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Parade, plebiscite, pandemic: legitimization efforts in Putin's fourth term

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ABSTRACT

Putin's fourth term as president (2018–2024) has involved new challenges for Russia's hybrid regime. COVID-19 hit the Kremlin at a sensitive time, when the old institutional forces had been demounted and new arrangements, including extensive constitutional changes, had yet to become cemented. There is an emerging gulf between state rhetoric, PR events, and patriotic performances, on the one hand, and economic chaos, social disorder and dysfunctional state capacity, on the other, which is likely to reduce system legitimacy and cause increased reliance on repressive methods. This article examines Kremlin legitimization efforts across Beetham's three dimensions: rules, beliefs, and actions. We argue that the regime's legitimization efforts in 2020–21 have failed to reverse emerging cleavages in public opinion since 2018. Increased reliance on repression and manipulation in this period, combined with the contrast between regime promises and observable realities on the ground, speak not of strength, but of the Kremlin's increased weakness and embattlement.

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Introduction

Twenty-twenty was a tough year for the Kremlin. The stress test of the pandemic revealed serious limitations in the capacity and performance of the Russian state apparatus; Alexei Navalny attracted far too much publicity for the liking of the Kremlin; and the collapse of oil prices reduced economic resources for the patronal rule of the power vertical. This article deals with the Putin regime's attempts to legitimize its power in the face of various crises across 2020–2021. As we will demonstrate, the record has been mixed.

While Putin's ratings fell to a 20-year low at one point in 2020, they recovered to relatively high levels and he is still the most popular political figure in the country by far (Levada 2020a). However, we argue that his charismatic authority has been scaled back in recent years, not least due to the pandemic. While the military-style discipline of the power vertical ensures there is no serious dissent within the political elite, the regime's reputation as a guarantor of stability and order is likely to have been damaged by the handling of the COVID-19 crisis. Moreover, the Kremlin's "master narrative" for upholding power and legitimacy relies heavily on tried and tested patriotic and ideational components, which no longer have the resonance of the peak years of the "Crimean consensus" during the years 2014–2018 (Nikolskaya and Dmitriev 2020).

The key sources of this article include official Kremlin and government website outputs and secondary reporting on the central and regional levels of the power vertical. This allows us to elaborate upon presidential and nation-level policies, as well as policies on the regional level. The

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analysis is structured according to Beetham's (2013) three dimensions of legitimation: rules, beliefs, and actions. We examine the bending of rules to keep Putin in power, the reduced charismatic appeal of his actions, and the embattled beliefs to which the regime has remained wedded in 2020–2021. We examine the Russian state's legitimation strategies in 2020 across Beetham's three dimensions, choosing two levels of the state (federal and regional) to reveal the inherent difficulties faced by the government in the years of COVID-19, arguing this may well be the precursor of a legitimacy crisis for the Putin system as a whole. Examining the regional level, we consider a "most-likely" case of regional autonomy with more resources and power (Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin) and a "least-likely" case (Novosibirsk Oblast Governor Andrei Travnikov) of regional autonomy. This sheds light on how federal-level legitimation efforts may not always be in harmony with what is needed to secure the legitimacy of regional leaders, as Russia's non-functional federalism and power vertical interventions drain regional politics of vitality.

Hybrid regimes, political legitimacy, and the study of legitimation efforts

Highly personalized president-dominated systems that rely on extensive patronage networks and use democracy largely as a façade are a key feature of the Eurasian political environment in the twenty-first century (Hale 2014; Way 2015). In the post-Soviet space, Turkmenistan (and now increasingly Belarus) resembles the "full" authoritarianism of China. Some belong to the category of "competitive authoritarianism" (Levitsky and Way 2002) where elections are rigged in favor of the incumbent, but the outcome is nevertheless uncertain and a transfer of power to a non-systemic party/leader is still possible. Others (Kazakhstan, Russia) are "hegemonic" systems where the ruling party and president are highly dominant, and the electoral arena, including actors and outcomes, is carefully managed.

In hegemonic systems there is neither "a formal nor a de facto competition for power ... the possibility of a rotation in power is not envisaged" (Sartori 1976, 230). Yet, "hegemonic" systems still have "nominally competitive elections ... characterized by higher levels of political unrest than those with no elections" (Shirah 2016, 471). Thus, "hegemonic" hybrid regimes such as Russia are more vulnerable than closed systems to anti-regime mobilization and protest (Dollbaum, Semenov, and Sirotkina 2018). As Smyth (2021, 196) put it, "contemporary autocratic politics is a continuing and constantly evolving battle over narratives, beliefs, and information." Such narratives and beliefs are cornerstones in the construction of regime legitimacy, which is essential for the regimes to remain in power (Edelman 1977; Dukalskis and Gerschewski 2017).

Hybrid hegemonic regimes therefore engage in a never-ending struggle for ideational legitimation that is central to system vitality and sustainability. We can view hybrid regimes as a halfway house between established democracy and closed authoritarianism that lacks some of the key legitimating resources of both but enjoys some flexibility in its course of action. Studying hybrid regime legitimation efforts sheds light on which direction they may be moving in: from hegemonic to more pluralistic competitive regimes, or, conversely, battering down the hatches to an even more closed system.

Following Beetham (2013, 16–17), political legitimation has three dimensions: (1) "rules governing the acquisition and exercise of power"; (2) normative beliefs: "shared by both dominant and subordinate" about the common benefits that the system of power provides; and (3) "appropriate actions": public and symbolic acts that ensure the consent and loyalty of subordinates to the system. In Russia's contemporary context, the "rules" dimension refers to the procedure of winning elections and plebiscites. In Russia's electoral authoritarianism, power is delegated to a strong president who has a plebiscitary-style mandate from the majority of the population. A power vertical, formally mandated by the people, structures the relations between the regime and the electorate and between the federal center and the regions.

The second dimension in Beetham's framework – "beliefs" – refers to the ideas, values, and identities promoted from above that are used to demonstrate how far the authorities are one with elite and popular values and desires. In Russia's case, an officially sanctioned identity narrative

appealing to national unity, purpose, and belonging has been particularly important (Sharafutdinova 2020). From 2012, symbolic politics emphasizing the values and traditions of “loyal Russians” (Smyth 2021, 172) has helped secure a pro-Putin majority even in the face of economic decline (Smyth, Sobolev, and Soboleva 2013; Smyth and Soboleva 2014; Blackburn 2020). The Kremlin’s symbolic politics portray Russia as a great power seeking fair recognition, a bastion of traditional European values and common sense, and a country permanently pressured by the West, which seeks Russia’s downfall (Blackburn 2021). President Vladimir Putin, according to the master narrative, has “raised Russia from her knees,” held off the West, and made Russia a force with which to be reckoned (Sakwa 2014; Laruelle 2021; Malinova 2021; Petersson 2021).

The third dimension refers to “appropriate actions”: symbolic PR events and high-profile policies that demonstrate the consent of the elite and masses for what the leadership is doing. Here, Putin has been presented as a man of action, who is always able to deliver on his words and to secure a desirable level of well-being for the great majority of his people (Drozdova and Robinson 2019; Petersson 2021; Wilson and Lee 2020). The actions dimension clearly ties in with the belief component, and in the Russian context, actions to live up to and maintain Russia’s great power role are highly popular. Here, Putin has again come to embody Russia’s successes during the last two decades. Clearly, the three components are, and need to be, interconnected. Unless rules and actions reflect beliefs that matter to people and deal with matters that they care about, the result will not be enhanced legitimacy but rather the opposite.

