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THE PUTINIST NATION: PUTIN AND RUSSIAN NATIONALISM AS A REGIME STRATEGY

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Summary

After years of upheaval in Russia, Putin's arrival on the political stage constituted an important turning point for the country, as the new President successfully rebuilt a strong central government and gained the support of the Russian people. This paper lays out Putin's domestic and international strategies for rallying distinct and seemingly conflicting forms of nationalism: 'ethnic' and 'imperial' nationalism. The paper shows that at the domestic level, Putin branded his regime as the ultimate representative of ethnic Russians, building a quasi-nation-state that gave voice to traditional, conservative Russian nationalists. Yet by targeting specific international interests, Putin simultaneously revived Russian imperial nationalism in ways that complemented, rather than antagonized, ethnic nationalist interests. Ultimately, I argue that Putin has gained Russians' support in part by mobilizing diverging, and inherently conflicting, nationalist trends. Yet the President's persisting popularity masks a troubling failure to cement long-term support for the Russian state.

Key Words: Putin, Russia, nationalism, ethnic nationalism, imperialism, foreign policy.

Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union brought with it an unprecedented crisis of identity for the Russian nation. After some 70 years of communism, Russia was adrift—left entirely without the institutional structure and Marxist-Leninist creed of the communist regime. As such, the USSR's dissolution led to a “comprehensive identity crisis in the Russian population,” pushing the country to search for its national roots (Bagger 2007). To many, communism came to represent an inauthentic passage in Russia’s history, leaving the nation with a deep void that spanned most of the twentieth century (Bagger 2007). This crisis of identity was compounded by a “deep and prolonged economic recession” throughout the 1990s that wreaked social, political and financial havoc in Russia (Gel'man 2015). The Yeltsin regime, which took power in the aftermath of the Soviet Union’s collapse, was utterly incapable of navigating the harsh realities of 1990s—eventually resulting in Yeltsin’s quest to find a viable successor. His appointment of Vladimir Putin to the position of Prime Minister in August of 1999 represented a major turning point for Russia.

Capitalizing on fortunate economic and political shifts of the early 2000s, the Putin regime cemented an unprecedented grip on power—moving quickly to suppress opposition media, problematic oligarchs and political competition (Gel'man 2015). While favorable conditions enabled Putin to gain both power and popularity in his first term, however, the President also deployed an array of nationalist strategies to revive the image of a great Russian nation and bolster his regime’s legitimacy and popularity. Through the strategic employment of symbolism, rhetoric and policies that appealed primarily to ethnic Russians, as well as a quasi-imperialist foreign policy agenda, Putin played on two divergent strands of nationalism in Russia: ethnic nationalism, and imperial nationalism. The former emphasizes ethnic Russians’ unique and shared traditions, values, and history, and thus seeks a Russian nation-state that is representative of ethnic Russians (Pain 2016). The latter, ‘imperial’ or ‘great power’ form of Russian nationalism is based primarily on the Russian nation’s historical experience of belonging to powerful empires whose boundaries extended well beyond territories inhabited by ethnic Russians—and thus depends on the construction of a powerful state focused on elevating Russia’s status on the global stage (Pain 2016). These two forms of nationalism carry fundamentally differing emphases. Ethnic nationalism, in its extreme form, wants a “Russia for Russians only,” thus focusing on the creation of a nation-state that embodies distinctly *Russian* values and traditions (Shevel 2011). Imperial nationalism, by contrast, seeks to revive Russian ‘greatness’ through territorial expansion and interventionism aimed at securing Russia’s status as a great power. While both play on elements of Russia’s history, and pride, ethnic nationalism is more focused on domestic matters, while great power nationalism is outward-oriented and aimed at *expanding* Russia’ territory and influence. As this paper will argue, Putin’s singular success in garnering broad popularity among Russians partly emanated from his ability to activate *both* ethnic and imperial nationalism in Russia.

The paper will proceed in several sections. First, I will provide a broad overview of the Soviet era’s impact on Russian identity. I will argue that Russians were deeply influenced by the Soviet regime’s imposition of a communist way-of-life—eventually creating a non-negligible and distinct ‘Soviet nation’ to which Russians increasingly felt they belonged. I will then address, briefly, the fall of the USSR and Yeltsin’s failure to mobilize the Russian nation’s support for his regime. Putin’s arrival on the political stage, I will argue, constituted an important turning point in Russia, as the new President successfully rebuilt a strong central government and gained the support of the Russian people. The paper will then lay out Putin’s domestic and international strategies for rallying both ethnic and imperial nationalist enthusiasm for his Presidency. At the domestic level, I will show that Putin effectively branded his regime as the ultimate representative of ethnic Russians, building a quasi-nation-state that gave voice to traditional, conservative Russian nationalists at the expense of the multiethnic ‘appeasement’ approach endorsed by Yeltsin. Moreover, I will argue that by targeting specific international interests and re-casting the West as an antagonistic ‘other,’ Putin revived Russian imperial nationalism in ways that complemented, rather than antagonized, ethnic nationalist interests. The paper will end on a discussion of the long-term implications of Putin's strategies. Ultimately, I shall argue that the regime's employment of diverging nationalist trends has failed to cement long-term support for the Russian state. Indeed, Putinist nationalism may be vulnerable to fracturing in the future, as its merging of ethnic and imperial forms of nationalism is incoherent outside of foreign policy initiatives that can be credibly billed as defending the interests of ethnic Russians. Finally, Putin's centrality to Russian state has rendered him virtually irreplaceable, opening Russia up to the possibility of another identity crisis upon his eventual departure from the Presidency. In the end, while Putin's nationalist strategies helped construct a powerful regime, I will argue that the Russian state is built on an unsustainable base of support —leaving open the question of what will become of Russia without Vladimir Putin.

Russian and Soviet Identity in the USSR

For over 70 years, Russian identity was deeply influenced by the nation's communist experience. The Soviet Union deeply changed its constituent nations' economic, social, and national realities. In Russia, the Soviet regime instituted certain radical departures from long-established traditions, redefining the people's relationship with religion, the state, as well as the world. By promoting the separation of church and state, and limiting the influence of religious forces within the USSR, as well as working to build a Soviet empire, the communist era left a distinctly Soviet imprint on Russian identity. The USSR, particularly under Khrushchev, also worked to build popular support for the notion of a 'Sovetskii Narod'—a Soviet people or nation—through the promotion of symbolism that drew heavily on Marxist-Leninist principles and the USSR's victory in World War II. The Cold War also heightened anti-Western rhetoric by the communist regime, which painted the 'Sovetskkii Narod,' and thus Russia, as defending a way-of-life that was under Western, capitalist assault. The Soviet era thus entailed vast changes within Russian society that contributed to important shifts in Russians' conception of their national identity.

