

Putin's popularity:

Why did support for the Kremlin plunge, then stabilize?

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1 Introduction

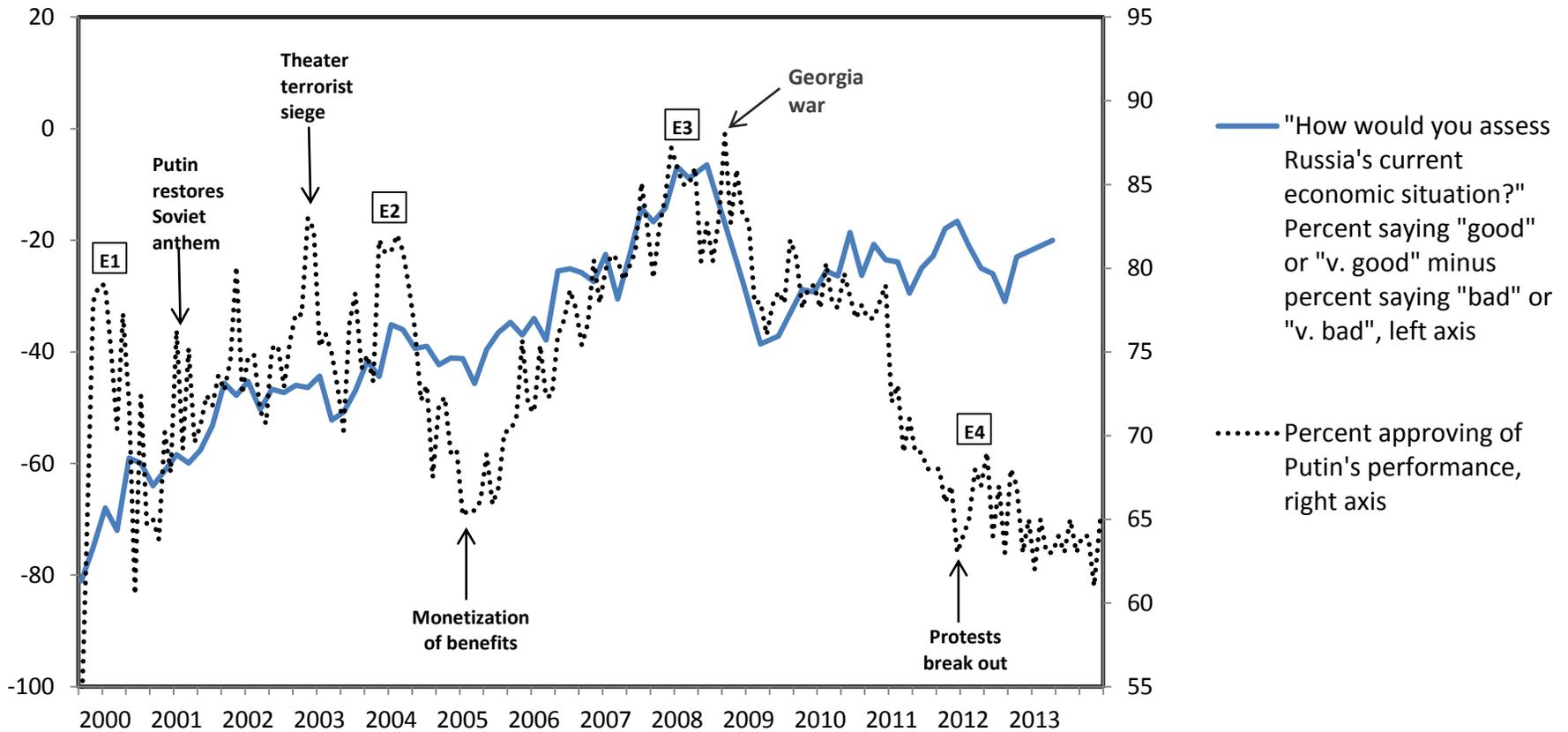
What explains the level of popular support for Russia’s political leaders? Until recently, one determinant seemed relatively clear. For much of the last 20 years, approval ratings of Russian presidents have varied in parallel with public evaluations of economic performance (McAllister and White 2008, Colton and Hale 2009, Treisman 2011). Most scholars have found the most relevant assessments to be “sociotropic” ones—related to the state of the national economy—rather than “pocketbook” judgments—reflecting the individual’s own finances (e.g. Rose, Mishler, and Munro 2011, Rose and Mishler 2010). Popular perceptions of the economy—although perhaps also influenced by the media, especially during election campaigns—correlate with objective indicators of performance such as the real wage (Treisman 2011). Other factors have also mattered, but economic influences have been consistently important.

This correspondence can be seen in Figure 1, for the years 2000-2010. The dotted line shows the proportion of respondents in the Levada Center’s monthly, nationally representative polls that said they approved of Vladimir Putin’s actions in office, as president or acting president (from January 2000 to April 2008, and after May 2012) and as prime minister (from September to December 1999, and from May 2008 to April 2012). The solid line shows a measure of economic sentiment—the proportion of respondents, also from Levada Center polls, that said that the current economic situation of Russia was “good” or “very good” minus the proportion considering it to be “bad” or “very bad”.¹

Until the end of 2010, a relationship is apparent. Putin’s rating trends higher as economic perceptions improve during the boom of 2000-2007, and then falls in the global crisis of 2008-9.

