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Populism and political development in hybrid regimes: Russia and the development of official populism

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Abstract

Hybrid regimes like electoral authoritarianism blend elements of democratic and non-democratic political practices. Hybrid regimes can develop from populism or can themselves develop populism to explain and justify their democratic shortcomings. Where the latter occurs, populism is a tool of regime stabilisation rather than a form of 'populism in power'. Moving from using some populist themes to assist regime stabilisation to official populism requires the development of populist discourse to a point where it becomes definitional of what constitutes the relationship between state and society. The paper uses the example of Russia to discuss the uses of populism in a hybrid regime. Populist rhetoric has been used by the Putin regime since the mid-2000s, but was initially balanced by other discourses. This changed during the 2011–2012 electoral cycle as a conservative-traditional populist discourse was deployed that redefined political agency and the relationship of the state to Russian society.

Keywords

Russia, Putin, hybrid regime, populism, conservative-traditionalism

Introduction

Populist resurgence across the globe has led to renewed interest in what happens when populists are in power. The emerging literature on populists in power focusses on what happens when a populist movement or party takes power through the ballot box, and on the reactions to such take-overs and the possibility of domestic and external actors mediating and moderating populist action

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(Kaltwasser and Taggart, 2016). Not all populisms come into power through electoral competition, however. The development of populism from within an existing regime poses different questions to those that are the focus of the 'populism in power' literature. How can we tell when a regime moves from using language that has some populist tones to one that has developed an 'official populism'?

The argument in this article is that the inclusion of populist rhetoric in regime discourse does not signify that a polity has developed an official populism. We argue that the establishment of an official populism occurs when the use of populist rhetoric alters an established regime's conception of the state-society relationship and comes to define legitimate political agency fully. In this article we look at how this might happen in a case of a polity that falls within the broad category of hybrid regimes, of which electoral authoritarianism is the main form. A main characteristic of electoral authoritarianism is the combination of authoritarian political practices with elections that provide some possibility of anti-regime organisation and agitation so that 'incumbents are forced to sweat' (Levitsky and Way, 2010: 12).[1] Authoritarian elements of electoral authoritarianism mean that elite control of the state is often high and a key support of the leadership is state officialdom and economic interests that interact with officialdom. Both officials and these economic interests generate their wealth through their political status and connections. At the same time, the democratic elements of electoral authoritarianism mean that the regime has to create electoral support for itself if it is not to rely entirely on electoral fraud. A hybrid regime's social support base is thus complicated; the particular interests of elites and the interests of wider society that can become politically effective during elections may not always align. Official populism is one way of squaring the circle between a regime's elite support and its need to construct an electoral majority. It is thus one possible solution to a problem of regime hybridity, especially where, as in Russia, this problem has led to a combination of weak institutional structures and over-management of the political system, which limit possibilities for reforms that might produce socio-economic development or allow a revitalisation of democratic life.

The next section of this article looks at populism and the issue of regime hybridity. The article then moves on to use the case of Russia to examine how populism can be developed within an electoral authoritarian polity. The Russian case shows that the articulation of some populist themes is not in itself indicative of an electoral authoritarian system becoming populist. Some populist rhetoric was used in Russia from the mid-2000s onwards (see Casula and Perovic, 2009). However, we argue that official populism only developed after the electoral cycle of 2011–2012, when the regime was threatened by a counter-hegemonic populist threat from political opposition and social groups that had suffered from economic crisis. The Russian case therefore supports Moffitt's (2016: 113) contention that crisis is a key element in the development of populist politics. After 2001 an official populist frame based on an essentialised cultural understanding of traditional values was developed to counter threats to the Putin regime. We will see, through an analysis of Putin's speeches from this period, how this frame was developed to define political agency. This official populist frame serves to marginalise both liberal and ethno-nationalist opposition to the regime. The article describes this logic and the way that it recast the relation between state and society. The article concludes by arguing that this move to official populism has been successful in stabilising Russia's hybrid regime but offers only a limited range of policy solutions to Russia's problems.

