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Why Hide It?:

State Legitimation and Elections in Putin's Russia

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Introduction

> Our country is run by the people of the Russian Federation through legitimately elected bodies of power and administration: through representative bodies (the parliament) and executive bodies (the president and the government of the Russian Federation).[1]
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> —Vladimir Putin in 2010, interview by Larry King

> I just want to take a minute here to give a shout out to friend of the show, Vladimir Putin. Yesterday, Vladimir Putin won re-election with 76% of the vote. So congratulations, no, ladies and gentlemen, you've got to give it up. Congratulations to President Putin for making up a realistic-sounding number.
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> —Stephen Colbert in 2018, *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*

In 2014, unmarked soldiers swept into the Crimean Peninsula. All evidence toward the identity of the invaders pointed toward Ukraine's powerful neighbor, The Russian Federation. However, the president of Russia, Vladimir Putin, denied sending troops into Ukraine. Fast forward to 2015, when Putin dropped all pretenses and stated that it was in fact Russian forces who had invaded Crimea, arguing that soldiers were sent there to protect ethnic Russians from repression by Ukrainian nationalists. Putin stated, "That's why I gave orders to the Defense Ministry—why hide it?"[2] Putin's government has a habit of violating international norms and denying involvement even in the face of overwhelming evidence. Despite wide international

[1] Sputnik International, "Transcript of Vladimir Putin's Interview with CNN's Larry King," Sputnik International, https://sputniknews.com/20101202/161586625.html.

[2] "From 'Not Us' To 'Why Hide It?': How Russia Denied Its Crimea Invasion, Then Admitted It," accessed May 23, 2021, https://www.rferl.org/a/from-not-us-to-why-hide-it-how-russia-denied-its-crimea-invasion-then-admitted-it/29791806.html.

acknowledgement that elections held in Russia by the Putin regime are illegitimate, Putin has held—and continues to hold—Presidential elections every six years, despite well-known practices of voter intimidation and control of the media which lead to overwhelming victories of Putin's party.[3] Why does Putin repeatedly market his party and country as a democracy when Russians protest rigged elections and international watchdog organizations label Russia as an autocracy?

In this paper, I argue that elections help serve a function to Putin: to maintain his hold on power. At the beginning of his rule, elections did so by mimicking a norm of Western liberal democracy, helping solidify the Russian Federation as a legitimate state under Putin. However, I argue that the integrity of this strategy degraded over time, and today elections in the Russian Federation are used as a strategy by Putin to maintain his hold on power by using them to frame Russia as a nation under attack and himself as her chosen defender. I will first analyze the Russian state's search for a political identity in the 2000's and the liberal democratic norm of the West in the same period. Then I will argue that Putin mimicked this norm through elections to solidify his regime in the Russian Federation. Finally, I will argue that after the first two terms of Putin's regime, elections are no longer held to legitimate the Russian state, but rather as a tool used by Putin to frame himself as the necessary leader of Russia, as a different method to maintain his hold on power.

This theory was tested methodically by analyzing the rhetoric of Putin's addresses to the Russian Federation. Although it is not possible to look inside Putin's head to determine his election strategies, it is possible to analyze his speeches. Speeches are not the same thing as elections, but

[3] Regina Smyth and Sarah Oates, "Russia's Rigged Elections Look Nothing like the US Election – They Have Immediate, Unquestioned Results There," The Conversation, accessed May 29, 2021, http://theconversation.com/russias-rigged-elections-look-nothing-like-the-us-election-they-have-immediate-unquestioned-results-there-149710.

they can give us more insight into Putin’s overarching political strategy. I analyzed Putin’s speeches in two time periods: the first period of his presidency, from 1999-2008, which I named “Phase 1,” and the second period of his presidency, from 2012-2021, which I named “Phase 2.” These phases were broken up by the presidency of Dmitri Medvedev (Putin served as Prime Minister rather than President during this period due to the constraints of the Russian constitution). For each speech, I identified key terms and phrases associated with each strategy to see if Putin’s rhetoric evolved over time to match my theory behind his holding of elections. The speeches were then compared by time period to see how Putin’s rhetoric evolved. I found that Phase 1 had a slightly higher occurrence of words and phrases related to liberal democratic norms and civic duty, while Phase 2 had a much higher occurrence of words and phrases related to civic duty than liberal democratic norms. These findings tentatively support my theory that Putin’s election strategy has shifted over time from one of legitimation to one of maintaining his hold on power by framing himself as a national defender.

This paper contributes to the greater literature on authoritarian behavior by examining elections, the paradox which exists within many authoritarian regimes. In the past twenty years, authoritarian backsliding has increased. However, rather than traditional forms of dictatorships where elections were rarely—if ever—held, many modern autocrats take power and hold it while maintaining the trappings of democracy. My theory argues that this strategy is not static—it has shifted over time to serve different purposes to the autocrat in a fluctuating international context. Where it was once fashionable or desirable for non-Western countries to adopt liberal democracy, the benefits of this strategy have decreased over the last few decades. Now, I invite other scholars to ask: why do today’s autocrats hold elections? My answer in the case of Vladimir Putin—to maintain control through narrative framing—may apply to other cases globally.

Literature Review

Elections and Autocratic Regimes

Much has been written about the phenomenon of elections held by autocratic regimes. The literature on this topic falls roughly into two camps: the rationalist camp and the normative camp. These camps form the basis of many contemporary debates within the International Relations community today. The rationalist group argues that autocratic leaders host elections for functional purposes, as a mechanism to maintain control of their position and status as an autocrat. The normative group argues that autocratic leaders host elections for socially constructed reasons—reasons having to do with the autocrat and state's identity and position within the international social structure. Some scholars argue that autocrats hold elections for a mix of reasons including rational and normative. In this section, I will summarize and evaluate the existing theories on this subject by scholars in the IR field.

Rationalist Theories

The rationalist camp argues that autocrats host elections for functional purposes: to help maintain their hold on power. There are several different mechanisms through which it is argued this may happen. In Jason Brownlee's book, *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization,*[4] Brownlee argues that elections under authoritarian regimes act as a "barometer" of the regime's control over the political arena, and the opposition's support in contesting that control.[5] He argues that an autocratic election is advantageous to the regime in providing information about its opposition and support base, both within the elite population and at the grassroots level.[6] Gauging

[4] Jason Brownlee, *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization* (Cambridge University Press, 2007).
[5] Brownlee.
[6] Brownlee.

levels of support among the general population is crucial if the regime wants to foresee potential uprisings or popular movements which could unseat its autocrat. Furthermore, knowledge on levels of support among elites can help autocrats gauge the opinions of its most direct supporters who may have the power and opportunity to subvert the regime directly. Holding elections thus provides information to the autocrat on two key audiences, allowing them to change their behavior before either group challenges the autocrat's authority. Brownlee argues that elections are most useful in gauging support when a one-party system is effectively in control— in this case, a vote for anyone other than the party candidate can be taken as a signal of lack of support to the regime. Thus, by observing trends in voting patterns, the party and its leadership can sus out evidence of support or lack thereof among the populace and elite coalitions, using elections as a mechanism by which to adjust their behavior to maintain hold over the regime.

Similar to Brownlee, Beatriz Magaloni argues in her book *Voting for Autocracy: Hegemonic Party Survival and its Demise in Mexico,*[7] that elections serve a functional purpose for autocratic regimes. Magaloni identifies four mechanisms through which elections may help autocrats maintain their grasp on power. According to her, elections allow autocratic regimes to survive since elections are a mechanism 1) to share power with and disseminate rewards to elites, 2) to discourage elites from challenging the regime by demonstrating the regime's popularity, 3) to help the regime gather information about supporters and opponents of the regime, and 4) to siphon off opposition into a legal framework, avoiding the possibility of a violent coup by creating an institution through which the regime may be challenged.[8] Magaloni's third mechanism is similar to Brownlee's argument—that elections help the regime gauge how much support the regime has

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[7] Beatriz Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy: Hegemonic Party Survival and Its Demise in Mexico* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).
[8] Magaloni.

across multiple sectors of society. Her other mechanisms elaborate further on the roles of the populace and the elite population within an autocratic regime.

