

Putin

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INTRODUCTION

“20 Years of Putin”

This issue is the result of a cooperation between the Russian Analytical Digest and dekodeR—an online media source striving to “decipher” Russia by translating Russian independent media sources and combining it with German academic expertise in Russian Studies (www.dekoder.org). The texts by Fabian Burkhardt on the Putin system, Gwendolyn Sasse on Russia and Ukraine and Ulrich Schmid on Russian nationalities policy are part of dekodeR’s special report “20 Years of Putin” (“20 Jahre Putin”). The editors of the Russian Analytical Digest are grateful to dekodeR for allowing us to republish these three texts in a slightly revised English version. The special report on Putin was produced as part of “Knowledge transfer squared—Russian studies,” a joint project of the Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen and dekodeR. The project is funded by the Volkswagen Foundation. The report can be found at: <https://putin.dekoder.org/de>

ANALYSIS

The 2020 Russian Constitutional Reform

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Abstract

While the focus of the current Russian constitutional reform¹ is on the succession management allowing President Vladimir Putin to stay in power until 2036, the adopted amendments go far beyond: The amendments aim at a further concentration of powers in the office of the president thereby weakening the separation of powers established by the 1993 Constitution. The amendments also strengthen national sovereignty and add conservative values to the Constitution.

Overview

As the basic chapters of the Constitution—Chapter 1 on constitutional principles, Chapter 2 on human and civil rights and freedoms, and Chapter 9 on constitutional amendments—cannot be revised by the amendment procedure being used now, all new amendments technically can only affect Chapters 3 to 8. In practice, though, many changes affect the separation of powers, which is enshrined in Chapter 1. Chapters 3 to 8 deal with the structure and organization of the government and allow for amendments via a simple procedure outlined in the Constitution’s Article 136.

As a result, the Constitution is now divided into two parts: The first part with the basic principles, adopted under the leadership of Boris Yeltsin in 1993, and a newly designed second part adopted under Vladimir Putin. In many ways these new amendments openly contradict or even override provisions of Chapters 1 and 2, most significantly concerning the separation of powers.

With the recent amendments, the 1993 Constitution loses its characteristic spirit. Even though presidential

powers have always been strong in the Russian Constitution and constitutional practice often differed from the text, the first two chapters, especially the comprehensive catalogue of human rights in the second chapter, expressed the basic text’s liberal and pluralistic character, as well as its openness to international law. The new amendments are adapting the Constitution to the constitutional practice of the Russian authoritarian regime as it exists today. This is significant because the constitutionalists among Russian legal scholars and practitioners up to now were able to convincingly contrast a liberal interpretation of the Constitution with the way that the Constitution was actually implemented. The recent changes to the Constitution deprive them of making these arguments in many ways.

Zeroing Out Presidential Term Limits

The core of the new amendments “zeroes out” presidential term limits, allowing President Putin to stay in office for another two terms until 2036. While the newly amended Article 81.3 of the Constitution now only provides for the president to serve a *maximum* of

1 The Law on the Constitutional Amendments: <http://duma.gov.ru/news/48045/>.

two terms instead of two “consecutive” terms, this provision is supplemented by Article 81.3¹ which zeroes out the presidential terms for any former or current president—obviously a constitutional coup!

At first, Putin’s annual address to the Federal Assembly on January 15, 2020² suggested a different regulatory path for President Putin to stay in power beyond 2024: By proposing to give additional powers to the State Council, Putin gave the impression that he was creating a new position for himself as chairman of the State Council. However, Putin quickly denied these interpretations.

But zeroing out the presidential term limits of previous and current presidents openly contradicts the first chapter of the Russian Constitution.³ In 2002, the Russian Constitutional Court had ruled that the principle of a republican form of government requires democratic rotation among political office holders: separation of powers in a temporal dimension. Several reports issued by the Venice Commission regarding presidential term limits made this point as well. The 2018 “Report on Term Limits”⁴ emphasizes the danger of establishing authoritarian structures resulting from giving the president an unlimited mandate. According to the report, term limits are essential to safeguard democracy, rule of law, and human rights.

However, as expected, the Russian Constitutional Court confirmed the constitutional reform promptly on 16 March 2020.⁵ The Constitutional Court defended the reform by referring to the people as the main source of power, acknowledging the right of the people to vote in free elections for the person “most worthy” to be the head of state. Therefore, in the court’s reasoning, the principle of the democratic state under the rule of law should be “balanced” with rule by the people. With this logic the Constitutional Court adheres to a central pillar of the Russian and Soviet constitutional tradition, according to which the will of the people is essential to legitimate state power. In consequence, the constitution is regarded as only reflecting the respective will of the people.

Strengthening Separation of Powers?

The Constitutional Court also claims that the reform is strengthening the separation of powers. This is most surprising as the Constitutional Court itself loses independence by the reform. While the Constitutional Court is now defined as the “highest judicial body for constitutional oversight” in Article 125.1 of the Constitution, at the same time, the number of judges is reduced

from 19 to 11 and according to the newly introduced Articles 83(F⁶) and 102.1(k) judges of the Constitutional Court as well as other judges can be dismissed by the Federation Council at the recommendation of the president if they commit actions “violating the honor and dignity of a judge.” This regulation is open for political interpretation and may thus be easy to abuse.

Strengthening Presidential Powers

Altogether, the legal amendments to the Constitution aim at an extensive broadening of presidential powers. By the new amendments the president is made head of the executive branch of power providing him with the leadership of the government in Articles 83(b) and 110.1 of the Constitution. This has long been the way that the Russian political system works in practice. The 1993 Constitution, however, had not been clear on this point, thereby providing arguments against delegating this powerful responsibility to the president.

This new role gives the president the right to determine the structure of the federal branch agencies and to propose changes to it (new Article 83(b¹)).

The president now leads the government and “coordinates the functioning and interaction” of the “unitary system of public power” that not only includes state organs but, from now on, also integrates local self-government. This new provision obviously weakens the constitutional guarantee of local self-government.

Article 92¹.1 of the Constitution now also grants immunity to former presidents. For the revocation of immunity, Article 92¹.3 foresees the same procedure as in the case of the impeachment of an incumbent president, as regulated in Article 93 of the Constitution.

Several far-reaching changes are introduced to Article 83 that lists the competences of the president, many of them concerning the process of forming a government. According to the new Articles 83(a), 103.1(a), and 111.1, the president no longer appoints the prime minister upon the consent of the State Duma, but instead appoints the prime minister after the State Duma confirmed the application “presented” by the president. The president maintains the right to nominate the prime minister, although this is no longer described as a “proposal” (предложение), but as a “presentation” (представление) (see Article 111.2 of the Constitution).

According to the new Articles 83(e), 103.1(a¹), and 112.2,3, the president appoints the deputy prime minister and the federal ministers (with the exception of the most important ministers) following the confirmation of

2 Vladimir Putin, Address to the Federal Assembly: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/62582>.

3 William Partlett, ‘Russia’s Unconstitutional Zeroing Amendment’ IACL-AIDC Blog (16 March 2020) <https://blog-iacl-aidc.org/2020-posts/2020/3/16/russias-unconstitutional-zeroing-amendment>.

4 Venice Commission of The Council of Europe, [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD\(2018\)010-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD(2018)010-e)

5 Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation, 16.3.2020, Nr.1-Z, <http://doc.ksrf.ru/decision/KSRFDecision459904.pdf>

the candidates by the State Duma. Until now, the president appointed them directly at the recommendation of the prime minister. However, the right to nominate candidates stays with the prime minister, with the difference being, that until now, the prime minister “proposed” the applications to the president, whereas now he “presents” them to the State Duma.