¹ This question is asked less frequently, so the line includes some interpolation between the data points.

Figure 1: Russians' perceptions of economic performance and approval of Putin, 1999-2013



Source: Levada Center and author's calculations.

Note: E1: elections of 1999-2000; E2: elections of 2003-4; E3: elections of 2007-8; E4: elections of 2011-12.

It overshoots in periods before presidential elections, when approval typically surges above retrospective economic evaluations, and also at certain moments of national trauma such as the 2002 Nordost terrorist theater siege and the South Ossetian war of 2008.² A large fall, beginning in 2004, culminates in January 2005, when an unpopular reform “monetized” social benefits to pensioners and others. Still, taking account of such factors, a simple index of economic perceptions could be used to forecast Putin’s popularity quite accurately in 2000-2010. During this period, economic sentiment, measured this way, and Putin’s rating one month later correlate at $r = .65$.³

However something seems to change in 2011. While the economic perceptions index varies in a narrow band, Putin’s rating plunges from a high point of 79 percent in December 2010 to a low of 63 percent a year later, before stabilizing in the mid-60s. The slide in approval that year was even larger than that recorded during the first year of the global financial crisis. Although similar falls had occurred in 2004 and the second half of 2000, in both cases the trend quickly reversed, with a major rebound coming in the following months. Nothing like that occurred on this occasion.

In this paper, I seek to account for Putin’s popularity decline in 2011. Understanding the dynamics of politicians’ approval ratings in semi-authoritarian, hybrid states such as Putin’s Russia is important for several reasons. Although Western democratic politicians are often portrayed as obsessed with polling, in some ways it is in *less* democratic regimes that credible, independent surveys are most important. When elections are manipulated or falsified, fear of mass protests may still constrain incumbents (Fearon 2011). Yet, for such protests to arise

² There is no such “rally round the flag” effect after the terrorist attack in Beslan, North Ossetia, in 2004.

³ An augmented Dickey Fuller test suggests we can reject non-stationarity at $p < .05$ for both series.

requires that discontented individuals know that others are also discontented. Polls can generate the necessary common knowledge. Conversely, high presidential ratings from reputable pollsters may deter protests more effectively than the regime's threats or self-interested deceptions.

Besides disseminating information about others' preferences, surveys can reveal the extent of fraud in elections. A large gap between official results and pre-election or exit polls may serve as an indication of foul play and a focal point around which resistance can coordinate. Statements by opposition parties or international election monitors could also mobilize regime opponents. But such groups are unlikely to have a measure of voter preferences as accurate as those uncovered by professional surveys, and opposition parties may also be viewed as having incentives to distort the truth.

In Russia, some have seen presidential ratings as a key element of the existing system. I demonstrate (2011, pp.251-61) that the behavior of regional notables and parliamentary deputies in the last 20 years correlated with poll and election results; they tended to pile on the bandwagon when presidents were popular and to defect to the opposition when they were not. In poorly institutionalized regimes, such poll-coordinated elite strategies may in practice constrain incumbents more effectively than poorly functioning formal checks and balances (Treisman 2010). Hale (2005) also argues that public opinion helps elites choose whether to rally behind an incumbent or defect to a potential successor.

Explaining the 2011 slide in Putin's rating might also cast light on the mass protests that broke out in Moscow and other cities that December. Their close proximity makes it tempting to attribute the two phenomena to the same cause, but the coincidence might be accidental. Disentangling the determinants of these events could also offer insight into whether the current

political stabilization is likely to last.

Of course, no study of public opinion can be better than the data on which it is based. In highly repressive autocracies, respondents may answer sensitive questions insincerely. However, various scholars have concluded that in the hybrid regimes of post-communist Russia self-censorship is unlikely to have distorted results significantly (Wyman 1997, p.5-19; Rose 2007). Although some respondents may be intimidated or subject to social desirability bias, large proportions of the population have expressed harsh criticism of incumbents in surveys at various times. The Levada Center, whose data I study here, has a strong reputation for professionalism and independence, which apparently explains why it has come under pressure from the Putin administration on several occasions. Even if the average rating of the president were biased upwards by anxiety about criticizing incumbents, so long as this bias remained constant over time trends in the ratings would still be meaningful. It is also reassuring that the proportion of respondents who say they don't know or refuse to answer when asked whether they approve of the president is quite low in these polls, usually around eight percent.

2 Possible explanations

What might account for the softening of Putin's support in 2011? We can break this down into two questions. First, *who* defected from the leaders' support coalition? What types of Russians grew disenchanted with the Kremlin around this time? And, second, *why* did they do so? What issues or grievances prompted this switch?

To start with the first question, Putin might have lost support disproportionately within certain sociodemographic or economic groups. An obvious candidate is the so-called "creative class." This term, apparently first applied to Russia by the political consultant Gleb Pavlovsky in

2008, has been used to denote a stratum of highly educated, internet-linked, urbanites, with globalized consumption habits and a post-modern sensibility.⁴ It was this class that pundits identified in the mass protests of December 2011, sporting witty posters and articulating demands for political participation and honest government. Perhaps these educated urbanites also caused the ratings plunge during the preceding year by defecting en masse as they gave up on Medvedev's faltering modernization project. According to Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes (2012), Putin won the March 2012 election "by mobilizing antimodern Russia against modern Russia, and by mobilizing the countryside against Moscow." Alternatively, the ratings slide might reflect changing attitudes of some other economic, social, or geographic subset of Russians.