Among the most extreme shifts for Russia under the Soviet regime was the USSR's insistence on a secular state, and its effective suppression of powerful religious factions. Historically, Russia had been a deeply religious nation. The Orthodox Christian Church had close ties to Tsarist Russia, serving a critical role in the legitimization of the Tsars' claim to absolute power; and had a gargantuan following among peasants and nobility alike (Encyclopedia Britannica 2016). Under the Soviet era, by contrast, state power was legitimized by the regime's promotion of Marxist-Leninist ideology. As such, problematic or disobedient religious sects came under significant regime pressure, occasionally producing violent confrontations. In a 1922 letter to the Politburo, for instance, Lenin outlined a ruthless plan of attack against the extremist Black Hundreds clergy that had been defying state orders to surrender church valuables (Library of Congress 2016). Lenin demanded that the confrontation "end not other than with the shooting of the very largest number" of the Black Hundreds leaders (Library of Congress 2016). More generally, under the Soviet Union, those "religious concepts and behavior not conforming" to the regime's interests were "deemed inimical influences that must be combatted" (Boiter 1987). The communist regime's absolute monopoly on political power within the USSR thus conflicted with a long history of religious influence of the state in Russia. Ardent communists viewed religion as antithetical to the achievement of a true communist state, as it diluted the total hold of communism over the hearts and minds of the people. In his writings, Marx famously referred to religion as the "opium of the people," claiming it was but the "sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions" (Marx 1843). Despite permitting the practice of religion, the USSR's constitutions thus enshrined the principle that "church is separated from the state and school from church" (Boiter 1987). The Soviet Union's secular stance, and its attempts to limit the influence and power of religion, thus represented a large break from Russia's historical experiences and relegated religion to a more peripheral role within the Russian nation.

Beyond limiting religious influence, the USSR, particularly under the leadership of Nikita Krushchev, promoted the idea of a pan-national 'Sovietskii Narod'—or 'Soviet Nation.' In the early years of the Soviet regime, the USSR was characterized by the state as a *multinational* union, emphasizing the multiplicity of ethnicities and nations it encompassed (Aktürk 2012). A few years into World War II, however, German attacks against the USSR prompted the more frequent use of the term "Sovetskii Narod" to unite the Soviet people against a common aggressor (Aktürk 2012). The USSR's ultimate triumph over Germany, and its loss of some 24 million people in the process, became a crucial national symbol that resonated with all citizens of the USSR (Dykman 2016). The regime portrayed the USSR's victory as the successful defense and sacrifice of a common, *Soviet* people (Aktürk 2012). It was not until Nikita Khrushchev, however, that the Soviet nation-building project gained a strong foothold. Throughout his tenure as Chairman of the Communist Party, Khrushchev sought to popularize the notion of a Sovetskii Narod, frequently appealing to "soviet patriotism" by invoking notions such as the "Soviet motherland," and calling on the "further strengthening of the moral-political unity of *our nation*" (Aktürk 2012). Khrushchev often evoked the Soviet nation as the defeater of fascism and the builder of a new, communist way-of-life. This new Soviet nationalism was perhaps best summed up in Khrushchev's claim that the Soviets were "a new historic community of people" united by the common mission of promoting Marxism-Leninism (Aktürk 2012). Though Khrushchev did not succeed in eliminating ethnic identifications within USSR passports—a goal he had considered crucial to cementing a Pan-Soviet nation—his tenure was marked by a significant rise in USSR citizens' recognition of a genuine Soviet national identity (Aktürk 2012). Though Soviet-ness remained "contested and multi-faceted," a concerted effort by party leadership to bring about a supranational identity within the USSR yielded greater allegiance to "a unique Socialist civilization" that overcame national divides (Wojnowski 2015). Indeed, Soviet citizens increasingly recognized that the Soviet Union "reflected the interests of a multiethnic Eurasian community" (Tolz 1998). For Russians, then, an important new sense of identity, tied to the USSR's broad socialist project, emerged through the Soviet conception of a Sovetskii Narod.

The unparalleled, communist way-of-life in the USSR—defined by economic and social realities that were wholly unique to the Soviet Union—further cemented the idea of a Sovetskii Narod. The shared experience of a communist lifestyle under the Soviet Union long defined Russian life as well. For one, the USSR installed a revolutionary economic structure that entailed total state control over market prices, and the production of goods (Grossman 1962). The result was an oft-inefficient market punctuated by drastic food shortages, bread lines, and a total lack of choice in consumer goods (Grossman 1962). Even in the 1980s, for instance, Brezhnev claimed that "food was 'economically and politically' the central problem facing the country" (Burns 1982). Russians were also exposed to Soviet Union propaganda and educational material on a daily basis. The Komsomol, founded in 1918, was perhaps the Communist Party's most important tool in the indoctrination of young Soviets (Hornsby 2016). Dedicated to raising "youth in a 'spirit of Marxism-Leninism,'" the Komsomol worked to educate young people to become "good communists and loyal Soviet citizens," constantly teaching youth about the virtues of Marxism and the Soviet way-of-life (Hornsby 2016). Furthermore, propaganda was omnipresent in the USSR—whether in the form of posters, movies, anthems or texts and educational materials. Depicting idealized visions of Communism, or trumpeting calls to action or state initiatives, propaganda was a virtually inescapable and constant part of Russians' lives under the Soviet Union (Hornsby 2016). Consumer goods shortages, the Komsomol, and Soviet propaganda and symbolism became common in the everyday lives of nearly all Soviet citizens, thus solidifying the notion of a shared experience of the Sovetskii Narod—an experience that transcended pre-existing ethnic and national boundaries. While Russian nationalism persisted through the communist period, the unparalleled, communist way-of-life under the USSR nonetheless became an inextricable part of what it meant to be Russian in the Soviet Union (Oushakine 2009). Consequently, the USSR impregnated Russian identity with a sense of nationalism separate from Russian ethnicity that "most closely identified with Soviet, proletarian [identity]" (Shevel, Russian Nation-building from Yel'tsin to Medvedev: Ethnic, Civic or Purposefully Ambiguous? 2011).