Magaloni argues that elections not only help the regime gather information on elites but serve other important functions as well. For example, elections—even those which are known to be illegitimate—help broadcast a message to the elite population that opposing the regime will be unsuccessful since the regime is universally popular.[9] This discourages elites from challenging the sitting autocrat by suggesting that a bid for power will not be successful against a popular sitting leader. Magaloni also argues that elections serve as a mechanism to distribute rewards and power among elites, incentivizing them to continue supporting the autocrat.[10] Finally, Magaloni argues that elections serve a function among the populace: to offer a way for citizens of the regime to challenge it in a systemic fashion, rather than opt immediately for violent resistance.[11] Rather than engage in an armed rebellion against the state, the existence of elections offers a nonviolent alternative within the bounds of the existing system by which to challenge the autocrat. This may help sustain the survival of the regime by reducing the chance that the regime may have to defend itself against an armed opposition force. When all four mechanisms are put together, these functions encourage elites to invest in the survival of the regime and remain loyal, while keeping the regime aware of potential challengers and exerting some control over the method of challenge, thereby functionally sustaining the autocrat's regime. Put simply, both rationalist authors argue that holding an election serves a function—to help the autocrat maintain his hold on power.

[9] Magaloni.
[10] Magaloni.
[11] Magaloni.

Although the rationalist argument is convincing, I argue that the threat to Putin's autocratic regime of a legitimate challenger is too high to host elections simply for functional purposes. The rational group may be right that elections serve a functional purpose to autocrats—in this case, allowing autocrats to gauge support of the regime or allowing opponents an institutional way to digress from the regime before resorting to more dramatic resistance. However, holding an election leaves a chance, albeit small in the case of the Russian Federation, of an opposition candidate challenging the regime through institutional means. The odds of this occurring have grown stronger in recent years. Opposition leader Alexei Navalny campaigned to run for President of the Russian Federation in 2018, before being denied from running by the Central Election Commission[12] due to a case held against him which the international community recognized had no merit.[13] Although this challenge to Putin's regime was shot down, Navalny continues to pose challenges to the regime. In January of 2021, backlash in Russia against Putin's treatment of Navalny grew to the highest levels of dissidence in modern Russian history, with over 3,100 people[14] detained by police during protests from Moscow to St. Petersburg to Siberia. With levels of dissent against the Putin regime reaching historic levels, I argue that the potential costs of holding an election seem to outweigh the potential benefits to Putin at this point in time.

Normative Theories

Normative reasons for an autocrat to hold elections despite a predetermined outcome are also varied. Unlike rational explanations, normative explanations are less concerned with a cost/benefit

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[12] "Russian Opposition Leader Barred From Running Against Putin In 2018," NPR.org, accessed May 23, 2021, https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/12/25/573394432/russian-opposition-leader-barred-from-running-against-putin-in-2018.
[13] "Alexei Navalny: Russia's Vociferous Putin Critic," *BBC News*, April 21, 2021, sec. Europe, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-16057045.
[14] "Aleksei Navalny Protests Constitute Biggest Russian Dissent in Years - The New York Times," accessed May 23, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/23/world/europe/navalny-protests-russia.html.

analysis regarding elections and more concerned with the social meanings of elections within today's international society. As Ted Hopf writes in his piece "The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory," actors are concerned with how structures constrain and enable the actions of actors, and how far actors may deviate from these structures.[15] Constraints can be easily conceptualized in the form of material dis/incentives, as in the rational explanations above. However, normative reasons may also consider the identity of actors and the nature of the structure of the system when determining constraints.[16] Often, actions of actors may define or redefine the actor itself and the structure. An example given by Hopf is the United States' intervention in Vietnam. Hopf argues that appeasement was an "unimaginable act" due to the United States' identity as a great power. In this way, the identity of the United States constrained it to certain courses of action, rather than a cost/benefit analysis (which would have likely demonstrated that a drawn-out conflict in Vietnam would be incredibly costly with little benefit). Considering normative explanations for autocratic decisions to host elections is a path with several possibilities, as these authors demonstrate.

Meyer et. al address global norms in their paper, "World Society and the Nation State."[17] Here, they argue that international legitimacy is bestowed upon states which conform to a widely accepted culture in global society. Meyer et. al argue that powerful states in the world system "model" nation-state identities, structures, and behaviors. When new states enter the global system, they seek legitimation by powerful existing states. Thus, these new states mimic the behaviors of the existing states. Once established states see evidence of these accepted behaviors within

[15] Ted Hopf, "The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory," *International Security* 23, no. 1 (1998): 171–200, https://doi.org/10.2307/2539267.
[16] Hopf.
[17] John W. Meyer et al., "World Society and the Nation-State," *American Journal of Sociology* 103, no. 1 (1997): 144–81, https://doi.org/10.1086/231174.

emerging states, they are likely to bestow the newly formed states with legitimacy—regardless of whether these behaviors are effective or ineffective in practice. For example, a state with a wide range of liberal democratic institutions—from state-protected citizen rights and democratic forms to a formal national polity with a constitution and educational system—is likely to be seen as legitimate in a global society dominated by Western, liberal democratic states. Based on this theory, Putin may be holding elections to mimic the behaviors of the most powerful states in the system, in order to prove himself as a legitimate actor. These elections would serve this function regardless of whether the competition is free and fair. This may well provide another incentive for authoritarians to host elections, regardless of whether the competition is free and fair.

Catherine Schuler in her article "Priamaia Liniia s Vladimirom Putinym: Performing Democracy Putin-Style," addresses the Russian case specifically. Schuler argues that Putin hosts elections in a performative manner to legitimatize his regime to its people and describes the style of Putin's regime as a "managed democracy."[18] Managed democracies are defined as systems which perpetuate an image of democracy while employing authoritarian tactics. In Putin's case, Schuler argues that managed democracy is deployed to satisfy the "competing expectations and interests" of "Western neoliberal democrats, post-Soviet communists, and Russian nationalists."[19] In Putin's system, for example, Russian citizens do in fact going to polling places and cast ballots on which they indicate their preferences for President and members of legislature. However, media outlets are heavily skewed toward coverage of Putin and the presence of opposition parties are virtually nonexistent, giving the voters few options between which to choose. Although Russian voters do cast ballots in favor of Putin, the competitive playing field is such that Putin is presented

[18] Catherine A. Schuler, "Priamaia Liniia s Vladimirom Putinym: Performing Democracy Putin-Style," *TDR (1988-)* 59, no. 1 (2015): 136–60.
[19] Schuler.

as the only viable candidate for whom to vote. This combination of "real" votes within a skewed political environment is described by scholars such as Schuler as a "managed democracy." Schuler argues that this tactic is used to perform an "illusion of democracy" [20] through votes and annual televised interviews rather than practicing democracy itself. Schuler suggests that the illusion of democracy is performed not for reasons which directly benefit Putin or help him maintain power, but to satisfy a Russian populace who demanded Western democratic practices after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989. In other words, Schuler argues that Putin holds elections to legitimate his regime to the Russian people who expected this norm to be upheld.

Some scholars argue that Putin's practice of holding elections satisfies a combination of rational and normative motivations. Andreas Schedler in his book, *The Politics of Uncertainty: Sustaining and Subverting Electoral Authoritarianism,* uses a combination of rationalist and normative explanations to address the puzzle. Like Magaloni, Schedler argues that elections are tools to help autocrats retain power through the huge advantages given to them through the electoral institution, while minimizing risk of military coup by allowing the opposition with the opportunity to seize power through institutional means.[21] The election in this case is described by Schedler as an "arena of struggle between actors"[22] in which challengers to the regime may express their dissatisfaction and attempt to unseat the autocrat in a legitimate way. Thus, elections serve as a way for autocrats to "siphon off" dissatisfaction with the regime through institutional means, dissuading challengers from an attempt at a violent rebellion.

[20] Schuler.
[21] Andreas Schedler, *The Politics of Uncertainty: Sustaining and Subverting Electoral Authoritarianism* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2013).
[22] Schedler.

However, unlike Magaloni, Schedler argues that a single-party dictatorship is the most effective way for an autocrat to retain power, although this model is "unpalatable" in the global community since the Cold War, due to an international culture of liberal democratic norms.[23] Thus, Schedler argues that many authoritarians settle on electoral authoritarian regimes as a more palatable alternative within the constraints of the existing global normative structure. Not only is an autocratic system without elections unwise from a cost/benefit analysis, Schedler argues that it is also unwise because it violates international norms against single-party dictatorships. In short, like Schuler, Schedler implies that elections are held by Putin as a function through which he may establish the legitimacy of his regime, presumably to the global community.