Whatever group or groups made up the 16 percent that deserted Putin in 2011, the question remains why they did so. Did some new issue surge onto the agenda, eclipsing economics? Given the outrage with which Moscow protesters met the perceived fraud of the December 2011 election, one obvious possibility is that plunging ratings reflected dissatisfaction with the Kremlin's restrictions on democracy. One might expect the rapid economic modernization of the 2000s to have produced an increase in demands for political participation, open politics, and other "self-expression values" (Inglehart and Welzel 2005).

Another topic that became more salient around this time was Russian nationalism. In December 2010, the killing of an ethnically Russian soccer fan by a native of the North Caucasus set off xenophobic rioting in Manezh Square, prompting a crackdown by authorities. Anti-immigrant sentiment appeared to be spreading. Putin's ambivalent responses—calling for interethnic harmony, while simultaneously asserting the Russian

⁴ For Gleb Pavlovsky's use of the term, see Bilevskaya (2008).

nation's "cultural dominance" and rounding up migrant workers—risked alienating both liberals and nationalists.⁵ In foreign policy, Putin, on the one hand, endorsed the "reset" of relations with the US, while, on the other hand, labeling US monetary policy as "hooliganism" and accusing the West of interfering in Russia's elections.⁶ Again, this threatened to offend both advocates of a more assertive role and supporters of greater accommodation, potentially depressing Putin's popularity in either or both of these groups.

A third issue was the state's perceived failure to provide essential services effectively. Focus groups conducted by Mikhail Dmitriev's Center for Strategic Research in the spring of 2012 found that economic grievances were being at least partially displaced by frustration with the poor functioning of state hospitals, schools, law enforcement agencies, and other suppliers of public services (Center for Strategic Research 2012). Dmitriev and Treisman (2012) speculated that the dramatic modernization in Russia's provinces, although not yet creating much of a Moscow-style creative class, was shifting priorities from individual economic survival to questions of human development—health, education, and personal security. This suggests another hypothesis: that the Kremlin's falling support in 2011 reflected resentment at the deterioration in public services.

Finally, Putin's declining ratings might represent not some new grievance but a growing tendency to blame him and his government personally for old grievances—including poor economic performance.⁷ For some years, respondents had shown a surprising

⁵ RT, "Putin trumpets Russia's 'cultural dominance,'" January 23, 2012, <http://rt.com/politics/putin-immigration-manifest-article-421/>.

⁶ Lynn Berry, "Putin Warns West as He Launces Presidential Bid," AP, November 27, 2011; <http://blogs.wsj.com/economics/2011/04/20/putin-u-s-monetary-policy-is-hooliganism/?mod=WSJBlog>.

readiness to compartmentalize their judgments of the state of the country and of their leaders' performance. In December 2010, even among those who thought "things in Russia are going in the wrong direction," 44 percent nevertheless approved of President Medvedev. Perhaps in 2011, Russians stopped giving the incumbents the benefit of the doubt. Even if Russians' perceptions of economic performance did not change at all, an increasing tendency among those disappointed in the economy to disapprove of Putin would depress his average ratings. Stable economic perceptions would then coincide with falling approval, giving the misleading impression that economics and approval had de-linked.

3 Analysis

I use a number of Levada Center polls to examine these hypotheses.⁸ While some ask about approval of both Putin and Medvedev, others inquire only about Medvedev, who was president in 2010-11. However, the extremely high correlation between the two leaders' ratings suggests the public viewed them as politically indistinguishable. In the polls that asked about both, the correlation over time is almost perfect ($r = .93$ in 2008-2012). The two converged until May 2011, when Medvedev was less than one percentage point below Putin, and then diverged. Both series responded similarly to shocks such as the Georgian war and the global financial crisis. The cross-sectional correlation is also very high: the same individuals tended to support both leaders. In December 2010 and December 2011, for instance, more than 95 percent of those approving of President Medvedev's actions also

⁷ Chaisty and Whitefield (2012) argue, on the basis of evidence from a 2009 survey, that the global financial crisis may have had a lingering effect on Russian public opinion. Those worst affected by the crisis had a more negative evaluation of the governing authorities.

⁸ I am grateful to the Center's director, Lev Gudkov, and to its production director, Alexei Grazhdankin, for sharing these data.

approved of Prime Minister Putin's. Medvedev's rating fell 18 points between December 2010 and December 2011, compared to Putin's 16-point fall. In the analysis, I use Putin's ratings when they are available but Medvedev's when Putin's are not.

To explore what changed, I compare polls from late 2010 and late 2011. Where possible, I combine two Levada center polls (asking the same questions) from each period to increase the sample size and power of the statistical tests. To explore *who* left the pro-Putin coalition, I crosstabulate or regress approval of the incumbents on social, economic, and geographical characteristics of respondents. To examine *why*, I crosstabulate or regress approval on respondents' positions on the issues mentioned. Ideally, one might wish to include multiple variables in the same regression. Unfortunately, different questions are asked on different surveys ruling out any comprehensive statistical "horse race." Still, I use multiple regression where possible to control for confounding factors. In each case, I use the Levada Center's survey weights to render the sample representative of the Russian adult population.

