

Middle-Class Nationalism in Post-Crimean Russia*

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Abstract

The annexation of Crimea in March 2014 reinforced the national solidarity in Russia and boosted President Putin's popularity. This phenomenon is usually regarded as a "rally round the flag" effect. While the literature on rally effects considers it self-evident that they are short-lived, little is known about how long they last and how they disappear. By analyzing the surveys conducted by the VTsIOM, this study shows that the rally effect in Russia faded first among less wealthy and less educated people, while the urban middle class remained supportive of Putin for two years. This is in stark contrast to before the annexation of Crimea, when the former type of people supported Putin more than the latter.

INTRODUCTION

A crisis often reinforces national solidarity and increases support for the government. In times of crises, especially when external threats to national security are imminent, the public see their national leader as the embodiment of national unity. This phenomenon is usually understood as a “rally round the flag” effect, or simply a “rally effect.” The literature on rally effects examines the impact of rally-triggering events on approval for state leaders, especially in the United States. Mueller (1970, 21) first argued that a president’s approval rating increases during events that (1) are international, (2) involve the United States and the president directly, and (3) are specific, dramatic, and sharply focused. It is widely believed that such a crisis would cause a rise in nationalism and boost support for the leader.

This logic can be applied to the impact of the Ukrainian Crisis on Russian President Vladimir Putin’s popularity (Hale 2018). The Russian leadership has spread the perception among the public that Western countries manipulated the Euromaidan Revolution behind the scenes and posed a threat to Russia. This made the Russian public support Putin’s decision to annex Crimea and boosted his popularity rating up to unprecedented levels, sweeping patriotism and anti-Western nationalism throughout the country (Sperling 2016).

However, the rally effect wears off shortly as the euphoria of nationalist sentiments dwindles. In fact, economic recession has caused a gradual decline in support for Putin. Russia has been in an economic recession owing to international economic sanctions and falling oil prices. In June 2015, about one third of Russians noted that the sanctions had created very serious (8%) or somewhat serious (25%) problems for them.¹ Furthermore, Putin's approval rating dropped by 20%, when Prime Minister Dmitrii Medvedev announced the pension reform in June 2018. Thus, the economic downturn has weakened the rally effect in Russia.

¹ “Sanctions and Countersanctions,” Levada Center, August 3, 2015 (<http://www.levada.ru/en/2015/08/03/sanctions-and-countersanctions/>)

While it is well known that a rally effect is short-lived (Baker and Oneal 2001, 664–67), little is known about how it will disappear. This question will be explored in this study by examining the dynamics of trust in Putin in post-Crimean Russia. Given that Putin's approval rating rose to over 80% after the annexation of Crimea, but slowly declined later, we need to answer the following question: who still does and does not support Putin?

I reason that the rally effect after the annexation of Crimea faded first among less-wealthy and less-educated people. In contrast, the urban middle class remained supportive of Putin for at least two years. Thus, while the working-class population were more supportive of him before the Ukrainian Crisis, people with the higher income and education level became more supportive of him after the crisis. In sum, economic and social vulnerability determines the persistence of the rally effect in Russia.

In this manner, this study contributes to a better understanding of the stability of Russia's authoritarian regime. Although studies have revealed that Putin's inclination toward nationalism, especially the takeover of Crimea, have become an important source of his legitimacy (Hutcheson and Petersson 2016; Feldmann and Mazepus 2018), it remains to be seen what changes have the annexation of Crimea made in Putin's support base. By analyzing the chronological shifts of his popularity, this study shows that the current Russian regime has become more dependent on richer and more educated people than before.

This essay is structured as follows. In the next section, I review the literature on rally effects and protest movements in Russia. The subsequent section develops theoretical arguments about autocratic legitimation and derives a hypothesis. After describing in detail the data sources of this study, I then analyze the dynamics of trust in Putin by the following three criteria: income, education, and occupational status. The final section concludes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is widely agreed that the “Crimea effect” caused Putin’s popularity to soar and legitimized his rule (Hutcheson and Petersson 2016; Feldmann and Mazepus 2018). Thus, scholars have sought to determine what kind of people respond strongly to the annexation of Crimea. For instance, Hale (2018) found that the Crimea effect was the strongest among those who consumed internet news rather than television news, because frequent television viewers were already guided by the state-filtered opinions. Other studies note that such an effect was weak among those who faced economic difficulty during this period (Frye 2019). These studies indicate that the annexation of Crimea boosted support for Putin among those who had been less supportive of him and those who were not affected by economic recession after the Ukrainian Crisis.

While studies have pointed out that “rally round the flag” effects are short-lived, little is known about how long the Crimea effect lasted and how it faded away. Economic concerns among the mass public appear to have been driving down Putin's popularity (Alexseev and Hale 2015, 2016; Sherlock 2020), but it is not clear what kind of people have actually changed their attitudes.