Legitimacy crises occur when the three dimensions are not properly integrated with each other or appear dysfunctional: the government violates the official or informal “rules”; the “beliefs” advocated by the political leadership are out of step with popular opinion or obsolete; inappropriate actions serve to underline the distance between the authorities and the population. Avoiding a legitimacy crisis requires serious efforts: the careful adherence to “rules,” the convincing demonstration of clinging to “beliefs” in domestic and foreign policies, and “appropriate actions” demonstrating and ensuring mass consent to authority. Avoiding a legitimacy crisis can also be achieved by darker methods: selective repression, electoral manipulation, and bribery to remove oppositional challenges (Gerschewski 2013), as well as actions that send a signal that the incumbent is weak and cannot win a fair contest. Increased use of such methods indirectly attests that previous legitimization efforts have not produced the expected results.

We argue that there is a developing legitimacy crisis in Russia on the nationwide level due to a decline in Putin’s charismatic authority and continued overreliance on previously successful symbolic politics. To stay in power, the regime has increasingly resorted to repression of individuals and groups who have openly challenged the system. This is most clearly illustrated by the heavy-handed handling of the Navalny case: the assassination attempt; his arrest, trial, and imprisonment; as well as the ban on his organizational network and the crackdown on widespread demonstrations supporting him that occurred in a range of Russian cities in 2021.

It is a challenging task to substantiate the beginnings of a legitimacy crisis, especially as the regime would make maximum effort to thwart any signals that such a process is underway. Polling data in Russia suffer from an “authoritarian bias”: the authoritarian system distorts how the public expresses its opinion (Rogov 2017). The lack of open debate, critical reporting, and airtime to political opposition in state media condition the population to see no alternatives to the officially approved discourses (Wilson and Lee 2020). Moreover, there is reason to believe it is the more critical and dissenting sections of the population that refuse to participate, thus reinforcing the skewing of the numbers (Rogov 2017).

On the other hand, research has shown that preference falsification is not that serious an issue in Putin’s approval rating, accounting only for a 6–9% inflation (Frye et al. 2017). Whether or not the approval ratings are inflated, polling data are still useful as an indication of trends over time, although we cannot treat them as an exact measure of legitimacy at a given point in time. We support our claims of an emerging legitimacy crisis by examining Russian polling data and observing legitimization efforts alongside observable social reality. Indeed, it is precisely deepening cleavages in

society and increasing gaps between state informational campaigns and observable reality that are the precursor to mass unrest in authoritarian contexts (Von Soest and Grauvogel 2017; Koesel, Bunce, and Chen Weiss 2020).

Setting the context (2018–2020): new challenges for Putin and his team

Vladimir Putin's fourth term as president, begun in 2018, did not start as well as he may have hoped. The economy remained stagnant and the increased focus on the so-called "National Projects," which promised more money spent on human capital development, healthcare, and road construction, did not bring concrete results (Kolesnikov and Volkov 2019). Putin also developed a ratings problem, which began with deeply unpopular pension reform measures announced in 2018 (Levada 2019a, 2019b; Logvinenko 2020). Protests involving much of Putin's core voter demographic led the government to soften the measures at least temporarily. The ratings of United Russia, the party of power, tumbled further. In 2019 pockets of protests broke out across the country, ranging from Moscow to the Russian North and Ekaterinburg, each of which had powerful resonance in social media (Chatham House 2019). In July 2020 large demonstrations, protesting the arrest of popular governor Sergei Furgal, rocked the Far Eastern city of Khabarovsk and nearby regions, gathering tens of thousands of people over a sustained period.

A major external shock preceded COVID-19 in 2020, as Russia's withdrawal from an existing OPEC agreement¹ caused Saudi Arabia to increase its oil production, leading to a slump in the price of oil. As a result, the ruble lost 25% of its value, the Moscow stock exchange plummeted, and the price of imported goods rose exponentially. Discussion of these economic woes was soon interrupted and eclipsed by news of a spike of COVID-19 infections in Italy; the virus that had originated in Wuhan, China, was on its way to Russia. As was the case with the rest of the world, the virus was to stay on there for a long time, redefining the whole political context.

Moreover, two other high-profile events occurred in August 2020 to interfere with the Kremlin's legitimation efforts. The first was the outbreak of mass protests against Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko following his rigged re-election on 9 August, serving as a stark reminder of the sudden instability that can hit even the most apparently stable hegemonic regime around election time. The second was the news that Russia's most prominent opposition politician, Alexei Navalny, had fallen severely ill during a flight out of Tomsk. After his evacuation to a Berlin hospital, experts in several European countries agreed that he had been poisoned, presumably with the nerve agent Novichok, which is only available within the Russian state security sector. These two events led Russian state media into a counter-offensive, accusing Western actors of crude and illegal intervention in Belarus to create a "color revolution" scenario. Navalny was treated to several stages of negative reporting, from derision and dismissal to outright accusations that he had coordinated a fake poisoning with Western intelligence agencies. The regime's media counter-offensive ties in with a central aspect of the "beliefs" dimension: the idea of the West as protagonist and main force plotting Russia's demise. In 2020–2021 this was a key message in regime legitimation efforts and visible in the plebiscite for constitutional changes, parades to commemorate WWII, the Sputnik vaccination program, and attempts to spar with newly elected US President Joe Biden.

Bending the rules, seeking endorsement

The unimpressive start to Putin's fourth term was made starker by a looming problem; Putin's projected exit from Russian politics in 2024 due to presidential term limits in the Russian 1993 Constitution. Russia's political system is highly personalized and centralized; the president takes the key decisions on how to use extensive resources to co-opt or marginalize opponents. A lame-duck president in this setting is highly destabilizing and Putin's scheduled exit cast a long shadow over Russian politics.

On 15 January 2020, Putin took action on the “lame-duck” problem. The government was reshuffled, and his long-standing companion Dmitry Medvedev resigned as prime minister. Medvedev, in manner typical of the subservient style he has shown throughout his career, announced “we as the government of Russia must give the President of our country the freedom to take all the necessary measures” (Rossiya 24).² He was replaced as Russia’s premier by Mikhail Mishustin, a fresh face who had made his name reforming the Russian tax system.

In his annual address to the Federal Assembly, Putin announced imminent constitutional changes. At that stage it was up for debate whether the changes were intended to strengthen the system, particularly the legislature and the prime minister’s function, in preparation for Putin’s exit from the presidential office politics in 2024 (Sakwa 2020). By March 2020, it became clear that Putin had decided otherwise: the constitutional tinkering was mainly to achieve *obnulenie*: the “resetting” of presidential terms. Now Putin would be able to serve for two more six-year terms, potentially keeping him in office until 2036, by the time he would be at the age of 83.

Importantly, a plebiscite was scheduled to legitimate this non-democratic transfer of power (Teague 2020; Goode 2021; Hutcheson and McAllister 2021). This was not a legal requirement for the Kremlin: legislative approval at central and regional levels had already been won. Yet, in line with the “rules” dimension of legitimacy, it was crucial to have the Russian people’s seal of approval on the president’s plan. This plebiscite was originally set for 22 April, but due to the pandemic, Putin decided with huge reluctance to postpone it until the first days of July, when it would be held over the course of a week to avoid crowding around the polling stations. The desire to avoid mass gatherings led to so-called “voting on tree-stumps”: hastily improvised irregular voting booths in car parks, fields, and people’s front gardens.³ The proposed amendments eventually sailed through, with 78% voting “yes” in an overall turnout of 68%.⁴ Such results do not reflect cleavages in Russian public opinion, such as the findings of a Levada poll of February 2021 that 48% would like to see Putin as president after 2024, versus 41% who do not.⁵ The administrative resources used in referendums and elections serve to conceal such cleavages.