What types of people lost faith in Putin and Medvedev during 2011? Table 1 explores the impact of gender, age, income, education, settlement size, and technological sophistication (proxied by ownership of a notebook computer). Panel A shows the proportion of respondents in each category that approved of Medvedev in each year, along with the change in approval between the two years, estimated using regressions for each determinant without controls. Panel B shows the change between the two years in the given category, now controlling for all other variables in the table (estimated with a multivariate regression).⁹

⁹ For example, the coefficient in the third column for "Income in the top fifth of the national distribution" shows that approval of Medvedev fell by 21.6 points between late 2010 and late 2011 among respondents in the highest-earning

Measuring how approval changed within the “creative class” is complicated by the fact that there are no universally recognized markers of this stratum. Members are variously considered to be highly educated, concentrated in large cities (especially Moscow and St Petersburg), and frequent users of information technology. In fact, we might expect creative classers to have several of these attributes (some Muscovites and some with higher education are certainly *not* members). I examine the effect of these characteristics individually, but also explore approval changes within a composite category—respondents who lived in Moscow or St. Petersburg, had some higher education, *and* owned a notebook computer—that I will call the “core creative class” (CCC; see row in bold in Table 1). This subgroup made up less than three percent of the total sample in both 2010 and 2011. Under a different criterion, the creative class might be slightly smaller or larger, but probably not by much. However defined, it represents not just a tiny minority nationwide, but a minority within just Moscow and St Petersburg.

Between late 2010 and late 2011, Medvedev’s approval nationwide fell by 14.6 percentage points in these surveys.¹⁰ The drop was more dramatic in some subgroups than others. Among women, the president’s rating fell by 18.4 points, more than eight points more than among men. In the highest-earning fifth of the population, Medvedev’s approval fell by almost 22 points, about eight points more than among Russians in the bottom 80 percent.¹¹

quintile; the figure in the fourth column shows that of this 21.6 point drop, 9.5 points cannot be accounted for by other factors such as the respondent’s size of settlement, gender, education, and age.

¹⁰ “Late” here refers to the average of October and December ratings. The drop is slightly less than the 18-point fall between December 2010 and December 2011.

¹¹ The influence of income weakens and loses significance when I control for other factors, suggesting that in part it is picking up effects of size of settlement, education, and other factors rather than income per se.

Table 1: Who gave up on Putin and Medvedev in 2011? Percent approving of Medvedev in various categories of respondents

	(A)			(B)
	-----No controls-----			<i>Controlling for other factors</i>
	2010	2011	Change	Change
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
<i>Memo: Full sample</i>	70.7	56.1	-14.6	
<i>“Creative class” and its components</i>				
Moscow or St Petersburg (no higher education or notebook) ^a	65.5	58.8	-6.7	-1.0
Higher education (no notebook, not Moscow or St Petersburg)	70.4	50.5	-19.8*	-8.4
Owned notebook (no higher education, not Moscow or St Petersburg)	70.5	50.7	-19.9	-8.1
Higher education and notebook (not Moscow or St Petersburg)	74.0	58.9	-15.1	-0.5
Moscow or St Petersburg and higher education (no notebook) ^a	80.7	60.5	-20.2**	-8.9
Moscow or St Petersburg and notebook (no higher education) ^a	82.6	53.5	-29.1***	-18.2*
CCC: Moscow or St Petersburg, higher education, and notebook^a	80.0	52.9	-27.1***	-23.6***
<i>Other characteristics</i>				
Residents of other cities with population over 500,000 ^a	68.1	47.9	-20.3**	-13.0
Residents of cities with population 100,000 - 500,000 ^a	72.1	51.6	-20.5**	-13.2*
Residents of small towns and rural settlements ^b	70.3	60.3	-10.0**	-3.4
Aged 60 or over	68.8	54.5	-14.4	-3.0
Female	75.6	57.2	-18.4**	-12.6***
Income in top fifth of national distribution	77.4	55.8	-21.6**	-9.5

Sources: Author’s calculations from Levada Center data. Vestnik surveys, October and December of each year combined.

Note: robust standard errors, clustered by region, shown for changes only (all proportions statistically different from zero); * p < .10, ** p < .05, *** p < .01. Significance levels refer to significance of *difference between change in the given category and in the reference category*. (For instance, the 19.8 point drop (uncontrolled) among those *with* higher education but no notebook computer who lived outside Moscow and St Petersburg differed from the 12.6 point drop (not shown) among those *without* higher education (and no notebook computer who lived outside Moscow and St Petersburg) at significance level p < .05.) N: 3,276 in 2010; 3,031 in 2011. All regressions use sample weights. ^a excluded settlement size category is small towns and rural settlements; ^b excluded category is large provincial cities.

Turning to the creative class, Medvedev’s rating crashed (falling 27-29 points) among Moscow and St Petersburg residents who owned notebook computers, whether or not they had higher education. The drop among creative classers was still around 20 percentage points even controlling for income, age, and other factors. Outside Moscow and St Petersburg, the effects of higher education and technological sophistication were less clear, although they may have been associated with above average slides in approval of the Kremlin team.

Women, high earners, and members of the core creative class had in late 2010 been

more enthusiastic than others about Medvedev. The wave of disillusion in 2011 caused women and high earners to converge to around the levels of men and the less wealthy. Even creative classers started out so positive about Medvedev that their stunning decrease in 2011 only left them slightly below the national average, with an approval rate of 53 percent compared to 56 percent.