Studies on protest movements are informative in this regard. These studies have revealed the demographics of protests and debated the role of the middle class in them. Since the protests that shook Russia in 2011 and 2012 were unprecedented in their scale, scholars have conceived them as a sign of the regime’s vulnerability. After the passive acceptance of the authoritarian rule, it seems that the civil society was finally waking up and the urban middle class that grew in the 2000s played a central role in the movements. In fact, unlike the 1990s, these protests took place mainly in Moscow and other big cities (Robertson 2013; Shevtsova 2012). As Makarkin (2011) observed, “even if the middle strata often treated corruption

conciliatorily before the crisis (“officials steal, but they also let others live”), now they consider it one of the key factors hindering the development of the country.”

Democratization studies have long debated the role of the middle class. A number of studies have argued that economic development and the rising middle class will lead to democratization (Boix 2003; Lipset 1959; Welzel and Inglehart 2008). Contrary to such a theoretical expectation, however, the revolt of the middle class in Russia was not motivated by the growing demand for democracy or political liberalization (Crowley 2015; Dmitriev 2015; Shevtsova 2012). They were frustrated with electoral fraud, corruption and Putin’s return to the presidency, but they were also more likely to support authoritarian leadership (Chaisty and Whitefield 2013). Thus, modernization theory does not apply to today’s Russia.

Furthermore, the middle class is not necessarily a unitary actor. Recent studies have revealed that there are conflicts of interests within the middle class, especially between state-sector and private-sector employees (Chen 2014; Gontmakher and Ross 2015; Lankina and Libman 2021; Remington 2011; Rosenfeld 2017, 2021). Since state-sector employees are the main beneficiaries of state-led economic growth in developing countries, they do not want the regime change but are more likely to favor maintaining the status quo and support the authoritarian regime.

The notion of such an “autocratic middle class” also applies in Russia. During the commodities boom in the 2000s, the government expanded state control over the economy (Abramov, Radygin, and Chernova 2017). The number of state-dependent workers, such as state officials, security officers, military personnel, and employees of state-owned companies has increased since Putin’s second term. Under these circumstances, the middle class in the state sector receives more benefits and has fewer incentives to support democratization than those whose economic opportunity, upward mobility and life chances are independent of the state (Rosenfeld 2021, 48).

Although it is compelling to argue that the state-sector middle class has a major role in the authoritarian stability, several problems have not been addressed yet. First, studies have been biased toward post-election protests, especially those in 2011 and 2012. It is true that these protests had significant impacts on the regime's stability but taking a snapshot of these prominent events is not sufficient to evaluate the regime's long-term persistence.

Second, it remains to be seen what changes in Putin's support base occurred before and after the Ukrainian Crisis. Which strata of society were most affected by it? Are the state-sector middle class still supportive of Putin? These are the problems we should address.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Autocratic Legitimation

Dictators² face two fundamental challenges: elite defections and mass uprisings. While the former type has been the most common method to oust a dictator, elite-led ousters have declined and mass-driven overthrows have increased since the end of the Cold War. Especially in personalist dictatorships, the number of which has increased for the last thirty years, dictators are vulnerable to outsider challenges (Frantz 2018; Grundholm 2020). Thus, autocrats today need to pay more attention to how they manage mass uprisings.

In order to prevent mass protests and maintain the regime's stability in the long run, not only do autocrats use repression and co-optation; they need to obtain legitimacy from the populace (Burnell 2006; Cassani 2017; Gerschewski 2013, 2018; Gilley 2009). Legitimacy is defined here as the justification of power through the pursuit of the common good of society. It is based on values that benefit the community as a whole both in a material and ethical sense (Feldmann and Mazepus 2018, 59). Thus, any political leader, whether autocratic or democratic, needs public support and invests considerable resources to this end.

² In this article, I use "dictators," "autocrats," and "authoritarian leaders" interchangeably.

Autocratic leaders, however, have more difficulty in claiming legitimacy than democratic ones. A regime is authoritarian or autocratic if the executive achieved power through undemocratic means, or if the executive achieved power via free and fair elections but later changed the rules such that subsequent electoral competition was limited (Frantz 2018, 6). Thus, by definition, autocrats lack democratic (procedural) legitimacy. Instead, they seek to gain support from the public by providing concrete outcomes such as improved living standards, and maintenance of law and order. Such “performance legitimacy” is one of the strategies to legitimate their autocratic rule.

Putin’s Strategies for Legitimation and Public Reaction

With regard to legitimacy, Russia is in a paradoxical situation: while Vladimir Putin has consistently enjoyed high approval rates, trust in the state institutions has been low (Gel’man 2010; Sil and Chen 2004). Accordingly, the current Russian regime has been dependent on Putin’s personal popularity. In fact, he has cultivated mass support by holding a call-in TV show, “Direct Line with Vladimir Putin,” every year. As power has been concentrated in Putin’s hands, his relationship with the masses has become more important than before.

During the first eight years of his presidency, his popularity rested on economic recovery and a rapid improvement in living standards (Feklyunina and White 2011; McAllister and White 2008; Rose, Mishler, and Munro 2011). As domestic economic growth slowed after the global financial crisis in 2008, however, this “performance legitimacy” also receded. Following the State Duma elections of December 2011, several tens of thousands of people took to the streets in Moscow and other cities to protest against electoral fraud and to demand “Russia without Putin,” forcing the Kremlin to confront a level of public discontent that had not appeared since Putin came to power in 2000.