Running concurrently with the plebiscite agitation were efforts to celebrate the 75th anniversary of Russia’s victory in WWII. Already in May 2018, Putin had signed a decree outlining the scale of the preparations.⁶ It is of no surprise that Russia paid more attention to WWII commemorations than any other country in 2020; previous scholarship has underlined the fundamental importance of the Great Patriotic War for Soviet and Russian regime legitimation (Tumarkin 2003; Malinova 2017; Stewart 2021). In April 2020, COVID-19 had forced Putin to abandon some of the biggest parts of the commemorations.⁷ The 9 May ceremonies became a muted affair, with Putin making a public appearance on a grey and wet day to lay flowers at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.⁸ Unable to lead the planned march of the Immortal Regiment, he was reduced to releasing a video message to its online version participants.⁹

Not to be denied “appropriate actions,” Putin moved the parade to 24 June, the 75th anniversary of Stalin’s Victory Parade in 1945. It was certainly no coincidence that the commemorations were timed to occur at the same time as agitation went on for the July plebiscite; the plan was to use the “beliefs” about WWII to boost “rules” and action-based legitimation. In his speech on 24 June, Putin called the WWII victory “a triumph of unprecedented scale, the triumph of good over evil, of peace over war, and life over death.”¹⁰ The memory of the War and of Russia’s ultimate victory after immense suffering and hardships contain the mythological stuff of which legitimizing strategies are made. Such trump cards were obviously not to be discarded lightly. In a video message, in which Putin is rather awkwardly positioned in front of a statue newly erected to commemorate the bloody battles of Rzhev (1942–1943), the president laid the patriotism on thick, underlining how WWII commemoration was fused with voting “yes” for the constitutional amendments.¹¹

In the months prior to the constitutional plebiscite, it was clear the Kremlin had no desire for an open debate as to why Russia needed to change its 1993 Constitution. Symbolic politics were preferred to substantive policy discussions. In late May, an extensive “Yes to the amendments” campaign was unleashed that largely ignored reforms to legislative, judiciary, and executive power,

which were concealed among a multitude of minor amendments. Instead, a key element of the “yes” campaign was the so-called “ideological block” of amendments, which are closely tied to the “beliefs” that have been so essential for regime legitimacy since 2012. Three key discourses stand out in the “ideological block”: (1) the struggle to hold Russia together against the designs of the West¹²; (2) Russia as a unique civilization upholding traditional values¹³; and (3) the glorious past of Russia’s 1000-year-old state and the need to “honor the memory of those who defended our Fatherland and defend historical truth.”¹⁴ A series of short agitational videos, featuring some of Russia’s most famous cultural figures, showcased these key themes. Iconic actor Vladimir Mashkov had stern words on the need to retain Russia’s territorial integrity¹⁵; pop star Oleg Gazmanov displayed his solidarity in opposition to those who cast slurs on Russia’s heroic struggle in WWII.¹⁶ Screen and stage actor Sergei Bezrukov supported the amendment protecting Russian as the “state-forming language” of the country.¹⁷ All these videos argued that voting “yes” was the action of patriots who honor the sacrifices of previous generations and wish to protect Russia from malicious enemies.

Yet, the lofty rhetoric on patriotism, pride, and unity visible in the plebiscite and parade campaign should be contrasted to the chaos on the ground. Patriotic agitation and calls for all citizens to vote for the constitutional amendments were incongruent with chaotic voting on tree-stumps, legal irregularities, and vote stuffing.¹⁸ This leaves us with a split picture of two polarized groups; key cleavages have solidified on regime legitimization efforts. On the one hand, the procedures carried out by the Kremlin will be seen to violate the basic rules upon which their authority should rest and damage their image. On the other, many will have seen absolutely no reason to vote “no” in the plebiscite: “The President, to whom authority is delegated, knows best. I vote for him.” On the one hand, excessive attention to the WWII victory sits uneasily with the general economic chaos and disordered state response to COVID-19 in most regions of the country. On the other, these commemorations were completely appropriate to many people who agree with the rhetoric and appreciate the efforts made by the state to recognize Russia’s victory in the Great Patriotic War. Polling on the plebiscite suggests serious division in Russian society: 32% saw the constitutional changes as “extremely negative” and from this group younger age cohorts dominate: 40% of those taking this position are aged 18–24; 38% aged 25–29.¹⁹ Polling on voting in the plebiscite also shows cleavages in voting along lines of age, education, and city size (Levada 2020b).²⁰

Embattled beliefs and inappropriate actions: Putin’s image change

Vladimir Putin’s political appeal over the last 20 years has had much to do with his charisma and energy (Petersson 2017). Whether on horseback or sailing, marching among the people, or vigorously disciplining wayward subordinates, Putin’s charisma has been front and center (Wood 2011; Goscilo 2013; Sperling 2014; Matovski 2020). This charisma and appeal can be viewed as part of the “belief” dimension of legitimation: Putin’s image, personality, and role as savior to the Russian people is central to the worldview presented by the Kremlin. A functional Putin is also vital to the “appropriate actions” dimension of legitimation: Putin takes part in the staged events that demonstrate the bond between state and society, ruler and people. In 2020, COVID-19 deprived the regime of Putin in this sense, as, confined to Zoom, he was unable to conduct high-profile mass PR events in the same fashion as before.

With the president stuck on Zoom, the day-to-day handling of the COVID-19 crisis was instead, through a presidential executive order, delegated to a committee headed by the new prime minister, Mikhail Mishustin, and made up of the regional governors and Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin. From statements that Putin made, it was clear that he would let regional heads take the blame if things went wrong.²¹

Like several other political leaders across the world, Putin interpreted the virus as an external threat that could be locked out of the country.²² Flights were restricted and the border with China closed. At the end of March 2020, the government closed the rest of Russia’s borders and announced

a “non-working” week, later to be extended to all of April.²³ Yet, it seems that many viewed these “non-working” weeks as a holiday; many Russians continued to socialize, use public transport, and travel to tourist hotspots. Without access to an adequate furlough and compensation system, many had to keep working to put food on their tables. Meanwhile, despite the high numbers of people in uniform across the country, the state authorities did not deploy aggressive track-and-trace measures for those returning to Russia from countries with high infection rates. Once again, hybrid regimes can be seen as a halfway house between democracy and closed authoritarianism, unable to enjoy the full benefits of either system.

Instead of parade and plebiscite and a strong, decisive leader full of strength, the spring of 2020 often saw an ashen-faced and tired Putin giving televised addresses to the nation from behind a desk in his office. For the first time in many years, he appeared closer to a grey and undynamic bureaucrat than the hyper-masculine man of action. In his dull weekly online conferences with the Government and regional heads, Putin looked bored, playing with pens and occasionally raising his voice to offer some rebuke or demand his underlings to “work more effectively.” Putin’s speeches on the coronacrisis were listless (Åslund 2020). He was thus reduced to playing out the petty procedures of the bureaucrat: endless Zoom calls on official business and the performance of presidential duties. Clearly, this performance, repeated over and over on Russian TV, cannot provide the same legitimization resources as those enjoyed in normal times by a normally active Putin.