Moving beyond Moscow and St Petersburg, Medvedev's popularity also suffered—falling about 20 points—among residents of other large and medium cities. (Some 13 points of this could not be explained by income and other characteristics controlled for in column 4.) Provincial urbanites had not started out particularly enthusiastic about the country's political leaders, so their 2011 slide left them less supportive than average. *Disapproval* was also particularly high in the large provincial cities by late 2011, with 45 percent there saying that they disapproved of Medvedev (not shown). By contrast, the Kremlin found its most stable support in the countryside and small towns, where approval fell by only 10 points and ended 2011 about four points above the national average. Moscow and St Petersburg turn out to be polarized. Among residents *without* higher education or a notebook computer, Medvedev's ratings fell less than seven points, compared to the 27 point drop among core creative classers. By late 2011, approval among these “less creative” Muscovites and St Petersburgers was slightly higher than the national average and more than 10 points above the average in large provincial cities. The proportion of respondents *disapproving* of Medvedev was actually lower in Moscow (26 percent) than it was in the countryside (32 percent). Old age had no discernible influence.

In short, women, the well-off, and creative classers soured on the ruling team more than others in 2011. This deflated their earlier enthusiasm, returning them to near or slightly

below the national average, but not rendering them particularly oppositional. Moscow and St Petersburg residents who did *not* own a notebook computer remained relatively favorable towards the Kremlin, indicating polarization within the two capital cities. Disapproval also rose in the country's medium and large provincial cities, whose residents had not been particularly enthusiastic to begin with. By late 2011, provincial urbanites had among the lowest rates of approval—and the highest rates of disapproval—of Putin and Medvedev.

All this notwithstanding, the main message from Table 1 is actually that support for the Kremlin fell quite uniformly, declining in all social, economic, and geographic categories examined. Even among non-creative-class Muscovites and St Petersburgers and among residents of the countryside and small towns the ratings decreased by 7-10 percentage points. The lowest levels of approval as of late 2011, recorded in large provincial cities, still remained just under 50 percent.

While the creative class certainly curbed its enthusiasm in 2011, this can explain only a tiny part of the nationwide decline. Even if, as estimated, about 27 percent of creative classers switched from approving to not approving of Medvedev, given that the group comprised just 2.4 percent of the population in late 2010 this would produce a fall of just 0.6 percentage points out of a total drop of 14.6 points. For comparison, the switch of about 20 percent of large provincial city residents would produce a 3.5 percentage points drop. The creative classers' disillusion with the Kremlin contributed to the leaders' ratings slide, but the phenomenon was much broader, embracing Russians from almost all social groups.

Why did these various defectors give up on their leaders? Were they frustrated by the Kremlin's restrictions on democracy? Were they motivated by nationalism, blaming

Medvedev and Putin for failing to staunch the flow of illegal immigrants or check the US and Europe's global pretensions. Were they angered by deteriorating public services?

Table 2 presents evidence drawn from more Levada Center surveys. In both December 2010 and December 2011, the pollsters asked whether respondents thought that what Russia currently most needed was for “the authorities to be strengthened” or for “the authorities to be placed under the control of society.” In both years, a majority favored more societal control, and the proportion rose from 51 to 59 percent during 2011—consistent with the notion that the demand for democracy was growing (Panel A). However, in both years, a majority of those who favored more societal control nevertheless approved of Putin. And the *fall* in his rating was almost the same among advocates of more societal control and believers in a stronger state. Based on the different rates of approval in the two groups as of late 2010, the observed swing of eight percent of the population towards the more democratic option could explain at most a little less than one percentage point of Putin's 16 point drop.¹²

Another question asked: “What, in your view, should be done with illegal immigrants from other former Soviet states?” Respondents could choose between “Legalize them and help them to get work and assimilate in Russia” and “Deport them beyond Russia's borders.” The average response hardened slightly in 2011: support for deportation rose by six points, while backing for legalization and assimilation fell by the same amount (Panel B). In both years, approval of Putin was slightly higher among those favoring assimilation.

¹² That is -8 percentage points multiplied by the 11 percentage point gap as of late 2010 between approval among respondents favoring stronger authorities (85 percent) and among those favoring societal control (74 percent), for a total of 0.88 percent. Using the policy preferences as of 2011 (67 and 54 instead of 85 and 74), this could explain just over one percentage point.

Table 2: Why did they give up on Putin and Medvedev? Possible sources of discontent, Russia 2010-2011