In his third term, therefore, Putin became more inclined to other sources of legitimacy: domestic order and the demonstration of great power status abroad. To compensate for the loss of its “performance legitimacy,” the Kremlin redefined its social contract with the populace, by emphasizing national security and nationalism. Russia’s assertive foreign policy, especially its hardline reaction after the Euromaidan Revolution, can be understood as a new type of legitimization strategy (Feldmann and Mazepus 2018; Hutcheson and Petersson 2016).

In fact, the annexation of Crimea brought about an unprecedented rise in Putin’s approval ratings. According to the surveys by the Levada Center, the downward trend in Putin’s approval ratings from 2008 ended abruptly with the annexation of Crimea, after which his approval ratings rose to above 80%. Such high approval ratings for Putin continued until 2018.³

At the same time, the Ukrainian Crisis also triggered economic recession, which would lead to accumulated dissatisfaction among the population. In fact, when Prime Minister Medvedev announced the disreputable pension reform in June 2018, Putin’s approval rating dropped by 20%. The Russian public seem to be sensitive to deterioration in living standards.

While the Russian people appreciate Putin’s achievements in terms of restoring domestic security and reviving the country’s status as a great power, they are dissatisfied with the current economic problems. According to surveys carried out in April 2018 by the Levada Center, 48% of respondents cited “restoring Russia’s status as a great respected power,” and 38% “stabilizing the situation in the North Caucasus” as the biggest success of Putin’s rule. The percentage of the respondents giving such answers increased by more than 10% compared to before the annexation of Crimea. Asked what Putin failed to achieve during his tenure, on the other hand, 45% of the respondents replied “ensuring a fair distribution of income in the interest of ordinary people”; 39% noted “returning to ordinary people the resources that they lost during the reforms”; 32% answered “raising salaries, pensions, stipends and benefits”; and

³ “Odobreniie deiatel’nosti Vlamidira Putina,” Levada Center. (<https://www.levada.ru/indikatory/>)

27% cited “overcoming the crisis in the national economy and stopping the decline in production.”⁴ These answers indicate that inequality and improvement of living standards are the main concerns for the Russians.

Hypotheses

The previous discussion gives rise to the hypothesis that economic and social vulnerability determines the endurance of a rally effect in Russia. The “rally round the flag” effect theory assumes that an international crisis would evoke the rise of nationalism, which would lead to support for the national leader. Such a rally effect is more likely to continue among the middle class, because with sufficient financial resources and secure social status, they have an incentive to maintain the status quo. Thus, rising nationalism is likely to persist among the middle class. In contrast, the rally effect is likely to wear off shortly among the working class, because it is more probable that they will face personal financial hardship and will become dissatisfied with the status quo. While nationalistic sentiments can distract them from their discontent to some extent, prolonged economic recession will worsen their political attitudes toward the national leader.

The Middle Class

Thus, the middle class is a key concept in this study. There is little scholarly consensus, however, on what criteria should be used in defining the middle class and how it should be measured in Russia.⁵ This study makes several assumptions as follows. First, following Rosenfeld (2021, 61), I assume that while the population can be stratified into elites, the middle class, and the working class, only the latter two are represented in survey samples. Since elites

⁴ “Vladimir Putin,” Levada Center, May 7, 2018 (<https://www.levada.ru/2018/05/07/vladimir-putin-6/>)

⁵ For the review of the debates among Russian scholars, see Remington (2011).

comprise only a very small share of the population in developing countries such as Russia, it is reasonable to assume that only the middle class and the working class can be captured by the poll surveys.

Second, this study takes a sociological approach rather than an economic one in defining the middle class. Economists tend to focus on income level alone, but sociologists and political scientists usually argue that other factors such as education, occupation, and self-identification should be taken into account. For example, Mareeva (2014) uses four criteria to define the middle class: (1) education level (at least specialized secondary education), (2) professional status (non-manual labor), (3) level of well-being (indicators of average monthly income per capita or the quantity of available durable goods not lower than the median value), and (4) self-assessment of his or her status in society (not lower than 4 points on a 10-point scale). On the basis of these criteria, she calculated that the middle class made up 42% of the population in 2014.⁶ In the following, I also use this definition, though I exclude the criterion of self-assessment from my analysis due to the data limitation.

DATA AND METHODS

In order to clarify how the rally effect after the annexation of Crimea has faded in Russia, I analyze the public opinion surveys conducted by the Russian Public Opinion Center (*Vserossiiskii tsentr izucheniia obshchestvennogo mneniia*, VTsIOM). VTsIOM regularly conducts surveys asking the following question: “We all trust some people, but not others. Speaking of politicians, whom do you trust?” 1,600 respondents, aged 18 and over, are polled daily by phone in at least 80 regions of the Russian Federation,⁷ and seven-day average values

⁶ She argues that 34% of the population could be ranked as the middle class in 2008. See Tichonova and Mereyeva (2013).