Another explanation combining norms and function is studied in Susan D. Hyde's book *The Pseudo-Democrat's Dilemma: Why Election Observation Became an International Norm.* Here, Hyde argues that in certain cases states comply with an international norm (such as hosting elections) even when the norm contradicts the state's rational self-interest.[24] This happens as a way for states to signal that they are complying with internationally expected behaviors so that they can continue receiving international benefits such as foreign aid, investment, tourism, trade, and membership in international organizations.[25] Hyde uses the example of inviting international observers to elections as an example of a norm which could be considered costly to actors who comply with it—in this case, autocrats such as Putin whose elections are decried by those same observers as illegitimate. Here, Hyde would argue that the observers are nevertheless invited because doing otherwise could lead to a decrease in international benefits, both monetary and

[23] Schedler.
[24] Susan D. Hyde, *The Pseudo-Democrat's Dilemma* (Cornell University Press, 2011), http://www.jstor.org.proxy.uchicago.edu/stable/10.7591/j.ctt7z647.
[25] Hyde.

status related. Hyde's theory in the context of the case of Putin's elections would mean that elections are held to satisfy a global norm so that autocrats may continue to receive material benefits from the global community—even though the global community understands the elections are not legitimate.

The normative explanation, however, also requires further explanation. It is true that the global community generally adheres to a norm of liberal democracy, which makes complying with norms such as holding elections an attractive option for actors who wish to be accepted within the global community. However, Putin is not afraid to violate traditional Western norms. This has been proved through his annexation of Crimea,[26] a move which violated international sovereignty—a norm articulated by the United Nations.[27] Subsequent to his annexation of Crimea, Putin fully invaded Ukraine in 2022, a move which stunned the international community due to its flagrant violation of sovereignty and violation of international law.[28] For this reason, it seems unlikely that the desire to adhere to Western norms, or to be accepted into a community of Western countries, is the only thing holding Putin to the habit of conducting elections.

Strategy of Domination Theory

A final theory about autocratic elections is described in Lisa Wedeen's book, *Ambiguities of Domination,* as a method to retain power. Wedeen's book examines Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad's cult of personality and argues it is a strategy of domination "based on compliance rather

[26] "From 'Not Us' To 'Why Hide It?': How Russia Denied Its Crimea Invasion, Then Admitted It."
[27] "Repertory of Practice of United Nations Organs — Codification Division Publications," accessed May 23, 2021, https://legal.un.org/repertory/art2.shtml.
[28] "Vladimir Putin vs. the Entire Concept of International Law - CNNPolitics," accessed April 6, 2022, https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/25/politics/putin-russia-ukraine-international-law-what-matters/index.html.

than legitimacy."[29] The regime enforces participation through rituals—such as elections—which are "transparently phony" to those who conduct them and those who participate. This manner of politics is politically effective as it produces guidelines for acceptable speech and behavior, defines a specific type of national membership, and induces complicity by compelling citizens to participate in rituals, upholding the "norms constitutive of domination."[30] In other words, when citizens comply with the language, iconography, and rituals required of them by the leader's cult of personality, it makes it more difficult for them to see themselves as victims of the state's domination. In my paper, I argue that this strategy includes the regular hosting of elections, regardless of the fact that the citizens do not believe that the elections are a legitimate competition. I argue Asad's strategies hold many similarities with the Putin regime's techniques of domination and control. Wedeen's argument specific to elections is that the Syrian people understand that the elections held are not legitimate—that they are "transparently phony."[31] However, when an actor such as Putin holds elections, the act of participating in these elections makes citizens complicit in upholding the regime and its norms constitutive of domination, therefore strengthening his grip on power.

The concept of autocrats hosting elections as a method to retain power is also held by Grigory Yavlinsky in his book, *The Putin System.* Specifically examining the Putin case, Yavlinsky argues that elections in the Russian Federation are presented as a way for the Russian people to express support for their leader. Here, as in Wedeen's theory, elections are framed as the civic duty of the people—not as a form of competition among several candidates on an equal basis,

[29] Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*, ed. the Author (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015), https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/A/bo22776830.html.
[30] Wedeen.
[31] Wedeen.

but rather as a method through which the Russian people may affirm Putin as their leader. Putin frames himself as the only viable option to lead the Russian Federation, constructing a narrative of himself as the "sole and unrivaled tsar and leader of the nation," defending Russia from attempts by outsiders and imposters to seize the throne from its legitimate holder and destroy the Russian nation."[32] By voting for Putin in elections, Russian citizens are therefore supporting the defender of the nation, affirming their identity as Russians defending the homeland as well as continually supporting the regime.

While this argument feels convincing, it has its flaws as well. It is difficult to distinguish between Putin framing himself as a legitimate actor for purposes of maintaining power, or for purposes of simply running a convincing campaign. It is also difficult to distinguish why people vote the way they do. There is a possibility that Russians vote for Putin because they genuinely believe he is the best candidate for the Presidency, not because they see this choice as their civic duty, or Putin as the last hope of defending the Russian Federation against the Western world. The Levada Center, a Russian Non-Governmental Organization which tracks public opinion toward the president, has historically recorded high approval ratings for Putin.[33] It could be argued that high public approval ratings are due to the Russian people subscribing to Putin's framing of himself, or for completely different reasons which have nothing to do with narrative framing. In short, it may be difficult to prove causally that Putin's framing of himself as defender has to do with his election strategy, or that the Russian people vote for Putin because of this framing.

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[32] Grigory Yavlinsky, "Authoritarianism on the Periphery," in *The Putin System*, An Opposing View (Columbia University Press, 2019), 65–132, http://www.jstor.org.proxy.uchicago.edu/stable/10.7312/yavl19030.7.

[33] Levada Center, "Putin Approval Rating Russia 1999-2022," Statista, accessed May 3, 2022, https://www.statista.com/statistics/896181/putin-approval-rating-russia/.

Theoretical Argument

Why does Putin market his party and country as democratic when international watchdog organizations label Russia as an autocracy and Russians protest rigged elections? I argue that there are two answers to this question. During the first half of Putin's regime, his first two elections were considered by foreign observers to be legitimate, although flawed. However, during the second half of Putin's regime, his third and fourth elections were considered by foreign observers to be illegitimate. I argue that elections helped Putin maintain his grasp on power in "Phase One" of his rule by mimicking a norm of Western liberal democracy, helping solidify the Russian Federation as a legitimate state under Putin in the eyes of its people. Elections are part of a Western, liberal democratic norm and using this norm helped Putin legitimate his regime internally in the early 2000's as Russia redefined itself after the Soviet Union and the Yeltsin years. Here, Putin combined a Western norm with his own autocratic strategies to form a "managed democracy." This "managed democracy" helped Putin legitimate the new Russian Federation to its citizens as a model of an established Western country, while allowing Putin to maintain control over the regime. Thus, I argue Putin's intent during the first phase of his rule was to use elections and their associated liberal democratic norm to establish and maintain legitimacy in the eyes of his people, therefore maintaining control of his regime.

The connection between complying with norms modeled by dominant states and legitimacy in the international system is laid out in Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink's foundational piece, "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change," where Finnemore and Sikkink outline the "life cycle of a norm." The life cycle of a norm involves three stages: norm emergence, norm cascade, and internalization. Norm emergence occurs when norm entrepreneurs attempt to convince states to adopt new norms, establishing new norms in the global system. Once a norm

has been established in the global system, a tipping point occurs once a critical mass of states has adopted the norm—a mass which could be determined by number of states in the system or relative power of the adoptive states. Once this critical mass has been achieved, the norm "cascades" throughout the rest of the global community as more and more states begin to adopt the norm even without domestic pressure to do so.[34] This compliance can be explained in several ways.

Fulfilling a norm modeled by powerful states in the international community can satisfy a pressure for conformity, a desire for self-esteem, or the goal of legitimation in the international system. For the purposes of my paper, I emphasize the goal of legitimation in the international system. Complying with norms in the cascade stage of the norm life cycle can help a state establish legitimacy on the international stage and in the eyes of its domestic audience. This may help to explain why autocratic leaders such as Putin host elections despite the outcome in contemporary global society—they may be attempting to satisfy a liberal democratic norm established by a critical mass of states, specifically in the West in the 1990's. Satisfying this norm confers legitimacy upon their state in the global system.