	Percent saying this in		Of these, pct. approving Putin (Medvedev)		
	late 2010	late 2011	late 2010	late 2011	change
A. DEMOCRACY					
<i>What do you think Russia most needs now?</i>					
Authorities to be strengthened	39	31	85	67	-18
Authorities placed under control of society	51	59	74	54	-20
Don't know or no answer	10	10	76	65	-11
<i>Valid N</i>	799	800			
B. ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION					
<i>What to do about illegal immigrants?</i>					
Legalize, help them get work and assimilate	27	21	85	62	-23
Deport them	52	58	77	56	-21
Don't know or no answer	21	21	80	64	-16
<i>Valid N</i>	799	800			
C. ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE WEST					
<i>Overall how do you feel about the US?</i>					
Very positive	4	5	80	84	4
Mostly positive	55	57	84	73	-11*
Mostly negative	23	20	73	51	-22***
Very negative	4	5	61	37	-24
Don't know or no answer	14	13	74	73	-2
<i>Overall how do you feel about the EU?</i>					
Very positive	6	6	87	77	-9
Mostly positive	64	63	82	72	-11
Mostly negative	13	13	68	48	-21
Very negative	2	3	53	26	-26
Don't know or no answer	16	15	76	69	-7
<i>Valid N</i>	3,271	3,191			
D. ASSERTIVE NATIONALISM					
<i>Is Russia currently a great power?</i>					
Definitely or probably yes	55	48	88	78	-10
Definitely or probably no	41	47	71	57	-14
Don't know or no answer	4	6	87	75	-12
<i>Valid N</i>	796	796			
E. PUBLIC SERVICES					
<i>How did the following change in previous year?</i>					
<i>Education</i>					
Improved	14	11	88	77	-11
Stayed the same	44	40	79	63	-16
Worsened	30	34	71	51	-20
Don't know or no answer	13	15	83	56	-27

Table 2: (cont.)

	<i>Pct. saying this in</i>		<i>Of these, pct. approving Putin (Medvedev)</i>		
	<i>late 2010</i>	<i>late 2011</i>	<i>late 2010</i>	<i>late 2011</i>	<i>change</i>
<i>Hospitals and clinics</i>					
Improved	12	10	86	72	-14
Stayed the same	45	42	83	62	-21
Worsened	37	40	72	51	-21
Don't know or no answer	7	8	70	69	-1
<i>Police and law enforcement</i>					
Improved	11	8	81	66	-15
Stayed the same	45	52	85	59	-26
Worsened	31	25	68	54	-14
Don't know or no answer	13	15	79	64	-15
<i>Valid N</i>	<i>799</i>	<i>800</i>			
F. ECONOMIC PERCEPTIONS					
<i>How would you assess Russia's current economic situation?</i>					
Good or very good	11	12	89	80	-8
Average	48	50	81	67	-15
Bad or very bad	33	29	51	28	-23**
Don't know or no answer	9	9	65	55	-9
<i>How would you assess your family's current material situation?</i>					
Good or very good	14	16	87	79	-8
Average	59	59	75	59	-16
Bad or very bad	25	24	53	34	-19**
Don't know or no answer	1	1	50	63	13
<i>Valid N</i>	<i>3,276</i>	<i>3,031</i>			

Sources: Author's calculations from Levada Center Kurer polls and Vestnik surveys (some provided to author by Levada Center, some available at <http://sophist.hse.ru>). Panel C combines polls for September and November in 2010 and for August and November in 2011. Panel F combines polls for October and December in each year.

Notes: Sample weights used wherever available. Columns C, D, and F: significance levels shown (only) in final column, for difference between change in the given row and change in the top row for that question (for example, the 22 percentage point decrease in approval of Putin among those "mostly negative" about the US differed from the 4 percentage point increase in approval among those feeling "very positive" about the US at $p < .01$); * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$. Data not available to calculate significance levels in panels A, B, and D.

Could the growing popularity of deportation—along with a sense that the Kremlin's approach was "too soft"—have motivated the slide in Putin's ratings? If so, only a small part of it. In 2010 and 2011, the proportion approving Putin was 6-8 percentage points lower among advocates of deportation. The six percentage point increase in support for deportation multiplied by the 6-8 percent lower approval rate in that category would produce a fall in Putin's rating of between 0.36 and 0.48 percentage points, a small fraction of the total. The

decrease in approval among those favoring deportation, 21 points, was about the same as that among those favoring assimilation, 23 points.

To capture attitudes towards the West, I combine two Levada Center polls from late 2010 and two from late 2011 that asked how respondents felt about the US and the European Union (Panel C). There is no evidence of a surge of anti-Western sentiment that might have driven down Putin's rating. In fact, the percentages feeling negative about the US and EU were almost exactly the same in 2011 as in 2010. Despite Putin's periodic anti-Western rhetoric, his approval was considerably higher among pro-Western than among anti-Western respondents. The proportion judging Russia to be a "great power" fell during the year from 55 to 48 percent (Panel D); since Putin was less popular among those who thought the country had lost its great power status, such nationalist frustration might have contributed to the ratings slide, but the estimated impact would not exceed 1.5 percentage points.¹³

What about declining public services? In December 2010 and December 2011, the Levada Center asked an identical battery of questions about which aspects of life had improved and which worsened in the previous year. Panel E shows figures for education, healthcare, and police. In each case, about three times as many respondents thought the service had deteriorated as thought it had improved. The proportion thinking education had deteriorated was four points higher in 2011 than in 2010, and the percentage was three points higher for healthcare. By contrast, the proportion thinking that the work of the police had deteriorated *fell* by six percentage points. While frustration with public services might have become important later, it was probably not driving the ratings down in 2011.

¹³ That is a switch of 6-7 percentage points multiplied by a gap of 17-21 points between the levels of approval in the two response categories, resulting in a predicted change of from 1.02 – 1.47 points.

Overall, attitudes towards immigration, the West, and Russia's international status, as well as assessments of public service quality, did not change much during 2011. Many Russians in 2011 viewed the public bureaucracies as grossly deficient, but they had thought this as well in 2010, when 79 percent nevertheless expressed approval of Putin. The small changes in opinions and perceptions might have added a little to dissatisfaction with the Kremlin. But there is no sign that these issues eclipsed economic concerns and motivated a 16-point slide in presidential approval.