⁷ The surveys conducted before 2016 are called “Ekspress,” the results of which can be retrieved at https://bd.wciom.ru/baza_rezultatov_oprosa_s_1992_goda/. Those since 2017 are called “VTsIOM-SPUTNIK,” the results of which can be retrieved at https://bd.wciom.ru/baza_rezultatov_sputnik/.

are indicated. I have collected the data of the percentage of the respondents who replied, “Putin” to the above question. There are 366 observations available from March 2011 until the end of 2018. The published data are not individual data, but only reflect the percentage of trust in Putin according to various socio-demographic categories, such as age, party affiliation, education, occupation, and income. Despite these data limitations, this study seeks to identify the differences in the emergence and disappearance of the rally effect among social groups.

As noted earlier, I define the middle class on the basis of four criteria: income, education, occupation, and self-perception. Since VTsIOM does not provide a continuous stream of data on Putin’s trustworthiness per self-identification, I examine the changes in the percentage of Putin’s supporters by the remaining three criteria.

Figure 1 shows changes in the percentage of respondents who answered that Putin was a trustworthy politician. I use the LOWESS (locally weighted scatterplot smoothing) method to fit a smooth curve to data points. Each smoothed value is given by a weighted linear least squares regression over the span. In using the LOWESS method, the larger value we set as the smoothing parameter, which is called the “bandwidth,” the smoother the fitted curve will be. In contrast, the smaller the bandwidth is, the closer the regression function will conform to the data. Thus, for all the following analyses, the bandwidth is set to 0.1, which is smaller than the value chosen normally.

As indicated in Figure 1, it is obvious that Putin’s popularity has declined since 2008, and by the end of 2011, the percentage of those respondents who trusted him had dropped by approximately 20 points. Such a downward trend, however, suddenly ended with the outbreak of the Euromaidan Revolution in Ukraine, which led Putin’s approval ratings to skyrocket. On February 16, 2014, 45% of Russian expressed trust in Putin, and 49.6% did so on February 23, 2014. This number continued to rise subsequently, reaching its peak in early 2015 and never dropping below 60% until February 2016. Therefore, it is fair to say that the rally effect started

in February 2014, when Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych fled from Kyiv and the Ukrainian parliament voted to remove him from his post, and continued at least until February 2016, when oil prices dropped to below thirty US dollars per barrel.

[Figure 1 about here]

The percentage of trust in Putin has continued to decline since then, although his approval ratings recovered briefly before the parliamentary and presidential elections in September 2016 and March 2018, respectively. In 2019, only about 30% of the respondents answered that Putin was a trustworthy politician. Putin's popularity has fallen to its lowest level throughout his presidency.

In the following part, I examine how socio-demographics have differentiated the level of trust in Putin, and how such differences have changed over time, by analyzing the poll results from 2011 to 2018. As noted earlier, in 2011 a series of protests against electoral fraud took place in Moscow and other big cities, and Putin's approval rating dropped to its lowest level since he took office in 2000. He faced even harsher protests in 2018, when the announced pension reform aroused the public resentment, and this time, the mass protests spread not only in big cities but across the country. Thus, in order to identify the rally effect and its retreat, it is reasonable to examine the public approval for Putin during this period.

The period from 2011 to 2018 can be divided into three phases: phase one is called "the pre-Crimean period" (until February 2014), when trust in Putin consistently declined. Phase two is the period of "the Crimean consensus" (from March 2014 until February 2016), when Putin enjoyed massive public support on an unprecedented level. Phase three is dubbed "the post-Crimean consensus period" (after March 2016), when the frustration of the Russian public

began to reappear. The vertical broken lines in Figure 1 and the following figures illustrate these distinctions.

RESULTS

Income

VTsIOM divides the respondents into five quintile groups by income levels and provides the data of each group's level of trust in Putin (see Figure 2). According to my definition, the top two groups and the upper half of the third quintile group are categorized as the middle class, while the remaining groups are regarded as the working class.

The data yielded several important findings. First, the Ukrainian Crisis increased trust in Putin across all the groups but in different ways. During the pre-Crimean period, the lower-income groups expressed more trust in Putin than the middle class, but once the crisis took place, the gap expanded greatly. Moreover, the timing when the rally effect started also differed. On the one hand, among the lowest-income respondents, Putin's popularity peaked as early as May 2014 (71%) and started declining thereafter, falling to about 40% in March 2017. Among the highest-income group, on the other hand, his popularity reached its peak (80%) around February to May 2015, about a year later than the former group. The average level of trust in Putin over this period differed by 18.3% between the two groups. Putin's approval ratings among the other three groups were generally in between the two. Thus, in contrast to the pre-Crimean period, the period of the "Crimean consensus" has seen a positive correlation between income levels and trust in Putin.

[Figure 2 about here]

Second, as Putin's prestige declined in the post-Crimean period, the differences among the groups shrank. Such a trend emerged as early as June 2015 between the top-two income groups, and in early 2017 among the top-three income groups. In addition, the steep declines of Putin's popularity after the presidential elections and the pension reform in 2018 narrowed the differences among all the groups.

In short, although the differences among the income groups were small before the Ukrainian Crisis, the rally effect resulted in the following changes: the higher the income level, the more likely they were to trust Putin, at least until February 2016. Once the "Crimean consensus" was over, however, the differences among the groups became small again.