However, Putin's third and fourth elections occurred 12 and 18 years after Putin took office, making a legitimation strategy less likely. In fact, there have been widespread protests against the regime in the Russian Federation in recent years and it is unclear how much longer Putin can uphold a façade of liberal democracy. Why does Putin continue to bother hosting elections if his regime and the Russian Federation are regarded as legitimate—especially as the Russian public is beginning to show signs of dissatisfaction with this strategy? I argue that Putin's objectives have shifted over time, altering his strategy to maintain his hold on power.

[34] Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change," *International Organization* 52, no. 4 (1998): 887–917.

In the Asad case, Wedeen focuses attention on the use of familial metaphors to reinforce Asad's cult of personality, as Asad is depicted as the father of the nation. I argue that Putin uses a different role to portray himself to his country—that of national defender against the encroaching West, which threatens to destroy the Russian nation. This framing is consistent with patterns in the Russian national narrative, dating back to the imperial era and through the Soviet period. By leveraging this framing, Putin encourages citizens of the Russian Federation to participate in elections, therefore signing on to Putin's regime. By staging elections which Russian citizens participate in, Putin reifies his position as leader of the Russian Federation, regardless of the fact that the elections are not free and fair competitions.

I argue that in the second phase of Putin's rule, these elections have been held as a way for Putin to reinforce his claim to power by framing elections as a civic duty of the Russian people. By employing rhetoric which frames himself as a defender of the Russian nation and its history against Western forces which seek to destroy it, Putin encourages the Russian populace to cast their votes for him, reaffirming his status as the true leader of the Russian people (regardless of the fact that Putin is the only viable candidate). Having citizens cast their votes for Putin introduces complicity in the regime to the Russian populace: although most citizens recognize that the elections are not a free and fair competition, by complying with the elections, the citizens become "accomplices" in the regime. Thus, I argue that elections under Putin in "Phase Two" of his regime have been held for the purpose of reinforcing Putin's claim on power through framing of himself as a defender of the Russian nation against foreign threats.

Putin also frames elections as the "civic duty" of the Russian people, compelling them to participate and further reify Putin's status as defender of the nation by voting for him to continue leading the country. Grigory Yavlinsky in his book *The Putin System: An Opposing View* describes

Putin's system of authoritarianism in Russia and the mechanisms which sustain it. One of these mechanisms is elections. Yavlinsky argues that elections are part of a formulated ideological stance. Rather than a mechanism of power transfer, elections in Russia are framed as a civic duty of the Russian people as a mechanism through which Russian citizens can express their support for the Putin regime, which helps defend the state from international threats.[35] Yavlinsky argues that once in place, a system of elections is much easier to manipulate for an autocrat's self-interest than remove by changing the system altogether.[36] Since the electoral institutions are "sticky" to a certain degree, once elections were implemented as a tool to establish legitimacy, it was easier for Putin to continue hosting them for a different function than it was for him to do away with elections all together.[37] Instead, Putin's government used the state-owned media to reframe the elections as a civic duty of the Russian people, a way to affirm their support of the Putin regime and thus defend the Russian state from outside actors.

Method

Although we cannot get into Putin's head to determine exactly what his strategy surrounding elections consists of, we can use his speeches as a proxy to understand his general reasoning. Speeches are not the same as elections, but they can give us insight into Putin's priorities, the way he wishes to present himself as a leader to the Russian Federation, and the way he wishes to present himself as a leader to the international community. The narrative Putin tells on broadcast television frames his leadership position, the state of the Russian Federation, and its role within global society in specific ways. In short, Putin's speeches to the Russian people provide a window into his general political strategy.

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[35] Yavlinsky, "Authoritarianism on the Periphery."
[36] Yavlinsky.
[37] Schuler, "Priamaia Liniia s Vladimirom Putinym."

To explore both aspects of my theory, I plan to analyze Putin's rhetoric across time. I have collected speeches which Putin has made to the Russian nation and marked key words and phrases. These words and phrases are according to both theories which I am contesting: 1) complying with a liberal democratic norm to establish legitimacy in the eyes of the Russian people and the international community, and 2) maximizing his control over his regime by framing himself as the defender of Russia from the West and elections as a civic duty of the people to protect their nation. If my theory is correct, I expect to find more language in the first category than the second category in speeches made during Putin's Phase 1, and more language in the second category than the first category during Putin's Phase 2.

For the purposes of this study, I am defining Phase 1 as January 1, 2000, to May 6, 2008, the day before Dmitri Medvedev was inaugurated as President of the Russian Federation. I am defining Phase 2 as May 7, 2012, to January 1, 2022. This is the date of Putin's third inauguration as President of the Russian Federation until the first day of the current year. I have decided not to include speeches from the current year to simplify the data collection process of the study. All of the speeches I collected were given publicly by Putin to the Russian Federation between the years of 2000-2021. The speeches were transcribed and translated from the Russian language into English by the official website of the Kremlin. I believe this will help to investigate my theory in the most accurate way for several reasons. First, the speeches I pulled were all categorized the same way by the Putin government, which I hope will help me control for different types of speeches given by Putin. The speeches included in my study are all categorized as "Addresses" rather than "Addresses to the Federal Assembly," "Statements on Major Issues," "Working Meetings and Conferences," "Meetings with Representatives of Various Communities," "News conferences," "Interviews," and "Articles."

I chose “Addresses” as my category of focus as these speeches included those which were given to the Russian Federation as a whole, rather than a subgroup within the country. Of the speeches categorized as “Addresses,” I removed the speeches which were addresses to subgroups, such as speeches given at galas, ceremonies, or other events which the majority of the population were unlikely to attend or view on their own time. By selecting speeches which addressed the entire country and were broadcast widely, I assumed Putin’s language in these speeches would be the most representative of the leader he was attempting to act as to the entire country, rather than to a smaller community or population within it. After this selection process I was left with 9 speeches given during the Phase 1 period of my study, and 17 speeches given during the Phase 2 period of my study.

The second reason I believe this selection will help to investigate my theory in the most accurate way is through translation. The translation of the speeches I am using is the language chosen by the Putin regime to present to English audiences. By using the given translations from Russian to English rather than translating the speeches myself, there is no room for error in translation, as there are several Russian words used within the speeches which have multiple meanings across contexts. For example, the Russian word “народ” may be translated to mean “nation,” “people” or “folk” in English—words with different contexts to English speakers. My assumption is that these speeches have been translated into English to have the same connotations and meanings as they are intended to have in their original language. This will help me eliminate errors of translation or misinterpretation on my part.

Overall, the sample of speeches chosen consists primarily of the New Year Address. The New Year Address is a speech given every year on New Year’s Eve (with a few exceptions) by the country’s leader since 1945. The New Year’s Address has changed form in a few ways—

originally given by the General Secretary of the Communist Party in the Soviet era, it is now given by the President of the Russian Federation. The address is an annual event that is typically watched by half the country, giving it the highest viewership rates of all programming during the New Year's and Christmas holidays in the country.[38] Eight of nine of the Phase 1 speeches and 10 of the 17 Phase 2 speeches are New Year's Addresses. This makes the New Year's Address the primary way Putin addresses the country as a whole.

I have identified categories of words and phrases for each theory. For my first theory I draw on Patrick Gill-Tiney's piece, "A Liberal Peace?: The Growth of Liberal Norms and the Decline of Interstate Violence." Here, Gill-Tiney argues that liberal interpretations of sovereignty, including international law, interdependence, free trade, democracy and individual rights and freedoms have become increasingly prevalent in UN Security Council resolutions since 1970, reflecting "broad consensus" between major powers as to how these norms should be interpreted.[39] Drawing inspiration from the Gill-Tiney article and the other works mentioned in my literature review which concern liberal democracy, I determined categories under which words and phrases could fall. These categories are:

Liberal democratic norm

- State sovereignty
- Democracy
- Law
- Free (Freedoms, free society, free individuals)

[38] "President's New Year's Speech TV Reach Russia 2021," Statista, accessed April 14, 2022, https://www.statista.com/statistics/1196277/president-s-new-year-speech-tv-reach-russia/.
[39] Yulia Afanasyenko, "Russian Tradition: The History and Secrets of the President's New Year's Address," Russia Beyond, December 30, 2020, https://www.rbth.com/lifestyle/333224-russian-president-new-year-adress.