The USSR also embodied a 'great power' or 'imperial' nationalism that sought to project Soviet influence abroad, and strengthened anti-Western sentiment among its people. Despite trying to distance itself from Russia's imperial past in the first decade of its foundation, the Soviet Union under Josef Stalin's rule embraced imagery of Russian and Soviet greatness to mobilize support for the USSR's battle against Germany in World War II (Shcherbak 2013). The Soviet Union's ultimate triumph in the conflict, alongside a ravaged and destabilized Europe, allowed the USSR to emerge as one of only two superpowers on the global stage (Kanet 2006). The Cold War rivalry that ensued between the United States and the Soviet Union sent both sides on and a quasi-imperial quest to extend their influence (Kanet 2006). To this end, the communist regime promoted great power imagery and rhetoric that sought to justify the need to expand the USSR's global reach "to gain access to – if not real influence in – a number of countries" (Kanet 2006). Like the United States, the Soviet Union undertook a number of proxy battles, in Somalia, Afghanistan, and other countries, that were aimed at installing regimes more amenable to Soviet influence (Kanet 2006). The Soviet Union's quest to project its power further escalated its anti-Western rhetoric, as the regime claimed its involvements abroad were necessary to defend countries from the "armed aggression of imperialist circles"—un-ironically referring to the US (DeYoung 1980). Even at the level of the Komsomol, young Soviets were taught about the importance of "spread[ing] communist influence abroad" and defending nations against Western, capitalist encroachment (Hornsby 2016). The imperialist nature of the Soviet Union's foreign policy agenda ultimately constituted an extension—if not an amplification—of the Russian imperialism that had coursed through the history of Tsarist Russia (Lieven 1995). Though driven by diverging political forces, the USSR, and the Russian Empire it replaced, shared "authoritarian centralist" state structures and emphasized their embodiment of "great civilizations" to justify their pursuit of an empire (Lieven 1995). The Soviet Union's aggressive, imperialistic foreign policy throughout the Cold War era, as well as its anti-Western rhetoric, thus promoted a view of the Sovetskii Narod as a great and powerful nation whose influence must be extended abroad.

Undoubtedly, the Soviet era powerfully impacted Russian identity. The repression of certain Tsarist Russian traditions, such as deep Church influence over the state and people; the promotion and deliberate state-construction of a "Sovetskii Narod;" the unique Soviet, communist way-of-life; and the USSR's imperialist and anti-Western traits, lent credence to a true 'Soviet' identity beyond Russian-ness. While people in Russia continued to identify themselves as 'Russian' throughout the Soviet period, they also increasingly saw themselves as part of a 'Soviet nation'—united by communist tenets, and a patriotic desire to defend the USSR and assert its power on the international stage.

Crisis of the 1990s: The Fall of the USSR and the Search for Russian Identity

The sudden collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 deeply shook Russian identity. As summed up by the headline of a daily Soviet newspaper, many Russians "Woke up […] stunned [that] Soviet power is gone" (Oushakine 2009). Amid huge economic and political upheavals, Russians struggled to understand what would fill the void left behind by the Soviet Union. The 1990s saw the rise of vast societal inequalities, deep economic recession and the loss of Russian power on the global stage (Gel'man 2015). These harsh realities, alongside the swift dismantling of Soviet symbolism, and the annihilation of a communist way-of-life, culminated in a profound sense of "loss" among Russian people (Oushakine 2009). For many Russians, the fall of the USSR entailed the fall of the Russian nation as they had come to know it. Russia was no longer part of a vast, quasi-imperial Cold War superpower in which Russians could pride themselves, thus stifling a 'great power' nationalism that had characterized the Soviet era. Moreover, Russians were no longer part of a broader 'Sovetskii Narod' that had been constructed by the communist regime. The fall of the Union began a negotiation process between the Yeltsin regime and various ethnic groups within Russia in which the new President stressed the 'multi-national' nature of the country, and gave broad independence to various ethnic regions within the Russian Federation's borders (Bahry 2006). In essence, Russians' "feeling of belonging" to a united "Soviet power and […] Soviet motherland were gone" (Oushakine 2009).

Nation-building efforts under the Yeltsin regime utterly failed to take hold. The dissolution of the Soviet Union meant the disappearance of a superpower—and with it, a source of national pride. Though Russians had not identified themselves as primarily Soviet, many saw the USSR as "the Russian Empire reincarnated" (Simes 1999). During the Soviet era, the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic was therefore seen more as an administrative body, rather than the embodiment of the "real, greater Russia" (Simes 1999). This posed a serious problem for the Yeltsin regime. To gain the full backing and enthusiasm of the Russian nation, the state needed to maintain Russia's status as a great power. Yet this proved impossible throughout the 1990s. With the collapse of the USSR, some 15 nations eventually gained their independence, while many more finally escaped the grip of powerful Soviet influence over their domestic affairs (World Atlas 2018). In the context of a fracturing, crumbling Soviet empire, Yeltsin simply could not portray Russia as *growing* in influence and strength; indeed, Russian power appeared, by all accounts, to be on the retreat (Simes 1999). Deepening Russians' perception of a weakened nation was the Russian Federation's tumultuous economic situation throughout the 1990s. Yeltsin's tenure as President was marked by "excessively high inflation, and a deep and protracted transformation recession" (Gel'man 2015). Many Russians lost their life's savings, jobs, and any semblance of security vis-à-vis their livelihood in 1990s Russia (Herrera 2001). The result was a widespread feeling that the Russian nation had lost its strength, and its bearings—and that the Russian state was no longer a representative of Russian might (Simes 1999). This perceived loss of strength throughout the 1990s contributed to growing disillusionment with the central government. By the late 1990s, in fact, President Yeltsin's approval ratings had plunged to the single digits (Univeristy of Washington 2017). The tumult surrounding the USSR's collapse spelled the death of a superpower, and left Russians deprived of the national pride that had always accompanied the Russian (and later, Soviet) empire. The failure of the Yeltsin regime to restore Russian power and 'greatness' ultimately undermined support for the state.

Furthermore, an 'ethnic' sense of Russian nationalism was sidelined by the strategy Yeltsin devised to prevent further disintegration of Russia's territory. Among the top challenges faced by the Yeltsin regime was the question of how to maintain authority over the country's eighty-nine provinces—many of which contained ethnic groups that felt distant from ethnic Russian people (Stoner-Weiss 2001). Yeltsin's approach to these communities was marked by a strategy of appeasement. In order to "calm the more rebellious and demanding regions of Russia," Yeltsin signed over forty bilateral treaties that granted the more independent-minded regions greater autonomy over their affairs (Stoner-Weiss 2001). The result was heavy emphasis on the multi-national, rather than *Russian* character of the Russian Federation (Stoner-Weiss 2001). The process of nation-building throughout the 1990s thus came up against a familiar problem in Russia: the natural conflict between nation-building and empire-building (Khazanov 1997). Indeed, while the Russian Federation encompassed a population that was roughly 80% Russian, its territory had been acquired, historically, through the conquest of ethnically diverse regions (Khazanov 1997). The Yeltsin regime therefore had to balance its hopes of building an effective nation-state against the preservation of Russian territorial bounds, which included a number of ethnic groups bent on achieving greater autonomy and self-determination in the post-communist era. In this effort, the Yeltsin regime considered "the Russian nationalists as its adversaries," and stuck firmly by a multi-national definition of the Russian Federation (Khazanov 1997). But pitting the regime squarely against Russian ethnic nationalism left it stranded without the legitimizing power of aligning the state with a single nation. Though 1990s Russia was predominantly ethnically Russian, Yeltsin thus failed to create a strong nation-state, leaving behind a relatively weak federal structure based heavily on a multitude of shaky bilateral agreements (Stoner-Weiss 2001).