In June 2020, the president addressed the nation on the issue of the coronavirus. In his speech he read out a long list of quantitative indicators of his administration’s successes in handling the crisis, including a lengthy account of economic support measures provided by the federal government.²⁴ The June speech was bureaucratic rather than empathetic. Putin’s disengaged approach to the pandemic was equally apparent at a meeting with Mayor Sobyenin in the autumn, when he referred to the corona infection as an “issue that everyone is tired of hearing about but which we must discuss.”²⁵

At the same time, it has emerged that Putin on a personal level was highly concerned about the pandemic. Great care has been taken to keep Putin away from the risk of infection. He has been secluded in a special bunker; his public appearances have been severely curtailed. Navalny’s mocking references to Putin as “the small man in the bunker”²⁶ have probably hit home. Among the protective measures were installations of a special “disinfectant tunnel” for visitors to his residence outside of Moscow and in the Kremlin itself (Hodge 2020). Protecting the incumbent was made harder due to Putin’s reluctance to wear a mask in public. As a result, all those preparing to enter the same room as the president would need to spend two weeks in quarantine, during which time they would not be able to leave their hotel room. In March 2021, BBC Russia released figures on the huge expenses involved in protecting Putin: 6.4 billion roubles (\$84.5 million) paid for 12 hotels across Russia to house those visiting the president.²⁷

All this spending was necessary because the president did not want to stand in a disinfected room wearing a face mask. This reinforces an imagery that Putin is above the people; a sacred person to whom the normal rules do not apply. While ordinary people must wear a mask and take the vaccine, Putin was reluctant. When it was finally announced that Putin had taken the vaccine in March 2021, there was no televised stunt to accompany it as in the case of British Prime Minister Boris Johnson or US President Joe Biden. Overall, Putin’s image change in 2020 was largely negative: not the man of action; not the man of the people standing before adoring crowds; not the one actively wielding the reins of power in a time of crisis. If we consider this with reference to the framework of social leadership theory, used extensively by Sharafutdinova (2020), Putin is out of sync with the people he claims to represent. While they are insecure from the virus and its economic consequences, he is safe. This is contrary to the image that he has tried hard and consistently to cultivate of being a good and just ruler that always tries to side with his people to battle their grievances (Mamonova 2016; Busygina 2019; Malinova 2021). Putin’s apparent incapacity to show empathy for people’s suffering may therefore have damaged his image.

Relinquishing the vertical: new conditions for action

The year 2020 thus saw a different Putin who, while constantly on the television screens, has limited himself to commenting, critiquing, and making recommendations while remaining in a bunker protecting him from infection. In addition to Putin cutting himself off from direct contact with people, he also reduced his proximity to decision-making with some bureaucratic decentralization. Russia's regions, deprived of real power over two decades and increasingly facing limited budgets, were handed the responsibility to wage war on COVID-19. Returning to Beetham's three legitimation dimensions, it is necessary to elaborate on how this applies to center-periphery dynamics. From the outset it was clear that for a country of Russia's size, a single legitimation strategy, devised in the Kremlin, cannot be applied across all the country's regions uniformly. One important reason for this is that regional authorities need part of their legitimation plan to be firmly based on the specifics of their region.

As we move down the power vertical, especially in conditions of temporary devolution, the Kremlin's package of legitimation efforts may contradict the strategies and policies that regional authorities see as appropriate. In 2020, "devolution" of power to Russia's governors was not about increasing federalism or empowering regional leaders; it was more of a kind-tsar/wicked-boys "blame game" (Smyth et al. 2020). The president takes the credit for impressive nation-level achievements while regional leaders, deprived of sufficient resources, are the ready-made fall guys when chaos and disorder strike at the local level (Busygina 2019; Malinova 2021; Petersson 2021).

In regional politics, the decentralization of responsibility to governors for managing the pandemic appears at first glance to be a serious departure from previous operating procedures: the use of a centralized "vertical of power" to run the country has been a trademark of the Putin system, during which time a "dominant centre versus dominated periphery" model has emerged (Kynev 2020, 155). While direct elections were returned in 2012, a municipal and presidential filter allows oppositional candidates deemed dangerous to be excluded, meaning Kremlin approval was a requisite to run for office as regional head (Blakkisrud 2015, 115). In 2017–2019, more than two-thirds of governors were removed (Ivanov and Petrov 2021, 158), many of whom were replaced by "Varyaga": outsiders integrated into "federal clientelist networks" but lacking roots in the regions to which they were appointed.

In this context, shifting responsibility for fighting COVID-19 to Russia's regions, deprived of real political decision-making power for many years, cannot be viewed as serious decentralization either in administrative or fiscal terms; only a short-term political decentralization (Burkhardt 2020). Meanwhile, nation-level measures take priority and regional politics remain exposed to rough arbitrary interventions from the political center, something, as we expand on below, that is likely to damage the legitimacy of regional political systems across Russia. In this section we look at two cases representing different trends in the power vertical. In the first case, the mayor of Moscow has substantial resources and visibility. There is sufficient confidence to pursue a regional legitimation strategy that deviates from the central plan at least in some ways. In the second case, the governor of Novosibirsk Oblast, lacking fiscal resources and a grassroots following, is an example of the loyal and subservient lieutenant who relies heavily on the center's legitimation plan.

Mayor Sobyenin of Moscow: taking advantage, falling into line

Putin's decision to delegate executive power in the battle against COVID-19 created space for new political actors to shine. From March to June 2020 Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin found himself in the limelight through his determined handling of the corona crisis in the virus-stricken capital. Utilizing Moscow's huge municipal budget, he was soon able to take more impressive measures than Prime Minister Mishustin, who was formally supposed to be heading the virus management response.

In early 2020 it became clear, in terms of recognizability, experience, authority, and approval ratings in Moscow itself, that Sobyenin was well outperforming Mishustin (Levada 2020c). Russia's governors looked to Sobyenin rather than Mishustin or Rospotrebnadzor (The Federal Service for Surveillance on Consumer Rights) for measures to emulate; his "social monitoring" track-and-trace program was a high-profile technocratic solution based on the Singapore model (Kolesnikov 2020).

Sobyenin was quick to realize the looming public health disaster and wanted correspondingly strong measures to combat it. The measures taken cost small and medium-sized enterprises in Moscow dearly, as the mayor's efforts prioritized saving lives over saving businesses. This was made clear during the limited 9 May Victory Day celebrations, which were reduced to a series of decentralized celebratory fireworks to prevent crowds from gathering. Sobyenin personally called on Muscovites to remain home and watch the fireworks from their windows and balconies, an initiative soon copied by other cities in Russia.

In connection with the July plebiscite on the constitution, Sobyenin advertised his administration's technocratic profile by praising the innovative deployment of electronic voting in the city.²⁸ His commitment to the "rules" was on display as he promised to punish any voting manipulations, particularly any attempts by institutions to force their employees to go and vote "correctly."²⁹ Sobyenin offered a somewhat different focus in terms of "belief" and "appropriate actions" dimensions: deploy the experts and technology to save Moscow from COVID-19; put the good of Muscovites first and ensure the situation does not turn catastrophic. In commenting on the referendum outcome on 2 July, Sobyenin welcomed the results as "a choice away from backsliding into chaos and towards a challenging, difficult but positive step forward."³⁰

It appeared Sobyenin substantially increased his nationwide profile and, up until June 2020 at least, could even be seen as an emerging candidate to eventually succeed Putin. Given the inaction of the president and other top figures, Sobyenin became a *de facto* leader by taking decisive action. The extent of Sobyenin's rise, however, should not be overestimated. Like the rest of the power vertical generals, at no point did Sobyenin contradict the supreme commander. Indeed, his servility to Putin was parodied in a comedy sketch by Maxim Galkin that went viral.³¹ Dressed up as both Putin and Sobyenin in a two-screen video conversation, Galkin parodied Putin's quizzical facial expressions and tetchy interventions to Sobyenin's lengthy descriptions of new measures to regulate the allocation of walks for Moscow's inhabitants, all delivered in mind-numbing bureaucratic style.