With respect to the appointment of the most important federal ministers, the constitutional reform provides for a specific system, introduced by the newly added Articles 83(e¹) and 102.1(j). The candidates for the chairmanships of the federal organs, including the federal ministers dealing with security, justice, interior and foreign affairs are proposed by the president and then nominated by him after “consultations” with the Federation Council. Thus, the prime minister is excluded from the process of appointing these most important ministers of his government.

What is more, the president has the right to dismiss the prime minister according to Article 83(a) of the Constitution.

By the amendments the president *de facto* receives a second veto. The president may now overturn a law passed by parliament if the Constitutional Court declared it unconstitutional through procedures of preventive control laid down in Articles 107.3 and 108.2.

The Duma does not gain power in any significant way even if the prime minister is no longer appointed by the president “with the consent” of the Duma, but after its “confirmation.” Similarly toothless is the new Article 103¹ of the Constitution, according to which the parliament now gets the “right of parliamentary oversight,” allowing it to put questions to the government. On the contrary, Article 109.1 of the Constitution provides that the Duma can be dissolved by the president: This may happen not only in the case of Article 111, but now also with Article 112, if the president and Duma do not agree on the make-up of the government, as well as in the case of Article 117, if the Duma votes no confidence in the government.

Article 95.2 changes the composition of the Federation Council: Now, former presidents may become life-long members. The Federation Council may now additionally include up to 30 representatives nominated by the president, which strengthens the power of the president over the Federation Council. The members of the Federation Council are henceforth officially called “senators of the Russian Federation”.

Sovereignty

The constitutional amendments strengthen state sovereignty. The amendments integrate existing jurisprudence of the Constitutional Court and federal laws into the Constitution by mandating that a decision of the

European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) can only be implemented in Russia after the Constitutional Court approves. This contradicts international law, according to which the Russian Federation has to abide by final ECHR rulings even if the Russian authorities do not agree with them.

Another important new provision refers to the territory of the state: It is now prohibited by Article 67.2¹ to give away parts of Russian territory. This regulation must be understood as seeking to maintain the status of Crimea which had been annexed by Russia in violation of international law. According to Article 65.1 of the Constitution, Crimea is part of Russian national territory.

By introducing numerous requirements regulating who can hold public offices, limiting these positions to Russian citizens, permanent residents, and individuals with no foreign bank accounts, the amendments seek to enhance state sovereignty and bolster the “patriotic” attitudes of top-level civil servants. These requirements apply to, among others, members of the Federation Council, deputies of the State Duma, judges and regional leaders.

Presidential candidates must meet even stricter requirements, according to Article 81.2. To name only a few, aspirants for Russia’s top office must now have resided in Russia for the last 25 years (increased from 10), may not have, or ever have had, the citizenship of a foreign state, or a document granting permanent residence in a country other than Russia.

Ideology and Values

Lastly, the constitutional amendments introduce several conservative or “patriotic” values into the Constitution. These include the reference to God in Article 67¹.2, the definition of marriage as the “union of a man and a woman” in Article 72.1(g¹), and the protection of the “historical truth” in Article 67¹.3, to name only a few. These additions not only destroy the system of the Constitution, but also its pluralistic liberal character. The ideological provisions apparently seek to generate support for the reform within Russian society. However, they also give the authorities justifications for interfering with the fundamental rights enshrined in the Constitution’s Chapter 2.

On top of these changes, vast catalogues of state objectives are added to the competences of the government in Article 114.1, such as social security and economic recovery, mixing up competences and obligations.

Procedure

While the reform process not only started as a surprise but moved extremely quickly, leaving almost no room for public or academic debate, the procedure was just as unexpectedly stopped for an indefinite time as the man-

datory national vote, scheduled for 22 April 2020, was postponed due to the corona virus pandemic.

In general, the constitutional reform relies on the procedure established by Article 136 of the Constitution. According to this procedure the amendments could already be in force. However, the new amendment law introduced two additional procedural preconditions: approval by the Constitutional Court and a national

vote. The amendments will come into force on the day of the publication of the results of the national vote if more than half of the voters participating voted in favor of the amendments.

Therefore, at the moment, it is hard to predict how and when the constitutional amendment process will be completed.

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ANALYSIS

The Institutionalization of Personalism? The Presidency and the President after Putin's Constitutional Overhaul

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Abstract

Is it still possible to conceive of the institution of the presidency being separate from Vladimir Putin, the president? The constitutional amendment that would zero out Putin's current presidential terms and therefore allow him to run once more for president in 2024 suggest that regime personalization has further progressed. Nonetheless, it still remains analytically useful and important to distinguish between the presidency and the president: presidential power remains a polymorphous phenomenon. Putin needs to maintain control of a strong presidency to exert authority.

One-Man Rule?

Vladimir Putin seems to have merged with the Russian presidency. He even admitted this himself in his speech to the State Duma plenary session on 10 March 2020: "I am convinced that a time will come when the supreme power in Russia, that of the President, will no longer be personified and will no longer be associated with a specific person."¹ However, he left open the question of when that time will come. In Putin's view, Russia still has to go through a long, evolutionary development, for which a strong presidential hierarchy of power is absolutely indispensable.

When on 15 January Vladimir Putin unveiled his plans for the most comprehensive overhaul of Russia's constitution since its adoption in 1993, it initially

appeared to many observers that he intended to remain in power beyond 2024 by stepping down from the presidency, and by occupying another high-ranking position in the state and thereby retaining power as the de facto ruler. This theory was suspicious from the very beginning² for two reasons: First, contrary to Putin's rhetoric, the draft amendments submitted to the Duma on 20 January strengthened the presidency at the cost of other state organs. Second, as a consequence, no other position in the state was bolstered to such a degree that would allow Putin to wield enough power to check a future successor president. Take Kazakhstan for comparison: The formal upgrade of Russia's State Council is negligible compared to the sweeping powers Nazarbaev prescribed to the chairman of Kazakhstan's Secu-

1 Kremlin.ru (2020) 'Plenarnoe zasedanie Gosudarstvennoi Dumy', 10 March. Accessed 30 March 2020.

2 Burkhardt, F. (2020) 'Putins Verfassungstreik: Die Nachfolgefrage in Russland ist weiterhin offen', 21 January. Accessed 30 March 2020.

rity Council³, the position he took up later after stepping down from the presidency while retaining far-ranging prerogatives as the first president of Kazakhstan-Elbasy⁴.

The 10 March “Tereshkova amendment” during the second Duma reading was the first clear and unambiguous signal that the constitutional overhaul was about Putin’s “end game”⁵: The “zeroing out” of Putin’s presidential terms would allow Russia’s long-term ruler to run for the presidency once more in 2024. At this point, however, it remains unknown when the constitutional amendments will come into force⁶. The plebiscite initially slated for 22 April was postponed indefinitely due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, uncertainty will remain up until 2024 whether Putin will run again for the presidency. Nonetheless, the formal zeroing out of presidential terms marks a further increase in personalization of Russia’s authoritarian regime. Given this high degree of personalism⁷, one might ask whether it is possible to conceive of the institution of the presidency being separate from Putin, the president? What system of power has Putin built over the past 20 years? And finally, how much does Putin control in Russia today?

Does Putin Decide Everything Himself?

In comparative presidentialism, it is common to distinguish between president-centered and presidency-centered explanations of presidential behavior.⁸ In authoritarian regimes with a high degree of personalization such as Russia, one might indeed ask whether a presidency-centered approach is still justified. But as I argue in a forthcoming article⁹ on the Russian Presidential Administration, presidential power can be conceptualized as a polymorphous phenomenon: Depending on the level of analysis such as time or policy domain, presidential behavior can follow highly personalized or, to the

contrary, institutionalized patterns. A related conception is the “double state” in Russia.¹⁰ In this state, there are two different regimes whose interaction creates constant tension and uncertainty. One regime is that of the president’s “manual control,” in which his personal authority is paramount. The second regime is governed by regular and rule-based patterns of behavior, for example in the everyday management of the civil bureaucracy, in which even the strong president cannot easily interfere.