Populism and regime hybridity

Populism offers an alternative conceptualisation of state-society relations to that proffered by liberal democratic political institutions (Hadiz and Chryssogelos, 2017) . Populism is a discursive

frame that can often be used by political entrepreneurs to frame the 'people' and their interests as being opposed by an antagonistic 'other', with this 'other' often, but not exclusively, described as consisting of some set of dominant elite groups (Aslanidis, 2016: 100–101). The definition/naming of the 'people' by populism is a 'performative operation' (Laclau, 2005: 97) that claims to represent a unified political identity unachievable through electoral competition and political elite negotiation of government and policy formation. When populism comes to power, therefore, tensions can develop within democratic institutional structures. This may present a challenge to pluralism if there is an attempt to remove populism's antagonistic other(s) from the institutional space of the state in order to effect 'popular' sovereignty and the particular representation of the 'people' as conceived by populism.

Achieving a transformation of the state to fulfil a populist agenda is hard. Difficulties in transforming the state mean that populism can create hybrid regime types rather than realizing its project to create a new form of popular representation that allows for pluralism. There is some evidence of this having occurred in Latin America, where populism has revitalised democratic discourse whilst in opposition but has sometimes been detrimental to pluralism once in power (Huber and Schimpf, 2016; for a discussion of the complex relationship between populism and democracy see Moffitt, 2016: 133–151).

The extent to which populist movements can develop into full-blown projects of state reform that eliminate antagonistic 'other(s)' by reconstituting the state and its relationship with society depends on their success in three areas. First, they will need to resist external pressures to moderate the populist political project. Second, populism in power will have to chart a course between its constituent interests, meeting some demands, suppressing demands that cannot be met or redefining populism itself to neutralise some demands. Third, populism in power will have to overcome opposition from the interests that they seek to supplant, opposition that will have a place within the political system thanks to elections.

Dealing with these three areas will limit the ability of a populist movement in power to enact a state building project that enables what they perceive to be a proper representation of the people. External pressure, movement splits (or their potential), and the continued existence of interests antagonistic to populism, or not incorporated into it, will sustain democratic representation and institutional structures that the populist movement protested against before its ascension to power. This perpetuates political pluralism and supports demands for continued pluralist political competition through elections. At the same time, a populist government needs to act and overcome its 'antagonistic other'. This, and contempt for the institutional structures of the past that gave rise to the movement, can create pressures to circumvent democratic practices and old institutions that are seen as harmful to 'true' popular representation. This may create some authoritarian tendencies, and regime hybridity, by undermining institutions that mediate between state and society such as parliaments or parties, manipulating law and legal institutions (for example, staffing courts with loyalists) and stimulating extra-constitutional institutional development (for example, using elements of the populist movement to redistribute state resources or to supplant inherited, formal government structures), to work around institutional constraints.

Populists who achieve power through the ballot box may, therefore, create hybrid regimes as they work from within old institutional structures that they cannot fully overcome and at the same time circumvent these structures to bring their project of popular empowerment to completion. A similar set of issues confronts hybrid regimes that are not created by a populist movement's rise to power, but that emerge as a result of a failure to institutionalise democratic state autonomy based on 'a fairly strong institutional differentiation of the political realm of formal collective decision making from the overall system of inequality in … society' (Rueschemeyer et al., 1992: 63). Inability to create democratic state autonomy has facilitated state capture, with political and

economic elites controlling access to power and undermining democratic government. This has produced regime hybridity. An elite faction that achieves capture of the state will, unless it is of uncommon virtue, perpetuate its rule by making its control over access to power unchallengeable. This involves co-opting, weakening or destroying potential rival factions, creating sanctions to prevent defection from the winning group, and reducing the possibility of threats emerging from the electoral system. Achieving security over control of power constricts the space for free political competition by strengthening authoritarian political practices (such as the repression of dissent, manipulation of the legal system) and incentivises the creation of political capitalism in which access to wealth is conditional on loyalty to the dominant elite group.