Ultimately, the Russian Federation under Yeltsin failed to rally national support and legitimacy, as the regime failed to revive either great power nationalism or harness the support of ethnic nationalists who sought the creation of a true Russian nation-state. On the one hand, Yeltsin was incapable of maintaining—due both to sheer circumstance, and shaky leadership—the image of a powerful empire that had been essential to Russian nationalism in Tsarist and Soviet Russia alike. On the other, Yeltsin's regime engaged in myriad negotiations and treaty-signings between the central government and various subnational regions that empowered a multiethnic definition of the Federation at the expense of solidifying a *Russian* nation-state. The 1990s were thus punctuated by the state's failure to deliver Russians a clear understanding of their nation; the regime represented neither a great multiethnic Russian 'empire,' nor an ethnically Russian nation-state. The Yeltsin regime's inability to tackle Russia's post-communist identity crisis left the Russian Federation without the support of its most key constituency: the Russian nation.

Putin and the Revival of a Powerful, Centralized Russian State

Putin's ascent to the political apex marked the beginning of a sea change in Russia. In many ways, Putin came in as the right man at the right time. Appointed acting President upon Yeltsin's resignation on December 31, 1999, Vladimir Putin came into office just as the Russian economy was finally recovering from the major 1998 financial crisis (Gel'man 2015). After the Russian government and Russian Central Bank defaulted on their debt, Russia saw a major economic recession, with its GDP shrinking at a staggering rate of 5.3% in 1998 (Herrera 2001). Within just over a year, however, the country's economy rebounded, with its GDP reaching a 6.4% rate of growth in 1999, and an impressive 10% in 2000 (Herrera 2001). Russia's economic comeback emanated from a growth in oil and gas prices—two key resources Russia continues to depend on for revenue (Virginie Lasnier 2018). With the economy doing better than it had in the 1990s, Putin reaped significant political benefits. After years of economic tumult, the dawn of Putin's Presidency coincided with a major turning point, thereby legitimizing Putin's regime as the first effective post-communist Russian state (Gel'man 2015). Presidential approval ratings, which had remained in the single digits throughout the end of Yeltsin's tenure, rocketed upwards in the first years of Putin's tenure. Throughout his first two terms as President, Putin enjoyed an average approval rating above 70%, at times exceeding 80% (Levada-Center 2018). Putin understood, however, that achieving a stable, long-term grip on power in Russia would require gaining deeper support from Russians —support that would not waver through the booms and busts of the global economy.

Putin's first step in reviving state strength in Russia was to aggressively reshape the relationship of the central government with the various regions. While Yeltsin had pursued a policy of appeasement that embraced Russia's multi-national nature, Putin moved quickly to establish the total supremacy of the central, Russian government over all regions within its borders (Stoner-Weiss 2001). By 2000, Putin managed to secure Duma support for two landmark pieces of legislation that moved power in Russia back to Moscow. The new laws barred elected regional leaders from serving on the Federation Council (which wielded significant power in Russia), and granted Putin the power to remove elected regional leaders who violated federal laws (Andrew Konitzer 2006). Putin took a step further in 2004, passing a law that abolished the direct election of regional governors and making them presidential appointees instead (Andrew Konitzer 2006). While the 1990s had enshrined a weak form of federalism with strong, autonomous regions, Putin's presidency reasserted the supremacy of a powerful, centralized Russian state (Andrew Konitzer 2006). The impressive shift in center-regional dynamics was exhibited in several specific cases. For instance, Nikita Belykh, Governor of the Kirov region from 2009 to 2016, who had been a liberal leader critical of Putin, was sentenced to 8 years in prison in 2018 on bribery charges that were widely viewed as a targeted attack by the Putin regime (Vedyashkin 2018). In effect, Putin reestablished a centralized state authority more in line with the Soviet period. To many Russians, Putin was "reasserting law and order over the Russian regions" and thereby strengthening what had been a weak and ineffective central government throughout the 1990s (Moran 2017).

Putin's centralization strategy effectively stream-rolled efforts by ethnic groups to gain full independence from Russia, and reclaimed the supremacy of the central, *Russian* state of territories and peoples within its borders. Nowhere was this more evident than in Putin's treatment of Chechnya. The first Chechen War, which took place under Yeltsin, had been resolved by the 1996 Khasavurt Accord that granted Chechnya de facto (though not de jure) independence (Sakwa 2010). Yet by 1999, a number of border clashes, rebels' invasion of Dagestan, as well as Chechen terrorist activity, sparked renewed tensions between the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (CPI) and the federal Russian government (Jack 2005). After the September 1999 bombings of several Russian apartment building, which were blamed on Chechen separatists, the Russian Federation launched an attack against the CPI. Alongside the military intervention, Putin moved aggressively to de-stabilize the Chechen government, declaring in October of 1999 that Chechen President Aslan Mashkadov was an illegitimate leader (Sakwa 2010). By May of 2000, the Russian central government had largely retaken control of Chechnya, and quickly installed Akhmad Kadyrov—a Putin loyalist—as President of the region (Sakwa 2010). While the Russian state granted Chechnya significant autonomy under the leadership of Kadyrov, it had also sent a clear message; namely, that the independence of any region in Russia would only go as far as Putin allowed it to. In other words, Putin "was the boss in this country" (Gel'man 2015).

To further bolster his nationalist credentials, Putin strategically employed imperial and Soviet symbolism. Putin recognized early in his presidency that both the Russian empire, and the Soviet

Union, contained historical symbols essential to Russian national pride. In 2000, for example, Putin adopted a national anthem that reused the tune of the Soviet era with a different set of lyrics (Warren 2000). The Soviet anthem, created on Stalin's orders in the midst of World War II, became a symbol of Soviet strength, and the indomitable nature of the Russian and Soviet people (Warren 2000). Putin also continued the Soviet tradition of extravagant Victory Day celebrations —complete with military marches meant to evoke Russia's enduring strength and the nation's critical role in World War II (Lipman 2015). Putin has also endorsed the use of imperial symbols to embody Russia's national roots in the Tsarist era. One of the most prominent symbols of this post-soviet rapprochement with imperial Russian history and tradition is Putin's continued use of the double-headed imperial eagle as a representation of the state, and in particular the presidency (Kremlin 2018). The double-headed eagle, which first appeared in the 1490s, was long used to represent the "sovereign of all Rus"—or Russia—thus emphasizing the Putin regime's claim to rule over the Russian nation and its territory (Alef 1966). Putin selectively revived certain symbols of both the Soviet Union and Russian Empire to rebrand the new Russian Federation as the natural successor to the powerful empires that had preceded it, thereby bolstering his legitimacy among Russians seeking a revival of their nation's strength.