- Humanitarian
- Respect/Dignity (either directed at other countries or directed at the Russian Federation)
- Authority
- Development (including development of the economy, the people, and national defense capability, mentions of progress, improvements, and successes)
- Elections (regarding “free and fair” elections and the act of voting)
- Constitution
- Federalism

For my second theory, I drew words and phrases from Wedeen, Yavlinksy, Stent, and Goddard & Krebs’s pieces. From these works, I determined a list of categories of words and phrases which indicate a framing of Putin himself as the defender of Russia, the Russian way of life, and/or Russian ideals. These words and phrases could also demonstrate framing of elections and/or electing Putin as a “(civic) duty” or “right [as a citizen and/or member of the Russian majority ethnic group].”

Civic Duty

- Nation or people (the Russian word народ)
- Defense or implied existence of “other” which poses a threat
    i. Includes references to Russia’s security or military forces
    ii. References to a lack of international support for Russia
    iii. References to the threat of terrorism
- Unity
- Duty
- History (of Russia)

- Destiny (of Russia)
- Character of Russia (commonly referred to as "unique" or "great")
- Tradition
- Family (regarding Russian nation or people) or familial language regarding the Russian nation or people (i.e., Fraternal, paternal)
- Previous generations (grandfather, grandmother, veterans, ancestors, etc) or future generations (children, grandchildren, young people, descendants)
- Motherland/Fatherland/homeland
- Events crucial to Russia's mythology and tradition including:
    - iv. Great Patriotic War
    - v. Founding of Kievan Rus
    - vi. Founding of USSR

Due to the varied language used across time in Putin's speeches, it did not make sense to scan for specific words or phrases. Rather, the speeches were read through multiple times to identify words and phrases which fell under these categories in context. These categories underwent revision as I began studying the language of the speeches more thoroughly. Whenever a word or phrase was identified as being associated with one of these categories, it was marked (Appendix A has a marked speech as a sample of this process). I went through the speeches four times to make sure that all of the marked language was concurrent with one of the categories, and that no language was missed where it should have been marked. Once the words and phrases were identified, I aggregated the number of terms under each category into a table and the frequency of each category under each theme (Appendix B). The frequency of each theme was then plotted, for

each time period separately and both time periods. These plots are in the following section of this paper.

Identifying key terms and phrases within the language of the speeches was a more complex process than one might expect. I made sure all the terms and phrases were used in correct context when marking them within the speech. Certain words were directly related to the category under which they fell ("democratic" as a subset of "democracy", "legal norms" as a version of "law"). Other phrases reflected the ethos of the category ("We [the Russian people] have never had any help in these endeavors, and never will," a phrase which implies the "us vs. them" mentality I describe as part of Putin's framing). Certain terms came up in almost every speech (references to the development of Russia or previous and future generations) while others were only used once ("humanitarian"). For more information on how terms were identified, I provide two sample speeches in Appendix A. Overall, the terms and phrases were identified about 300 times. In the next section I present my findings along with historical context which addresses the realities in the Russian Federation during each phase.

Evidence

Phase 1

Complying with a norm which is widely followed in the international community can help establish international legitimacy. States crave international legitimacy because it heavily contributes to domestic legitimacy among the state's own citizens.[40] One example of this phenomenon is the norm of Western liberal democracy which cascaded through central and eastern Europe in the 1990's after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Central European states which were formerly part of the Communist Bloc adopted liberal democratic norms and systems of government to join

[40] Finnemore and Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change."

international organizations such as NATO and the European Union. Books like Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History* predicted that the rise of Western liberal democracy was inescapable, that the global community was witnessing not just the end of the Cold War, but "the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government."[41] At this point in time, liberal democracy was the expected norm across the global community. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, domestic legitimacy was essential to new regimes, as new leaders stepped into a new system of power after decades of top-down rule. Joining international organizations recognized by the system's remaining hegemon (the United States) is a powerful way to convince one's citizens that your regime can be trusted with the running of a state. Thus, international legitimacy was a high priority for new leaders managing a regime transition, making liberal democracy an extremely attractive option.

When Putin came to power in the year 2000, the Russian nation was unsure how to define itself. After the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, Boris Yeltsin faced the difficult task of reshaping the newly founded Russian Federation into a nation with a defined identity. Angela Stent points to this phenomenon in the Russian Federation specifically after the collapse of the Soviet Union. After the Soviet Union collapsed, it left an ideological vacuum, as the tenets upon which the former regime rested had collapsed as well.[42] At this point, a group of "pro-Western liberals" surrounding President Boris Yeltsin sought to redefine Russia with Western institutions so that it may join the West. Diplomat Andrei Kozyrev stated:

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[41] Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?," *The National Interest*, no. 16 (1989): 3–18.

[42] Angela Stent, *Putin's World: Russia against the West* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2019), https://www.twelvebooks.com/titles/angela-stent/putins-world/9781455533015/.

> Our choice is . . .to progress according to generally accepted rules. They were invented by the West, and I am a Westernizer in this respect . . . the West is rich, we need to be friends with it. . . it's the club of first-rate states Russia must rightfully belong to.[43]

During the 1990's, mimicking Western norms and institutions was a high priority for the Russian Federation who hoped to establish itself as a legitimate player and major power in the international community. Thus, the liberal democratic ideals modeled by the United States, the then-current hegemon in the global system, replaced the framework which disappeared in the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse.

Yeltsin's strategy to create a new liberal democratic state faced serious challenges. Yeltsin's reign was marked by a rough transition from a command to free-market economy, the movement of Russian troops into Chechnya after its succession, and a breakdown in balance of powers.[44] In 2000, Yeltsin resigned and named the then-current Prime Minister, Vladimir Putin, as acting President. 3 months later, Putin was elected President in a race considered by international observers to be legitimate.[45] Quickly, Putin ended the war in Crimea, stoked economic growth, and took a strong hand in leading the Russian government. Yet Putin viewed a divided—or pluralistic—Russia as inherently dangerous.

When coming to power, a perceived threat of national disintegration hung over the Russian Federation, prompting Putin to note that his first challenge was "creating the country's unity [and the] establishment of sovereignty of the Russian people, rather than the supremacy of individuals

[43] Stent.
[44] "Boris Yeltsin | Biography & Facts," Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed May 27, 2021, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Boris-Yeltsin.
[45] Michael McFaul and Michael McFaul, "Russia's 2000 Presidential Elections: Implications for Russian Democracy and U.S.-Russian Relations," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, accessed June 1, 2021, https://carnegieendowment.org/2000/04/01/russia-s-2000-presidential-elections-implications-for-russian-democracy-and-u.s.-russian-relations-pub-421.