Reducing threats from the electoral system is only partially achieved through extending control over elite groups. Hybrid regimes also face a problem of reconciling political pluralism and rights to representation with the political exclusivity and closure that they create to control elite rivals and prevent threats from electoral competition. Reconciliation may be by repression, but hybrid regimes have also attempted to justify their transgression of democratic norms by appealing to other, 'better' forms of democratic representation. The use of populist rhetoric and framing is one way to do this. The use of populist framing balances appeals to universal and liberal democratic norms, but does not replace them, in an electoral authoritarian regime. Such a use of populist rhetoric may include such things as referencing local, particularistic practices of communal solidarity as 'democratic' and more representative of social values and practices than universal and liberal norms. Electoral authoritarian regimes can also use populist rhetoric to legitimise undemocratic practices and to build up electoral support by incorporating some social interests into the regime's support base that would otherwise lie outside the political system.

Using some populist rhetoric does not constitute a move to official populism if populism's development is only partial and a balance to appeals to democratic universalism. Where this occurs populist themes do not reframe the relations of state and people. Official populism only develops fully when state-society relations become defined by populist logic of social and political antagonism and these supplant, rather than balance, democratic universalism. When this occurs populism becomes the means of defining legitimate political agency so that there will be a constriction of political space that limits the political agency of forces and interests conceived of as 'other' and which legitimate their political agency by appeal to universal principles of pluralist liberal democracy. Such a development can also be used to discipline elite members and so backs up other sanctions on disloyal, or potentially disloyal, elite members, who, it can be claimed, put themselves outside of legitimate politics if they appeal to universal democratic norms as a basis for protesting against the regime.

Stabilising electoral authoritarianism during Putin's first presidential term 2000–2004

Putin did not come to power as a populist. Populist rhetoric only slowly developed in reaction to threats to the Putin regime that developed towards the end of Putin's first term. Moreover, populist rhetoric was articulated initially alongside other political frames that argued for other modalities of incorporating social demands into the politico-administrative system. The use of populist frames alongside other ideas about politics helped to stabilise regime hybridity and create the impression that the regime represented order after the chaos of the Yeltsin period. Populist frames developed to support this idea of order, which in the first instance was based on constitutionality as the means of defining state-society relations.

Putin's initial response to the crises of the Russian state was to try to create what has been referred to as a 'normal' polity in Russia (Sakwa, 2004). The supposed key to creating a normal polity was the restoration of constitutional order and legality. As Gleb Pavlovsky, then a political

analyst close to the Presidential Administration, explained it, the Putin project was one of 'managed normalisation […] bringing the political, economic and public game into the framework of the Constitution, and at the same time into the framework of everyday human life' (*Vremya novostei*, 30 March 2004). 'Managed normalisation' was supposed to provide the means to revive the state and enable it to incorporate different social demands through the creation of greater state autonomy from special interests (oligarchic economic interests and regional political elites), and by increasing state capacity through improving revenue extraction so that common social interests could be satisfied through the state's administrative machinery. 'Managed normalisation' involved putting political, social and economic actors in their 'right', that is their legally defined 'constitutional', place, rather than defining them and defeating them as 'enemies of the people'. The best example of this is the limited action taken against the 'oligarchs' who rose to prominence under Yeltsin. Direct action in the form of prosecution and confiscation of assets was taken against two oligarchs, Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Gusinsky. In July 2000 Putin made a deal with the other oligarchs: there would be no reconsideration of the privatisations of the 1990s that were the basis of their wealth if they stayed out of politics. Putin's actions aimed to separate political and economic power and restore to the state some autonomy from the economic elite. The relationship of the state to the economic elite would be equidistance (*ravnoudelenost'*), rather than the satisfaction of particular interests by factions of the state as had been the case under Yeltsin. Actions against the oligarchs were not developed into an antagonistic divide of 'we, the people' versus an old elite, at least not at this stage of the development of Putin's politics. In fact, in most respects Putin's actions in the first few years of his first presidential term were based on ideas about the restoration of state autonomy so that administration could be more effective that Yeltsin had previously voiced, and that were commonly held in Russia and beyond.[2] The initial discourses of the Putin regime were thus conservative, focussing on the existing constitutional order, rather than populist, and looked to 'autotomizing the sovereign subjectivity of the state from, respectively, regional and business elites, which throughout the 1990s … dominated the space of statehood' (Prozorov, 2005: 125).