Through the confusion and chaos of the 1990s, Putin's regime emerged as an effective government that brought Russians economic recovery, and an empowered centralized state. Putin largely quelled the Yeltsin era's deep economic and political uncertainties. Benefiting from good timing due to the economic turnaround that began in 1999, Putin used his popular support to quickly and massively recentralize power by nixing the Yeltsin era multi-nationalist approach in favor of a system in which regional leadership and affairs were to be supervised and controlled by the central government. This centralized Russian regime, which was reminiscent of all-powerful Tsarist and Soviet-era states, recouped some of the public pride and faith in the central government which had been lost in the Post-Soviet era. For Putin, however, securing an unshakable grasp on power would require further nation-building strategies—which this paper will turn to next.

Rhetoric & Policy in Putin's Embrace of Ethnic Nationalism

Mobilizing nationalist support for his regime required Putin to strategically employ nationalist rhetoric and symbolism, as well as to coopt ultranationalist and conservative trends that could otherwise pose a threat to his power. Putin quickly adapted to the complex socio-political terrain of the 1990s by employing rhetoric and policies aimed at garnering the support of ethnic Russians. In so doing, Putin successfully aligned his regime with the Russian nation, thus cementing a nation-state despite the myriad ethnicities and nations encompassed by the Russian Federation.

While the First Chechen War was unpopular among Russians, clever and subtly-nationalist marketing on Putin's part successfully mobilized popular support for Russia's second campaign in the region, and for the Putin regime itself. Putin's first move was to bill the war as a "counter-terrorist operation" aimed at securing Russians from Chechen terrorism (Vaughn 2013). But beyond his labeling of the conflict, Putin also employed discriminatory and vitriolic rhetoric to frame Chechnya as a sort of "other" that—kept unchecked—constituted a threat to the Russian way-of-life. Speaking to reporters at an EU-Russia summit in 2002, Putin argued that whether "you are […] a Christian, […] or an atheist […] you are in danger" because "they speak about the necessity of killing all" non-believers (Feifer 2002). In his remarks, Putin made no effort to clarify that "they" referred to a small, radicalized fraction of the Chechen people. Instead, the President appeared to opt for a fear-mongering strategy which sought to justify his regime's brutal actions in

Chechnya as a necessary evil in subduing a morally defunct, radicalized, and fundamentally dangerous Chechen people. Partly as a result of this deep antagonism, the Second Chechen War was marked by atrocities and egregious human rights violations that only bred further distrust between Russians and Chechens (Jack 2005). The conflict appeared to be fought over both political, but also ethnic, grievances (Jack 2005). By framing the conflict in drastic and almost anti-Chechen terms, Putin mobilized ethnic Russians nationalism against Chechnya—and in support of his own regime. Despite the unpopularity of the first war, Putin's demonization of a Chechen "other" helped ensure a majority of Russians felt positively about Russia's second campaign in the region, subsequently increasing Putin's over all approval ratings (Levinson 2010).

Alongside Putin's rhetorical strategies with regards to Chechnya, the President effectively coopted certain Russian ultranationalist factions throughout the early 2000s with a strategy of "controlled nationalism." The so-called 'Color Revolutions' in both Georgia and Ukraine, which occurred in 2003 and 2004, respectively, led to very real fears within the Putin regime that such revolts might occur in Russia (Wilson 2010). As such, Putin developed a strategy that harnessed nationalist support for the regime—thus limiting the chances of a revolution—while controlling for the more problematic elements of nationalist movements. The idea was that allowing certain pro-regime ultranationalists groups to express themselves would "decrease the opportunity of nationalists becoming a force that would destabilize the regime" (Petkova 2017). Among the moves aimed at appeasing nationalists was the abolishment of the October Revolution celebration in favor of a "National Unity Day" commemorating the 1612 liberation of Moscow from the Poles—which had been celebrated during the Tsarist era (Moscow Times 2013). Moreover, by allowing a number of nationalist groups, including "Great Russia" and the "Slavic Union," to form and march at various events, the Putin regime successfully coopted certain fragments of the far-right that exhibited pro-regime tendencies (Petkova 2017). Indeed, "Great Russia," among other groups, continues to claim that it is a "pro-government group" (Petkova 2017). Coopting far-right, nationalist factions also permitted Putin to better control those elements that billed themselves as anti-government. Where far-right opposition movements became problematic for Putin, imprisonment of their leaders was common practice (Petkova 2017). Yet such actions faced little opposition because Putin had effectively broken any true unity among Russian nationalist groups by gaining the support of certain parties. While phrases such as "Russia for Russians only" gained traction in the early 2000s, Putin strategically turned a blind eye to nationalist rhetoric so long as broad support for his regime appeared secured (Shevel 2011). In Putin's quest to solidify his grip on power, the President thus strategically sanctioned pro-government ultranationalist groups.

Putin also cemented a powerful political coalition by embracing conservative, religious and 'traditional Russian' values that were broadly appealing to ethnic Russians. The initial liberalization of Russia in the 1990s, with the growth of free expression, independent media, and the destruction of a despotic central state, led to hopes that Russia would come to embody Western-style democratic and liberal norms (Gel'man 2015). Putin's first term as President, however, allowed conservatism to gain "ideological hegemony in Russian politics" (Prozorov 2005). While Putin's political style had initially been viewed as "technocratic and depoliticized," the President found natural allies in a constituency that was wary of liberal, progressive values and clung instead to traditional, 'Russian' ideals (Prozorov 2005). Though Putin did not immediately set himself against Western liberalism, the President progressively shifted toward the embrace of a clearly traditional, conservative Russian ideology. In his 2013 State of the Union address, for instance, Putin emphasized that tensions in the country were provoked "by people devoid of culture and respect for tradition," arguing that Russians had to "safeguard […] the unity and integrity of the Russian state" (Putin, Presidential

Address to the Federal Assembly 2013). In this speech, as in others, Putin drew clear connecting line between ‘respect for tradition’ and the ‘Russian state.’ Going further, Putin argued that the state needed an educational system that helped “our nation’s citizens form their identity” by instilling in them “the nation’s values, history and tradition” (Putin, Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly 2013). The ‘nation,’ ‘values’ and ‘tradition’ Putin mentions here are not multinational or multiethnic in nature, but rather distinctly *Russian*, thus connecting traditionalist, conservative rhetoric to the President’s nation-building project.

