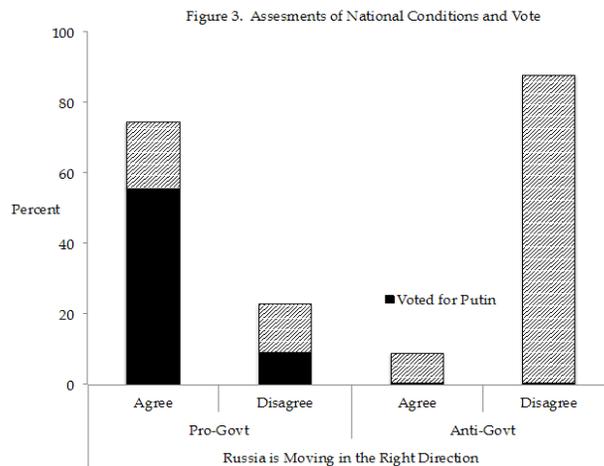
over time have been high, and they are off the charts among rally participants: 90.6 percent. Rally respondents exhibited a strong correlation between trust and vote. However, Putin also won support from those who did not trust him, illustrating the power of the “Putin as the only choice” frame that was promulgated by both the reelection committee and the rallies themselves. Voters may not have been entirely satisfied with Putin, but in the context of the other candidates on the ballot, he was the only viable choice.

These findings may also reflect a darker influence of the rallies. These high positive assessments, coupled with evidence that some respondents with high trust in Putin voted against him, suggest that respondents followed the imperative to act “as if” they supported the president by reflecting back the state’s narrative while reporting deviations in private behavior. The rallies established a pro-Putin myth that had to be adhered to despite personal beliefs.

Counter-intuitively, about 23 percent of protesters reported positive trust in Putin, an assessment correlated with better economic conditions. However, their positive assessments had no effect on vote choice, emphasizing the total rejection of personalist linkages among opposition supporters.

A second form of personalism stresses the candidate’s direct role in securing benefits for constituents—a personal responsibility for the successes of the regime. **Figures Three and Four** explore this form of personalism, examining correlations between vote choice and two assessment indicators, regime direction and pocketbook economic conditions.

The first significant finding across the two figures is that protestors hold far more negative assessments of regime policy than their counterparts at the rallies, particularly on assessments of the direction of the country. In general, these voters exemplify what we think of as normal politics, punishing the candidate who has not produced collective goods. As



we see in the impact of trust, personalist linkages are rejected, as voters give Putin no credit for policy success—particularly as it relates to economic well-being.

In contrast, regime assessments are much stronger predictors of vote choice for rally participants, especially assessments of personal economic conditions. Yet, they are also not as important as trust in shaping vote support. On the whole, Putin receives credit for regime successes and limited blame for failures. Vote support among negative respondents suggests the triumph of rally strategies to shift blame toward internal and external enemies and away from Putin.

Conclusions: Personalism and Regime Support

The rival images of Putin in the rallies and protests define a clear attitudinal and behavioral divide. Anti-regime protests took direct aim at personalist appeals to undermine electoral support and to deprive the regime of control over alternative levers to maintain the electoral authoritarian regime. Following this cue, protestors themselves rejected personalism as a basis of regime support and blamed Putin for conditions in the country. 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.

Among rally participants, popular attitudes toward Putin were much more positive and formed the basis of strong vote support. For these citizens, personalism remains a pillar of regime stability. The survey evidence suggests different types of personalist appeals rooted in trust and policy success complemented the “only choice” message at the foundation of the “Putings.” It also demonstrates that the state’s use of rallies to mobilize support and counter the protest message was effective.

Yet, the evidence also reveals that the regime faces two potential dangers. First, it remains unclear if the majority of voters, and particularly urban voters, look more like protestors or rally participants. If they resemble the former, the regime may face a crisis—even if it can deliver more tangible benefits. Second, Putin’s support, based largely in trust, remains vulnerable to scandal, external crisis, or illness, which may alienate stalwart voters and undermine the mechanisms that bind elites to the regime. Hence, while the dominoes did not fall in spring 2012, the protests rendered Putin more vulnerable and prompted significant changes in regime strategies—including a growing reliance on coercion—that will have serious unintended consequences.

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