Yeltsin was already called an “electoral monarch”¹¹ because of his personalistic style. However, personalization has steadily increased under Putin.¹² A growing number of policies that were once part of the second regime are no longer protected from attacks by the first regime. Of course, this rules-based, institutionalized behavior should not be confused with “democracy” or “good governance”: even under Stalinism such a second regime existed to a certain extent.¹³ To illustrate that presidential power is still a polymorphous phenomenon, in the following sections I attempt to disentangle president- and presidency-centered characteristics of Putin’s Russia.

Putin as the Mafia Boss of a Network State?

To describe the Putin system, one can imagine a kind of solar system in which various actors from the political and economic elite orbit the Putin sun. The celestial bodies are of different weights, are closer to the sun or further away from it, and can also have their own satellites. Other metaphors can also be used: a politburo in which there are different categories of members according to the Soviet model. Or several Kremlin towers that face each other in contention.¹⁴ One of the most elaborate models is that of *sistema*:¹⁵ a network state in which the elite bends or bypasses laws. The network state cre-

3 Adilet.zan.kz (2020) ‘O nekotorykh voprosakh Soveta Bezopasnosti Respubliki Kazakhstana’, 12 February. Accessed 30 March 2020.

4 Adilet.zan.kz (2017) ‘O pervom Prezidente Respubliki Kazakhstan-Elbasy’, 15 June. Accessed 30 March 2020.

5 Hale, H. (2020) ‘Putin’s end game?’ Ponars Policy Memo 638. Accessed 30 March 2020.

6 There is convincing evidence that both the content and procedure of the constitutional amendments are unconstitutional: Rogov, K. (2020) ‘Dekonstruksiya Konstitutsii’. Moscow: Fond ‘Liberal’naya Missiya. Accessed 30 March 2020.

7 Personalism is understood as a regime trait rather than a regime type. For a time-variant concept of personalism see: Geddes, B., Wright, J. G., Wright, J., and Frantz, E. (2018) ‘How dictatorships work: Power, personalization, and collapse’. Cambridge University Press.

8 Hager, G. L., and Sullivan, T. (1994) ‘President-centered and presidency-centered explanations of presidential public activity’. *American Journal of Political Science*, p. 1079–1103.

9 Burkhardt, F. (2020) ‘Institutionalising Authoritarian Presidencies: Polymorphous Power and Russia’s Presidential Administration’, *Europe-Asia Studies*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2020.1749566> (forthcoming).

10 Sakwa, R. (2010). ‘The dual state in Russia’. *Post-Soviet Affairs* 26(3), p. 185–206. The concept of the dual state goes back to Ernst Fraenkel: Fraenkel, E. (1941). ‘The Dual State: A Contribution to the Theory of Dictatorship’. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

11 Shevtsova, L. (2007) ‘Russia lost in transition: the Yeltsin and Putin legacies’. Carnegie Endowment.

12 Batur, A., & Elkins, J. A. (2016) ‘Dynamics of regime personalization and patron–client networks in Russia, 1999–2014’. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 32(1), p. 75–98.

13 Gorlizki, Y. (2002) ‘Ordinary Stalinism: the Council of Ministers and the Soviet neopatrimonial state, 1946–1953’. *The Journal of Modern History*, 74(4), p. 699–736.

14 Petrov, N. (2011) ‘The nomenklatura and the elite’, in: Petrov, N. and M. Lipman (eds.) ‘Russia in 2020: Scenarios for the Future’. Brookings Institution Press, p. 499–530.

15 Ledeneva, A. V. (2013) ‘Can Russia modernise? Sistema, power networks and informal governance’. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

ates interdependencies in the extremely complex network of relationships among this elite.

However, it would be too simplistic to reduce the *sistema* to a kleptocracy, a mafia state, or a militocracy under the sole rule of the *siloviki*, the leaders of Russia's military and intelligence agencies. Informal practices remain ambiguous,¹⁶ moving smoothly between legality and illegality, legitimacy and illegitimacy. For example, someone in the presidential administration can pick up the phone to influence the courts (telephone justice). On the other hand, governors sometimes make calls to overcome bureaucratic hurdles in building factories, or to call back aggressive regulators from successful companies. The new prime minister, Mikhail Mishustin, for example, succeeded in modernizing the tax authority. He is considered a comparatively effective manager in the civil service, who in 2020 received the second most important post in the country. At the same time, he amassed a significant fortune with the help of his family members, according to Alexey Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation.

How Popular is Putin?

The Kremlin likes to measure Putin's popularity in polls, and there is good reason for that. The presidential rating is one of the most important resources available to Putin. His consistently high approval ratings have hovered between 60 and almost 90 percent over the past 20 years, symbolizing the leader's direct engagement with the people. To maintain the "image of invincibility" and the sense that there is no alternative, the Kremlin must ensure that Putin is the most popular politician in Russia permanently and by far. As constant plebiscites of approval,¹⁷ ratings and polls are intended to replace other broken feedback channel to the population, such

as elections or the media. Even for governors in the regions, they are considered one of the most important indicators that determine their careers.¹⁸

But what makes Putin popular, and to what extent is this popularity real? In particular, the fluctuations in confidence and approval ratings show that it is not so much Putin's biography and personal traits that contribute to his popularity, but above all two aspects: the perception of economic development and the expectation that one's own economic situation will improve, and, in the foreign policy sphere, the sense of an external danger.

Large fluctuations after unpopular social or pension reforms or longer-term downward trends after the Great Recession reflect changing perceptions among the population.¹⁹ Russian foreign policy sometimes causes erratic changes: especially in conflict situations in which Russia is threatened, or to the contrary, when foreign policy "successes,"²⁰ such as the annexation of Crimea, trigger euphoria, there are rally-'round-the-flag effects that at least temporarily increase support for Putin.²¹

However, media control and Internet censorship play a crucial role. One simulation assumes that a repeal of Internet censorship would cause Putin's rating to plummet by 35 percentage points.²² The question of whether Putin's popularity is genuine is therefore not clear. In any case, research shows that respondents do not lie when asked about Putin.²³ The restriction of political competition, censorship of television and Internet control create an alternative reality, which suggests majority support for the president.²⁴ Since most Russians are above all apolitical, the minority, which is willing to answer questions from pollsters, often joins the perceived majority for social reasons.²⁵

16 Ledeneva, A. (2016) 'The ambivalence of favour' in: Henig, D. and Makovicky, N. (eds.) *Economies of Favour after Socialism*. Oxford University Press, p. 21–49.

17 Yudin, G. (2019) 'Governing Through Polls: Politics of Representation and Presidential Support in Putin's Russia' *Javnost – The Public*, p. 1–15.

18 Reuter, O. J., and Robertson, G. B. (2012) 'Subnational appointments in authoritarian regimes: Evidence from Russian gubernatorial appointments' *The Journal of Politics*, 74(4), p. 1023–1037 // Ukaz Preyidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii ot 25.04.2019 no. 193 'Ob otsenke effektivnosti deiatelnosti vysschich dolzhnostnykh lits (rukovoditelei vysschich ispolnitelnykh organov gossudarstvennoi vlasti) subektov Rossiskoi Federatsii i deiatelnosti organov ispolnitelnoi vlasti subektov Rossiskoi Federatsii'. Accessed 30 March 2020.