However, Table 2 does contain intriguing evidence for the fourth hypothesis. Even if the nature and intensity of their grievances changed relatively little, the target of Russians' discontent did change. Those unhappy about some aspect of life were much less likely to approve of the country's political leadership in late 2011 than they had been in late 2010. Russians appear to have increasingly located the source of their problems in the failures of their leaders.

Among those feeling very positive about the US, 80 percent approved of Putin in 2010 and the proportion rose to 84 percent in 2011. By contrast, among those feeling very negative about the US, approval of the prime minister plunged from 61 percent in 2010 to just 37 percent a year later. Those perceiving decline in public services still approved of Putin at remarkably high levels in 2010, ranging from 68 to 72 percent. Those seeing deterioration in 2011 were less forgiving: approval among such respondents fell to the low fifties. Among those who thought public services had *improved* in 2011, Putin's rating generally fell much less.¹⁴

¹⁴ The results for police and law enforcement are anomalous, with the largest fall coming among those who thought the quality of these had stayed the same.

The same phenomenon is striking with regard to economic perceptions. In 2010, among those thinking the economy was in bad or very bad shape, 51 percent nevertheless said they approved of Putin's actions. By late 2011, this had dropped to 28 percent. Among those perceiving good economic performance, Putin's rating fell just nine points, from 89 to 80 percent. Similarly, among respondents classifying their family's material situation as bad or very bad Putin's rating fell from 53 to 34 percent, more than twice the fall (from 87 to 79) among those whose family finances were good or very good.¹⁵

But which of these grievances prompted Russians to judge their leaders more harshly? Answering this is tricky since those upset about one issue may have also been upset about the others, and no surveys contain all the relevant questions. Still, Table 3 provides some hints. Including assessments of both the national economy and the respondent's family finances in the same regression (Panel A), the former had an effect on approval two to three times larger than the latter. Comparing the *change* in approval among those criticizing national economic performance and among those reporting bad family finances (while controlling for the other), approval fell nearly nine points among the former but not at all among the latter. As previous studies have found, sociotropic effects loom larger than pocket-book ones.

Among the public service variables, the perceived trend in police performance loses any predictive power once one controls for the trends in education and healthcare (panel B); a belief that hospitals and clinics have deteriorated is the strongest predictor of (lower) leader approval.¹⁶ However, it could be that perceptions of public service quality are just picking up the influence

¹⁵ The approval decline was not larger among those who favored deporting illegal immigrants, and only slightly larger among respondents who felt Russia was no longer a great power. It was among those frustrated with the state of the economy, public services, and relations with the West that Putin lost disproportionately.

¹⁶ Data were only available to run these regressions for 2011.

of economic performance, with which they are likely to correlate. The standard questions on the current state of the Russian economy and of family finances were not included on the public service surveys. But respondents were asked two *other* questions about economic conditions: “What do you think is currently taking place in Russia—growth and development, stabilization, or slowdown and stagnation?” and “How did the material situation of your family change during the last year?” Controlling for the proportion that chose the most negative answers on these questions, the effects of deteriorating healthcare and education become small and insignificant. By contrast, the economic perceptions are huge and highly significant. The apparent effect of discontent with state services was probably capturing correlated dissatisfaction with the general economic situation.

The surveys containing questions about attitudes towards the West include few economic questions, but one asks respondents: “To what extent are you satisfied with the economic course of the country’s leadership?” This is not ideal, since it combines a question about the economy with one about Russia’s leaders. As one might expect, responses to this very strongly predict approval of Putin (Panel C). Still, controlling for dissatisfaction with the country’s economic course, hostility towards the West retains a large and statistically significant negative effect on Putin’s rating in both years. Defensive nationalism may, indeed, exert an influence independent of economics. However, controlling for the economic question, the effect of anti-Western attitudes on the *change* in approval of the Kremlin between 2010 and 2011 is cut by two thirds or more. While disapproval of the country’s economic course was associated with a large drop in Putin’s ratings, hostility towards the West was associated with a much smaller and statistically insignificant change. Once again, controlling for some measure of sociotropic economic concerns weakens or eliminates other possible explanations of the slide in approval.

Table 3: Estimated effects of opinion variables on approval of Putin or Medvedev, including controls

	-----No controls-----			-----With controls-----		
	2010	2011	Change	2010	2011	change
<i>A. Economic perceptions</i>						
Russia's current ec. situation "bad" or "very bad"	-31.8***	-41.1***	-9.2**	-27.7***	-36.3***	-8.6*
Family's material situation "bad" or "very bad"				-13.8***	-13.0***	0.8
<i>B. Public services</i>						
Education deteriorated last year ^a		-8.8			-2.9	
Hospitals and clinics deteriorated last year ^a		-10.8*			-2.0	
Police and law enforcement deteriorated last year		1.6			-0.1	
<i>Adding economic controls</i>						
Family material situation worsened last year					-22.2***	
Slowdown and stagnation in Russia					-33.5***	
<i>C. Attitudes towards the West</i>						
Feel "bad" or "very bad" about the US	-12.4***	-25.7***	-13.3***	-13.2***	-18.4***	-5.2
<i>Economic control: Not satisfied with economic course of country's leaders</i>				-22.0***	-40.7***	-18.7***
Feel "bad" or "very bad" about the EU	-16.1***	-29.3***	-13.2***	-16.6***	-21.1***	-4.5
<i>Economic control: Not satisfied with economic course of country's leaders</i>				-21.9***	-40.8***	-18.9***

Sources: Author's calculations from Levada Center Kurer polls and Vestnik surveys (some provided to author by Levada Center, some available at <http://sophist.hse.ru>).