Education

Russia has inherited a high level of education from the Soviet era. According to the OECD, Russia has one of the highest tertiary attainment rates across the OECD countries, at 63% among 25–34-year-olds, compared with the OECD average of 44%. This is the second-highest proportion after South Korea (OECD 2019).

In terms of education levels, VTsIOM surveys include four categories: incomplete higher (at least three courses of higher educational institutes) or higher education, specialized secondary education (technical schools), secondary education (schools or vocational schools), primary or lower education, and incomplete secondary education. Mareeva (2014) referred to the first and second categories as the criteria for identifying the middle class and found that 76% of the respondents to her survey were included in the middle class according to these criteria.

Figure 3 describes how the percentage of Putin supporters has changed among these four categories. In the pre-Crimean period, the group with the lowest level of education was

the most supportive of Putin, while the most-educated respondents had the smallest percentage of trust in Putin.

[Figure 3 about here]

The shifts after the Ukrainian Crisis were dramatic. Putin's approval ratings surged among all the groups with different education levels, and the distinctions among them almost disappeared during the crisis. Again, however, the groups diverged greatly in their subsequent development. Putin's popularity among the respondents with primary or lower education started to decline as early as May 2014, when 73% of them answered that Putin was trustworthy. Since then, their trust in him has dropped steadily to around 35%. For those with the lowest education level, the rally effect was quite short-lived.

Among the middle-class respondents, in contrast, trust in Putin remained high through the end of 2015. For example, his popularity among the most-educated group reached its peak (79%) in July 2015 and remained over 70% until the end of 2015. In other words, the rise of nationalistic sentiments among the most-educated lasted for almost two years. Since 2016, however, the percentage of respondents who trusted Putin has declined to below 40%. The drop was especially pronounced in 2018, when pension reform was implemented. As a result, the distinctions among the groups with different education levels have decreased.

In a nutshell, while education levels and trust in Putin were inversely correlated in the pre-Crimean period, they were positively correlated in the period of the Crimean consensus. This is mainly because the rally effect was quite short-lived for the least-educated group. In other words, the middle class was at the core of the rising nationalism in Russia.

Occupations

In terms of occupations, VTsIOM surveys include twelve categories,⁸ but these classifications do not distinguish between the middle class and the working class. Here, by making some comparisons about the differences among the occupations, I investigate how occupational differences affect trust in Putin before and after the Ukrainian Crisis.

First, a comparison between specialists with higher education in the private sector and those in state sectors reveals that the dividing line between the two groups vanished just after the annexation of Crimea (see Figure 4). As noted above, the literature, especially the literature focusing on the post-election protests in 2011 and 2012, claims that the middle class is divided by sector of employment and that those in the state sector are more likely to support authoritarianism and less likely to participate in the protests than those in the private sector (Rosenfeld 2017, 2021). Figure 4 confirms that this was the case until the rally effect occurred in February 2014. Such a divide was replaced by a kind of “consensus” within the middle class, when nationalism was at its peak, and even after the rally effect started fading away in mid-2015. In 2017, however, Putin’s popularity rebounded among employees in the state sector, and the divide in the middle class re-emerged thereafter. Thus, the rise of nationalism appears to have weakened the divisions within the middle class. Such a “unity” in the middle class, however, did not last long.

[Figure 4 about here]

⁸ These are (1) pensioners, (2) students, (3) unemployed persons, (4) those engaged in housework or on parental leave, (5) skilled workers, (6) non-skilled workers, (7) employees without higher education, (8) specialists with higher education in the private sector, (9) specialists with higher education in the state sector, (10) servicemen and servicewomen in the army or internal affairs agencies, (11) businesspeople or entrepreneurs, (12) state or municipal officers.

Second, from another comparison of state and private sectors, we can discern a somewhat different but interesting pattern. In this case, I compare the levels of trust in Putin among three different groups (officers in the army or internal affairs agencies, state or municipal officers, and businesspeople or entrepreneurs). The first two groups belong to the state, whereas the last one works in the private sector. While state or municipal officers, including army officers, showed higher trust in Putin in 2012 than businesspeople, such a state–private distinction suddenly disappeared before the Ukrainian Crisis, due to the steep decline of trust in Putin by state officers in 2013 (see Figure 5). Thus, there was a dynamic shift even before the Euromaidan Revolution and the annexation of Crimea.

Peculiar patterns can also be seen during the period of Crimean consensus. Contrary to the previous case shown in Figure 4, the levels of trust in Putin among the three groups rose at different times. As early as late 2014 and early 2015, support for Putin by state or municipal officers reached its peak and started declining, while support by the other two groups was growing. Moreover, while the rally effect was the strongest among the officials in the army and security agencies, its decline was the earliest to occur. This is an interesting fact, because army and security officers are generally considered to be the most dependent on the state and most loyal to the regime. Their decline in support for Putin in recent years has followed a similar curve to that of the other groups.

[Figure 5 about here]

Finally, I compare four categories of non-working population: pensioners, students, the unemployed, and houseworkers (see Figure 6). Throughout the period, pensioners remained the strongest supporters of Putin. During the period of the Crimean consensus, over 60% of the pensioners were supportive of Putin. Even in the post-Crimean consensus period, more than

half of them answered that Putin was a trustworthy politician. It is worth noting that no other groups were more supportive of Putin than pensioners after the pension reform was announced in 2018.

