

Russian Public Assessments of the Putin Policy Program: Achievements and Challenges

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Abstract

Attention is given to Russian public assessments of President Vladimir Putin, important political actors of the Putin period, and major policy areas that are at the heart of the governing Putin team's programmatic agenda (as of the second Putin presidency, 2012–18). The intention is (1) to assess the level of support for President Putin, key political actors comprising the Putin team, other governmental institutions and a leading rival, (2) to determine the level of congruence between the preferences of the Putin team and the Russian public regarding major policies intended to strengthen the Russian state and to modernize the Russian society, and (3) to evaluate Russian public assessments of the work of the Putin team in actually addressing these overriding goals. It is found that Russians' positive assessment of Vladimir Putin, Russia's paramount leader, is juxtaposed with more middling assessments of all other actors, excepting opposition figure Aleksei Navalny, who is poorly viewed. A strong congruence is found between the Putin team's policy priorities and those of the Russian public, but public assessments of the Putin team's performance across specific policies are mixed and reveal areas where that team has been both successful and come up short. Results of the October 2014 ROMIR public opinion survey indicate that Putin and his team are well-positioned and that their overall policy performance is acceptable, but policy soft spots and points of concern are revealed: this suggests continuing challenges for the Putin team in delivering a program accommodating the preferences of an aware domestic public. It is argued that Putin's position as a paramount leader redounds to his governing team's advantage, but this position also represents a profound dilemma for the Russian political system.

Keywords

Putin – Putin policy program – Russian public opinion – political elites – elite-mass relations – paramount leader

Russia's evolution through the period 2000–16 has entailed a policy program that is multifaceted, that can be connected with identifiable outcomes, both positive and negative, and that is directly associated with Vladimir Putin and his governing team.¹ These policies and the overall program which they comprise were formulated and evolved through all three of 21st century Russia's interconnected presidencies, the first presidency of Vladimir Putin (2000–08), that of Dmitry Medvedev (2008–12), and Putin's second (since 2012). Briefly summarized, these policies were directed to the simultaneously overriding goals of strengthening the Russian state, modernizing the Russian society, and bolstering of Russia's global position. Observers can debate to what extent these policies emerged as part of a coherent program, constitute a more haphazard set of policy responses to changing conditions, or evolved overtime to ultimately form a distinguishable programmatic whole. By 2014, however, a decade and a half after Vladimir Putin's rise to the Russian presidency and well into his second presidency, a distinguishable policy agenda and program were evident. The Putin agenda and implemented policies were subject to public assessments, and these public judgments merit our attention. This article analyzes the public's assessments, finding a mix of judgments that both support and challenge the Putin regime's assertions about its performance.

Putin and his governing team have given considerable attention to their policy program and claimed successes, and the desired public support has been central to regime efforts at securing legitimacy. Russian public opinion surveys by established firms such as Levada, VTsIOM, and FOM have illuminated public assessments, and we can identify considerable over-time stability in attitudes.² The October 2014 NEPORUS-ROMIR survey, crafted by a team of Norwegian-Swedish-Russian-American scholars and conducted in the field by the Russian survey firm ROMIR, offers important insights into Russian public assessments, and these assessments fit squarely with other Russian survey results.³ While

1 This study is grounded in the October 2014 ROMIR all-Russia survey of 1007 respondents, with this survey and resultant database part of the NEPORUS Project, "New Politics Groups and the Russian State", funded by the Research Council of Norway. I thank Jacob Cramer for statistical research support, and Mikhail Beznosov, Geir Flikke, Patrick McGovern, Daniel Pelin, and the two anonymous reviewers for incisive analytical suggestions.

2 See the over-time summary public assessments at Levada, <http://www.levada.ru/eng/indexes=0>, and <http://www.levada.ru/indikatory/polozhenie-del-v-strane/>, and VTsIOM, <http://www.wciom.com/index.php?id=61&uid=1254>.

3 The ROMIR survey, consisting of 70 questions, spans four major substantive concerns: the executive and society; social protest and framing; societal developments; and mobilization and social media. The survey was crafted in summer 2014, and ROMIR conducted the survey in October 2014. For information regarding ROMIR, see: <http://romir.ru>. The NEPORUS eight

much of the NEPORUS project addresses social movements, media, and mobilization efforts, my interests and the focus of this NEPORUS-based article are on the Putin federal executive, its policy concerns, and the level of public receptivity to that executive's programmatic efforts.

The year 2014 represents an important and appropriate moment to evaluate the Russian public's assessments of Putin, his team, and various political actors (governmental and nongovernmental). Fifteen years of governance is more than a sufficient time period to take the pulse of a citizenry's visceral reactions to a well-ensconced governing team. Certainly there has been a predictably wide array of influential events and policy developments across the entirety of the Putin period, spanning such impactful lows as the August 2000 Kursk submarine disaster and September 2004 Beslan school attack to the profound 2014 highs of the February Sochi games and March return of Crimea to Russia. Russians are nicely positioned, well into the second Putin presidency, to assess the Putin team's core policies and the overall regime program, especially as Russians anticipate continuing governance by Putin and his team for the foreseeable future. Although Russian public opinion centers such as Levada, VTsIOM, and FOM have produced reliable survey results that reveal the relatively stable – and overall long-term supportive – Russian public assessments of Putin's leadership, it is important to illuminate in more detail the policy concerns and results that are so essential to both Putin's continuing standing as the country's dominating leader and the team's ability to effectively govern. Indeed, any evidence of public 'fatigue' with the governing regime could result in institutional and personnel changes, as when the May 2011 decision was taken by the Putin team to augment a seemingly besieged United Russia Party with a new organizational vessel, the All-Russian People's Front. As we shall find, this All-Russian People's Front initiative may not have yielded the desired payoff in bolstering mass support, but it reflected the governing team desires to bridge to mass interests and preferences.⁴ However one judges the state of the Russian polity, whether as some sort of 'hybrid regime' or a returned 'soft' authoritarian state, there is no doubt that Russian public preferences matter

team members who constructed the survey are Geir Flikke (principal investigator), Elena Belokurova, Steven Fish, Pål Koltsø, Jardar Østbø, Carolina Vendil Pallin, Anna Tarasenko, and John P. (Pat) Willerton. For details regarding the survey instrument, contact Geir Flikke (University of Oslo).

- 4 Aleksei Navalny's 2011 characterization of United Russia as "the party of swindlers and thieves" found widespread agreement and revealed the dilemmas confronting the Putin team as it faced upcoming elections. See Ellen Barry, "Rousing Russia with a Phrase", *The New York Times*, 9 December 2011.

for the country's political life, and elites – including Vladimir Putin – are well aware of this.⁵ The October 2014 ROMIR survey offers a rich snapshot of Russians' thinking about both the governing team and its policies, with its detailed attention to public assessments of nearly two dozen specific policy concerns especially valuable.

Expectations and Approach, with a Caveat

A number of central questions guide this analysis. A decade and a half into the Putin team's tenure, what are Russians' policy concerns, and how do they accord with Putin team priorities and actions? What is the level of public support for Putin and his team, and how do Russians assess the Putin team's policy record to date?