Notes: Sample weights used. Robust standard errors: * p < .10, ** p < .05, *** p < .01. ^a full data only available for 2011.

Finally, does the increased tendency to blame the country's leaders for poor economic performance help explain why women, the rich, the creative class, and residents of provincial cities became less supportive in 2011? Did assessments of the health of the economy deteriorate particularly sharply among Russians in these categories?

More residents of large provincial cities judged the economy to be in trouble at the end of 2011 than in 2010; by contrast, among residents of small towns and the countryside, gloomy assessments grew rarer, dropping by seven percentage points. An even more dramatic improvement occurred in Moscow and St Petersburg, where the share of respondents reporting a

bad or very bad national economy fell from 33 to 18 percent. Among the country's highest-earning fifth of respondents, negative evaluations increased by four percentage points, and they decreased by three percentage points among the bottom 80 percent. As for women, they did not become more gloomy about economic conditions; but while their evaluations remained about the same, men were becoming more positive: the proportion of men reporting bad or very bad economic conditions fell by seven points. In short, provincial urbanites, the rich, and women were all becoming—in absolute or relative terms—more doubtful about Russia's economy. That might explain why they also grew less supportive of the country's leaders.

4 Conclusion

The dramatic slide in Putin's and Medvedev's ratings in 2011, at a time of relative economic stability, seemed at first to indicate a de-linking of political opinion from economic concerns. This also appeared to be the message of the Moscow demonstrations that erupted as the Kremlin's popularity hit a low point that December. Protesters from the new creative class seemed to be motivated by ideas rather than bread-and-butter issues, a desire for justice and dignity rather than for higher wages.

Yet closer analysis of survey data suggests a somewhat different interpretation. Although the creative class was vocal and visible, it was also tiny. The fall in support for Russia's leadership team was far broader, embracing just about all economic, social, and geographical groups. Muscovites *not* from the creative class actually remained more loyal than most. Along with the creative classers, women and the well-off had been particularly enthusiastic about the Kremlin team in 2010. By late 2011, they had reverted to around the national average. It was in

provincial Russian cities that large falls in support for Putin resulted in unusually high levels of latent opposition.

Falling approval of Putin reflected not so much the emergence of new issues—although demands for democracy and a tougher line on immigration did tick up—as a general loss of faith among the discontented that the Kremlin team would address the sources of their discontent. Those with grievances became less willing to give the country’s leaders the benefit of the doubt. This was true of Russians with a variety of grievances—from nationalists angry at the West to middle class Russians frustrated at failing schools and dilapidated hospitals. But the most robust evidence points once again to economics. Rather than being eclipsed by other issues, perceived economic performance became more tightly linked to respondents’ views of Putin and Medvedev, with gloomy economic assessments translating more powerfully into lower approval. It was this that caused the leaders’ ratings to fall even as average evaluations of the economy remained quite stable.

The data are far from comprehensive and definitive, so other interpretations are possible as well. But the account sketched above fits available evidence better than most alternatives. If it is correct, several implications follow. First, the subsequent stabilization in 2012 may have reflected not a rallying of support for Putin so much as a depletion of the pool of Russians with illusions to be dispelled. By 2012, few among those disappointed in economic conditions still entertained hopes that the Kremlin could turn things around. What loyalty remained after that point was likely based much more on current performance and concrete benefits than on vague hopes.

This is consistent with various other Levada Center poll results that suggest a hollowing out of support for the president. Between February 2011 and April 2012, the proportion considering Putin “businesslike, active, energetic,” fell from 51 to 39 percent. Fewer than eight percent in 2012 found Putin pleasant, appealing, and charming or honest, decent, and not corrupt. Six weeks after his election, fewer than 40 percent of respondents thought that Putin would still have won the presidency if Russia had “a free press and television, which could freely talk and write about abuses of the authorities.”

Second, this interpretation suggests that Putin’s popularity remains highly vulnerable to a further deterioration in the economy. While the Kremlin might be able to rally some support exploiting anti-Americanism and anti-immigrant sentiment, any gains are likely to be undone if incomes stagnate and unemployment rises. Russia’s growth rate has fallen with impressive regularity over the past 18 months, dropping from 4.8 percent in the first quarter of 2012 to 1.2 percent in the third quarter of 2013. So far, the government has managed to protect living standards from this decline, so economic sentiment has not yet fully absorbed the impact of these statistics. But if Russians start to believe the economy is in much worse shape than previously thought, the political effects may be pronounced.

With large reserves and an oil price that is still historically high, Putin has some room for maneuver. But a final implication is that the Kremlin’s greatest future challenges are likely to come not from Moscow—at least not from Moscow acting alone—but from the provincial cities, where as of late 2011 Putin’s ratings were significantly lower than in either small towns and the countryside or in Moscow and St Petersburg if one excludes the small “creative class” minority. Expressed readiness to protest was also higher in the provincial cities.

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