19 Treisman, D. (2011) 'Presidential popularity in a hybrid regime: Russia under Yeltsin and Putin'. *American Journal of Political Science*, 55(3), p. 590–609.

20 Barbashin, A., Irisova, O., Burkhardt, F., and E. Wyciszkievicz (2017) 'A successful failure: Russia after Crime(a)'. Warsaw: Center for Centre for Polish-Russian Dialogue and Understanding. Accessed 30 March 2020.

21 Frye, T. (2019) 'Economic sanctions and public opinion: Survey experiments from Russia'. *Comparative Political Studies*, 52(7), p. 967–994 // Hale, H. E. (2018) 'How Crimea Pays: Media, Rallying 'Round the Flag, and Authoritarian Support'. *Comparative Politics*, 50(3), p. 369–391.

22 Guriev, S., & Treisman, D. (2015) 'How modern dictators survive: An informational theory of the new authoritarianism' *National Bureau of Economic Research*.

23 Frye, T., Gehlbach, S., Marquardt, K. L., & Reuter, O. J. (2017) 'Is Putin's popularity real?' *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 33(1), p. 1–15.

24 Volkov, D. (2020). *Is Putin no longer Russia's Mr. Popular?* *Riddle Russia*. Accessed 30 March 2020.

25 Greene, S., & Robertson, G. (2017) 'Agreeable authoritarians: personality and politics in contemporary Russia' *Comparative Political Studies*, 50(13), p. 1802–1834.

And this majority is undergoing a significant transformation. Especially in the last two years, the appetite of the Russian population for change has grown considerably. By the end of 2019, a clear majority of 59% thinks decisive, comprehensive changes are needed.²⁶ Recent polls on constitutional amendments suggests that an unambiguous pro-Putin majority is absent. Russia's population is split in half: While 48% of Levada respondents approve of the “zeroing amendment” nullifying Putin's presidential terms and allowing him to run again in 2024, 47% disapprove.²⁷ Younger and more urban Russians are more likely to oppose Putin running again for president. Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic did not lead to a rally-‘round-the-flag in the face of a dangerous disease. Putin's somewhat erratic reaction to the Coronavirus in conjunction with a historic drop in the oil price led to a sharp decline in Putin's approval ratings. Given that those who oppose a violation of term limits are more likely to protest²⁸, and that mass mobilization is a major threat²⁹ for personalist authoritarian regimes, it is fair to assume that uncertainty³⁰ is to remain the main characteristic of Russia's regime transformation.

Organization Chart of Power: The Continued Significance of Formal Institutions

In the network state, not only personal, but also predominantly formal, competences play a prominent role. Constitutions can be conceived of as “power maps” that signal to the individual actors of the elite who is the most powerful patron of the network. Because of his position as head of state, Putin is the linchpin of this patronal presidentialism.³¹ He is at the forefront of various pyramid-shaped networks and thus acts as a referee in the struggle for power and resources in the state and the economy.

Vladimir Putin inherited from Boris Yeltsin a 1993 constitution in which the presidency was endowed with enormous powers, especially by international standards. The powers are distributed among different state bodies, but the president is hardly ensnared by checks and balances. He hovers over the other branches of govern-

ment and has the final say, especially with regard to Parliament.³²

Although the Constitution remained virtually untouched until 2020 with a few exceptions, the president's powers have been steadily expanded beyond the constitution since 1993 via changes in federal (constitutional) laws, presidential decrees and decisions of the Constitutional Court. The result is an institutionalized asymmetry of power in which the president and the executive branch play a much greater role than any other branch.³³ In terms of the separation of powers, Putin's constitutional overhaul therefore achieved two goals: First, it sends a clear signal that the presidency will remain by far the most powerful organ in the state. Tereshkova's “zeroing amendment” was needed precisely because the initial constitutional amendment draft from January diluted the signal of who would be the main patron after the reform. The threat of Putin being perceived as a “lame duck” loomed large. Second, chapters 3 to 8 of the constitution are amended in a way that to a large degree adapt the constitutional text to constitutional reality in which the presidency already had powers such as the general leadership over the cabinet, the dual executive divided in a presidential and a prime ministerial bloc in the cabinet, the coordination of federal relations as chairman of the State Council, or control over local self-government, either informally or formally via gradual subconstitutional change.

All Just “Virtual Politics”?

While in the 2000s many observers argued that formally democratic institutions such as parties, parliament, or even elections in Russia under Putin were simply “virtual politics” or made for propaganda, a new realization has emerged in recent years: political institutions function differently than in democracies, but they still perform important roles.³⁴ With regard to the Presidential Administration (“the Kremlin”), we often tend to focus on salient personalities such as the chief of staff Anton Vaino, or the grey cardinals from the domestic politics department such as Vladislav Surkov or Sergei Kirienko. But as I show in my work, the reorganization of administrative units or recruitment patterns demonstrate a con-

26 Kolesnikov, A. and D. Volkov (2020) ‘Russians’ growing appetite for change’. Carnegie Moscow Center. Accessed 30 March 2020.

27 Levada-Center (2020) ‘Obnulenie prezidentskikh srokov’, 27 March. Accessed 30 March 2020.

28 Chaisty, P. and S. Whitefield (2019) ‘The political implications of popular support for presidential term limits in Russia’. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 35(4), p. 323–337.

29 Grundholm, A. T. (2020) ‘Taking it personal? Investigating regime personalization as an autocratic survival strategy’. *Democratization*, p. 1–19.

30 Noble, B., and N. Petrov (2020) ‘Russia's uncertain regime transformation’, Chatham House. Accessed 30 March 2020.

31 Hale, H. E. (2014) *Patronal politics: Eurasian regime dynamics in comparative perspective*. Cambridge University Press.

32 Stykow, P. (2019) ‘The devil in the details: constitutional regime types in post-Soviet Eurasia’. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 35(2), p. 122–139.

33 Burkhardt, F. (2017) ‘The institutionalization of relative advantage: formal institutions, subconstitutional presidential powers, and the rise of authoritarian politics in Russia, 1994–2012’. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 33(6), p. 472–495.

34 Wilson, A. (2005) *Virtual politics: faking democracy in the post-Soviet world*. Yale University Press.

siderable institutionalization over time.³⁵ Elections, to give another example, are not free and fair, since the campaigns are distorted and undemocratic. Yet elections are not meaningless: in the first place, they should co-opt elites and opposition and provide information about how much popular support the regime has. Later, lopsided election results for Putin and United Russia are designed to send signals of strength and used to command the loyalty of regional bureaucrats.³⁶ The same applies to the so-called “party of power,” the ruling party of United Russia: Despite its poor public image, the party guarantees the internal cohesion of the elites through its dominant position in the Federal Assembly, among governors, in regional parliaments and among mayors, and serves as a warning system to bring disloyal behavior or counter-mobilization among the elite to light early on.³⁷

However, excessive centralization can be costly. Already at the beginning of his first term, Putin pushed for harmonizing federal and regional legislation, strengthened control over regional security agencies by establishing federal districts, abolished the 2004 gubernatorial elections, deprived the regions of significant tax revenues through a complicated redistribution system, and thus increased fiscal control.³⁸ However, this centralization did not lead to better policy outcomes. Rather, it is one of the reasons for Russia’s bad governance.³⁹ Governance problems, lack of feedback mechanisms and misincentives for the regions prevent the socio-economic objectives set in the May 2012 presidential decrees and the 2018 national projects from being achieved. Although there are individual “pockets of efficiency”⁴⁰ in federal and regional civil administration, the institutionalized power asymmetries lead to a paradox of power⁴¹: the omnipotent president, who can intervene in all policy areas through manual control, is also powerless when it comes to day-to-day management and long-term goals. In the face of a global health crisis such as Covid-19, for example, Putin can order to send Russian employees into paid holidays, but compliance by businesses is bound to be patchy. What he can’t order is to make Russia’s

crumbling health system fit for long-term health challenges beyond the pandemic.