First, an important caveat is in order. There is an understandable scholarly focus on issues of Russian democracy building and civil society when evaluating the Putin record, and however vigorously the Putin team explains its approach to the country's political development, that team's efforts and policies are predictably subject to skepticism. My interest in illuminating the Putin team's record is in another direction: assessing Putin's and his team's governance with attention to core policies and the Russian public's perception of those policies' consequences. By core policies I mean Putin team initiatives that are said to address the functioning of state institutions, the operating of the economy, the universally desired improvement in living standards, the hoped-for provision of state-guaranteed services, and the intended strengthening of the country's society and cultural life. In the political realm, my focus is not on the potential democratic quality of the system, on system rules and functioning, but rather on the political system's ability, as judged by Russians, to provide the goods and services set out by the Russian Constitution and laws and as articulated by the governing elite. I do not examine civil society. While attentive to central domestic concerns, I also include the bolstering of Russia's security-foreign policy position: a policy concern long emphasized by the elite and public alike. In identifying and assessing priority policy concerns, I focus on the second Putin presidency, juxtaposing Putin policy priorities with those of the Russian public. While granting that individual Putin policies have arisen over time and that the overall program has been evolving, how do Russians assess the performance of this governing team roughly midway through the

5 On "soft" authoritarianism, see Vladimir Gel'man, *Authoritarian Russia: Analyzing Post-Soviet Regime Changes* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015): 82–83.

second Putin presidency? Indeed, while anticipating that Putin, in his second term, and in the wake of the Sochi Olympics and joining of Crimea to Russia,⁶ will enjoy considerable domestic public support, how does such support stack up vis-à-vis other political actors, governmental and nongovernmental? Overall, in illuminating Russian public assessments of the governing Putin team and that team's policy performance, can we identify not only areas where public approval is forthcoming, but also find areas of public reservation and skepticism. I posit that even granting institutional and political power advantages that accrue to the governing team, an analysis of the public's receptivity to – and assessment of – the regime's policy program can permit an identification of policy 'soft spots' that represent important points of concern and challenge to a politically well-positioned governing elite. There is considerable evidence that Putin and his team are highly concerned about public opinion, expending much effort and many resources to shore up domestic support.⁷ Indeed, the very return of Putin to the Russian presidency in March 2012 appeared to many as strong evidence of the governing elite's need to return to the country's paramount leader when his successor, Dmitry Medvedev, and his platform party, United Russia, were found to be so wanting by both critics and supporters.⁸

Drawing upon the ROMIR data, I expect to find continuing strong support for Putin, but with varying – and lower – levels of support for other governmental and nongovernmental actors. I anticipate a mixed set of Russian public assessments of the various actors that form the Putin-led decision-making system, including the government (Cabinet of Ministers) and the parliament (Federal Assembly) dominated by Putin supporters and allies, as well as the Putin platform party, United Russia, and the more recently formed Putin mass membership All-Russian People's Front. I want to juxtapose these levels of support with those of the consultative, quasi-state People's Chamber, and – for purposes of more stark contrast – the public assessment of the high-profile reformer and Putin critic, Aleksei Navalny.

Meanwhile, to rigorously tap the major policy concerns of the Putin program, I rely on the seven Putin 2012 presidential campaign policy position papers that

6 Given the highly contentious nature of the 2014 Ukrainian crisis and developments involving Crimea, I use value-neutral phrasing, understanding that Russian and Western perspectives are entirely opposite.

7 Vladimir Putin has proven especially attentive to such efforts, directly reaching out to various interests in high-profile ways. One important effort was his February 2013 participation in the First Congress of Russian Parents, addressing problems of juvenile justice; an effort reflective of the family policy priorities of his second presidency; see a summary article and video at Pervyi kanal, 9 February 2013, www.itv.ru/news/social/225987; accessed May 19, 2015.

8 See *Authoritarian Russia*, 104–23.

appeared in high-visibility national publications in January-February. While Putin has used many forums to set out his vision and specific concerns, I analyze these seven high-profile, interconnected addresses, they lay out a focused and coherent set of positions, they are broadly addressed to the Russian public rather than targeted audiences, they are grounded in the past years of Putin team governance, and they set the programmatic stage for the third presidency of the governing team. From these position papers I identify eleven major policy concerns, they are grounded in past regime actions, and they are central to Putin's second presidency. I expect variance in the level of importance that Russian citizens accord to these concerns, although all eleven merited considerable elite attention throughout the 2000–14 period. I posit that those policy concerns that are central to the people's economic well-being, standard of living, and material quality of life will be especially salient. If all of these policy concerns justify some level of public attention, the complexity of issues and the mix of policy consequences ensure that there should be variance in the degree of the Russian public's assessment of the Putin team's performance in advancing those eleven core policy concerns. I anticipate public judgments will range from predicted more positive assessments of the team's performance in the economic realm, to more mixed assessments in the area of social justice, and to more negative assessments in the areas of fighting corruption and state protection of people's rights and freedoms. Overall, I expect that broad public positive assessments of the Putin policy program will be critical to the overall continuing public support for the leader and his team.⁹

Understanding the dynamics of public support for a regime is critical as we seek to illuminate the logic of what some term 'hybrid regimes' and others call 'electoral authoritarian regimes'.¹⁰ If carefully structured campaigns and elections play an important role in these hybrid and qualified authoritarian systems, with coercive means ever-present, regime policy performance and public assessments of that performance are also important.¹¹ Indeed, cross-national scholarship demonstrates that elections are especially valuable

9 For a compelling analysis of Putin period Russian public opinion, see Richard Rose, William Mishler, and Neil Munro, *Popular Support for an Undemocratic Regime: The Changing Views of Russians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

10 For an illuminating discussion of the Russian case, see Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010): 183–235.

11 See Matthijs Bogaards, "How to classify hybrid regimes? Defective democracy and electoral authoritarianism," *Democratization* 16, no. 2 (2009): 399–424, and Jason Brownlee, "Portents of Pluralism: How Hybrid Regimes Affect Democratic Transitions," *American Journal of Political Science* 53, 3 (2009): 515–32.

in such hybrid (or electoral authoritarian) settings, as regimes under public pressure can calibrate policies to meet public needs while safeguarding their power positions.¹² Positive public assessments of regime performance are even more necessary for a regime that has governed for over 15 years, a regime which could be subject to policy weariness on the part of the citizenry and whose leader(s) could likewise be vulnerable to mounting public impatience. Meanwhile, we must factor into the equation a mainstream Russian populace that has seemingly been highly unresponsive to the efforts of rival political parties, social movements, and activists who have struggled to move Russia away from Putin and his team. While acknowledging the various institutional and power advantages that have been used by Putin and team,¹³ we must also be attentive to the policy means by which a governing elite cohort further enhances its position while advancing its population's issue agenda. I contend that the over 15-year Putin policy program, and its reception by the Russian populace, is an important and under-appreciated element undergirding the position of the governing team.¹⁴ Indeed, I further argue that understanding the Russian people's assessment of the Putin policy program is *the* compelling factor tied with Vladimir Putin assuming a position as Russia's paramount leader.¹⁵ This is not to deny the important role of state coercive means, as in governmental controls over the information and the media. Yet 21st century Russia presents itself as an intriguing hybrid regime, its leader seemingly operating with uncontested bottom-up support, yet standing atop a loyal governing team whose actions are judged by many – even in the mainstream – as uninspiring and with

12 See Michael K. Miller, "Elections, Information, and Policy Responsiveness in Autocratic Regimes", *Comparative Political Studies* 48, no. 6 (2015): 691–727.

13 Among these, informal networks and personalistic connections are highly influential, and such arrangements of the Putin period are comprehensively analyzed in Alena V. Ledeneva, *Can Russia Modernise? Sistema, Power Networks and Informal Governance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

14 See Richard Rose, William Mishler, and Neil Munro, 2011, and Timothy J. Colton and Henry E. Hale, "Putin's Uneasy Return and Hybrid Regime Stability: The 2012 Russian Election Studies Survey", *Problems of Post-Communism*, 61, no. 2 (2014): 3–22.