[Figure 6 about here]

As can be easily supposed, the unemployed were the least supportive of Putin through the pre-Crimean and the Crimean consensus phases. This suggests that unemployed people had the highest social instability and were the most frustrated with the status quo. Accordingly, they showed the weakest rally effect, which ended shortly after the annexation of Crimea.

Since 2017, students have become increasingly disapproving of Putin, and their trust in him has declined more than that of the unemployed. Although their trust in him was originally lower than the overall national average, the defection of young people from the Putin regime has become even more pronounced in recent years. Thus, the biggest threat facing Putin's regime today appears to be the youth.

CONCLUSION

In order to maintain regime stability, autocrats need to obtain legitimacy from the population. It is especially important in personalist dictatorships, where dictators are vulnerable to mass uprisings. Russia is also facing this problem. Putin's recent reliance on nationalism and takeover of Crimea were understood as an attempt to renew his legitimacy. In fact, the "rally round the flag" effect after annexing Crimea contributed to restoring his popularity. At the same time, economic recession has gradually diminished the rally effect.

This study attempted to comprehend how the emergence and disappearance of the rally effect in Russia differed among various social groups. The most important finding in this article is that Putin suffered a reverse in his support base in Russian society. Although the less wealthy

and the less educated were more supportive of Putin before the Ukrainian Crisis, support for him among people with the highest income and education level (and pensioners) reached its highest level after the crisis. In other words, the middle class was at the core of the rising nationalism in Russia. This result is consistent with the hypothesis that economic and social vulnerability determines the strength and endurance of a rally effect.

Moreover, while the Ukrainian Crisis expanded support for Putin across all social groups, there were wide differences in how much each group trusted Putin in post-Crimean Russia. Economic frustration caused the rally effect to disappear among socially unstable people like the unemployed. This suggests that the rally effect in Russia did not bring about a “consensus” in the population but widening gaps among the social groups.

Finally, the division inside the middle class faded away during the “Crimean consensus” period. While previous studies have highlighted the differences between the state-sector and private-sector middle classes, they have primarily focused their research on post-2011 protests. By describing the shifts of the political orientations of the middle class over time, this study contributes to a better understanding of the role of the middle class in authoritarian regimes.

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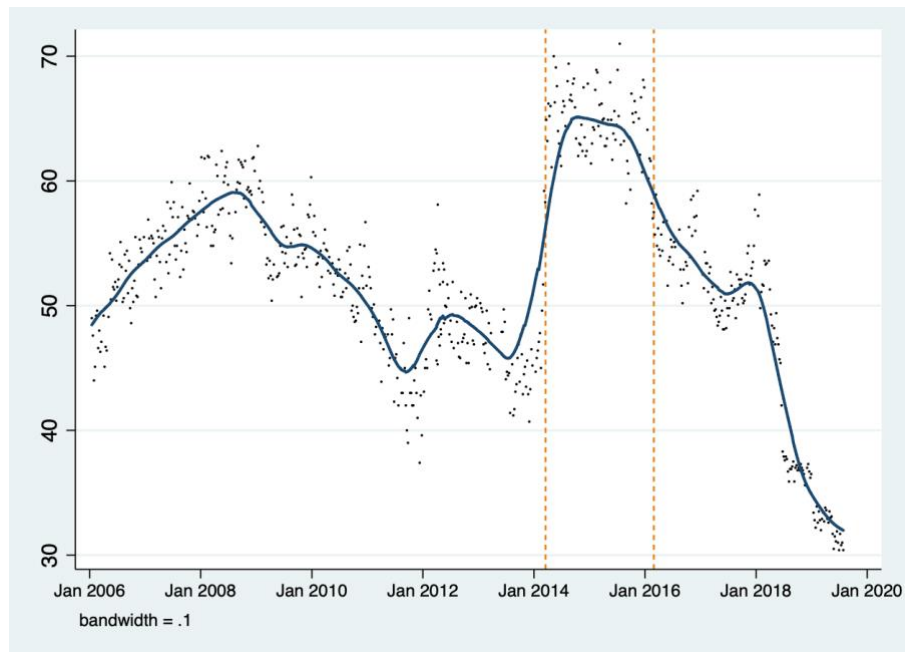