Furthermore, Putin has actively promoted conservative policies in Russia. Perhaps the most infamous example was Putin’s 2013 law imposing fines and restrictions around “propagandizing ‘nontraditional’ sexual relationships among minors” (Kramer 2013). Alongside the “gay propaganda” ban, the Duma passed a law that “criminalized the insulting of religion” (Kramer 2013). Though broadly denounced by Western, liberal countries as an affront to Russians’ basic human rights, the laws found broad popular support in Russia (Kramer 2013). One Levada-Center survey conducted in March of 2015, for instance, found that 77% of Russian respondents felt either ‘positive’ or ‘mostly positive’ about the “law banning homosexual propaganda” (Levada-Center 2015). The propaganda policy may have been strategically designed to enhance the Putin regime’s popularity among broad swaths of the Russian population, who adhere to traditional “Orthodox Christian” values, and who often “embrace patriarchal and homophobic positions” (Sperling 2015). Rather than embracing communist-era secularism, Putin effectively revived the state’s adherence to religious and conservative Orthodox norms that had dominated Tsarist Russia (Sperling 2015). While Putin was initially viewed as apolitical, the President clearly chose a nation-building approach that rallied ethnic Russians around a view of the state as a protector of their conservative and religious values and traditions.

Much of Putin’s nation-building agenda has thus depended on navigating domestic realities, and implementing strategic changes in his regime’s behavior at home that mobilized nationalist and ethnic Russian support for the state. From re-centralizing the Russian Federation and creating a truly powerful Russian government, to strategically managing both ultranationalist and conservative currents within Russian society, Putin has created a Russian nation-state—under his leadership —which is a true representative of the ethnic ‘Russian’ people. But beyond building a strong base of support through domestic actions that appealed to ethnic Russians’ sense of tradition, history and culture, Putin successfully revived an “imperial nationalism” through an aggressive and well-marketed foreign policy agenda.

Putin on the Global Stage: Merging Ethnic and Imperial Nationalism

Both in the Soviet Union, and imperial Russia, nationalism had been built around more than an inherited set of values and traditions that permitted the imagination of a Russian nation. In both cases, the Russian nation found its traditional ‘home’ in empires that extended their power well beyond the traditional territorial boundaries that encompassed ethnically Russian people (Simes 1999). The collapse of the USSR had ushered in a significantly weaker Russian state that in no way resembled the empires of the past. The sudden weakness of Russia on the global stage was a shock to a nation that had for centuries been among the world’s greatest powers, and thus contributed to the 1990s “identity crisis” in Russia. With ‘great power’ nationalism in mind, Putin worked to rebuild Russia’s strength internationally, balancing his ethnic nationalist nation-building project against a similarly important empire-building project. To reawaken the Russian nation’s imperial nationalism, Putin pursued an aggressive foreign policy agenda and re-cast Western liberal countries as adversaries bent on stifling Russia's might (Allison 2014). But Putin was also careful to frame expansionist efforts as defending the interests of ethnic Russians—thus uniting both ethnic and imperial nationalist sentiments in support of his regime's actions.

Since his ascent to the Presidency, Putin has successfully reasserted Russia's status as a major power on the global stage through aggressive interventionism. Russia's economic turnaround, and the re-centralization of power under Putin, permitted the President to turn his attention away from the many domestic struggles that had plagued Yeltsin's tenure as president. Throughout his presidential administrations, Putin intervened in Georgia, Syria, Ukraine and a myriad of other conflicts, thereby demonstrating his willingness to engage militarily wherever Russia's interests were at stake (McFaul 2018). Undoubtedly, Russia's geopolitical power has grown alongside Putin's increasingly assertive foreign policy agenda (McFaul 2018). Interestingly, Putin's desire to assert Russian power abroad has been matched by a growing domestic support for pursuing national interests beyond Russia's borders. One survey, for instance, found that some 82.3% of Russians polled in 2013 believed that "the national interests of Russia [...] exist beyond its existing territory" —compared to a mere 17.7% who believed the country's interests were limited to current borders (RAND 2017). This attitude is reflective of the Russian nation's historical conception of its country as a "great power" that was and always will be "one of the influential and competitive poles of the modern world" (RAND 2017). Unlike other post-communist countries, Russia under Putin has refused to "accept the rank of a middle power with merely a regional role" (RAND 2017). Putin has instead showcased Russia's intention to partake in both regional and global issues, and aligned his regime's behavior with the "imperial consciousness" of the Russian nation (Pain 2016).

Yet reviving Russian imperialist nationalism was initially incoherent with the ethnic nationalist ideas that Putin had discreetly encouraged throughout his first terms as President. By fostering the growth of Russian pride and nationalism throughout the 2000s, Putin strengthened the popular conception of Russia as a nation-state that primarily represented the interests of an ethnically Russian people (Pain 2016). Russian nationalism came to the fore in part through Putin's strategic play on traditional, conservative, and xenophobic currents within Russian society, and thus precluded, in some ways, the conceptualization of Russia as an outward-oriented nation interested in engaging with the world an expanding its territory. In fact, the same survey that found 82.3% of Russians in 2013 favored a broad interpretation of Russia's national interests (as extending beyond its borders) also showed a vast dip in this point of view between 1999 and 2012. In fact, in 2012, some 56.6% of respondents said they sided with the idea that Russia's national interest were limited to its own borders (RAND 2017). Such a domestically-focused Russian attitude was problematic for the President's great-power, imperial ambitions. Indeed, to revive Russian imperialist nationalism, Putin had to frame his aggressive foreign policy goals in terms appealing to the ethnic nationalist current he had electrified throughout the early 2000s.

For Putin, the answer was to market foreign intervention in terms of *defending ethnic interests abroad*. The Putin regime employed this tactic in its military intervention in Georgia in 2008, arguing Russia was "supporting its 'citizens' abroad" (Allison, The Russian case for military intervention in Georgia: international law, norms and political calculation 2009). The Russian government had been issuing passports to Georgians living in South Ossetia and Abkhazia—regions that have high proportions of ethnic Russians—enabling the "Russian assertion of its 'right to protect'" its own people (Allison, The Russian case for military intervention in Georgia: international law, norms and political calculation 2009). Though clearly problematic from the perspective of international law, Putin's invasion of Georgia was met with approval by Russians: in September 2008, roughly a month after the Russo-Georgian conflict, Putin's approval ratings hit a high of

88% (Levada-Center 2018). Likewise, the 2014 annexation of Crimea represented a significant geopolitical *and* domestic boon for Putin (Allison 2014). Both historically and ethnically, the Crimean peninsula has heavy ties to Russia. Indeed, 2014 surveys showed that a majority of Ukrainians living in Crimea primarily "identified themselves as ethnic Russians," and that more than 50% claimed Russian was their native language (BBC 2014). Putin portrayed the Crimean annexation as a move to defend the region's ethnic Russians from Western oppression. In a speech following the peninsula's ascension to the Russian Federation, President Putin emphasized the shared history of Russia and Crimea, going as far back as Prince Vladimir's baptism in the region, and claiming that the peninsula's population was primarily ethnically Russian (Putin 2014). Putin denounced attempts by the Western-oriented Ukrainian government to "deprive Russians" in Crimea "of their language and to subject them to forced assimilation," and argued that to "abandon Crimea and its residents in distress" would have amounted to a "betrayal" on Russia's part (Putin 2014). Putin thus carefully framed major international interventions as attempts to protect and defend the interests of ethnic Russians abroad, thereby appealing to ethnic nationalist currents in his country.