Putinism as Ideology?

Especially after the annexation of Crimea, the debate about the role of ideology in Russia flared up again. For example, Masha Gessen⁴² saw Russia on the road to totalitarianism, and Timothy Snyder even diagnosed the dawn of fascism.⁴³ Although some elements of totalitarianism, such as ideologically driven state propaganda or high approval ratings for Putin, were present in the first period after the annexation as a sign of mass mobilization, developments during the following years showed that Russian society is moving in exactly the opposite direction: the overly clumsy state television is becoming more unpopular, and especially after the 2018 pension increase, approval ratings also fell back to pre-2014 levels.

Not only did the population struggle to mobilize for Putinism, but in many places, local networks of activists have begun mobilizing against the regime because of declining real incomes, environmental problems, or election manipulation. That is why politics in post-Soviet Russia is largely non-ideological. For most actors in the state, it can even be dangerous to position themselves ideologically. For ideological commitment would require a long-term planning horizon, which even the most important members of the elite have only limited access to.

This does not mean, however, that ideological factors are completely arbitrary or play no role at all. In an elaborate attempt to crack the code of Putinism, the American political scientist Brian Taylor reduces it to the following three elements: ideas, behaviors, and emotions.⁴⁴ Among the guiding ideas are a strong state and great power status, an anti-Western and anti-American stance, as well as conservatism and anti-liberalism. As behaviors, the “collective Putin” prefers control, order, unity and antipluralism, loyalty and hypermasculinity. Emotionally, respect and humiliation, resentment as well as vulnerability and fear are of great importance. Taylor, however, warns against a too one-dimensional view

35 Burkhardt, F. (2020) ‘Institutionalising Authoritarian Presidencies: Polymorphous Power and Russia’s Presidential Administration’, *Europe-Asia Studies*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2020.1749566> (forthcoming).

36 Zavadskaya, M., Grömping, M., and F.M. Coma (2017) ‘Electoral Sources of Authoritarian Resilience in Russia: Varieties of Electoral Malpractice, 2007–2016’. *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, p. 25(4), p. 455–480.

37 Reuter, O. J. (2017) ‘The origins of dominant parties: Building authoritarian institutions in post-Soviet Russia’. Cambridge University Press.

38 Libman, A., and M. Rochlitz (2019) ‘Federalism in China and Russia’. Edward Elgar Publishing.

39 Gel’man, V., & Zavadskaya, M. (2020) ‘Explaining Bad Governance in Russia: Institutions and Incentives’. Ponars Policy Memo 634. Accessed 30 March 2020.

40 Gel’man, V. (2018) ‘Exceptions and rules: success stories and bad governance in Russia’. *Obshchestvennye nauki i sovremennost*, (6), p. 5–15.

41 Burkhardt, F. (2020) ‘Institutionalising Authoritarian Presidencies: Polymorphous Power and Russia’s Presidential Administration’, *Europe-Asia Studies*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2020.1749566> (forthcoming).

42 Gessen, M. (2017) ‘The future is history: How totalitarianism reclaimed Russia’. Granta Books.

43 Laruelle, M (2018) ‘Is Russia Really “Fascist”? A Comment on Timothy Snyder’. Ponars Policy Memo 539. Accessed 30 March 2020.

44 Taylor, B. D. (2018) ‘The code of Putinism’. Oxford University Press.

of this interpretation of Putinism: some elements were already present in Russia before Putin came to power. And, although these elements are shared by a significant part of the elite and wider society, factors such as generational change or the modernization of society from below contribute to Putin's life constantly rewriting the already incoherent code of Putinism.⁴⁵ What the constitutional overhaul demonstrates is that constitutional amendments with regard to social and health policy as well as the "nationalization of elites" are very popular among the population. Nationalistic and conservative constitutional amendments, however, such as heterosexual marriage, Russia's thousand-year history, or the status of the Russian language are mainly driven by the elite which is much more conservative than the general population.

The Question of Power and the Medvedev Experiment

The question of whether Putin should be separated from the institution of the president poses challenges to Putin himself. To at least preserve the appearance of legality, he launched a kind of natural experiment between 2008 and 2012. He left office because of the presidency's two consecutive term limit. His successor, Dimitri Medve-

dev, was elected president, and Putin formally held the *second* most important post in the Russian state as prime minister—but remained, *de facto*, the most important man in the state. This constellation is called *rokirovka* or castling and represents an almost ideal research design from a social science point of view.

The aim of the experiment was to find out whether it was enough to remain in power *de facto*. If Putin's power were to be pinned solely to his person and networks, then, counterfactually, nothing should have changed in these four years, even if the prime minister has far fewer institutional levers than the president. It is not known whether Putin and Medvedev had agreed in advance, and to what extent their differing preferences in domestic and foreign policy in the tandem were just a show. The experiment, however, demonstrated—at least as Putin and the wider elite understood it—that it was not enough to remain in power *de facto*: in order to continue the Putin system in the long run, Putin also needed the formal and symbolic power of the strong presidency. In the spring of 2020, Putin has created all the preconditions for this. But the future of both the presidency *and* the president are as uncertain as never before in Russia's post-Soviet history.

About the Author

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45 Panejach, E. (2018) 'Otmiranie gosudarstva. Rossiiskoe obshchestvo mezhdru postmodernom i arkhairoi, InLiberty. Accessed 30 March 2020.

Nationality Policy: Russian Nation vs. Russian People?

By Ulrich Schmid, University of St. Gallen

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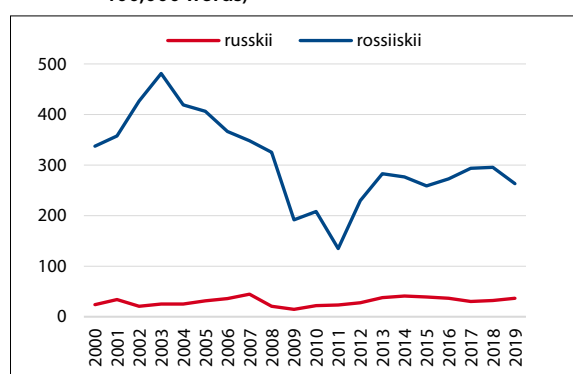
Abstract

In January 2020, President Putin initiated a major constitutional reform. One of the changes concerns the question of the national identity of Russia's multi-ethnic state and more specifically, the role of the ethnic Russians in the context of all peoples in the Federation. Article 68 of the constitution defines Russian as the official state language, but the new version adds as an explanation for this special status that Russian is the language of the "state-forming people." This noteworthy wording corroborates a development which has been going on for ten years. The changes include the concept of *Russkii Mir*, the idea of the multi-national nation of the "Russian Federation with an ethnic Russian cultural core" and the frequent use in official contexts of the phrase "ethnic Russian (*russkii*)" instead of "multi-national Russian (*rossiiskii*)."

Russkii, Rossiiskii

In Russian there are two adjectives whose meanings are close to each other and yet denote very different things: *russkii* and *rossiiskii*. Unfortunately, in English there is only one word for both concepts, Russian, so to make the distinctions between them clear, English texts tend to reproduce the two different Russian words. *Russkii* denotes the Russian people in an ethnic-national sense, while *rossiiskii* has a civic dimension and refers to citizens of the Russian Federation who can be ethnic Russian or belong to any other group as well. The country's official name Russian Federation is *Rossiiskaia Federatsia* and denotes an administrative entity with 85 regions—including two that international law does not recognize: the Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol.