Galkin's parody proved prescient. On 28 May Sobyenin warned Muscovites on Russia-24 that "the measures will stay in place for a long time, until we get a vaccine."³² However, while Sobyenin planned to keep the lockdown and drive the infection rate down, Putin was uninterested in Sobyenin's plans and already intent on a quick reopening of the country ahead of the July plebiscite (FSU Brief 2020a). Everything was resolved as one would expect in a hierarchical vertical of power: on 8 June, Sobyenin announced the end of the lockdown, the electronic *propusk* system, and his system of regulated walks. Putin prioritized the creation of a "feel-good" atmosphere prior to the July plebiscite; Sobyenin had put the public health situation in Moscow first.³³ Unsurprisingly, federal nationwide prerogatives won out, potentially compromising much of Sobyenin's progress in combatting COVID-19.

In a publicly reported meeting with President Putin in the early fall of 2020, Sobyenin clearly knew his place. In talks discussing how city authorities had combatted the pandemic, Sobyenin gave as much credit as possible to the president, be it his compensatory support packages, instructions, or general inspiration (Pettersson 2021, 141).³⁴ The images on the website accompanying the official report of the meeting were telling. Three images were on display in the posting about the bilateral meeting. Two of the images were snapshots of Putin only, and the third one showed Putin sitting by his desk facing a TV screen during the virtual meeting. To the far right one could glimpse Sobyenin on the screen but only from a perspective that made him look flat, one-dimensional, and highly marginalized. There was clearly no room for anyone else but the president at center stage.³⁵

In analyzing Sobyanin's actions during the pandemic, we see that Putin's interventions can be seen in different ways. For Putin supporters, the president's actions are legitimate; he is the supreme ruler and must take responsibility. For others, the way the power vertical operates will cause alarm. The story of Sobyanin demonstrates how quickly subordinates are brought into line, thus exploding the idea that they can be autonomous, smart, and capable officials with a mandate to do what is best for their city/region. Thus, Putin's actions, which are part of a national legitimization strategy, may come at the cost of damaging regional legitimization efforts. Turning now to Novosibirsk Oblast, we instead examine a case of a governor who is better aligned with Kremlin priorities than Sobyanin, something that may increase his chances of promotion up the power vertical but also creates a potential regional legitimacy problem.

Governor Travnikov of Novosibirsk Oblast: a faithful lieutenant in the power vertical

Unlike Moscow with its vast budget, most of Russia's regions, tasked with managing the COVID-19 crisis, lacked adequate fiscal resources. Even before the COVID-19 crisis began, the number of regions with budget deficits had grown to 35%.³⁶ As with previous interventions to remove unwanted governors,³⁷ the arrest of Khabarovsk Krai governor Sergei Furgal in July 2020 sent a timely reminder that even those enjoying popular electoral support could be brought down to size. Unlike Furgal, the governor of Novosibirsk Oblast, Andrei Travnikov, is an excellent example of the kind of loyal politician who was selected and trained in Moscow before being elevated to a high-profile political appointment in the provinces. A United Russia member who began his political career in Vologda, Travnikov was appointed Governor of Novosibirsk Oblast in 2017 and won the election in September 2018 with 64% of the vote in a turnout of 29%.³⁸ It is obvious that such a low turnout rate does not enhance the regional legitimacy of the governor to start with.

Travnikov's management of the first wave of the virus was unremarkable; he allowed key industries to keep working and, while quarantining those arriving from Moscow and St. Petersburg to spend two weeks in self-isolation, he stopped short of closing the oblast borders, which he argued would hurt the economy too much. He appeared to try to strike a balance between protecting the economy while keeping virus numbers stable and low. In doing this he differed little from the example set in Moscow by Sobyanin. However, complacency about COVID-19 would soon be on view. As autumn approached and the threatening second wave drew closer, Travnikov's deputy Yuri Petukhov claimed that the regional authorities were "ready for any scenario as the healthcare system has built experience in fighting coronavirus" and was preparing a quick vaccination campaign.³⁹ When a new high for cases was recorded in mid-October 2020, Travnikov assured that the healthcare system was managing the load and the existing measures were sufficient.⁴⁰ It took another two weeks for him to take measures such as restricting the opening hours of restaurants and attendance of stadiums, which had been hastily reopened in the summer.⁴¹

The second wave of the virus rolled on, revealing the lack of capacity in ambulance first aid services (long waiting times and no-shows), the lack of a testing system (people tended only to get a test when critically ill), the desperate shortage of beds in the healthcare system, and a breakdown in the supply of oxygen tanks and medicine across the region.⁴² Travnikov promised to solve the lack of medical supplies by making them prescription only and apologized to citizens for the "mishaps that happened over the last week in the healthcare system."⁴³ In late November he announced that the crisis was over, Novosibirsk Oblast numbers were plateauing, and the situation stabilizing.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, as with the rest of the country, the statistics of this second wave crisis were held back; while official COVID-19 deaths in Novosibirsk Oblast for November were a low 160, the number of recorded deaths was 5,150, an increase of 2,447 from November 2019.⁴⁵ On 15 December, the Ministry of Health for Novosibirsk Oblast remained cagey on the rapid rise in deaths, claiming "multi-level analytical work" needed to be done before drawing conclusions.⁴⁶

Travnikov's unremarkable handling of the epidemic in 2020 was combined by regular signals of compliance with other prerogatives of the political center. Travnikov was an early supporter of the constitutional amendment project, hailing the proposals as "directed to consolidation, the unification of our country."⁴⁷ In the plebiscite Travnikov oversaw an approval rate of 67.58% for the amendments, in line with general 60–70% approval rates across the country.⁴⁸ Travnikov followed this up with a solid performance in September's regional elections: once again he was visible as a United Russia man, keeping the party in control of the Novosibirsk Oblast Regional Assembly with 44 of the 76 seats.⁴⁹

During his agitation in favor of the constitutional changes, Travnikov demonstrated his keen awareness of the Kremlin ideological priorities in commemorating Russia's victory in World War II. Added to the plebiscite ballot was an additional proposition to vote in favor of approving Novosibirsk's status as a "Heroic City of Labor."⁵⁰ This honorary title would commemorate the contribution of Novosibirsk workers to the war effort. Putin confirmed Novosibirsk's new title on 3 July in a televised but disengaged speech, mentioning Novosibirsk in a monotonous list of 20 cities all simultaneously winning this title.

Travnikov followed Putin with an enthusiastic speech of his own, in which he expressed joy at this "great achievement," revelling in the glory of Novosibirsk's WWII exploits and sending special thanks to those who had voted for their own city in a contest that had most likely been decided well in advance.⁵¹ The self-congratulatory tone was continued in a special ceremony to lay flowers at the Novosibirsk war memorial, in the presence of the presidential plenipotentiary of the Northwestern Federal District; the mayor of Novosibirsk, and the metropolitan of Novosibirsk.⁵² None of them wore masks and social distancing was completely ignored.⁵³

Thus, over the course of 2020, the actions of the Novosibirsk governor reflected conformity with the three lines of legitimation pursued by the center: "rules": elections, ballots, solid majorities; "beliefs" – adhering to the "ideological block"; "appropriate actions" – conducting the events that, from the center's perspective, are considered to demonstrate unity and common consent. In doing this, Travnikov showed his loyalty to Putin and United Russia, and contrasted with Sobyenin's relative deviance from these priorities. However, as Travnikov seemed to prioritize symbolic and celebratory politics over a more hands-on struggle with the acute corona crisis, he may not have added much to the regime's legitimizing efforts, either regionally or on the systems level.