Yet Putin simultaneously revived Russian imperialist nationalism, spurring Russians' sense that their country needed to assert its position on the global stage and defend interest beyond its own borders. Geo-politically, Crimea "gives Moscow continuing access to the naval base at Sevastopol," which houses Russia's Black Sea Fleet, thus enabling the country to more easily "project power in and around the Black Sea" region (CSIS 2014). Putin made no effort to deny the strategic import of Crimea to Russia's strength, arguing in the aftermath of Crimea's annexation that Sevastopol "serves as the birthplace of Russia's Black Sea Fleet" and that Crimea as a whole "[symbolizes] Russian military glory and outstanding valour" (Putin 2014). In defending Russia's actions, Putin claimed that "like other countries, [Russia] has its own national interests that need to be taken into account and respected" (Putin 2014). Moreover, to highlight the imperial implications of Russia's Crimean annexation, the Putin regime announced in June of 2018 that it would create a national holiday celebrating the Russian Empire's 18th-century accession of the peninsula (Moscow Times 2018). Combined with his promotion of Soviet and Tsarist imperial symbolism domestically, Putin's actions and rhetoric with regards to foreign policy have revived a Russian desire to assert the nation's status as a global power. In the aftermath of Putin's action in 2014, Russians' perception that "the national interests of Russia […] extend beyond its existing territory" skyrocketed from a mere 43.4% in 2012, back to a stunning 82.3% in 2016 (RAND 2017). Putin's interventions in Georgia and Crimea also led to impressive spikes in Russians' perception that Russia was a "great power"—with roughly 60% seeing their country as a 'great power' in 2008, and as many as 70% feeling the same way in 2015 (Virginie Lasnier 2018). Moreover, Russians' conception of what constitutes a "great power" has also shifted to more classically imperial understanding of the term—with a growing emphasis being placed on "military strength" and territorial expansion, as opposed to "economic power," since Putin took office (Virginie Lasnier 2018). In effect, Putin's interventionism has activated "great-power nationalist" and "neo-imperialist" sentiments in the Russian population by re-establishing Russia as one of the largest geopolitical players in the international community (Virginie Lasnier 2018). To an enduring part of the Russian nation that conceives of its home as a vast empire, Putin's actions in Georgia and Crimea came as necessary assertions of strength for a country that had lost its major-power status in the 1990s.

To justify his actions in Georgia and Crimea, Putin also framed the West as an antipathetic "other" which the Russian nation had to mobilize against. Upon Russia's intervention in Georgia in 2008, Putin "alleged […] that the United States may have orchestrated the conflict in Georgia" in order to "boost the prospects of a presidential candidate" (Nichol 2009). Such conspiratorial, anti-Western rhetoric persisted through much of the 2000s and featured prominently in the events surrounding Crimea in 2014. In Russia, some 52% of the population in 2014 believed Ukraine had "become a puppet in the hands of the West […] who are pursuing anti-Russian policy" (Pain 2016). Russians' phobia of the West also grew across the board in Russia, with 74% of Russians claiming to have a 'bad' attitude towards the United States, while 60% said they also felt negatively about the European Union (Pain 2016). The backlash was not merely a natural reaction to the conflict in Ukraine, however. Putin's regime deployed a vast propaganda machine to draw out anti-Western sentiments on a scale unseen since the Cold War era. Framing the US as a "genuine threat" to the regime, both state media and the President himself claimed Western countries were behaving in imperialist ways to counter Russian interests (McFaul 2018). In his Crimean annexation address, Putin brought up a familiar complaint, claiming that "NATO's expansion to the East" had encapsulated Western dishonesty and encroachment on Russia's borders (Putin 2014). In effect, Putin has recast the West as a rival "other"—and provoked a "rally around the flag" effect that has boosted his popularity at home (Gel'man 2015).

Putin's foreign policy has successfully activated and recruited the support of a Russian imperial nationalist impulse that had been lying dormant throughout the 1990s. In reviving tensions with the United States and its allies to quasi-Cold War levels, Putin has framed Western rebukes as an attempt to stifle Russia's growing strength on the global stage. But Putin's strategy has also justified expansionist and imperialistic foreign policy decisions by claiming to protect Russians living in foreign territories. The Russo-Georgian War and Crimean annexation were thus depicted as necessary actions both in terms of protecting Russia's interests, and as a means of defending the freedom of Crimea's ethnically Russian citizens from Western oppression. As a result, Putin mobilized *both* ethnic and imperialist nationalist currents in Russia through his international policy agenda. Indeed, Putin's maneuvering seemed to have paid off politically, as the events in Crimea led to a veritable resurgence in his approval ratings—which climbed 20 points (to and impressive 85%) between 2013 and 2014 (Levada-Center 2018). This tremendous surge in popular support has since faded, however, begging important questions about the long-term sustainability of Putin's nationalist strategies.

Putin's Russia: A Fragile State in Disguise

For all the power Putin has accrued over the last two decades, the Russian President may not have cemented a true institutional legacy, leaving Russia's future grimly uncertain in the event of his departure. As this paper has shown, Putin's success as a political figure has depended on his strategic play on diverging strands of Russian nationalism—both ethnic and imperial. Indeed, Putin has created a nation-state that represents the traditions and values of ethnic Russians, while simultaneously reviving Russia's quasi-imperial strength internationally. But examining the tumult surrounding Putin's one-term departure from the Presidency, and his shrinking approval ratings in the years that followed the Crimea annexation, yields clear doubts about Putin's nationalist strategy. Indeed, Putin's own political survival may depend on his ability to continuously devise plans that simultaneously reinvigorate imperial and ethnic nationalist sentiments in favor of his regime. The result is a Russian state whose legitimacy is utterly dependent upon the political skill of a single leader, and void of any true national support for its institutions.

The weaknesses in Putin's nationalist strategy has become more apparent in the years since Russia's Crimean takeover. While Putin initially gained popular support—with some 85% of Russians approving of his performance in 2014—the President's approval ratings have since plunged to 66% (Levada-Center 2018). While his current approval rating would likely remain the envy of many leaders in Western democracies, the nearly 20-point drop has revealed the temporary an unsustainable nature of Putin's Crimea boost. Polls are even grimmer for trust in the Russian government as a whole, where approval ratings transformed from 66% approval in September of 2014, to a 66% *disapproval* by August of 2018 (Levada-Center 2018). The sharp reversal in public support for the Putin regime may signal underlying flaws in Putin's nationalist strategy. Indeed, it is clear that the President cannot rely on events like the Crimean annexation to cement long-term support for his government—which must also address controversial domestic issues that are wholly dissociated from any nationalist connotations (Petrov 2018). As this paper discussed, the Crimean annexation, like Russia's intervention in Georgia, was an incident with very particular circumstances. The realities in each case enabled Putin to bolster nationalist hopes of reuniting ethnic Russians in foreign territories with their homeland, while simultaneously endorsing an imperialist, expansionist foreign policy agenda. But how many 'Crimeas' are left for Putin to rely on? After all, Russia has truly *unique* historical and ethnic ties to the peninsula and it is unlikely that Putin will have another opportunity—let alone multiple chances—to capitalize on nationalist sentiments through such events (Taylor 2014). Putin's successful merger of Russia's imperial- and ethnic-nationalist impulses may thus be short-lived.