Tentative moves toward populism

Putin's initial approach to politics provided some means of safeguarding against shocks from the electoral system since the two groups with most potential to organise electoral opposition were targeted by it: regional leaders and powerful economic interests. However, Putin's approach did not amount to an extensive engagement with society so that the danger of a shock coming from the electoral system remained. Although social support for Putin was to grow as the economy grew, control over the electorate depended on marshalling their support for United Russia (UR), the party created as Putin's party in December 2001. This meant creating a favourable electoral climate for UR. Such an environment was necessary because of the weak association of Russian voters with parties and the high degree of electoral volatility. Voter identification with parties was low – with the partial exception of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation – and previous parties formed from within government had not managed to compete effectively, or in more than one electoral cycle (White et al., 1997). Consequently, many Russians did not identify with any part of the political system. Trust in government and other political institutions remained low and the electorate was potentially volatile despite Putin's high personal popularity and the recovery of the economy as a result of high energy prices.

The dangers of electoral shocks became more apparent as Putin's first presidential term drew to a close and the regime's approach to politics changed accordingly. The main cause of this change was the reaction to the 'colour' revolutions in Georgia in 2003 and in Ukraine in 2004–2005, which led to the overthrow of incumbent presidents or their nominated successors and the installation of

presidents whose policies and foreign policy orientations were not pro-Russian. Failure to secure partnership with the West because of differences over the Iraq war, relations with Iran and Russia's relations with other post-Soviet states, and growing perception that there were limits to co-operation and accommodation with the United States also contributed to the shift. Finally, the deal that Putin had struck with the oligarchs in 2000 had not modified their behaviour sufficiently. Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the CEO of Yukos (then Russia's largest private oil firm) breached the terms of the deal, funding political parties and talking of the necessity of civil society monitoring the state. Fear of colour revolutions, the Yukos 'affair' and disagreement with Western foreign policy reinforced each other. Western interest in regime destabilisation was 'proven' by colour revolutions and the Iraq war. Western criticism of Russia's actions over Yukos 'demonstrated' that Putin's regime was regarded as divergent from Western 'norms' and was potentially a target for destabilisation. The possibility of destabilisation, and the fact that protest could emerge quickly and unexpectedly, was highlighted by popular protests that took place over the monetisation of benefits in January 2005, whilst the Orange revolution was still in train in Ukraine.[3]

The regime response was to develop a proto-populist frame alongside the idea of Russia as a 'normal' state. The chief themes of this emergent frame were the ideas of Russian 'sovereign democracy' and Russia as a 'great' power. The idea of 'sovereign democracy' was developed by Vladislav Surkov, First Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration between 1999 and 2011.[4] Surkov argued that Russia had its own democratic traditions and standards that were different to liberal and pluralist notions of democracy espoused in the West. These traditions and standards were created by and supported Russian state sovereignty, and meant a different 'democratic' understanding of rights and political competition. The 'sovereign democracy' concept argued for the irreplaceability of Putin as the political actor who guaranteed unity against the types of factional politics that had marked the Yeltsin era. 'Sovereign democracy' was about 'centralisation' rather than division and competition between different social factions and their political representatives. Putin stood above 'daily political debate' as the unifier of difference and to ensure social development; 'sovereign democracy is personified, inasmuch as it interprets the course set by President Putin' (Surkov, 2007). Sovereign democracy was supposed to immunise Russia from the colour revolution 'virus' (as one Russian commentator put it) and was backed up by the establishment of movements like the *Nashi* (ours) youth group as anti-colour revolution forces, the first raft of legislation aimed at limiting the activities of NGOs with foreign connections, and curtailing foreign election monitoring (Ambrosio, 2009: 46). The 'sovereign democracy' concept was supposed to work with the idea of Russia as a 'great power'. Sovereignty guarantees a polity's ability to be a 'great power': 'sovereignty', as the title of one of Surkov's (2006) works put it, 'is a political synonym for competitiveness'. Ensuring sovereignty for Russian democracy would preserve Russia's status as a 'great power'. The emotional appeal of the idea of Russia as having different democratic standards and procedures was therefore grounded in an appeal to patriotism and around 'an antagonistic frontier' between 'sovereign' and 'liberal/universal' concepts of democracy.