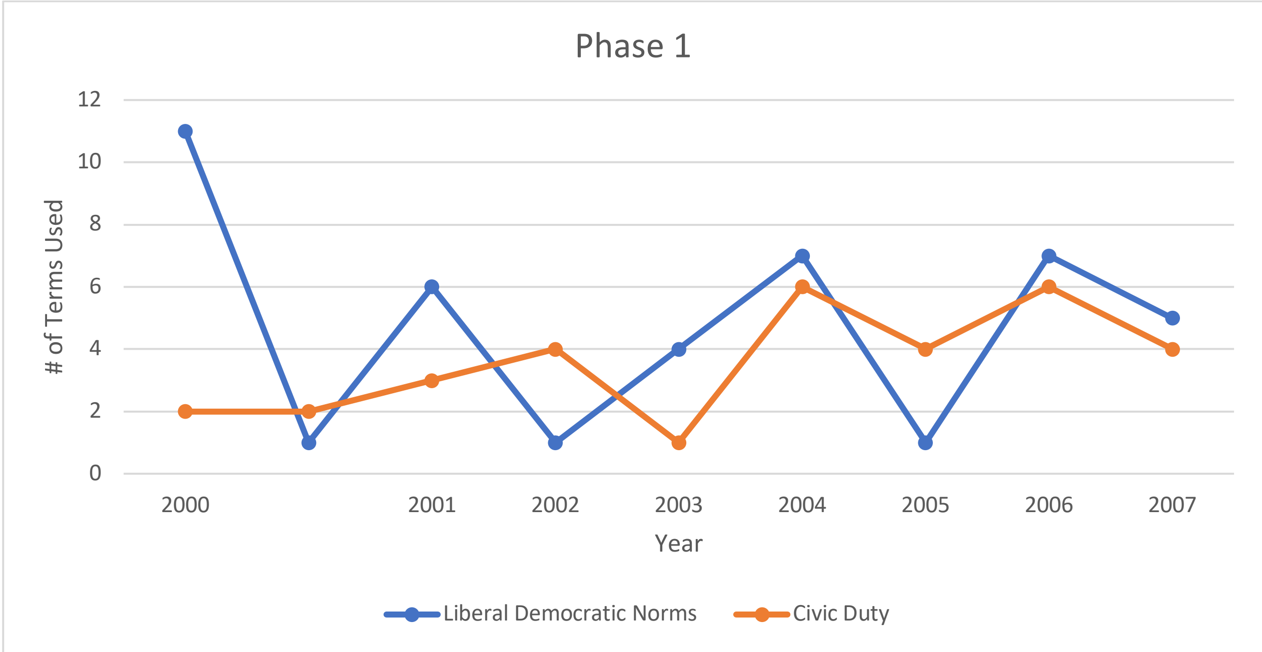
and groups, across its entire territory."[46] At this point in time, Putin stated that due to the lack of democratic institutions and a weak civil society, he was "forced" to restore authority and power to the state.[47] Later, in 2008, Putin contradicts himself by stating that "from the very beginning, Russia was created as a super-centralized state. That's practically laid down in its genetic code, its traditions, and the mentality of its people."[48] Putin's emphasis on state control and lack of pluralism are telling when analyzing his approach to government. Essentially, Putin views Russia as a state inherently in need of centralized state control, with little plurality in government, despite its adopted identity as a liberal democratic state under Putin's predecessor.

This highly centralized conception of a state runs counter to the idea of liberal democracy, a plural system in which elections are held regularly to determine which group maintains power. Thus, Putin was in a difficult position as the leader of a state with a history of centralized government searching for stability and identity amid a trend toward a pluralistic system. "Managed democracy" was Putin's immediate solution. Managed democracy has three basic elements: a strong executive branch unbalanced by the judiciary or parliament, state control over the media which shapes public opinion, and control over elections.[49] As a result of these three factors, elections under managed democracy are heavily skewed toward the incumbent. This system requires constant oversight by the autocrat, and is difficult to sustain long-term, especially when it

[46] Sean Cannady and Paul Kubicek, "Nationalism and Legitimation for Authoritarianism: A Comparison of Nicholas I and Vladimir Putin," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 5, no. 1 (January 1, 2014): 1–9, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2013.11.001.
[47] Cannady and Kubicek.
[48] Cannady and Kubicek.
[49] "PONARS Policy Memo 396 - From Managed Democracy to Sovereign Democracy: Putin's Regime Evolution in 2005," accessed May 27, 2021, https://www.csis.org/analysis/ponars-policy-memo-396-managed-democracy-sovereign-democracy-putins-regime-evolution-2005.

comes to processes as complex and visible as elections. However, this system served Putin well during the first eight years of his regime.

My theory is that Putin in Phase 1 was complying with a liberal democratic norm to establish legitimacy in the eyes of the Russian people and the international community. Thus, I expected to find more language in my "liberal democratic norm" category than in my "civic duty" category during this phase. In Phase 1, January 1, 2000 to May 6, 2008, Putin used a total of 43 phrases associated with liberal democratic norms and 32 phrases associated with nationalist ideas.



In this phase, I expected to find more language in the Liberal Democratic Norms category than the Civic Duty category in speeches made by Putin. There is a higher frequency of occurrence of Liberal Democratic Norm language than Civic Duty language by about 25%. This margin is not incredibly wide, meaning that Putin was still utilizing a significant amount of rhetoric related to

Civic Duty in Phase 1. This might call back to Putin's desire to "create unity" [50] within the country. The most commonly used phrases during this phase were in the categories of "Development" for Liberal Democratic Norms and "Generations" for Civic Duty. This makes sense—to establish legitimacy during these first eight years, emphasizing the progress and achievements of the Russian nation is a powerful strategy, while referencing previous and future generations stresses the history of the country and its people. Overall, the findings for Phase 1 were fairly consistent with my theory.

Phase 2

Putin's time as President of the Russian Federation is split into two periods. After serving two terms as President, the Russian constitution would not allow Putin to run for President again. Instead, Putin's prime minister, Dmitri Medvedev, ran for President and won. After assuming the role in 2008, Medvedev appointed Putin his Prime Minister. There is considerable debate among scholars on how much influence Putin retained over the presidency,[51] with a majority believing that Putin essentially retained his ability to call the shots during this period. Notably, the constitution was amended during Medvedev's rule—rather than calling for elections every four years, the constitution now calls for elections every six years. After Medvedev served a four-year term, Putin was reelected president and inaugurated in 2012. Up to this point, managed democracy had been a successful strategy for Putin, keeping him in power. Yet studies of managed democracy note that managed democracy, "like a mule, cannot reproduce itself."[52] The period which I label as "Phase Two" of Putin's regime saw cracks beginning to show in the façade of this strategy.

[50] Cannady and Kubicek, "Nationalism and Legitimation for Authoritarianism."
[51] Alexander Baturo and Slava Mikhaylov, "Reading the Tea Leaves: Medvedev's Presidency through Political Rhetoric of Federal and Sub-National Actors," *Europe-Asia Studies* 66, no. 6 (July 3, 2014): 969–92, https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2014.926716.
[52] Nikolai Petrov, "Putin's Regime Evolution in 2005," n.d., 6.

Elections under a managed democracy require an incredible amount of effort to sustain and control. For example, the electoral system must have high obstacles to participation for the opposition, selective enforcement of rules, and political control of electoral commissions and courts.[53] After being voted in as president democratically in 2000, Putin was able to manipulate Russia's electoral system to be voted in again in 2004, and his chosen candidate Dmitri Medvedev in 2008 (as the Russian constitution forbade another consecutive term for Putin). During this period the legislature was changed to remove a protest vote opportunity, block the ability of "negative campaigning" across news outlets, and block a minimum turnout requirement.[54] These reforms did not go unnoticed by individual actors and watchdog groups,[55] but much of the population was willing to accept them. Putin won the presidency again in 2012 and 2018.

Since 2012, there has been unrest regarding Putin's managed democracy. Notable figures who have challenged the Putin regime include Boris Nemtsov and Alexei Navalny. Nemtsov was a Russian physicist who served as deputy prime minister under Yeltsin and governor of Nizhny Novgorod. In 2011, he played a large part in protests against the Putin regime, continuing until 2014 with the annexation of Crimea. The night before a planned march in protest of the invasion of Ukraine and the growing economic crisis in Russia, Nemtsov was shot four times in the back as he crossed a bridge in front of the Kremlin. The assassination is widely suspected to be Putin's doing.[56] More recently Putin has been challenged by Alexei Navalny, a lawyer and blogger who

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[53] Petrov.
[54] Stephen K. Wegren and Andrew Konitzer, "Prospects for Managed Democracy in Russia," *Europe-Asia Studies* 59, no. 6 (2007): 1025–47.
[55] "Presidential Election, 14 March 2004," accessed June 1, 2021, https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/russia/eoms/presidential_2004.
[56] "Opinion | It's Been Four Years since the Murder of Boris Nemtsov. Russians Haven't Forgotten.," *Washington Post*, accessed June 1, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/03/06/its-been-four-years-since-murder-boris-nemtsov-russians-havent-forgotten/.

has criticized corruption in United Russia (Putin's party) since 2008. After being blocked from running for president in 2016, Navalny continued to draw attention to corruption in the Putin regime and was eventually poisoned[57] with the nerve agent Novichok in 2020. After recovering in Germany, Navalny returned to Russia, where he was arrested upon arrival. To date, Navalny's unjust imprisonment has led to the largest protests Russia has seen since 1991, with over 3,100 people participating. These protests may demonstrate that time is running out on Putin's strategy of managed democracy.