15 Deng Xiaoping stands as the most compelling late 20th century example of a paramount leader, his governance over the People's Republic of China, 1978–97, grounded in his leadership and policy prowess and his strong standing with both the elite and mass public; a prowess and standing that signified he had no need to hold a top political position. Lee Kuan Yew's position as Singapore's paramount leader for more than fifty years, in a putatively democratic setting, was grounded in similar leadership attributes and experience, with comparable unquestioned elite and mass public standing. By the time of his second presidency, Putin appeared to have achieved such a paramount leader standing.

skepticism. Herein lies a conundrum of Russia's hybrid regime, with an understanding of governance – and the population's assessment of that governance – of the utmost importance, as leader, team, and policies are juxtaposed.

Background Context and the Putin Policy Program

Evaluation of the Russian public's assessment of Putin, the Putin team, and their policy program must be considered against the background of the difficult realities of the late Soviet and immediate post-Soviet periods; periods that confronted Putin and his emerging team when they assumed power in 2000. The 'quadruple revolution' (i.e., political, economic, and societal change, with the search for a new national identity) overwhelmed Russia in the late 1980's and 1990's, and the Russian Federation would only evince progress in the four areas of that revolution by the second half of the first Putin presidency. Russians had been struggling with the various challenges of life in a 'failing state' for well over a decade, the widespread references to Russia's new (third) 'time of troubles' but one historically suggestive indicator of how just how difficult the Russian reality had become.¹⁶

Meanwhile, developments of the first Putin presidency yielded a changing domestic reality that further contributes to the important background context by which Russians evaluate Putin, the team, and the policy program as of the second presidency. A few benchmark economic and social developments merit mentioning, they have been important to Russians, and Russians have been fully able to contrast these Putin period advances with earlier troubled realities. First, assessments of Russian economic performance and related societal

16 By "quadruple revolution" I mean Russia's simultaneous experiencing of profound political, economic, and societal change, together with the search for a new post-Soviet national identity. By "failing state" I mean a state which is unable to uphold the commitments and provide the services set out in that country's constitution, other legal documents, and government decisions. See John P. Willerton, Mikhail Beznosov, and Martin Carrier, "Addressing the Challenge of Russia's 'Failing State': The Legacy of Gorbachev and the Promise of Putin," *Demokratizatsiya* 13, no. 2 (2005): 219–38. The "Time of Troubles" refers to a chaotic period in Russian history, 1598–1613, when there was a lack of strong leadership, elite turmoil, domestic strife, and foreign invasion. The use of the term arose again in the early 20th century as the Russian Empire moved toward collapse and Russia was overwhelmed with civil war. The term was popularly used in Russia in the early 2000s in referring to the confused and chaotic post-Soviet 1990s, when a weak Russia was said to once again experience simultaneously all of these domestic problems with related foreign meddling.

advances since 2000, including those set out by the World Bank, pointed to a significantly expanded national economy and growing middle class that placed Russia in per capita wealth at the top of the BRICS countries, with Russia matching Germany as the world's fifth largest economy (in purchasing power parity) by summer 2013.¹⁷ Meanwhile, United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) data showed that the country's manufacturing productivity had grown by more than 50% over the Putin period, *Rosstat* data revealed the country's food production had more than doubled during that same period, while the country recorded a bumper grain crop in fall 2014.¹⁸ It was especially notable that Russian state statistics revealed that the decades' long decline in the Russian population ended by 2012, with population growth recorded for that and subsequent years.¹⁹ Russia's dramatic population decrease over the course of several decades had arguably been the most important suggestive indicator of a Russian 'failing state'. The population rise in 2012 and succeeding years was modest, indeed miniscule, but it was symbolically important, and both Russian officials and citizens openly celebrated the demographic turnaround. Relatedly, Putin period surveys consistently revealed mounting upbeat attitudes on the part of Russian respondents regarding both their current and their anticipated short-term future socioeconomic circumstances, with governing Putin team members assuming ever more confident and buoyant public posturing (and as directed both domestically and internationally).²⁰ Other developments, including Russia's increased foreign

17 See World Bank data on size of states' economies as measured by purchasing power parity (PPP) for 2013, reported in BNE *IntelliNews*, London, 17 July 2013, <http://www.bne.eu/content/story/moscow-blog-russia-overtakes-germany-become-5th-largest-economy>; accessed 12 February 2014.

18 See Jon Hellevig, *Putin 2000–2014, Midterm Interim Results: Diversification, Modernization and the Role of the State in Russia's Economy* (Awaragroup, 2014), at www.awaragroup.com; accessed 20 March 2015.

19 Mark Adomanis, *Forbes Magazine*, has written extensively on Russia's population growth turnaround, one suggestive 2014 article, "The 'Russian Cross' Is Continuing to Reverse", *Forbes.com*, 30 April 30 2014, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/markadomanis/2014/04/30/the-russian-cross-is-continuing-to-reverse/>; accessed September 16, 2014. Other Western observers dispute Adomanis' and Russians' claims for a demographic turnaround. In a related vein, Russian male life expectancy grew from 59 years (2000) to 66 (2015); see Daria Litvinova, "Why Is Russia's Growth in Life Expectancy Slowing?" *Moscow Times*, 30 August 2015, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/why-is-russias-growth-in-life-expectancy-slowing/529029.html>, accessed 14 April 2016.

20 For an overview of Russians' general optimism about their immediate socioeconomic situations, see "Index of Social Moods", VTsIOM, 2005–early 2015, <http://www.wciom.com/index.php?id=126>; accessed 19 May 2015.

policy assertiveness and returned international prominence, could also be noted, but the overriding point is that the policy context of the Putin later 2000s and early 2010s contrasted markedly with that of Russia's 1990s so-called 'time of troubles'. Domestic Russian critics' and Western evaluations of the Putin period domestic policy environment – and interpretations of the above-noted developments – were, in contrast, negative,²¹ but these judgments had little influence on mainstream Russian expectations and reactions.²²

While understanding that the Putin team policy agenda entails a multifaceted set of initiatives that has evolved over a more than 15-year period, the resultant program does reflect the preferences of the same team that has governed Russia since 2000. Differing interests and concerns have dictated the particulars of the team program as its pieces emerged and came together into a more comprehensive programmatic whole across all three presidencies, 2000–15. If the desperate state of the Russian polity and economy in 2000 necessitated the fundamental economic and political measures of the first Putin presidential term (e.g., streamlined tax system and consequent collection of revenues, reining in of politically meddlesome oligarchs, and renewed state control over strategic industries), the stabilization of the political and economic systems a few years later would be conducive to hallmark initiatives of the second Putin term (e.g., the Four National Priority Projects and the Stabilization Fund).²³ The subsequent Dmitry Medvedev presidency, with Putin at the governmental helm as Prime Minister, entailed a continuation of these policy initiatives, with Medvedev's own priorities (e.g., upgrading the judiciary), pet projects (e.g., Skolkovo Research Center) and distinguishable public narrative (e.g., 'legal nihilism') in no way altering the policy momentum well underway. Evidence of the socioeconomic advances that were briefly referenced above was already evident to the Russian population as Putin positioned himself to return to the presidency in 2012.

The seven presidential campaign policy papers appearing in January–February 2012 reveal two fundamental goals articulated by Putin and said

21 For example, see Anders Åslund and Andrew Kuchins, *The Russia Balance Sheet* (Washington, D.C.: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2009).