The disparity between the President's consistently high approval ratings, and the abysmal status of the government's, is also telling of Putin's problematic institutional legacy. While the President has built a popular brand around himself as a champion of the Russian *nation*—by promoting both traditional, conservative Russian values and leading a resurgence in the country's global power—he has left state institutions outside of his Presidency weak, and largely untrusted. In August of 2018, for instance, Putin carried a 70% approval rating against the government's mere 33% (Levada-Center 2018). Other institutions, such as the judiciary, and law enforcement, face similar distrust among Russians. Even under Putin's popular presidency, Russia has continued to face a "general lack of trust in state institutions" (Hendley 2012). The persistent support for Putin's presidency, alongside distrust for every *other* state institution, points to a weakness in the President's institutional legacy. Indeed, the population's lack of faith in government institutions is a difficult long-term challenge for Russia—one that will be particularly problematic once Putin leaves office.

Among the prominent signs of persisting flaws in Putin's nationalist strategies was Russia's response to the 2018 pension reform law. As a result of both demographic and economic problems, the Putin regime resorted to increasing the age of retirement by 5 years (up to 65) for men—a move that has been widely reviled by Russians and which contributed to a steep decline in the President's popularity (Bennetts 2018). Polls show unparalleled disapproval of the law, with around 85% of Russians claiming they felt "mostly negatively" or "very negatively" about the proposed pension reforms (Levada-Center 2018). Yet this particularly inflammatory legislation is unlikely to be the last of President Putin's domestic challenges. In fact, while Russia's economy may be better off than in the 1990s, many of the "challenges facing Russia remain the same as two decades ago" (Havlik 2018). Economically, Russian development has largely stalled under Putin, due in part to a hostile climate for foreign investment, and repeated rounds of sanctions imposed in response to Putin's actions abroad (Havlik 2018). The lack of genuine rule of law in the country; "arbitrary expropriations" of private property for "political reasons;" corruption; and a "judiciary […] vulnerable to political pressures" result in an environment where property rights guaranteed on paper are not consistently upheld in practice (Heritage Foundation 2018). Consequently, foreign direct investment (FDI), and genuine economic development at home, has faced a generally hostile institutional environment. Though Putin has weathered the pension reforms while maintaining an impressive 60+% approval rating, domestic economic and demographic challenges are likely to continue plaguing his tenure. And in the event that Putin successfully maintains his grasp on power until a voluntary retirement, any successor will be met with a complex, potentially unresolved set of issues—without benefitting from the personal popularity Putin has thus far secured.

Putin's brief departure from the presidency, between 2008 and 2012, also led to upheavals that may be indicative of what lies ahead for the country once Putin definitively out of Russia's political picture (Petrov 2018). While Putin remained powerful as Prime Minister in Medvedev's administration—and some even speculated that he was still in the driver's seat—the government's popularity (and Putin's own), suffered significant during his absence from the presidency. The government's approval rating dropped from 66% to 40% between 2008 and 2012, Putin's slid from 88% to 63% (Levada-Center 2018). Moreover, increasing discontentment among Russians came to the fore during the 2011 protests "For Free Elections," which were the largest "public protests [in Russia] since the fall of the Soviet Union" (NPR 2011). Though Putin ultimately won the 2012 election comfortably, his popularity did not immediately recover; his approval ratings stalled from 2012 to 2013, making a recovery only once the President became more directly involved in the situation in Ukraine (Levada-Center 2018). Despite the Putin regime's outward appearance of invincibility, then, the current stability of public support for the President may be subject to erosion in the future, should public discontentment with domestic matters grow (Petrov 2018). And it is unclear if the President will find—once again—a Crimea or Georgia to reanimate nationalist fervor in his favor.

The most lasting legacy of Putin's iron grip on power may thus be that the President has left behind no institutional legacy at all. The Putin regime's highly strategic employment of nationalism to weather domestic concerns and build popular support seems to rely heavily on the personal appeal and political skill of Putin himself. Consistently low approval ratings and trust in either the government or any Russian legal institutions, and protests during the last year of Medvedev's presidency, underscore a gloomy future for Russia without Putin. For Putin, as well, growing domestic economic and demographic woes may pose further problems to his support among Russian people, and will likely require the president to continue finding strategic issues of nationalist interest to divert popular attention to.

Conclusion

Russian history has been marked by deep and important nationalist currents which Putin has successfully played on throughout his tenure as President. Seizing power in the midst of Russia's recovery from economic tumult, and capitalizing on a deep national identity crisis after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Putin successfully redefined the Russian political field. The President moved aggressively to recentralize the country politically, steamrolled ethnic independence movements, coopted certain ultranationalist factions, and embraced elements of Russian pride and traditional conservatism that led to the emergence of a veritable ethnic Russian nation-state. Beyond his strategic use of the ethnic nationalist current in Russia, Putin revived an image of Russian greatness that had permeated much of the nation's imperial history—in both Soviet and Tsarist Russia. To this end, Putin asserted Russian interests on the international stage, pushing back against perceived Western encroachment, and combining ethnic and imperial nationalist interests through targeted interventionism under the guise of protecting ethnic Russians abroad. As this paper has demonstrated, Putin's nationalist strategies largely paid off politically, as the President has maintained strong approval ratings marked by significant boosts during both the Georgian and Crimean interventions.

Nonetheless, Putin's presidency, and his nationalist strategies, have left his country on an uncertain and perilous path. While the President claims to be defending national interests on the world stage, his people continue to face socioeconomic woes that show no signs of subsiding. And while the President's own approval remains high among the Russian populace, other institutions in Russia have not similarly benefitted from Putin's popularity. Russians' broad distrust in virtually all domestic institutions leaves open the possibility that Putin's departure will generate another major identity crisis. Indeed, if the Russian nation depends on Putin's unique brand of domestic and foreign policy leadership to activate ethnic and 'great power' pride, his eventual descent from the political apex may spell the end of Russian nationalism in its current, Putinist form. What Russians will do to fill this inevitable void is a looming question which portends a difficult and dramatic period of national reckoning for Russia.

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