Indeed, it is hard to see how figures like Travnikov will not face a regional legitimacy problem over the longer term. There is a poverty of ideas among governors who blindly follow central plans regardless of local conditions. Like many governors in Russia today, Travnikov is risk averse and lacking in room for maneuver in developing his own legitimation strategy on the regional level. The Kremlin's desire for centralization and the elimination of open political opposition comes with a cost: the dynamic, independent, and popular regional politicians are out; replaced increasingly by stolid United Russia and Kremlin loyalists. Such a trend is unlikely to better the standing of the regional authorities among their electorates. In the long run, this is likely also to negatively affect system legitimacy.

Uniting beliefs and policies: vaccine as panacea?

In mid-August 2020, Minister of Health Mikhail Murashko announced that Russia had finally done it: "Sputnik V" was the world's first vaccine and, as with the race to enter space, Russia had beaten the West in this contest. Putin was quick to celebrate this,⁵⁴ repeating the point during the UN General Assembly in September⁵⁵ and the G20 summit meeting in November.⁵⁶ Clearly, the Sputnik vaccine was intended to have symbolic importance for Russian national identity and global prestige. It was also to signify that President Putin was fully back on stage, delivering resolute action, protecting his people, and demonstrating Russian great power prowess. This was to be his triumph, not the one of his governors.

Along the same lines, during the first week of December 2020, Russia managed to be the first in launching mass vaccinations, beating the United Kingdom to it by a couple of days. Putin was again eager to show that he was in the lead. During a televised government meeting, he instructed the

responsible minister to start the vaccinations: "Let's agree on this – you will not report to me next week, but you will start mass vaccination . . . let's get to work already," he said, playing the role of the tsar caring for his people and whipping boyars into action.⁵⁷ Presidential Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov was very clear about who should enjoy the benefits of the vaccine first: "The absolute priority are Russians . . . Production within Russia, which is already being developed, will meet the needs of Russians."⁵⁸ State media reporting focused intensively on Russia's campaign for mass vaccination with new Sputnik-V vaccination centers opening across Russia's regions.⁵⁹

From the winter of 2020, more and more countries, including EU members Hungary and the Czech Republic, as well as the German state of Bavaria, placed orders for the Sputnik vaccine. A key triumph came in February 2021 when Sputnik received a positive review in *The Lancet* science journal with a rating of 92% efficacy.⁶⁰ State media was quick to present Russia as triumphant on the world stage and ready to salvage countries lacking vaccines. Russia's efforts to export the vaccine were presented as "generous" and "humane" actions contrasted to the West's reluctance or inability to offer vaccines to other countries.⁶¹ While certain Western countries were accused of a "disinformation campaign" against Sputnik-V,⁶² numerous actors in Europe were shown trying to order Sputnik or gain access to its technology.⁶³

The Russian public did not seem to share its president's enthusiasm about the vaccine, however. A September 2020 poll by the Higher School of Economics showed as many as 31.9% who were asked about the significance of Covid-19 replied that they did not actually think the pandemic was real and that it was invented for the benefit of certain actors; in spite of the massive propaganda promoting Sputnik-V, 45.6% said they were unwilling to take the vaccine.⁶⁴ It is hard to untangle how much these numbers reflect a low level of generalized trust in post-Soviet Russia and a tendency toward conspiracy theories or a specific lack of faith in the Russian state and its information campaigns.

With a third wave of COVID-19 engulfing the country in June 2021, it was left to Russia's governors to take the unpopular decision to make vaccination obligatory and/or restrict the rights of the unvaccinated, which around half of Russia's regions decided to do.⁶⁵ The demand was generally enforced by employers, who were pressured by regional authorities to fire those unwilling to be vaccinated.⁶⁶ Rather than convincing the public with an informational campaign, it appears the rise in the double-vaccinated (27.6% by August 2021)⁶⁷ was most likely a result of these punitive measures. At the same time, an impressive jump in production of Sputnik-V for domestic consumption was achieved at the cost of renegeing on deals to supply second doses of Sputnik-V to countries such as Argentina, Bolivia, and Guatemala.⁶⁸

The story of Sputnik-V is one of contrasts: the triumphs of Russia in the worldwide vaccine contest and coming to the rescue of struggling European countries versus empty vaccination booths, the lack of vaccines in certain regions, and general unwillingness to take the Russian vaccines inside Russia. Despite Peskov's promises referred to above, of the 11.1 million vaccines produced by 20 February 2021, only 6 million were for domestic consumption, 4 million went for export, and 1 million was in reserve.⁶⁹ If serious outbreaks continue in 2021 and beyond, the Kremlin may become vulnerable to the accusation that it put geopolitical objectives and great power glory ahead of the welfare of its own people. Whatever the reason, Sputnik-V, which has been so energetically propagated to the whole world, was not taken up by Russians at home. It is therefore doubtful that Sputnik-V functions well as a panacea to prop up domestic regime legitimacy.

Back to normality? Putin emerges from his bunker

Clearly, the triumphant unveiling of the Sputnik-V vaccine in 2020 should be juxtaposed against the ravages of Covid-19 across the country, which exposed confusion about who is in charge and the limits of state capacity. At a meeting with the Speaker of the Duma, Vyacheslav Volodin, in late October 2020, Putin was informed that out of the 450 Duma deputies, 91 had contracted the virus, 38 were hospitalized, and one had died from the infection. At the same time, it was reported that

between 90% and 95% of all available hospital beds in Russia were occupied.⁷⁰ Nonetheless, Putin announced there would be no return to tough lockdown measures.⁷¹ At a meeting with government members in November 2020, at the peak of the second wave, Putin conceded that the situation was “far from simple.” On the one hand, he asserted that it was “certainly not easy but under control,” and on the other, he referred to severe shortages of medication, equipment, and supply of medical services.⁷²

With the New Year holidays approaching, the highly dubious statistical accounting of Russia’s COVID-19 death rate was increasingly put in question. While the infection rates put Russia in the world’s top five, Russia’s death rate remained suspiciously low. The COVID-19 death rate could be hidden, but it proved impossible to conceal the overall mortality rate: in the first half of 2020, 265,000 people died from all causes, twice the level of the whole of 2019 (Baev 2020). In the very last days of 2020, with most people’s attention focused on planning their upcoming holidays, the cat was let out of the bag: Russian officials admitted that the death toll had been gravely underreported. Russian statistical agency Rosstat concluded that during the period between January and November 2020 the number of deaths from all causes recorded had risen by 229,700 compared with the previous year. It was estimated that more than 81% of the increase in mortality was due to COVID-19. If correct, the official figure at that time would have to be increased three times over.⁷³ In March 2021 Rosstat confirmed that over 200,000 people had died of COVID-19 from March 2020 to 31 January 2021.⁷⁴ Subsequent investigations have suggested that even the scale of infections was inaccurate, as data extracted from state notification systems show that, by July 2021, 29 million had been infected by COVID, just under five times higher than the official number of 6 million.⁷⁵

This widespread falsification of numbers is likely to impact on regime legitimacy, as the combination of cynicism, populism, stage-managed political events, and corruption leave many citizens in Russia distrustful of the government and state bodies. The Kremlin seemed to be alerted to the danger and apparently took some action to avert it. December 2020 was a revealing month in terms of regime tactics, as several instruments in its toolbox were used in the quest for legitimacy and social control. In mid-December, Putin produced a furious populist tirade against the failure of the Russian government to deal with rising food prices.⁷⁶ State media TV crews followed government officials conducting inspections of supermarket shelves and issuing fines for apparently marked-up products.⁷⁷ This agitational campaign received due attention on 17 December, in Putin’s annual news conference,⁷⁸ where the president, like in the Annual Direct Line,⁷⁹ always tries to demonstrate his vigor, stamina, and all-encompassing knowledge of the country and its problems (Ryazanova-Clarke 2013; Petersson 2021; Wilson and Lee 2020). Meanwhile, on 23 December 2020 the State Duma passed a flurry of restrictive new laws, including an expansion of the “foreign agent” law, restrictions on freedom of assembly, a slander law to muzzle journalistic work, and new scope for blocking undesirable websites. Judging by Putin’s comments, these laws were designed to combat Western foreign influence in Russia’s elections.⁸⁰ The laws provided the basis for further political repression in years to come against organizations and individuals deemed politically undesirable.