Figure 1: Use of the Terms "russkii" and "rossiiskii" in Presidential Statements 2000–2019 (frequency per 100,000 words)



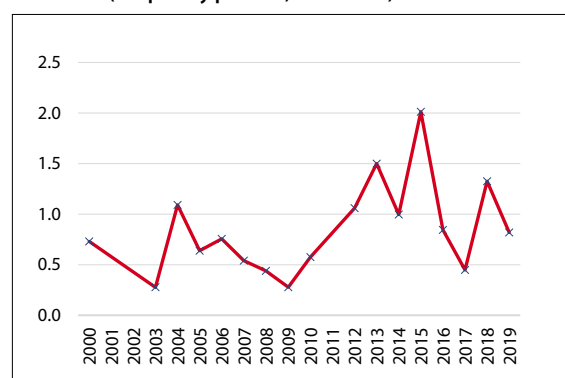
Source: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts>, analyzed by *dekoder* (<https://putin.dekoder.org/words>; (in German) <https://putin.dekoder.org/nationalitaeten>).

A Multi-national People

In 2016, in order to regulate the relationship of the state to the individual regions and their different ethnic

groups, Putin presented his concept of a "Federal nation (*Rossiiskaia natsia*) with a Russian cultural core (*Russkaia kultura*)." Putin's initiative was partly meant to check growing Russian nationalist tendencies in society. In contrast to the 1990s, however, ethnic-Russian nationalism in this conception no longer is considered to be a part of a supranational civic identity without any specific cultural content. Rather, the ethnic Russians are supposed to be the link holding together the fragile Russian (*Rossiiskii*) multi-ethnic state.

Figure 2: Use of the Term "mnogonatsionalnyi" (multi-national) in Presidential Statements 2000–2019 (frequency per 100,000 words)



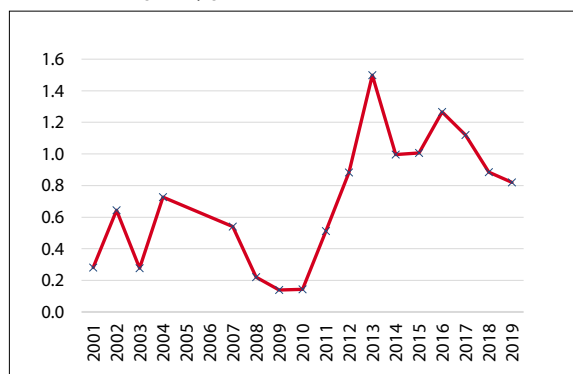
Source: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts>, analyzed by *dekoder* (<https://putin.dekoder.org/words>; (in German) <https://putin.dekoder.org/nationalitaeten>).

Nationality Policy

The Chechen war is probably the reason why "nationality policy" did not appear particularly prominent in Putin's speeches during the first two terms. Instead the president largely ignored the thorny issue. Only the official end of the war in 2009 and the emerging concept of *Russkii Mir*, Putin's attempt to exploit the ethnic Russians living outside of Russia to enhance the global position

of Russia, led to intense debates about the role of non-Russian nationalities in the federal state. Subsequently, in 2012, President Putin devoted one of his seven programmatic campaign articles to nationality politics, elevating the issue to much higher prominence.¹

Figure 3: Use of the Term “natsionalnaya politika” (nationality policy) in Presidential Statements 2001–2019 (frequency per 100,000 words)



Source: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts>, analyzed by dekodek (<https://putin.dekodek.org/words>; (in German) <https://putin.dekodek.org/nationalitaeten>).

Rossiiskii Nation

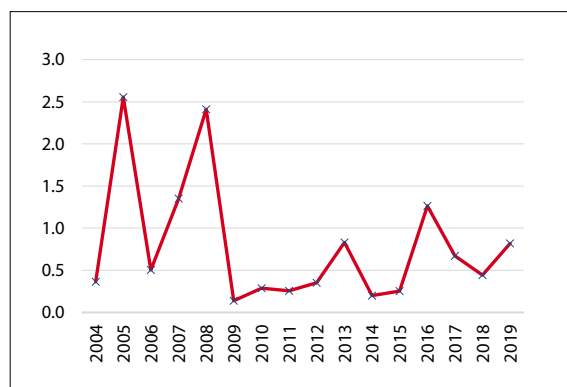
Putin did not begin to talk about the “Federal nation (*Rossiiskaia natsiya*) with a Russian cultural core (*Ruskaia kultura*)” until his second presidential term (2004–2008). He was concerned with safeguarding the Russian Federation from the fate of the Soviet Union, which had ultimately broken down along ethnic lines. However, Putin merely incorporated the state-building idea of the “Federal nation (*Rossiiskaia natsiya*) with a Russian cultural core (*Ruskaia kultura*)” into his public discourse, without giving the idea any particular prominence.

Then, in 2016, President Putin announced a “Federal nation (*Rossiiskaia natsiya*).” But he was not able to push the subject far. Some republics, in which ethnic Russians do not form a majority—notably Dagestan, Tatarstan, and Sakha (Yakutia)—did not see Putin’s idea as a supranational concept, but rather a threat to their own cultural foundations. As more and more powers were transferred from the regions to the center, they now feared ethnic Russian dominance.

Orthodoxy

The “*Russkii* cultural core” of the concept is closely linked to the Russian Orthodox Church. Orthodoxy is an important symbolic resource of power for the Kremlin. In the run-up to the Duma and presidential elections, campaign managers feed the topic prominently into the public discourse.

Figure 4: Use of the Term “rossiiskaya natsiya” in Presidential Statements 2004–2019 (frequency per 100,000 words)

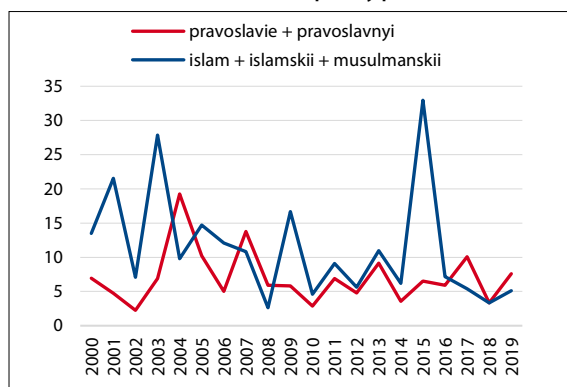


Source: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts>, analyzed by dekodek (<https://putin.dekodek.org/words>; (in German) <https://putin.dekodek.org/nationalitaeten>).

Orthodoxy, Islam

For the concept of the “Federal nation (*Rossiiskaia natsiya*)”, however, Islam is also of great importance. In part, it works to demonstrate a supposed superiority over Western Europe: Putin often highlights the fact that the Russian Federation has a much longer experience with the integration of Islam into society than the Western European states, which are overwhelmed by Muslim migration.

Figure 5: Use of the Terms “pravoslavie” (Orthodoxy) and “pravoslavnyi” (Orthodox) Compared to the Use of the Terms “islam” (Islam), “islamskii” (Islamic), and “musulmanskii” (Muslim) in Presidential Statements 2000–2019 (frequency per 100,000 words)



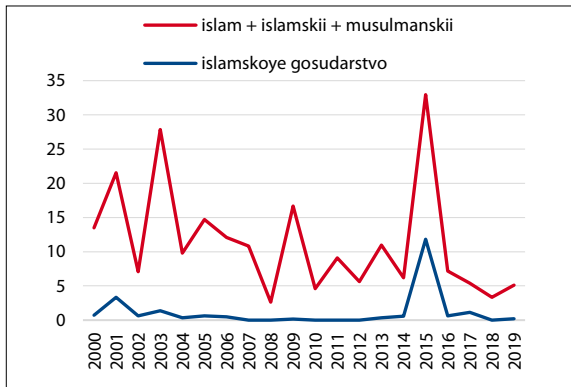
Source: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts>, analyzed by dekodek (<https://putin.dekodek.org/words>; (in German) <https://putin.dekodek.org/nationalitaeten>).