22 The fall 2014 ROMIR survey was conducted in the midst of both Western sanctions and an OPEC-inspired drop in world oil prices, with the full impact of these developments on the domestic Russian economy at the time unclear. Thus, the characterization of the Russian domestic scene offered here reflects the general condition of the second Putin presidency, and as evaluated by the 1007 Russians surveyed, but it does not reflect the long-term impact on the domestic economy of those sanctions and the oil price drop.

23 See Richard Sakwa, *The Crisis of Russian Democracy: The Dual State, Factionalism, and the Medvedev Succession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), and Marie Mendras, *Russian Politics: The Paradox of a Weak State* (N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 2012).

to reflect the overriding hopes of the mainstream Russian public: (1) the strengthening of the Russian state, and (2) the modernization of Russia's society.²⁴ These goals had been emphasized by Putin from his first days as acting president, they had always been treated as inextricably interconnected, and they found strong resonance with the Russian public. From the discussion surrounding these overriding goals that is set out in the Putin position papers, eleven more focused policy concerns can be identified, they may be grouped into five domains, and these policy concerns are at the heart of my efforts to illuminate public assessments of policy priorities and of the Putin team's performance in realizing a strengthened state and a modernized society. I organize the domains and more specific policy concerns as follows:

Political domain: (1) efficient state institutions; (2) quality social services; and (3) protection of people's rights and freedoms.

Economic domain: (1) higher standard of living; and (2) provision of goods and services to the public.

Societal domain: (1) revitalization of cultural life; and (2) promotion of traditional families.

Policies tapping the interconnected political, economic, and societal domains: (1) fight against crime and corruption; (2) ensuring social justice; and (3) returned trust to institutions.

Foreign domain: (1) protection of Russia internationally.

In the political domain, Putin gives detailed attention to strengthening the state and making state institutions more effective and efficient. He explicitly discusses protecting people's rights and freedoms, his emphasis on qualitative rights (e.g., education, healthcare, housing; what some refer to as 'material' or 'quality of life right'), and in this regard he points to the importance of the state providing 'quality social services'. In the economic domain, ensuring a heightened standard of living is an emphasis, as is the related provision of goods and services to the public. Concerns of the societal domain include revitalization of the country's cultural life and promotion of the family. Regarding

24 Vladimir Putin 2012 presidential campaign policy position papers: (1) "Russia muscles up – the challenges we must rise to face", *Izvestiya*, 16 January 2012; (2) "Russia: The Ethnicity Issue", *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 23 January 2012; (3) "Economic Tasks", *Vedomosti*, 30 January 2012; (4) "Democracy and the quality of government", *Kommersant*, 6 February 2012; (5) "Building justice: A social policy for Russia", *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 13 February 2012; (6) "Being Strong", *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, 20 February 2012; and (7) "Russia and the Changing World", *Moskovskiy Novosti*, 27 February 2012; all found at the website of the Prime Minister of the Russian Federation, <http://premier.gov/ru>; all accessed 4 March 2012.

the latter, creating the conditions for couples to once again choose to have multi-children families is salient, albeit this is directly tied to economic advances. With the promotion of the family, as with other specific policy concerns, individual goals are interrelated, so the identification of policy domains such as political or economic is a bit arbitrary. In fact, promotion of policies such as fighting crime and corruption, ensuring social justice, and returning trust to institutions – all given prominence by Putin and meriting attention – tap interconnected domains. Finally, Putin gives considerable attention in these papers to foreign policy and security issues but, for our purposes, these are all summed in the policy concern of protecting Russia internationally.

The ROMIR survey is especially valuable as it was originally crafted to permit analysis of all eleven of these specific policy concerns, with respondents asked to (a) assess each policy concern's importance and (b) assess the performance of the Putin team in dealing with that concern. Respondents use a 10-point scale (with 1 low to 10 high) in registering their assessment. The same 10-point scale is also used as respondents are asked to assess more generally the performance of Putin and other political actors.

Another caveat is in order here as we examine Putin team preferences and those of the Russian public. In juxtaposing Russian public and Putin team preferences, I cannot determine causality. If the seven policy position papers and the ROMIR survey data reveal interrelated public and governing team preferences, we cannot determine (a) whether it is Putin and his team who drive the public's preferences, or (b) whether in fact public preferences (which otherwise could be easily determined by confidential governmental surveys) determine Putin team policies. An overview of the eleven policy concerns reveals that these matters would surely be of significance to both elites and the mass public, and the likely interrelated policy preferences of both elites and the mass public drive one another. Hence, the concern here is to determine to what level there is a correspondence between governing elite and public preferences, and in a related vein illuminate how the Russian public assesses the job the Putin and his Putin team have actually done in achieving those desire policy ends.

Russian Public Assessments

Policies: Importance and Putin Team Performance

An examination of the Russian public's assessment of the importance of the policy concerns drawn from the Putin position papers and said to be at the heart of the second Putin presidency reveals strong public support, and across

all eleven concerns (see Table 1). On a 10-point scale, all eleven concerns register above an 8, with (a) higher standard of living and (b) better quality of social services registering just below 9. Even those policy concerns that rate relatively lower (returned trust to social institutions, return to traditional multi-children families, and efficient state institutions) still garner results well above 8. Again, we cannot judge whether this strong public emphasis on these eleven policy priorities set out by Putin reflects Putin's influence, or Putin policy concerns following public preferences. What we can judge, and strongly, is that there is

TABLE 1 *Public's ranking of importance of 11 policy concerns*

Policy Concern	Importance	Group
Higher Standard of Living	8.89 (0.055)	A
Better Quality of Social Services	8.80 (0.057)	AB
Fight and Eradicate Crime and Corruption	8.74 (0.059)	ABC
Ensure Social Justice	8.73 (0.057)	ABC
Project and Defend Russia's Interests Internationally	8.69 (0.060)	ABC
Protect Rights and Freedoms of the People	8.66 (0.058)	BCD
Revitalization of Cultural Life	8.63 (0.055)	BCDE
Provide Goods and Services Necessary for the People	8.53 (0.057)	CDEF
Efficient State Institutions	8.44 (0.060)	DEF
Return to Traditional Multi-Children Families	8.42 (0.061)	EF
Returned Trust to Social Institutions	8.36 (0.061)	F

10-point scale, where 1 is low and 10 is high; standard errors are in parentheses.

The group column shows an intuitive way to quickly assess statistically significant differences across responses. Responses sharing a letter in the Group column are not significantly different at the 5% level.

a high correspondence between Putin and public assessments as regards what are important policy matters, and across all domains: political, economic, societal, mixed, and foreign policy. These findings should come as no surprise when compared with results from other surveys. While results from such public opinion organizations as Levada, VTsIOM, and FOM are based on broader domestic and foreign policy categories, and do not include all of the specific policy concerns tapped by the ROMIR questions, they are comparable.²⁵

A closer look at the results of Table 1 reveals these public assessments of the importance of policy concerns can be organized in statistically differentiated groups (right column of Table 1). To try to illuminate how statistically similar or different the response rankings of the various policy concerns are, the results for all eleven policy concerns were juxtaposed. Policy concern rankings that share a group letter (i.e., A, B, C, etc.) are found to be statistically indistinguishable from one another at the 95% confidence level. For example, the policy concern with the highest rating – higher standard of living – is not significantly different from the four that follow it (all share the letter A). However, that policy concern ranking is significantly different from the last six (starting with ‘Protect Rights and Freedoms of the People’), as signified by their exclusion from group A. In other words, while all eleven policy concerns are judged to be very important, we can layer them as to relative importance, with some of the policy concerns clumping together as modestly more or less important. Consideration of the layered groups A to E reveal that policy concerns central to the public’s socioeconomic well-being (e.g., involving standard of living and social services) are slightly higher in importance, especially when compared with the operating of state institutions. But, in fact, none of the policy areas are significantly different from all others, because all are important. Overall, the Russian public strongly assesses as important all eleven policy concerns articulated by President Putin and his team.