Figure 1. The dynamics of public trust in Putin

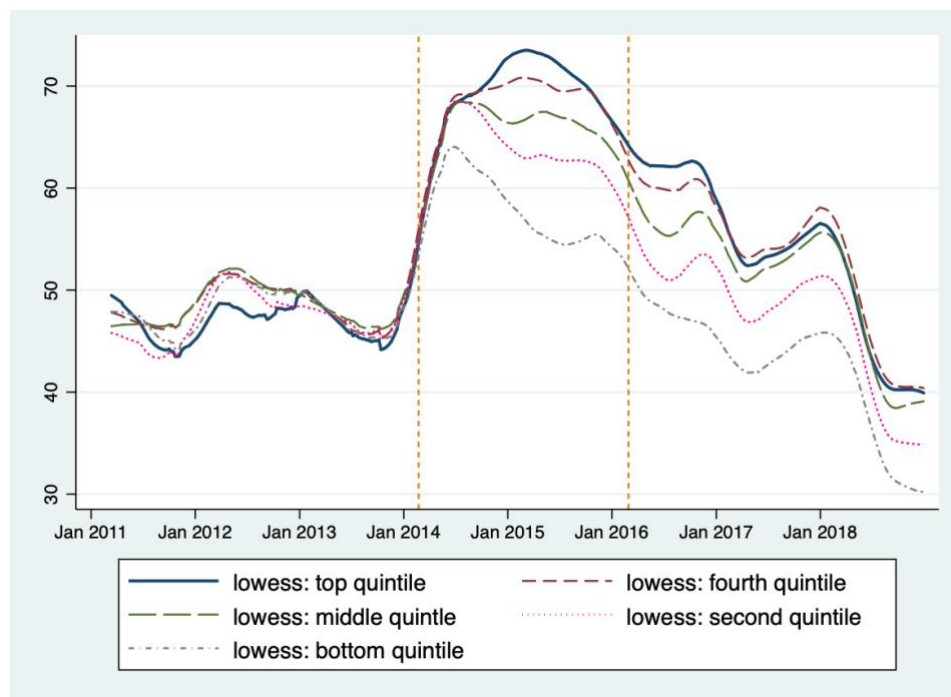


Figure 2. Trends by income level

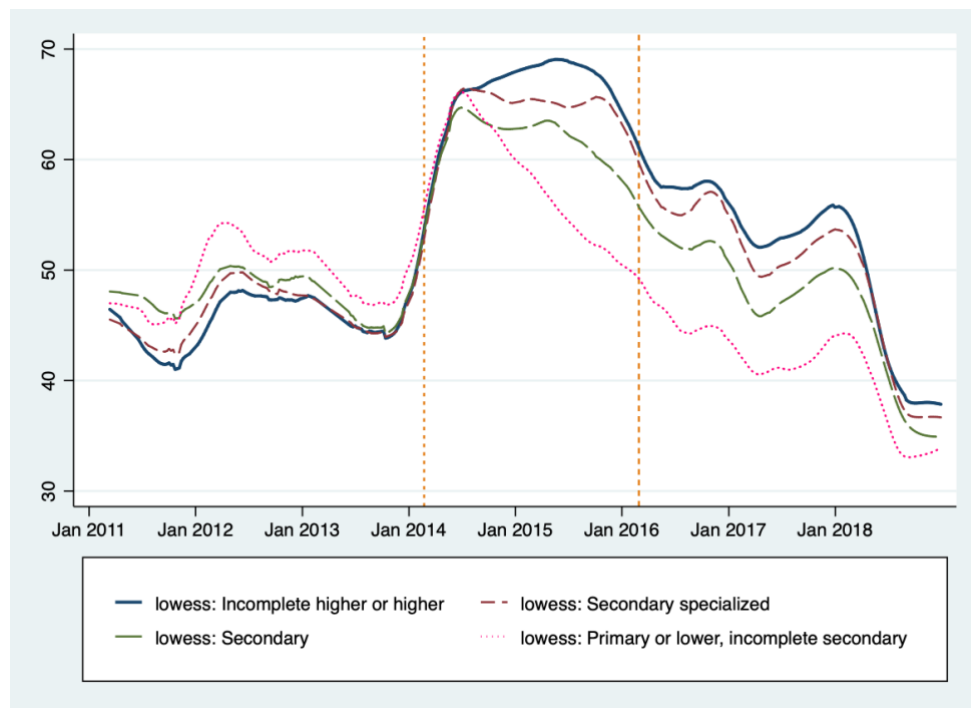


Figure 3. Trends by education level

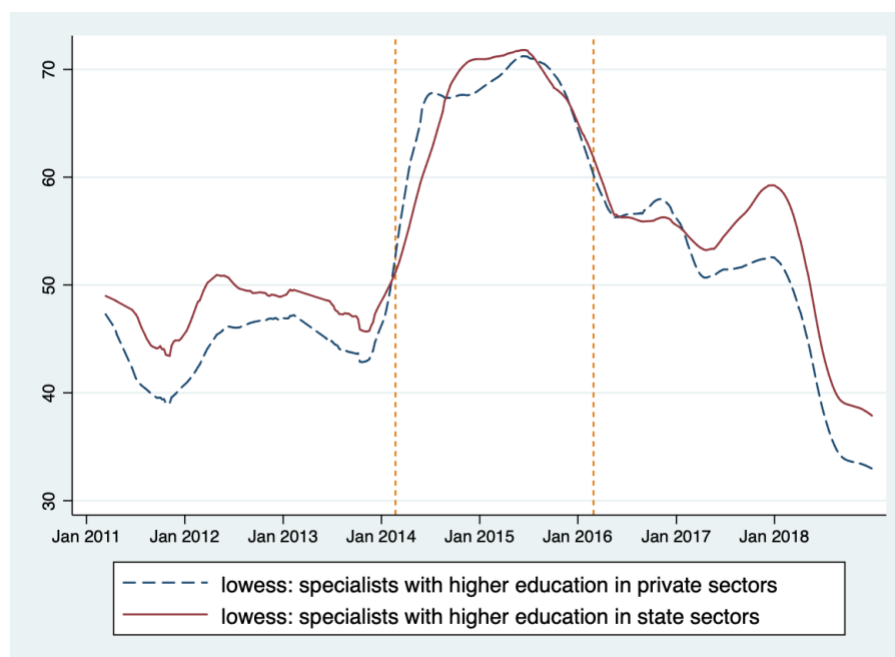


Figure 4. Comparison between state and private sectors