Islam, Islamic State

The interest in Islam in 2015 was mainly due to Russia’s military involvement in Syria, which is evident from the comparison with the Islamic State. The frequent

1 http://www.ng.ru/politics/2012-01-23/1_national.html

Figure 6: Use of the Terms “islam” (Islam), “islamskii” (Islamic), and “musulmanskii” (Muslim) Compared to the Use of the term “islamskoye gosudarstvo” (Islamic state) in Presidential Statements 2000–2019 (frequency per 100,000 words)



Source: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts>, analyzed by dekodeer (<https://putin.dekodeer.org/words>; (in German) <https://putin.dekodeer.org/nationalitaeten>).

thematicization of Islam has to do with the intensified rhetoric of the “Federal nation (*Rossiiskaia natsia*),” in which not only many nations, but also religions coexist harmoniously.

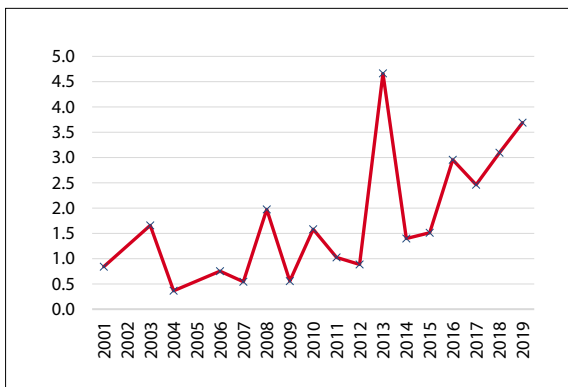
About the Author

Ulrich Schmid is professor of Russian studies at St. Gallen University.

A Note on the Data Analyzed by dekodeer

Within the context of the project “20 years of Putin”, dekodeer.org has developed a tool that “analyses texts from the official website of the President of Russia to generate a graphic representation of the frequency of word use by Putin (2000–2008 and 2012–2020) and Dmitry Medvedev (2008–2012). Researchers from European universities pick out individual terms and tell us the stories behind them” (<https://putin.dekodeer.org/words>). For further data and charts, see this URL and (in German) <https://putin.dekodeer.org/nationalitaeten>.

Figure 7: Use of the Term “identichnost” (identity) in Presidential Statements 2001–2019 (frequency per 100,000 words)



Source: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts>, analyzed by dekodeer (<https://putin.dekodeer.org/words>; (in German) <https://putin.dekodeer.org/nationalitaeten>).

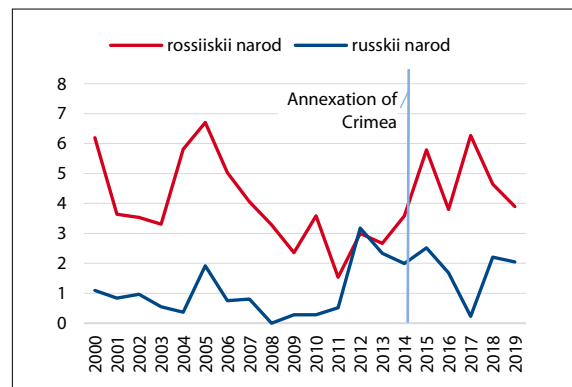
Identity

Closely intertwined with the concept of nationality is the theme of *identity*, which has seen a steady increase in the last twenty years.

Rossiiskii people, Russkii people

Almost throughout the Putin era, the politically correct term “*Rossiiskii* people” dominated, including all citizens of the Russian Federation, regardless of their ethnicity. In the course of the patriotic high spirits after the annexation of Crimea, however, the term “*Russkii*” is experiencing a renaissance again. The reason for this is the assumption of the historical pioneering role of the “*Russkii* people”: At a meeting of the Council for the Development of Civil Society and Human Rights on 10 December 2019, Putin declared that the Russian people themselves were born from different peoples, mainly Slavic, but also Finno-Ugric.² According to this logic, Putin is to derive the integrative function of the “Federal nation (*Rossiiskaia natsia*)” from the role model of the Russian people (*Russkii narod*) which also unites and amalgamates heterogeneous ethnic groups.

Figure 8: Use of the Terms “rossiiskii narod” and “russkii narod” in Presidential Statements 2000–2019 (frequency per 100,000 words)



Source: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts>, analyzed by dekodeer (<https://putin.dekodeer.org/words>; (in German) <https://putin.dekodeer.org/nationalitaeten>).

2 <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/62285>

ANALYSIS

Russia and Ukraine in Kremlin Rhetoric

By Gwendolyn Sasse, ZOiS (Centre for East European and International Studies, Berlin)

DOI: [10.3929/ethz-b-000409840](https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000409840)

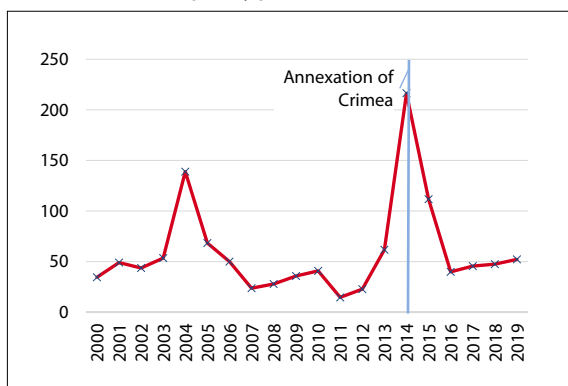
Two key events—the annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine—have significantly influenced the policies of Russia and Russia's relations with Ukraine, Europe, and the US. However, they only play an episodic role in Russia's official narrative—a clear sign of the deliberate discrepancy between politics and the rhetoric of the Russian state.

The figures in this article present how often the official Kremlin website refers to specific topics. Using the tool developed by dekodeer, we generated several graphic representations of word use frequency by Putin (2000–2008 and 2012–2020) and Dmitry Medvedev (2008–2012). The figures depict the occurrence of a word or a combination of words per 100,000 words.

Ukraine and Ukrainian

The Russian president only talks about Ukraine during crises—first in the context of the Orange Revolution in 2004, when mass protests prevented Russian-backed presidential candidate Viktor Yanukovich from manipulating the election result. Then there was the Euromaidan protests of 2013–2014, to which Russia responded by annexing Crimea and supporting the separatists in Donbass. Russian state television continues to regularly question Ukraine's state sovereignty. Thus, President Putin only feels the need to take up this issue himself during the actual moment of crisis.

Figure 1: Use of the Terms "Ukraina" (Ukraine) and "ukrain-skii" (Ukrainian) in Presidential Statements 2000–2019 (frequency per 100,000 words)



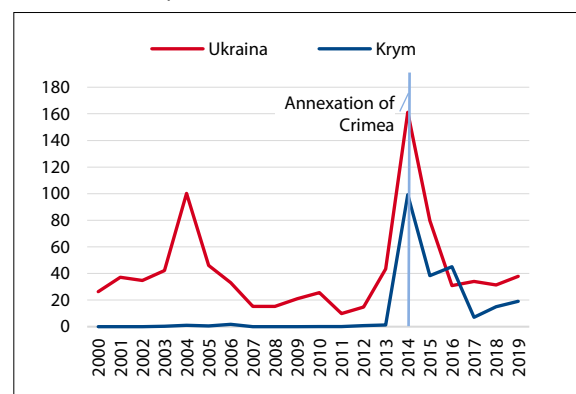
Source: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts>, analyzed by dekodeer (<https://putin.dekodeer.org/words>; (in German) <https://putin.dekodeer.org/nationalitaeten>).