Putin's philosophy toward the Russian Federation and its role in world politics has remained fairly consistent throughout his two decades in power. Angela Stent in her book *Putin's World: Russia Against the West and With the Rest* outlines what she terms "the New Russian Idea."[58] This idea is a combination of attitudes in place from the Soviet Union and Putin's personal outlook on world politics (and how he sees them). Stent writes that Putin "has cultivated the idea of Russian exceptionalism, of Russia's unique Eurasian destiny" as a country "bestriding both Europe and Asia, the center of a new, multipolar world in which Moscow deals with governments of all political persuasions."[59] Stent writes:

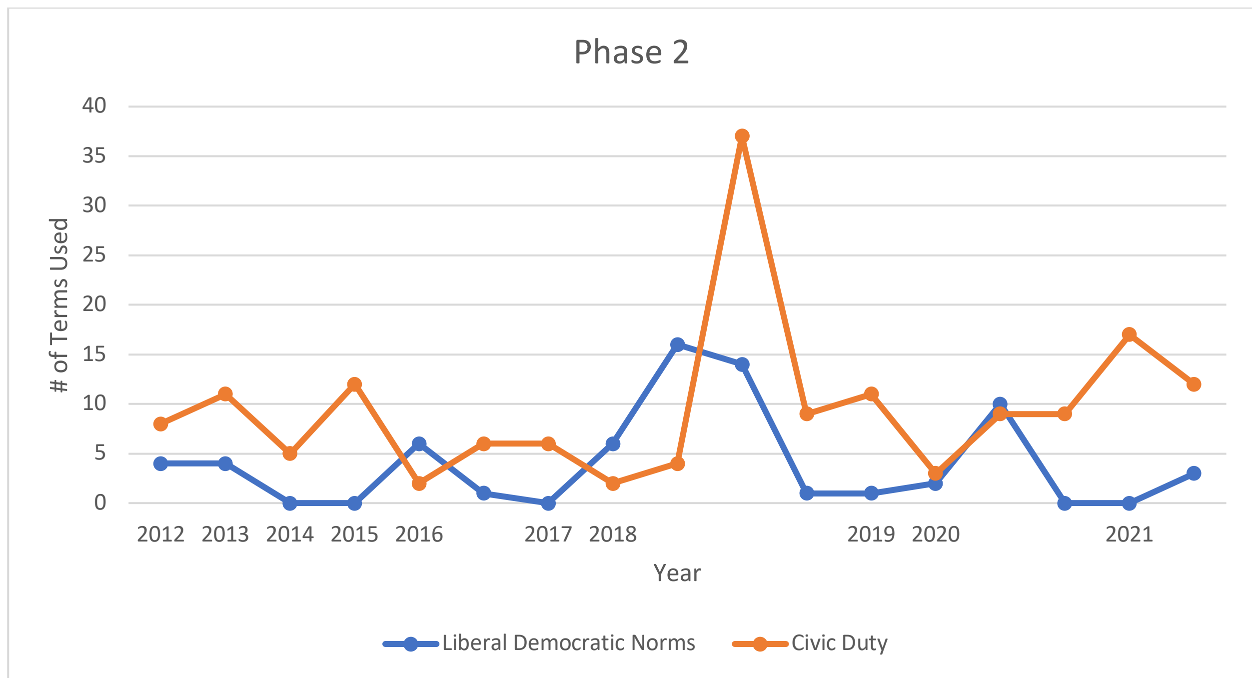
> During his second term, Putin increasingly turned against the West, and in his third presidential term, which began in 2012, foreign policy was largely used to bolster his domestic ratings. In 2011, he had been shocked by demonstrations protesting falsified parliamentary elections and his announced return to the Kremlin. A change in US

[57] "FSB Team of Chemical Weapon Experts Implicated in Alexey Navalny Novichok Poisoning," bellingcat, December 14, 2020, https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2020/12/14/fsb-team-of-chemical-weapon-experts-implicated-in-alexey-navalny-novichok-poisoning/.
[58] Stent, *Putin's World: Russia against the West*.
[59] Stent.

ambassadors further convinced Putin that Washington was out to undermine him. . . While extolling Russian exceptionalism, Putin has re-created the enemy image of the West and its purported agents in Russia. He portrays himself as the protector of Russians living in the near abroad, because of the perceived historical injustice that followed the Soviet collapse. He defends Russia's right to restore the global role it lost after 1992.[60]

In short, Putin sees the West as a force diametrically opposed to the Russian way of life, and himself, its protector.

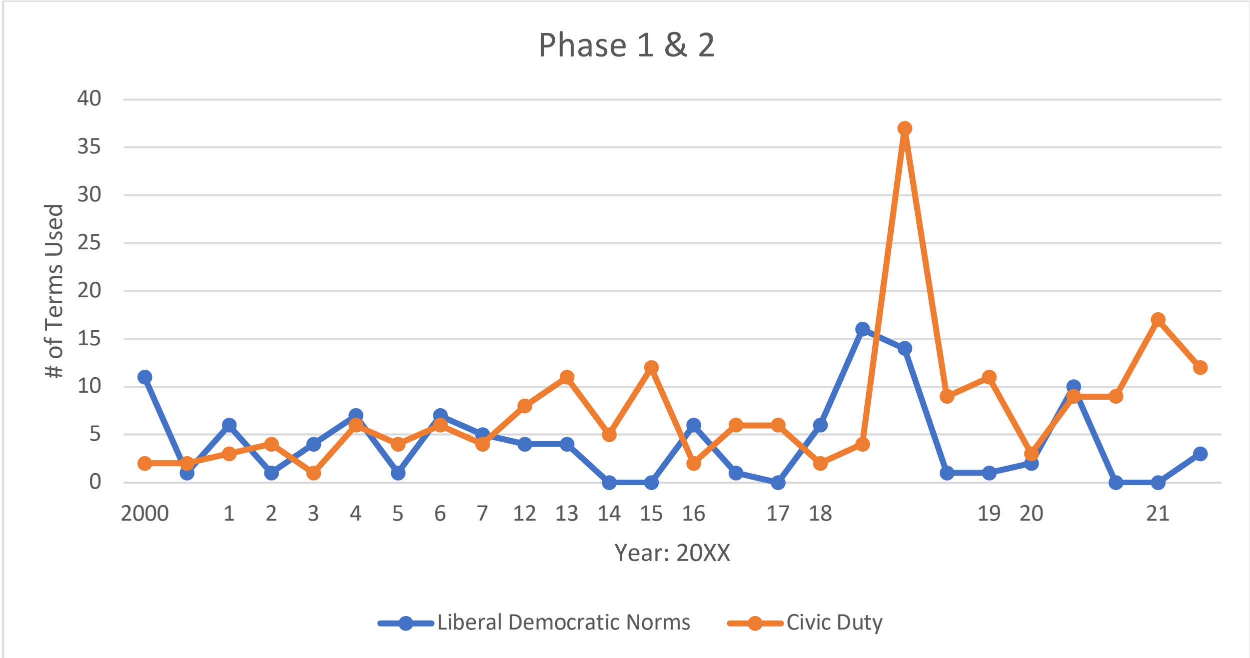
In Phase 2, May 7, 2012 to January 1, 2022, Putin used a total of 68 phrases associated with liberal democratic norms and 163 phrases associated with nationalist ideas. The distribution of these numbers is depicted in the graph below:



[60] Stent.

The most commonly used phrases during this phase were, again, in the categories of "Development" for Liberal Democratic Norms and "Generations" for Civic Duty. Calls to previous and future generations were even more frequent during this phase, occurring in all but 2 speeches. Development remained a focal point: Putin stressed the accomplishments of the regime and the nation in over half of the speeches.

Overall, the distribution of terms and phrases across categories in speeches from 2000-2021 is depicted here:



Although the data is somewhat different from what I expected, I argue that it still supports my theory. I predicted that in Phase 1 there would be a higher use of language regarding liberal democratic norms than nationalist phrasing. The usage of these terms was only slightly higher, indicating less of a shift in rhetoric than I expected. However, I predicted that in Phase 2 there would be a higher use of language using civic duty phrasing than liberal democratic norms, which proved to be true. Although the difference between the use of language regarding liberal democratic norms and civic duty was not as drastic as I predicted, the use of civic duty phrasing

did become much higher proportionally during Phase 2 of my study. Therefore, I find tentative evidence supporting my theories of the shifting reasons why Putin continues to host elections does hold. During the first phase of Putin's rule, he gave equal weight to ideas of liberal democratic norms and nationalist language. During the second phase of Putin's rule, he gave much more emphasis on nationalist language than the mention of liberal democratic norms. This signifies a shift away from the focus on liberal democratic norms, which my argument and theory explains.