However, the public’s assessment of the Putin team performance in addressing these eleven policy concerns is much more mixed, with a wider variance in responses across the eleven items (see Table 2). Again recalling that assessments are made on a 10-point scale, with 1 low and 10 high, the assessments of the Putin team’s performance range from a high for ‘project and defend Russia’s interests internationally’ (7.17), to a low for ‘fight and eradicate crime and corruption’ (5.55). Two basic observations can be immediately stated, and

25 E.g., VTsIOM, <http://www.wciom.com/index.php?id=61&uid=983>, and the Institute of Sociology, Russian Academy of Sciences, http://www.ntpp.biz.upload/iblock/f03/20_years_reform-vlfbsonfhkxvop.pdf, 2011; both accessed 8 January 2016.

these are grounded in understanding public assessments on the 1-to-10-point scale as follows:

Above 7 moderately-above-average to high
 5 to 7 average
 Below 5 moderately-below-average to low

It is reasoned here that, in a domestic environment where there are forces such as the government-controlled media that encourage more favorable assessments of the governing team's efforts, and in a time period when citizens may simply appreciate the actions of 'doers' (i.e., governing team members) over 'talkers' (i.e., critics), results even somewhat higher than the midpoint 5.5 (on the 1–10 scale) should be viewed as average.²⁶ Hence, ratings of 5 to 7 are understood as average, while those above this range are seen as to some level high, and ratings below this range as to some level low.

It is found, first, that with only one of these eleven policy concerns can the Putin team performance be judged as moderately above average (project and defend Russia's interests internationally), and that 7.17 is a modest figure for the 7–10 range. Second, none of the public assessments of the team performance fall in the low range (i.e., below 5), and all are at or above the 5.5 median. Thus, considered overall, the public's assessments are middling, not impressive in light of the full 1-to-10 scale. These assessments are arguably at least tolerable for the governing team, in some cases, modestly good, while none can be described as failing.

Examination of individual results yields both predictable and more surprising results. On the one hand, it is not unexpected that Russians would favorably view the Putin team's performance on international issues, not only given the 2014 highly successful Sochi Olympics and return of Crimea to Russia, but also because Russians have appreciated Putin and his team's assertive foreign policy posturing going back to the first Putin presidential term.²⁷ With the conduct of foreign-security policy a central task of the federal executive, and President

²⁶ An anonymous reviewer thoughtfully shared the observation that Russians may generally be more favorably predisposed toward those who take action over those who merely talk (and critique). Such a predisposition, if true, would favor those operating within the decision-making process over those who operate outside it.

²⁷ For a representative laudatory discussion, see Vladimir Solovyov, *Putin: Putevoditel' Dlya Neravnodushnykh* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2008). Solovyov writes, "But the most important thing that Putin did was to return to the Russian people a sense of pride... He put the Americans in their place – he told them to their face what he was thinking. He won the 2014 Olympics! Putin for the time of his leadership did all that he promised" (p. 108).

TABLE 2 *Public's assessment of Putin team performance for 11 policy concerns*

Policy Concern	Assessment	Group
Project and Defend Russia's Interests Internationally	7.17 (0.071)	A
Provide Goods and Services Necessary for the People	6.75 (0.069)	B
Efficient State Institutions	6.34 (0.067)	C
Revitalization of Cultural Life	6.32 (0.067)	C
Return to Traditional Multi-Children Families	6.24 (0.069)	CD
Protect Rights and Freedoms of the People	6.02 (0.067)	DE
Higher Standard of Living	6.01 (0.068)	DE
Returned Trust to Social Institutions	5.81 (0.068)	EF
Ensure Social Justice	5.77 (0.072)	EF
Better Quality of Social Services	5.75 (0.071)	EF
Fight and Eradicate Crime and Corruption	5.55 (0.074)	F

10-point scale, where 1 is low and 10 is high; standard errors are in parentheses.

The group column shows an intuitive way to quickly assess statistically significant differences across responses. Responses sharing a letter in the Group column are not significantly different at the 5% level.

Putin an energetic promoter of Russian foreign interests, performance on this policy concern earns a public regard higher than that for all others. Meanwhile, Russians are well aware of their country's economic strides over the period 2000–14, and they have seen the rise of an ever-larger middle class as the economic boats of most citizens rise. Russians appreciate that, especially in comparison with the 1990s, the state has ensured the mounting provision of goods and services necessary for the population. Hence, the Putin team's handling of this policy concern rates the second highest (6.75), in statistically layering the

policy concerns it is distinguished from all others, slightly lower than the assessment for Russia's international position, but statistically above all the rest.

What is more surprising, however, is that the governing team's performance in fighting crime and corruption (5.55), providing better quality of social services (5.75), ensuring social justice (5.77), and returning trust to social institutions (5.81) are all assessed as middling to modestly-above-average. Russians often comment negatively about these public policy areas, with domestic opponents especially vocal in their criticism. ROMIR survey respondents, however, give the regime at least a pass, with all rankings above the 5.5 survey midpoint.

Regarding the effort against crime and corruption, the regime itself has been explicit in acknowledging a lack of success, with Putin himself declaring at the end of his first presidency that the lack of further inroads against corruption had been the greatest failing of his presidency.²⁸ Yet while citizens acknowledge the continuing problem of crime and corruption, the everyday lives of citizens have evolved from the 'Wild West' days of the 1990s, when crime and corruption touched most everyone's lives in profound ways, prevalent at both the macro and micro levels. By the mid-2010s, the everyday lives of mainstream Russians had become more normalized and regularized, not only were citizens securing the desired goods and services (as commented on above), but they were receiving their salaries and pensions, they were depositing them without fear into banks, and their infrastructural needs were increasingly being met. The notion of 'corruption', needless to say, is vague, and for most Russians corruption means 'bribes'.²⁹ As Russia's political and socioeconomic life has evolved in the Putin period, crime and corruption have become less central to mainstream citizens' everyday lives. Thus, the results here – that respondents assess the Putin team's performance in fighting and eradicating crime and corruption as middling, but not failing – make intuitive sense.³⁰

A similar reasoning could be applied to the other policy areas where the team's performance is viewed as average, not exceptional, but not failing. Large government investments in the areas of the National Priority Projects

28 See the transcript of President Putin's press conference, 14 February 2008, Russian Federation Presidential Web Portal, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24835>; accessed 8 May 2015.

29 For a suggestive analytical discussion drawn from the late 1990's, see Ann Petrova, "Rossiyaneye o korruptsiii i korruptsionerakh", FOM, 24 December 1998, <http://bd.fom.ru/report/cat/power/corr/of19985108>; accessed 8 May 2015.

30 For an illuminating discussion revealing mainstream Russians' growing confidence that government measures are making headway against corruption, see "Counteracting Corruption: Mission Possible", VTsIOM, Press Release No. 1722, 24 March 2015, <http://www.vtsiom.com/index.php?id=61&uid=1083>; accessed 16 May 2015.