The articulation of the idea of 'sovereign democracy' and the increased stress on 'great' power created a form of exclusionary populist discourse in Russian politics by articulating the 'differences' between Russian and Western forms of democracy. However, sovereign democracy never came to dominate discourse or serve as a means of defining legitimate political agency fully. The concept was referenced by Putin, but never endorsed explicitly. For example, just after the Orange Revolution and monetisation of benefits protests, Putin (2005: 201–202) argued that Russians should 'uphold their state sovereignty and make an unerring choice in selecting a new vector of development in the thousand years of their history … to find our own path in order to build a democratic, free and just society and state'. This spoke to some of the

general themes of sovereign democracy. However, Putin placed this firmly within the context of European values and norms:

> The ideals of freedom, human rights, justice and democracy have been achieved through much suffering by European culture and have for many centuries been our society's determining values. Over three centuries, we along with other European nations have passed hand in hand through the reforms of the Enlightenment, the difficulties of creating parliamentarism, municipal and judicial authorities, and the establishment of similar legal systems. We moved step by step together toward recognising and extending human rights, toward universal and equal suffrage, toward understanding the need to look after the weak and the poor, toward women's emancipation, and other social gains. I repeat we did this together, sometimes behind and sometimes ahead of European standards.

The populist frame of sovereign democracy was thus balanced in Putin's speeches by wider notions of what kind of political community Russia was and should be; Russia was to find its own sovereign path of political development, but this path was not distinct from the universal set of democratic development. Other senior political figures, including Dmitri Medvedev, then deputy Prime Minister and the man who was to succeed Putin as President in 2008, rejected sovereign democracy altogether. Medvedev (2006) argued that 'sovereignty' and 'democracy' were different types of concept and unrelated to each other, that one should not dominate the other, and that 'putting a prefix before democracy gives off a strange odour … [and] suggests that we are talking about some kind of non-traditional democracy'.

Putin's response to sovereign democracy illustrates how a populist frame was not allowed to dominate official political discourse. Populist themes were, at this stage, just one of many elements in Russian political discourse that balanced each other out and helped stabilise regime hybridity. This meant that regime politics were flexible. Flexibility meant that the regime could appear as everything to everyone: populist (against the West) and interested in normal administrative/constitutional politics. This helped to create the massive majorities that Putin and UR enjoyed in 2004 and 2007, adding control over the electoral process to control over elite factions that had been achieved with the idea of 'normalcy', and stabilising hybridity.

The extent of control achieved looked so firm that it seemed that 'sovereign democracy' would be pushed to one side in the hierarchy of Russian political discourse by the idea of modernisation as Putin's second presidential term drew to a close in late 2007. Putin (2008) introduced the modernisation agenda as he handed over the presidency to Dmitry Medvedev. Medvedev (2009; 2010) expanded the definition of modernisation to include political reform after economic crisis hit Russia in late 2008. Medvedev argued that it was necessary to expand popular access to, and create avenues for social influence over, the state's administrative system to make it an effective engine for social and economic development. This suggested different forms of politics and political community to the 'sovereign democracy' discourse. Modernisation, as a think tank associated with Medvedev put it, required improving democracy through dialogue with citizens and interest groups to improve policy. This would reduce 'policy mistakes' and avoid the 'catastrophic' risks associated with authoritarian modernisation policies (INSOR, 2010: 10–12). For Medvedev, one of the aims of modernisation was reform of the political system and administrative politics so that they would become 'adequate for a dynamic, active, transparent and multi-dimensional social structure' (Medvedev, 2009). The modernisation agenda thus sought to revitalise 'daily political debate'. This was linked in Medvedev's speeches to the need to restore legality and social and bureaucratic respect for the law. These arguments repeated those made in the initial discourse of the Putin regime on 'normalcy' and constitutional order: stability and growth would come through including more people within the existing political system by ending corruption and the bureaucratic servicing of particular interests.