Conclusion

Why bother holding elections if those elections are widely acknowledged to be illegitimate? I argue that holding elections, even heavily skewed elections, helped President Vladimir Putin to consolidate power over the Russian state when he was brought into office. I argue that once Putin had a solid grasp on power, elections served a function to help him retain power over his regime. This occurred through a framing of Russia as under attack, the Russian people as a united front, and Putin as a leader effective at protecting the Russian nation. The data I collected on rhetoric used by Putin in addresses to the nation supports these theories. During the first phase of Putin's rule, his rhetoric was evenly split between language invoking liberal democratic norms and language depicting a nationalist idea of the country. Invoking liberal democratic ideas was an effective way to signal legitimacy to an international and domestic community during the early 2000's, when global society was focused on a set of liberal democratic norms after the end of the Cold War. This language, and the commitment to fulfilling these types of norms by investing in electoral institutions, likely helped Putin establish his control over the Russian state by signaling to the international community and Russians domestically that his regime was conforming to global norms.

Putin's shift to using more language emphasizing civic duty during the second phase of his rule suggests that the liberal democratic norms were no longer serving as great of a function to him as they may have during the first phase. However, he continued to hold elections despite this shift. The continued and accelerated use of language framing Putin as a defender of Russia, combined with electoral institutions, suggests that Putin may be hosting elections to maintain his grip on power in Russia. Hosting elections provides a way for citizens to partake in the Putin regime, reaffirming their commitment to Putin's narrative of himself defending Russia from the Other. This strategy is described by Grigory Yavlinsky and Lisa Wedeen in their works (Yavlinksy on Putin specifically, Wedeen in the Syrian context). Putin's accelerated use of language suggesting this framing is evidence supporting this theory.

My argument does have potential criticisms. For instance, it is difficult to gauge the impacts of global norms on the decisions of leaders, particularly those made 20 years ago. As Kuran writes, "tracking emotions and mental states is a treacherous business."[61] It is also difficult to prove a strategy of normative framing. It is likely we will never know from Putin himself what his motives are behind using nationalist language. However, these patterns have been explored by previous scholars in this case and others across place and time. The Putin case may be another example in this trend. The use of global norms as a tool by autocratic leaders to prove legitimacy, externally to the global community or internally to their own people, is worth examining, as typically the spread of liberal democracy has been considered a good and worthwhile process in the last two decades. The way in which leaders can frame democratic institutions such as electoral systems to serve nondemocratic functions is an area which is still emerging and not widely studied. However,

[61] Timur Kuran, "Now Out of Never: The Element of Surprise in the East European Revolution of 1989," *World Politics* 44, no. 1 (1991): 7–48, https://doi.org/10.2307/2010422.

with global trends of democratic backsliding on the rise, these types of strategies may be seen more and more often in the near future. These theories get a little closer to the question, “Why hide it?”

Appendices

Appendix A: Example Speech Analysis

December 31, 2005: A New Year Address to the Nation

Vladimir Putin:

Dear citizens of Russia! Dear friends!

In a few minutes we shall greet the New Year 2006.

These moments always bring together the people of our huge country because now each of us recalls the past, thinks about the future, and of course, hopes for the best. When evaluating the events of 2005, we think first and foremost about how we, our family and friends spent this past year. And the destiny of the whole country basically takes shape from each of our lives. We can say with confidence that as a whole, 2005 was a positive year in practically all areas. It has convincingly proven that we are capable of a great deal. Certainly, we still have plenty of problems and we know that we alone can resolve them.

We have ambitious and very important plans in economy and social sphere [sic]. We shall strengthen Russia's defences and protect the interests of our citizens in the widest sense of the word. And we shall do this. New Year is one of our most favourite holidays. It is a loving, and despite the winter weather, genuinely warm holiday. It unites us around our most important values—love of children, parents, friends and relatives, our home and our country.

A lot of joyful festive days lie ahead of us. I wish you all the best!

Happy New Year!

Liberal democratic norm categories:

- Development
    - “We have ambitious and very important plans in economy and social sphere”

Total: 1

Civic Duty categories:

- Defense or “Other”
    - “We shall strengthen Russia’s defences and protect the interests of our citizens”
- Destiny (of Russia)
    - “Destiny of the whole country”
- Unity
    - “It unites us”
- Generations
    - “love of children, parents, friends, and relatives”

Total: 4

December 31, 2012: New Year's Address to the Nation

President of Russia Vladimir Putin:

We are saying goodbye to 2012 which becomes history. This was an important year for our country. I would like to sincerely thank you all for your efforts, your work and achievements, your trust and support.

In these moments, we are particularly aware of the fleeting of time, of how quickly our children are growing, how much we value our families and friends, and how much we love them.

Right now, each of us recollects the events, encounters and words that have been most important. We all hope that New Year's Eve will bring us good luck and a bit of a miracle—which, they say, the New Year sometimes brings.

But ultimately and above all we rely on our own strength and on the people near us; on what we ourselves can achieve in our work, our studies and our creative expression; on how we can improve life around us and improve ourselves. We should become more responsive and benevolent, more generous and caring toward our loved ones, our children and parents, our friends and colleagues, and everyone who needs our support.

As we face the future, we naturally hope for positive, joyful changes, and our personal plans are inseparable from Russia, from our heartfelt, noble feelings toward our Fatherland. Its development and further advancement of its thousand-year-long history fully depend on our joint efforts and energy, our unity and responsibility, our aspiration to do as much good as possible. After all, only together can we, the people of Russia, move confidently forward, withstand all challenges, resolve the most difficult problems, and build a powerful, successful nation and a modern, prosperous, free society.

Friends,

Only a few seconds remain before the start of the New Year. I wish you good health, love and happiness! Let children be born and let all good ideas be realized. Let there be joy and harmony in every home and in every family. Then Russia, too, will stand strong and indestructible.

I wish you a happy New Year 2013!

Liberal democratic norm categories:

- Development
  - "Your work and achievements"
  - "how we can improve life around us and improve ourselves."
  - "[Russia's] development and further advancement"

Total: 3

Civic Duty categories:

- Unity
  - "our unity"
- Duty
  - "our responsibility"
- Implied existence of "other" which poses a threat
  - "We rely on our own strength and the people near us"
- History (of Russia)
  - "[Russia's] thousand-year-long history"
- Generations
  - "our children are growing"
  - "our children and parents"

    - “Let children be born”
- Motherland/Fatherland/homeland
    - “Fatherland”

Total: 8

Appendix B: Table of Recorded Term Frequency

Year	Speech Title	Liberal Democratic Norms	Civic Duty
2000	Address to a Gala Reception on the Day of the Declaration of Russian State Sovereignty	11	2
	President Vladimir Putin's New Year Address to the Nation	1	2
2001	New Year Message to the Citizens of Russia	6	3
2002	President Vladimir Putin's New Year Address	1	4
2003	A New Year Address to the Nation	4	1
2004	A New Year Address to the Nation	7	6
2005	A New Year Address to the Nation	5	4
2006	A New Year Address to the Nation	7	6
2007	A New Year Address to the Nation	5	4
2012	New Year's Address to the Nation	4	8
2013	New Year's Address to the Nation	4	11
2014	New Year's Address to the Nation	0	5
2015	New Year's Address to the Nation	0	12

2016	Address to the People of Russia Ahead of the State Duma Election	6	2
	New Year's Address to the nation	1	6
2017	New Year's Address to the nation	0	6
2018	Presidential Address to the Nation	6	2
	Address to Russian Citizens	16	4
	Speech at Inauguration Ceremony	14	37
	New Year's Address to the nation	1	9
2019	New Year's Address to the nation	1	11
2020	Address to the nation	2	3
	Address to the nation	10	9
	New Year Address to the Nation	0	9
2021	Address on Heroes of Fatherland Day	0	17
	New Year Address to the Nation	3	12

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