(agriculture, education, healthcare, and housing) had yielded evident overtime payoffs, citizens saw the country's educational system turning around, they saw state-guaranteed healthcare services strengthened, and they found their pensions arriving without delay. In both symbolic and in real terms, the lot of the country's most vulnerable – children and the elderly – had markedly improved over the period 2000–14, and ROMIR survey results reflect this and reveal the relative credit mainstream Russians accorded the governing team. In all of these areas, there were recognizable funding and policy advances by the Putin team. However, profound structural problems remained, Russians were well aware of this and, hence, there are limits to the extent to which governmental performance in the various domestic policy areas was positively viewed. Even the Putin team's handling of the domestic policy concern most highly ranked, providing goods and services necessary for the people, scored a 6.75 that falls below the minimum 7.0 for being moderately high. Thus, in initially summarizing these results of the public assessment of the Putin team's performance, especially in the domestic realm, the best characterizations are average-to-modestly-above-average, middling, no fundamental failures, but no spectacular successes.³¹

Table 3, however, offers an important additional perspective as we consider public assessments of the governing team's performance. Table 3 compares the public's ranking of the importance of the eleven policy concerns with the public's assessment of the Putin team's handling of these eleven concerns, with the rankings running from 1 (relatively most important or relatively best performance) to 11 (relatively least important or relatively poorest performance). The far right column of Table 3 indicates the difference in the two rankings, with a positive figure indicating that a policy concern has a lower importance ranking and a higher Putin team performance ranking, and a negative figure indicating a policy concern has a higher importance ranking and a lower Putin team performance ranking. A zero or a low number indicates the rankings of policy importance and team performance are relatively the same. As can be seen, results vary significantly. On the one hand, for the policy concerns of (a) provision of goods and services necessary for the people and (b) efficient state institutions, the Putin team's performance is assessed relatively higher,

31 When the ROMIR survey posed questions asking respondents to assess the work of the Putin team in coping with issues drawn from the National Priority Projects, respondents also expressed moderate levels of confidence: for education, 6.04, and healthcare, 5.59, though for housing among the lowest assessments offered, 5.18. Two other Putin second presidency initiatives generated similarly middling levels of confidence: for reindustrialization efforts, 5.83, and infrastructural projects, 5.78.

but these concerns are judged as less important (the difference in ranks for each yielding +6). On the other hand, for policy concerns (c) fighting and eradicating crime and corruption and (d) better quality of social services, the team's performance is judged at the bottom of the overall eleven concerns, yet these two policy concerns are judged by the public to be two of the three most important. Reviewing the overall table and results, we see a general pattern that the performance of the Putin team is judged by Russians as best for policy concerns that are not top priority, while of the top priority concerns, only the team's performance in handling foreign policy is among the upper half of the concerns viewed as important (and the importance ranking for this issue is only in 5th position of eleven).

These findings raise interesting questions about the logic of support for the Putin team and the Russian population's overall assessment of the team's performance to date. They suggest a nuanced and more complex relationship between citizen expectations and assessments and the 'promise' and record

TABLE 3 *Comparison of public's assessment of policy importance and Putin team performance*

Policy Concern	Rank of Policy Importance	Rank of Putin Team Assessment	Difference of Ranks
Provide Goods and Services Necessary for the People	8	2	6
Efficient State Institutions	9	3	6
Return to Traditional Multi-Children Families	10	5	5
Project and Defend Russia's Interests Internationally	5	1	4
Revitalization of Cultural Life	7	4	3
Returned Trust to Social Institutions	11	8	3
Protect Rights and Freedoms of the People	6	6	0
Ensure Social Justice	4	9	-5
Higher Standard of Living	1	7	-6
Better Quality of Social Services	2	10	-8
Fight and Eradicate Crime and Corruption	3	11	-8

of Putin and his team in the midst of the second Putin presidency. On the one hand, the Putin team is viewed as having delivered an acceptable overall policy program, and there are clear areas where the public is more positive. Moreover, there is no major policy concern among these eleven where the public characterizes the Putin team's performance as poor or failing. But when contrasting the publicly perceived more and less important policy concerns, the Putin team is judged as performing better with the less critical concerns, and its performance is found more wanting with the perceived more significant concerns. The public's perception that the Putin team has indeed bolstered Russia's international position may well be commendable, but the socio-economic gains of the past 15 years have not translated into public confidence that the team has performed strongly in heightening the standard of living (judged by the public as the most important policy concern) or bettering the quality of social services (judged as the second most important concern). And regarding the fight against crime and corruption, identified by the public as the third most important policy concern, the Putin team's performance is judged in last place among all eleven concerns, close to the 5.5 median.³² If the Putin team's efforts on important issues such as crime and corruption and social services are not judged by the public as abject failures, those efforts are viewed skeptically and compromise the regime's overall posturing of significant societal advance.

Drawing together the results from these three tables, we find both achievements and disappointments of the Putin program as perceived by the Russian populace. The overall public assessment of Putin team policy actions is mixed. Beyond the foreign-security domain, there are no policy concerns that merit strong positive assessment. Yet there is no case among the eleven where the Putin team's handling is judged a failure. One policy concern examined here, involving return to traditional multi-children families, merits attention because a high-profile policy interest of the second Putin presidency has been to promote efforts at strengthening the family. If this traditional family policy concern is not judged by the populace to be among the more important (tenth of eleven), it is an area where respondents assess Putin team efforts more favorably (fifth of eleven). Summed, these results point to both opportunities and challenges for Putin and the governing team as they proceed through the remainder of the Putin second presidential term. I return to these issues in the conclusion of this paper.

32 Similar findings, albeit based on differently worded questions, are found in VTsIOM reports for mid-2015; see <http://www.wciom.com/index.php?id=61&uid=1072> and <http://www.wciom.com/index.php?id=61&uid=1094>; both accessed 16 April 2016.

Putin and Other Political Actors

My analytical focus is on public assessments of the Putin policy program, but as relevant to public assessments of the performance of Putin and other political actors. There are important implications for the public's more general confidence in all of these actors, and Table 4 reveals, again using the 10-point scale, Russians' levels of confidence in all major actors comprising the governing Putin team. Included, for comparative purposes, is the measure of the public's level of confidence in a high-profile regime critic, Aleksei Navalny.

Six of the political actors included in the analysis tap the major individuals and institutions that comprise the governing Putin team. First, Putin himself is included, as are his government, the Cabinet of Ministers, and the federal legislature, the Federal Assembly (Federation Council and State Duma), dominated by Putin supporters. In addition, both the Putin platform party, United

TABLE 4 *Public's confidence in political actors*

Political Actors	Assessment	Group
Vladimir Putin	7.55 (.075)	A
United Russia Party	5.57 (.084)	B
Cabinet of Ministers	5.51 (.078)	B
People's Chamber	5.47 (.078)	BC
Federation Council and State Duma	5.39 (.077)	BC
All-Russian People's Front	5.17 (.084)	C
Aleksei Navalny	3.37 (.077)	D

10-point scale, where 1 is low and 10 is high; standard errors are in parentheses.

The group column shows an intuitive way to quickly assess statistically significant differences across responses. Responses sharing a letter in the Group column are not significantly different at the 5% level.

Russia, and the more recently created Putin popular front organization, the All-Russian People's Front, are included. Finally, an important institutional creation of the Putin team, the People's Chamber, presented by the regime as an influential consultative body that formally links various societal elements and the elite to decision-making bodies, is also included.