In the spring of 2021, President Putin tried to demonstrate his reinvigorated energy and activity, visibly attempting to put the difficulties of 2020 behind him. After imprisoning the returning Navalny and clamping down on protests, Putin emerged, as always without a mask, to address a packed Luzhniki stadium on the occasion of the seventh anniversary of Crimea’s “return” to the Russian Federation. Putin gave an emotional and raw performance, talking of how the return of Crimea to the Russian nation demonstrated people’s love for Russia, a love “for the motherland, which is in the blood, character, and genes of our people.” There was hardly a rapturous response from the audience but, assisted by the public address system, chants of “ROS-SI-YA” eventually rang round the stadium. The aim of the spectacle was clear: to revive some of the patriotic exuberance and euphoria of 2014⁸¹ – the euphoria that had been sought but not won in 2020.

The following week, Putin took a trip to the Russian taiga with Defence Minister Shoigu, perhaps to advertise his new mobility in a classic rustic Russian setting.⁸² This coincided with a war of words with newly elected US President Biden. State media made the most of the contrast: Biden mixing his

words and repeatedly tripping on his way up to Air Force One, Putin out in the woods, the huntsman boldly challenging the US President to a televised debate, any time and any place. The old methods, with their heavy dependence on Putin's personality and charisma, were back on display. A healthy and vaccinated Putin was, according to the implied message, out of his bunker. He has got back on his horse but the question is, after all that happened in 2020, will it still ride the way it used to?

Conclusion

We argue that the legitimacy of the Putin regime is likely to have suffered from three factors in 2020–2021. First, Putin's image change and his uncharacteristic step away from running everything have led various bureaucratic agencies to step into the vacuum. Second, the Kremlin's handling of the COVID-19 crisis is likely to have been detrimental to the legitimacy of the regional level of the power vertical, and thereby also of the political system in general. Third, the 2020–2021 period confirms the regime's continued reliance on high-profile, stage-managed events connected to previously successful narratives and beliefs. These remain largely unaltered despite the increased disorder on the ground during the years of the pandemic. We have argued that the regime's attachment to the old narratives of Russia fighting the West or order and stability cannot bring the results they used to. The adherence to the old narratives has only made cleavages in public opinion deeper, rather than restoring the consolidation of the post-Crimea days.

Polling data back this up: 32% viewed the constitutional changes "extremely negatively"; 34% were indifferent to Biden's accusation that Putin is a "killer"; 43% supported the Khabarovsk protests.⁸³ Meanwhile, half of those aware of Navalny's poisoning think it was fake and 38% sympathize with Lukashenko more than with Belarus's protestors.⁸⁴ Those dependent on the state (officials, *budzhethniki*, the poor, the elderly) tend to support the constitutional amendments and represent the pro-Putin core.⁸⁵

Yet, even with this illiberal core behind Putin, it is likely to become increasingly hard to present the current regime as the "only option." Many young people have contrasting values and expectations; they receive their information from totally different sources. In 2020, the number of those primarily consuming news on the internet (58%) had risen closer to that of TV (70%).⁸⁶ Meanwhile, the Russian state seems ready to declare war on the internet and repress all political figures who built their popularity online. We would argue that the Kremlin is aware it is in a deleterious situation. Its current solutions, in conditions of socio-economic worsening, decreased resources, and increasing geopolitical isolation, do not appear sustainable. The regime, which advertises itself as the guarantor of stability, continuity, unity, and order, appears unable to deliver this and yet it will not tolerate any real discussion of alternative pathways. New laws to muzzle opposition, penalize undesirable actors or organisations, and restrict basic democratic freedoms can be viewed as surrogates of legitimation: by removing critical opinion and visible protest actions, the Kremlin, at least in the short term, spares its legitimation efforts from serious criticism. It is a way of removing the symptoms but not addressing the underlying disease.

In making these assertions we concede that our analysis of the Russian government's legitimation measures through the framework of "rules, beliefs, and actions" is one thing; our assertions of an emerging legitimacy crisis is harder to substantiate. It has to be inferred through other means, above all the increased level of repression and violence to maintain social stability, and the marked contrasts between the regime's words and visions, on the one hand, and the realities on the ground, on the other. Such discrepancies are in rich supply: the triumphant tone of the Kremlin's plebiscites and parades stands in contrast to a worsening economy and declining living standards across the country. The Kremlin's posturing in battling COVID-19 contrasts with the limited support for citizens facing unemployment, bankruptcy, and the loss of loved ones. The Kremlin's stern and moralistic "yes" campaign before the plebiscite on the constitution contrasts with the spectacle of people voting on tree stumps. The glory of Sputnik V and the high-profile vaccine diplomacy contrasts with poor progress in vaccinating the Russian population.

Although it is too early to be sure, 2020 may well turn out to have been the watershed year when tried and tested pro-regime narratives lost their potency outside of the dwindling core constituency, causing the Kremlin to resort more comprehensively to a “menu of manipulation” (Schedler 2002) to retain system stability. While there has been much targeted and selective repression in Russia, there is still a reluctance to impose tough controls on the population across the board. This addresses the major dilemma that hybrid regimes are facing as a halfway house approaching but not corresponding to full-scale, closed authoritarianism. Time will tell whether the Putin system is moving into a firmly closed authoritarian style with the last spaces of openness shut down, or if decreasing resources combined with legitimacy decline will lead to a different outcome.