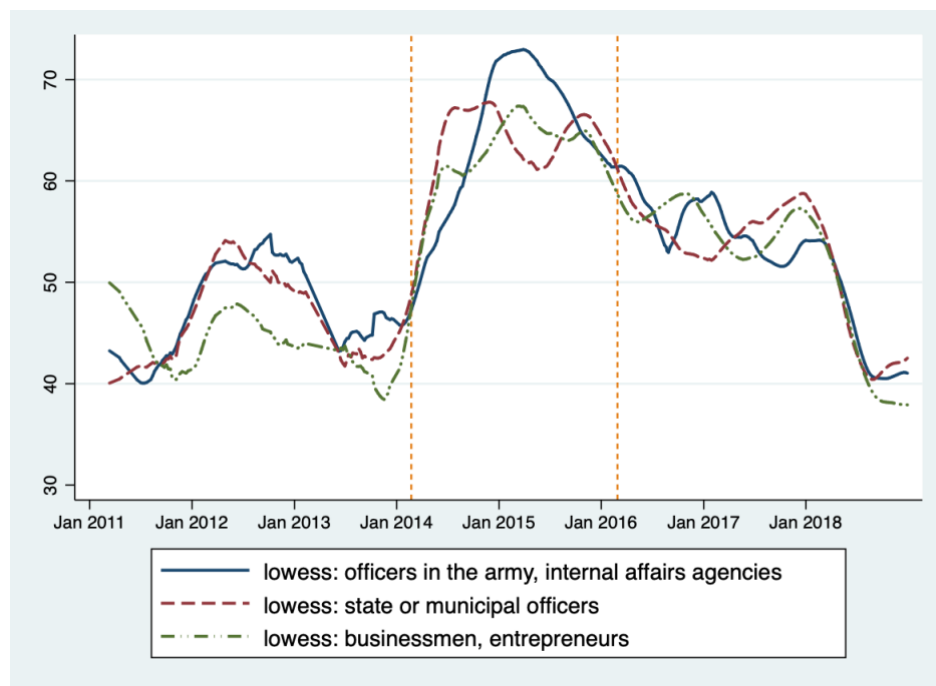


Figure 5. Comparison among army officers, state or municipal officers and businesspeople

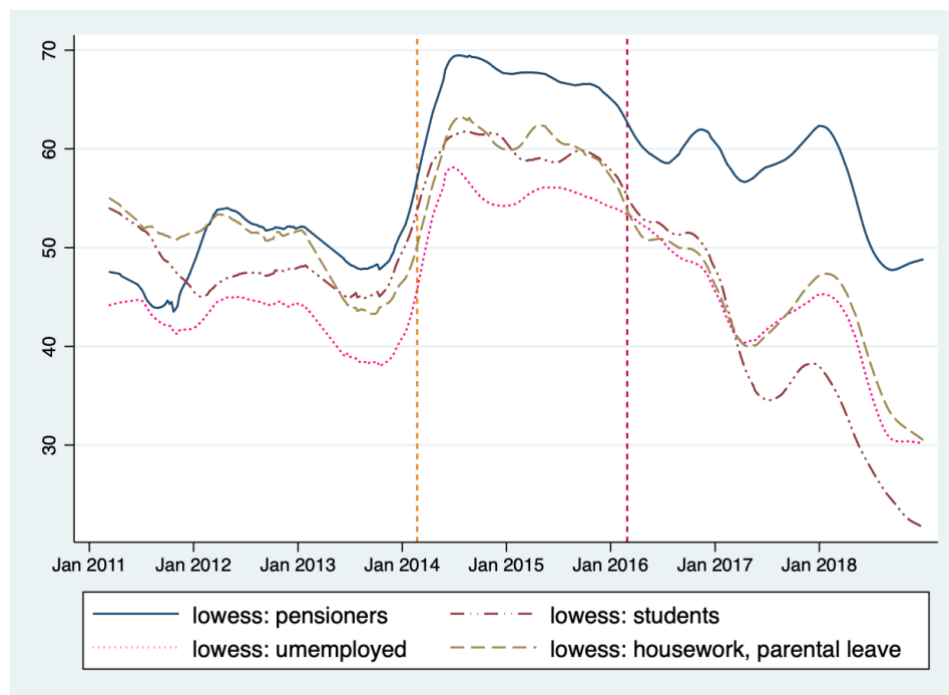


Figure 6. Comparison among pensioners, students, the unemployed and houseworkers