Table 4 reveals that the levels of Russian public confidence in all seven political actors, six of the Putin team, and the seventh of a leading Putin critic, can be arranged into three levels on the basis of their ranking. First, President Putin stands alone, his public confidence level at 7.55, significantly higher statistically than those of all other actors. Juxtaposed with the results of all other actors, this confidence level reveals Putin's paramount leader standing. This finding also fits neatly with the general level of public approval that Putin has enjoyed throughout his federal-level career, whether as president or prime minister.³³

The public confidence levels in Putin team institutional actors all group together, with the differences among them modest. All five political actors have confidence levels around the median 5.5 and must be judged as average. The result for the All-Russian People's Front proves to be the most unimpressive,³⁴ with the United Russia Party scoring the highest confidence level (5.57) among the five, but all of these results are middling. Assessments of the government (Cabinet of Ministers) and Federal Assembly (Federation Council and State Duma) are comparable and unexceptional. Depending upon the perspective of the observer, these results could be characterized alternatively. For the regime supporter, the results could be seen as a glass half-full, with a governing team that has tackled a monumental set of problems and policy challenges over the past 15 years registering public confidence levels around the 5.5 median. For the critic, such middling results could constitute a glass half-empty, especially given the positive economic developments that were referenced earlier in this article. The critic could further consider, after 15 years, the potential downward trajectory of such rankings should the public grow weary of the same

33 See FOM, "Third Term of V. Putin", July 2014, <http://fom.ru/Politika/11568>; VTsIOM, "Vladimir Putin: Two Years Before Presidential Elections", March 2016, <http://www.wciom.com/index.php?id=6iuid=1244>; and Levada, "Vladimir Putin: Attitude and Confidence", March 2016, <http://www.levada.ru/2016/03/21/vladimir-putin-otnoshenie-i-doverie-2/>; all accessed 16 April 2016.

34 Having arisen only in 2011, the All-Russian People's Front is relatively new to the political scene, and arguably less well known and appreciated, though its involvement in local matters – including its role in the formation of the "immortal regiments" (*bessmertnyi polk*) in numerous locations for the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II (May 9, 2015) – could eventually enhance its public standing.

governing team. Overall, the results suggest a Putin governing team that in all likelihood can continue to count on public support, but a team that must be wary that such support is neither substantial nor deep, leaving that team under continuing pressure to perform.

Meanwhile, the contrast between the public's confidence in Putin and his team is considerable, and it suggests that the President enjoys a level of policy discretion and leeway that his supporting associates and political institutions do not. The gap in Putin's and team's standing reinforces the reality of Putin as a paramount leader standing above an institutional-personnel base this is viewed as flawed. It is difficult to distinguish between the policy-relevant power of the system patron, Putin, and his support staff and their organizations; the successful operating of both is essential for the regime's ability to make good on its promises. This dilemma is not unlike that for observers who have tried to find light in preferences and actions between Putin and his senior protégé Dmitry Medvedev, whether Medvedev was serving as President or Prime Minister. In the end, a highly regarded Putin must still rely on the personnel and institutions which deliver his intended policies. At the same time, those personnel and institutions can only garner so much positive regard from their association with Putin, with the certainty that in any comparison with that leader by the public, those personnel and institutions will be found wanting. Where the Putin regime falls short in making good on its intentions, it is team members and institutions which are found responsible.³⁵

Finally, the low level of public confidence in Aleksei Navalny (3.37) contrasts dramatically with the public's confidence not only in Putin, but even in the modestly judged All-Russian People's Front and federal legislature.³⁶ Whatever excitement Navalny generated as he attacked United Russia as the 'party of swindlers and thieves', mainstream Russia judges United Russia much more favorably than Navalny, positioning United Russia as second only to Putin (albeit a distant second) among all of the political actors included here. It might be concluded this unexpectedly better public assessment of United Russia stems

35 The 2014 ROMIR survey does not include thermometer readings for individual government members, but an October 2013 VTsIOM survey did include thermometer results for ministers, and while the ratings of all fell well below Putin, those for ministers dealing with security-foreign affairs were by far the highest (e.g., Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, Foreign Affairs Minister Sergei Lavrov, Civil Defense Minister Vladimir Puchkov, and Deputy Prime Minister for Defense Industry Dmitry Rogozin); see <http://www.wciom.com/index.php?id=61uid=879>, accessed 14 April 2016.

36 On a related note, in contrasting the Russian public's assessments of Navalny and Putin, ROMIR survey results reveal that nearly 60% of respondents thought Putin believed in democracy, while only 16% thought he did not.

from the fact that, among the various Putin actors evaluated here, the United Russia platform party is the team element most closely associated with the country's paramount leader. Thus, if the performance of the Putin team is judged by Russians as mediocre, that team still stands held-and-shoulders above its most vocal public critic.

Conclusion: 'Inconvenient Realities'

The Russian public shares the same policy priorities as the governing Putin team, and that public offers a basically positive assessment of the performance of that team in implementing those policy priorities. The Russian public expresses strong confidence in Vladimir Putin himself, who appears as a paramount leader who stands above his team associates and the institutions – governmental and nongovernment – which they lead. The public's confidence in those associates and institutions, however, is restrained, suggesting acceptance rather than enthusiasm. Meanwhile, if the public's reaction to Putin critic Aleksei Navalny is any indication, elements strongly opposed to the Putin team's efforts enjoy little support from the Russian mainstream. Perhaps, as alluded to earlier, the public favors so-called office-holding 'doers' over 'critic-talkers' who cannot or do not deliver. In any case, the governing team is left to maneuver without any real constraint from political rivals, though policy failures – and consequent negative assessments by an interested public – might provide openings. Meanwhile, if the Russian public's unenthusiastic assessments of the Putin team raise questions of public confidence, such questions do not transfer to Putin himself.³⁷ Throughout the second Putin presidency, the public has consistently expressed its overriding intention to reelect the President in 2018.³⁸

ROMIR survey findings, overall, suggest there are dilemmas both for Putin and his team and for their critics. ROMIR findings also point to an unavoidable and profound dilemma for the post-Soviet Russian political system; a

37 Perceptions of an overtime decline in public assessments of the work of the Putin government are also revealed in FOM results, "About the Work of the Russian Government", March 2013, <http://fom.ru/Politika/10895>; accessed 8 January 2016.

38 While the 2014 ROMIR survey did not include questions regarding the positive characteristics respondents associate with Putin, a May 2014 VTsIOM survey did; see <http://www.wciom.com/index.php?id=61&uid=955>; for a subsequent discussion, see Ksenia Zurbacheva, "Why is Putin so popular among Russians", Q. and A. with Valery Fedorov, 4 November 2015, <http://www.wciom.com/index.php?id=61&uid=1193>; accessed 12 April 2016.

political system whose logic and operation have been so powerfully shaped by Putin and his team. I conclude that there are ‘inconvenient realities’ that all observers must countenance as they think about Russia 25 years after the Soviet collapse and more than 15 years into the Putin period. ROMIR survey results, bolstered by survey results from elsewhere, are revealing.

Inconvenient Realities for Putin and the Putin Team

ROMIR public opinion results reveal there are important policy areas where, after more than a decade and a half of efforts, the Russian public judges as wanting the Putin team performance. And by Russian public, I am referring to the Russian mainstream, citizens who have nearly always supported the regime. Hallmark second presidency initiatives involving education and the family may be yielding results and may be more favorably viewed by the public, but Putin team efforts in high-priority areas such as raising the standard of living and ensuring better quality social services are not, relatively speaking, so favorably judged. I conclude there are policy ‘soft spots’, indeed potential problem areas that must witness improved regime results to maintain or even improve the public’s confidence in the governing team. Averaged assessment figures of 5.77 (higher standard of living) and 5.75 (better quality social services) are mediocre and uninspiring at best, and there is no indication these policy concerns will not continue to be of the highest priority to the Russian public.³⁹ In his second presidency, Putin has emphasized these priority concerns; he has even criticized his (Medvedev) government’s efforts, including that government’s budgetary priorities and funding decisions. Such maneuvering hardly bolsters the position of his team, and it is readily evident policy-making of the second presidency is tricky and complicated.⁴⁰ ROMIR survey results demonstrate Putin’s continuing strong personal leadership standing, but these results also reveal that there are limits to which the strong leader can extend his reputational advantage to his supporting team.