Ukraine and Crimea

The 2014 annexation of Crimea came as a surprise to both Russian society and the international commu-

nity. The official Kremlin rhetoric reflects this fact: the Crimean peninsula was barely mentioned before 2014. Although the plan for the annexation had been drawn up for some time, the decision to make it a reality in February 2014 was not preceded by a propaganda campaign in Russia. It was only with the annexation that Crimea became a key element in Russia's self-representation.

Figure 2: Use of the Term "Ukraina" (Ukraine) Compared to the Use of the Term "Krym" (Crimea) in Presidential Statements 2000–2019 (frequency per 100,000 words)



Source: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts>, analyzed by dekodeer (<https://putin.dekodeer.org/words>; (in German) <https://putin.dekodeer.org/nationalitaeten>).

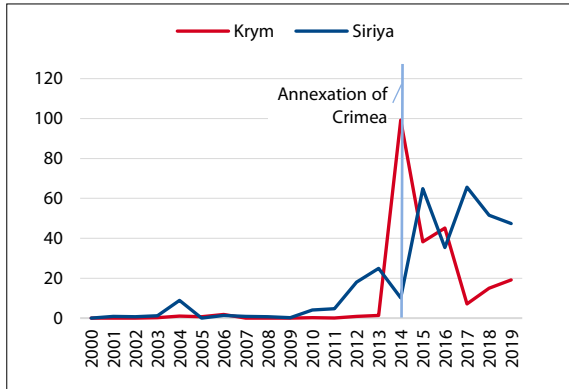
Crimea and Syria

Despite the central importance of the annexation of Crimea for Russia's domestic and foreign policy, direct references to Crimea in the official rhetoric have faded quickly. Crimea does not disappear completely from the Kremlin narrative, but from 2017 its presence hovers around a low baseline level. On the other hand, the importance of Syria in Russian foreign policy becomes paramount and is frequently referred to in the official rhetoric.

Crimean Tatars

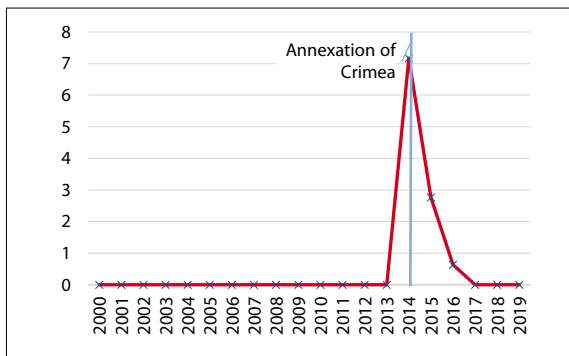
For Russia, the Crimean Tatars remain the most difficult aspect of the annexation of Crimea. Their territorial claim to Crimea is closely linked to the memory of their deportation under Stalin and their return to the peninsula after 1991. In 2014, Crimean Tatars were prominent protesters against the annexation. Since then, they have been a major target of Russian repression: Crimean Tatar organizations and media have been banned. It is there-

Figure 3: Use of the Term “Krym” (Crimea) Compared to the Use of the Term “Siriya” (Syria) in Presidential Statements 2000–2019 (frequency per 100,000 words)



Source: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts>, analyzed by *dekoder* (<https://putin.dekoder.org/words>; (in German) <https://putin.dekoder.org/nationalitaeten>).

Figure 4: Use of the Terms “krymsko-tatarskii” and “krymskotatarskii” (Crimean Tatar (adjective)) 2000–2019 (frequency per 100,000 words)



Source: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts>, analyzed by *dekoder* (<https://putin.dekoder.org/words>; (in German) <https://putin.dekoder.org/nationalitaeten>).

fore in Russia’s interest to mention the Crimean Tatars as little as possible in presidential speeches.

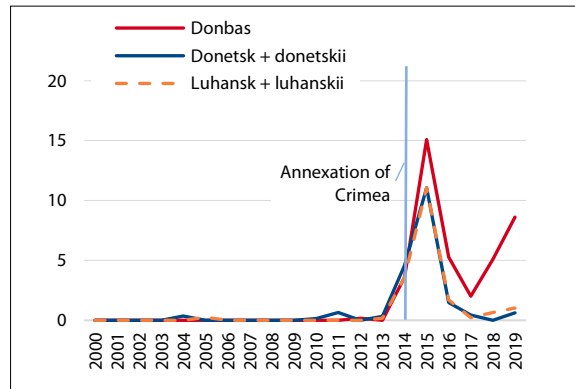
Donbas

The war in the Donbas, which began in the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea, is also rarely mentioned in Russia’s official rhetoric. With a certain time lag—the war began in the first half of 2014—the central locations “Donbas”, “Donetsk” and “Luhansk” are mentioned somewhat more frequently in 2015, but then drop off quickly. The actual frequency of the word “Donbas” behind the subsequent slight increase in visibility remains low. The official Russian narrative denies Russia’s involvement in this war; consequently Russia only refers to the region occasionally.

About the Author

Gwendolyn Sasse is the Director of the Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOiS) in Berlin.

Figure 5: Use of the Term “Donbas” Compared to the Use of the Terms “Donetsk” / “Donetskii” and “Luhansk” / “Luhanskii” in Presidential Statements 2000–2019 (frequency per 100,000 words)

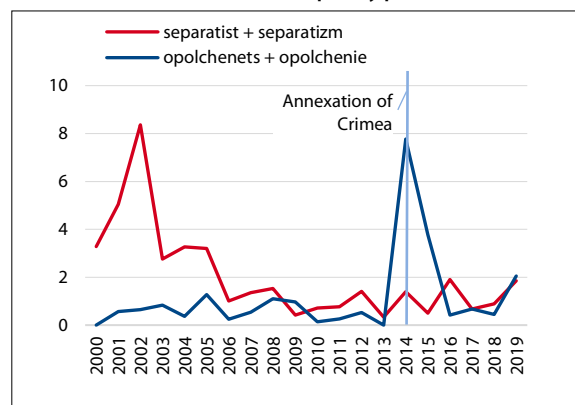


Source: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts>, analyzed by *dekoder* (<https://putin.dekoder.org/words>; (in German) <https://putin.dekoder.org/nationalitaeten>).

Separatism

The Russian president also avoids references to “separatist” and “separatism” in relation to the Donbas—in order to distinguish them from the Chechen separatists who figured prominently in earlier presidential rhetoric. With regard to the Donbas, Putin tends to use the term “people’s militias,” which suggests a greater degree of legitimacy from below.

Figure 6: Use of the Terms “separatist” / “separatizm” (separatist / separatism) Compared to the Use of the Terms “opolchenets” / “opolchenie” (people’s militiaman / people’s militia) in Presidential Statements 2000–2019 (frequency per 100,000 words)



Source: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts>, analyzed by *dekoder* (<https://putin.dekoder.org/words>; (in German) <https://putin.dekoder.org/nationalitaeten>).

ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST

Editors: Stephen Aris, Matthias Neumann, Robert Orttung, Jeronim Perović, Heiko Pleines, Hans-Henning Schröder, Aglaya Snetkov

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The Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies is home to a Master's program in European and Eurasian Studies, faculty members from political science, history, economics, sociology, anthropology, language and literature, and other fields, visiting scholars from around the world, research associates, graduate student fellows, and a rich assortment of brown bag lunches, seminars, public lectures, and conferences.

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