Notes

1. It appears this was the decision of Igor Sechin, the director of Rosneft, who seems to have seen possible gains in taking a hard line with the Saudis; <https://inosmi.ru/politic/20200318/247067762.html>.
2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t1o3xTYk0Gs>, minute 3, 40 seconds.
3. <https://meduza.io/shapito/2020/06/25/twitter-seychas-vyglyadit-tak-ahahaha-oni-chto-golosuyut-v-bagazh-nike-i-na-penkah-ihihhi-pogodite-rano-smeetes-vse-po-zakonu>
4. <https://meduza.io/news/2020/12/23/levada-tsentr-rossiyane-radikalno-razoshlis-v-otsenkah-obnuleniya-putina-ono-im-libo-ochen-nravitsya-libo-kategoricheskii-net>
5. <https://www.levada.ru/2021/02/26/otnoshenie-k-novomu-sroku-vladimira-putina>
6. <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/43034>
7. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63210>
8. <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-52591087>
9. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63334>
10. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63560>
11. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uKGatxG7zA0>
12. This is reflected in amendments excluding foreign passport and residence permit holders from political office and making Russian law take precedence over international law. It is also reflected in an amendment forbidding any “actions that are directed at the separation of parts of the territory of the Russian Federation” (article 67.2.1).
13. Article 67.1 expounds this vision: “The Russian Federation, united by a 1000-year history, preserves the memory of its ancestors, who passed on to us their ideals and belief in God, as well as continuity in the development of Russian statehood, recognizing a historically-occurring state unity.” Here the mention of believing in God is new, as well as the priority to “defend the family, motherhood, fatherhood, and childhood; defend the institute of marriage as a union of man and woman.” <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/02/03/2020/5e5d010e9a794718c0f57783>
14. <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/02/03/2020/5e5d010e9a794718c0f57783>
15. <https://informpskov.ru/news/325473.html>
16. <https://35media.ru/news/2020/06/12/oleg-gazmanov-ya-budu-golosovat-za-popravki-v-konstituciyu-kotorye-ne-dadut-iskazit-nashu-istoriyu>
17. <https://openmedia.io/news/n1/akter-bezrukov-obyasnil-uchastie-v-agitacii-za-popravki-k-konstitucii>
18. By December 2020, the head of the Russian Electoral Commission, Ella Pamfilova, finally addressed the voting irregularities, recommending “voting on tree stumps” be discontinued in Russia’s regions.
19. <https://meduza.io/news/2020/12/23/levada-tsentr-rossiyane-radikalno-razoshlis-v-otsenkah-obnuleniya-putina-ono-im-libo-ochen-nravitsya-libo-kategoricheskii-net>
20. Certain groups voted “yes” for the constitutional changes in high numbers: aged 55 or over (77%), small town inhabitants (67%), village inhabitants (72%), and those with education lower than middle (73%) (Levada 2020b). Meanwhile the highest voting “no” groups were: aged 18–24 (45%), Moscow inhabitants (42%), entrepreneurs (37%), and those with higher education (33%) (Levada 2020b).
21. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63303>
22. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63003>
23. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-52061381>
24. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63548>
25. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64000>
26. <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2021/02/02/vladimir-the-poisoner>
27. <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-56581095>
28. <https://www.mos.ru/mayor/themes/1299/6619050/>
29. <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/26/06/2020/5ef5cec19a794746a96e1905>
30. <https://www.sobyanin.ru/popravki-v-konstitutsiyu-moskvichi-sdelali-vybor>
31. https://www.instagram.com/tv/CAvjCDgHk2r/?utm_source=ig_embed

32. <https://ria.ru/20200528/1572139416.html>
33. <https://meduza.io/feature/2020/06/09/da-vy-verno-predpolagali-ogranicheniya-v-moskve-snyali-dosrochno-imenno-iz-za-konstitutsii-i-obnuleniya-my-vyyasnili-kak-imenno-prinimalos-eto-reshenie>
34. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64000>
35. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64000>. See (Pettersson 2021).
36. <https://www.rbc.ru/economics/12/02/2020/5e4281299a79471b4769c391>
37. <https://tass.ru/info/10957203>
38. <https://tass.ru/sibir-news/5549877>
39. <https://www.nso.ru/news/43218>
40. <https://www.interfax-russia.ru/siberia/news/novosibirskaya-oblast-poka-otkazalas-ot-dopolnitelnyh-ogranicheniy-po-koronavirusu>
41. <https://tayga.info/160660>
42. <https://meduza.io/feature/2020/11/05/u-rossii-bylo-vremya-chtoby-podgotovitsya-ko-vtoroy-volne-kovida-no-teper-skorye-zahlebyvayutsya-ot-vyzovov-a-mest-v-bolnitsah-bolshe-net>
43. <https://sib.fm/news/2020/10/27/travnikov-otsenil-podgotovlennost-novosibirskoj-meditsiny-ko-vtoroj-volne-koronavirusa>
44. <https://sib.fm/news/2020/11/27/travnikov-zayavil-o-vyhode-novosibirskoj-oblasti-na-plato-po-koronavirusu>
45. <https://tayga.info/162272>
46. <https://tayga.info/162659>
47. <https://www.nso.ru/news/40157>
48. <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/02/07/2020/5efd84cd9a7947f4ee02d0ad>. The actual numbers of Novosibirsk Oblast were less than impressive: there was a rather low turnout of 47% across the region, and an even lower one in Novosibirsk city (35%) <https://www.nso.ru/news/41858>.
49. <https://www.nso.ru/news/43008>
50. The term *gorod trudovoi doblesti* can be literally translated as “City of Laboring Valor” – the focus is on cities far from the front line who were engaged in the production of war materials.
51. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ebABrTL7_bw&t=94s
52. <https://www.nso.ru/news/41866>
53. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ef-6AMbTMG4>
54. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63877>. It later transpired that the “V” in Sputnik V stands for Victory; <https://ria.ru/20201224/vaktsina-1590791699.html>.
55. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64074>
56. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64460>
57. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/12/2/putin-orders-start-of-russias-mass-covid-vaccination-programme>
58. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/12/2/putin-orders-start-of-russias-mass-covid-vaccination-programme>
59. <https://www.gazeta.ru/social/2020/12/15/13401200.shtml>
60. <https://www.bbc.com/news/health-55900622>
61. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m4lg0ZdmZCo>
62. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9zU4R8a3GkU>
63. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m4lg0ZdmZCo>
64. <https://www.hse.ru/news/expertise/398120110.html>. Levada polling discovered similar results, with 46% not willing to take a free vaccine: <https://www.levada.ru/2020/12/28/koronavirus-strahi-i-vaktsina/>.
65. <https://www.rbc.ru/society/03/08/2021/60d0a0c19a79476c7f137ce8>
66. <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/rossiya-prinuditelnaya-vaktsinatsiya/31362773.html>
67. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4964786>
68. <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-57969809>
69. <https://www.proekt.media/opinion/dragan-vakzinaziya-v-rossii>
70. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64293>
71. <https://meduza.io/news/2020/10/21/vladimir-putin-zhestkie-i-totalnye-ogranicheniya-iz-za-koronavirusa-neplaniruyutsya>
72. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64436>
73. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/dec/28/russia-admits-to-world-third-worst-covid-19-death-toll-underreported>; <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/12/28/russias-mortality-hit-16-year-high-in-november-official-data-says-a72505>
74. <https://meduza.io/news/2021/03/12/smernost-v-moskve-v-yanvare-vyrosla-na-33-v-fevrale-na-21>
75. <https://meduza.io/feature/2021/07/20/razdavaya-qr-kody-mintsifry-sluchayno-rassekretilo-masshtaby-epidemii-kovida-v-rossii-eti-tsifry-v-pyat-raz-vyshe-ofitsialnyh>
76. <https://ria.ru/20201213/tseny-1588988104.html>
77. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6GPV8wkfyBA>
78. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64671>
79. Due to the pandemic these two media events were merged in 2020.

80. Putin claimed that “of course they will try to interfere (in our elections) ... but we know about this and we are making preparations ... the vast majority of our citizens understand that (a) this is interference; (b) we must counter it; and (c) this is unacceptable and we must determine our fate by ourselves”; <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64671>.
81. <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/18/03/2021/605346d09a794777e098fe5e>
82. <https://meduza.io/shapito/2021/03/23/putin-ne-prosto-s-ezdil-s-shoygu-v-taygu-i-nasolil-baydenu-tam-vse-gorazdo-slozhnee>
83. <https://meduza.io/news/2020/12/23/levada-tsentr-rossiyane-radikalno-razoshlis-v-otsenkah-obnuleniya-putina-ono-im-libo-ochen-nravitsya-libo-kategoricheski-net>; <https://meduza.io/news/2021/04/07/levada-tsentr-tret-rossiyan-vozmutili-slova-baydena-nazvavshego-putina-ubiytsey-esche-treti-vse-ravno>; <https://www.levada.ru/2020/11/05/protesty-v-habarovskom-krae-i-belarusi/>
84. <https://www.levada.ru/2021/01/04/itogi-goda-v-obshhestvennom-mnenii-rossii-sobytiya-i-lyudi/>
85. <https://carnegie.ru/2020/12/04/ru-pub-83338>
86. <https://realnoevremya.ru/articles/162968-mediascope-izuchilo-mediapotreblenie-v-rossii>

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