Inconvenient Realities for Putin Critics

For Putin critics, domestic and foreign, these ROMIR survey results also point to dilemmas: first and foremost, continuing strong public support for Putin,

39 E.g., a number of FOM reports on the Russian mood during the second Putin presidency indicated a growing number of respondents thought the country was stagnating; see for instance “Russia: Vector of Development & Position in World”, 3 August 2013, <http://fom.ru/nastroeniya/11022>; accessed 12 April 2016.

40 See a suggestive discussion in Gel’man, 2015, Chapter 6.

and even workable support for associated political actors that are essential parts of the Putin regime. In evaluating Putin's standing as his first presidency ended, Colton and Hale commented on Putin's ability to connect 'robustly' with the Russian electorate, and this is no less true in Putin's second presidency.⁴¹ Indeed, ROMIR survey results reveal that, as of fall 2014, over 71% of respondent were already very likely to vote for Putin in the 2018 presidential election.⁴²

Meanwhile, if respondents offered moderately diverging assessments of the Putin team's handling of the eleven core policy concerns, the averages of all those performance assessments on a 10-point scale are at or above the median point 5.5, with some stronger, in the 6-to-7-point range. There is not one policy concern among the eleven examined where the Putin team's performance is judged as failing, and this includes policy areas that critics have long identified as profound stumbling blocks that could compromise the Putin team's position: fighting crime and corruption, ensuring social justice, and providing quality social services. Scholars have pointed to the importance of public support for a leader's policy program to that leader's overall standing, even suggesting such popular policy support is more important than the leader's popular standing itself.⁴³

Mainstream Russians support Putin and his team's policy performance, and there is no evidence to suggest any imminent public movement away from such judgments. In contrast, a visible Putin opponent, Aleksei Navalny, garners little public sympathy, while the relatively high number of survey respondents who express more extreme negative assessments of this high-profile Putin critic (e.g., selecting 1, 2, and 3 on the 10-point scale) reveals considerable public disdain. Meanwhile, very few respondents reported participating in the high-profile 2011–12 anti-Putin and anti-team demonstrations, while many concomitantly indicated they viewed these public activities as detrimental to Russia's world position.

41 Timothy J. Colton and Henry E. Hale, "The Putin Vote: Presidential Electorate in a Hybrid Regime", *Slavic Review* 68, 3 (2009): 502.

42 Such high figures have been constant; compare with 73% in a May 2014 VTsIOM report, <http://www.wciom.com/index.php?id=61&uid=976>, and 74% in a January 2016 VTsIOM report, <http://www.wciom.com/index.pphp?id=61&uid=115604>; both accessed 12 April 2016.

43 See Richard Rose and William Mishler, "A Supply–demand Model of Party-System Institutionalization", *Party Politics* 16, 6 (2010): 801–22.

Public Assessments and an Unavoidable Dilemma for Putin's Russia

This analysis has focused on public assessments of the Putin policy program and the Putin team's performance, but it concludes with a final observation regarding the country's paramount leader and the state of the Russian polity. Vladimir Putin has dominated Russian politics for fifteen years, and public opinion – and attitudes expressed by those generally supportive of Putin, his team, and its policy performance – reveal how his continuing leadership adds ballast to the regime's position and policy efforts. However, as others have observed, Putin's dominant position also speaks to a profound political system dilemma, as the strength of the Putin team and the confidence of the mainstream public must be called into question given Putin's inevitable departure from the political scene.⁴⁴ Putin's own standing as a dominating leader may buttress his team and regime, but long-term reliance on a paramount leader constitutes a profound systemic challenge given the relative paucity of other publicly well-regarded powerful political figures. It is important to note, regarding public assessments, that Russians give the highest marks to the Putin team's defending of Russia internationally, and this is the very concern where Putin's own leadership performance has been most essential. Regardless of the mounting capacities of the Russian state or the professional acumen of other government ministers, the country's leader can have a strong, direct, and immediate impact on foreign and security policy, and Putin has been lauded by most Russians for his efforts.⁴⁵ With domestic policy concerns, however, the dominating leader cannot easily operate unilaterally, any policy successes depend more on the actions of others, individuals and institutions. And as we have seen, with all of these domestic concerns, where state agencies and myriad officials operate, team performance is less appreciated: Putin's guiding role, however important, is diluted and less evident. Thus, remove Vladimir Putin from the political scene, and serious questions must be raised about the team's viability, not to

44 See Graeme Gill, *Building an Authoritarian Policy: Russia in post-Soviet Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), for an especially trenchant discussion of future system challenges stemming from Putin's dominating leadership position.

45 Ironically, even Westerners can show such appreciation for Putin's strength and assertiveness. A March 2014 French survey, conducted in the midst of the breaking Ukrainian crisis, found that 72% of respondents appreciated Putin's "energy" and 56% appreciated that he "defend[ed] the interests of his country", even though only 14% of these respondents had a favorable view of Russia's paramount leader. See "Pourquoi il y a tant de commentaires pro-Poutine sur le Web", *Le Figaro Vox*, 7 March 2014, www.lefigaro.fr/vox/medias/2014/03/07/31008; accessed 14 May 2015.

mention questions about the willingness of an aware Russian public to countenance continuing – at best – average-to-middling team policy performance.

Overall, what we have found, on the surface, is a stable domestic Russian political environment, with continuing public support for a strong leader and governing team, and a related broad public comfort with the policy program and its results to date. But in fact the domestic political situation is potentially dynamic, because looking beyond the strong standing of Putin, most all public levels of support for institutions and policies are lackluster and could, in changing circumstances, and without Putin on the scene, shift. One can appreciate the pressures on the Putin team to continue to deliver in policy terms. And with no apparent heir to Putin, and no team member enjoying a strong independent position with the Russian public, important long-range uncertainty necessarily remains. Policy successes and tangible achievements will be necessary, and they may well constitute the most important means by which the Putin team retains power. I conclude that such successes and achievements have been essential to the already 15-year tenure of the governing team, but only time will tell whether this policy momentum and consequent payoffs for the ruling team can be retained.⁴⁶

Most Russians have long yearned for the strong state guided by the strong leader. ROMIR survey results reveal that Putin and his team are judged by the mainstream Russian public to have strengthened the state and to have helped in the modernization of Russian society, and the population appreciates that the country is led by a strong leader. However, with these developments has returned the eternal problem of the over 1000-year Russian civilization: excessive dependence on one leader, the absence of institutional arrangements facilitating the easy departure of that leader, and power realities that could threaten the predictable and stable formation of a successor regime. Neither opposition parties and social movements, nor the governing team-United Russia cohort, offer a coherent solution that resonates with mainstream Russians.⁴⁷ The Russian public's mixed assessments of Putin, the governing team, and their policy performance, only add to this highly problematic dilemma. Comparing this 21st century Putin era reality to the past, one can only conclude, *'Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose'*.

46 Clearly the mounting economic costs of the 2014 Ukraine-related Western economic sanctions and Russian counter-sanctions, combined with depressed global oil prices, raise important questions regarding the sustainability of such successes and payoffs during the second half of the Putin second presidency.

47 ROMIR survey results not considered here, but reflected in popular responses to dozens of other questions, indicate as much. For the full 2014 ROMIR survey and results, contact NEPORUS project principal investigator Geir Flikke (University of Oslo).

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