Instability and the rise of official populism in Russia

Medvedev's ideas about modernisation were not translated into political change (Robinson, 2013). The failure of modernisation created a problem for electoral management once more. Support for UR was heavily dependent on voters' perceptions of the economy (McAllister and White, 2008), and a significant proportion of Russians had become disenchanted with the Putin regime because of the economic crisis that hit Russia in 2008 (Chaisty and Whitefield, 2012). Electoral authoritarian management of the political system meant that there was no outlet for voter dissatisfaction. Opposition in the Duma elections was 'systemic', created by the administration (so-called 'project' parties like A Just Russia), or licensed by it to act as a sponge for anti-regime votes (the nationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation). The former parties were not real opposition parties; the latter were inconsistent in their opposition and unappealing to those segments of the electorate who had suffered from economic collapse, or who were dissatisfied with the stymying of the modernisation agenda and Putin's return to office.

The poverty of the party system under electoral authoritarianism meant that the political system could not incorporate many social demands for change, and left these demands available for opposition counter-organisation as a populist alternative to the regime. This alternative was organised by the extra-systemic opposition around the charge that UR was, in the phrase coined by Alexei Navalny, one of the leaders of the 2011–2012 demonstrations, 'the party of thieves and swindlers'; and opposition to Putin's proposed return to the presidency as captured by the slogan 'For a Russia without Putin' used in the demonstrations against electoral fraud that followed the December Duma elections. The extra-systemic opposition was not united over substantive policy issues or around a single leader. However, the opposition, media commentary and the Kremlin all framed the struggle between the extra-systemic opposition and the regime as a struggle between 'two Russias', a struggle that was over values and between metropolitan modernity and tradition, as well as over electoral integrity (Magun, 2015). Moreover, although many demonstrators were from the so-called 'middle/creative class' most identified themselves and their cause with that of the 'people' The demonstrators stood for the constitutional order and therefore stood for the rights of the whole 'people' no matter what their actual political preferences. Opposition to fraud, unfree elections and the alleged usurpation of power by the swapping of presidential and prime ministerial posts between Medvedev and Putin made the demonstrators, in their own eyes, the bearers of the interests of 'the people' despite the fact that the majority of the population were Putin voters (Matveev, 2015).

Economic crisis, electoral politics and the still-birth of Medvedev's reforms created a potential populist backlash to the regime from social groups interested in change and reform. Putin's return to the presidency resolved how this potential populist backlash was going to be dealt with: by a counter-development of official populism rather than by reform. The reasons for this were electoral as Putin sought to secure his core vote in the 2012 presidential elections to demonstrate his control over Russian politics and raise the cost of elite defection to the opposition. Putin's election campaign for the presidency picked up on the themes of 'sovereign democracy' and moved them to the centre stage of Russian politics: his giant electoral rally at the Luzhniki stadium was held on February 23, the 'Day of the Defenders of the Fatherland'. The rally's slogan was 'Defend Russia' and the theme of Putin's address was that the rally and the election were about 'people like us. … We are prepared to work for the good of the Motherland … [we will not allow others to] dictate their will to us, since we have a will of our own', and ended with a rallying call 'The battle for Russia continues, we will win'. This campaign theme was aimed not only at rallying Putin voters to the flag, but was also a pre-emptive move against further protest. It contrasted Putin as defender of a form of Russianness to the opposition, which could be portrayed as metropolitan and cosmopolitan.

Populism as conservative-traditional values and the redefinition of political agency

These themes formed the core of the official populism that framed Russian politics after the 2012 election. After the election, they were given greater coherence by the emphasis placed on conservative-traditional values and the use of these values to define state-society relations and create a new basis for defining legitimate political agency (Makarychev and Yatsyk, 2014). This marked a shift to full official populism. Putin's official populist frame argues that the main social demand that the state has to satisfy is the protection of traditional values against internal and external threats. Putin used conservative-traditional values as a rhetorical device. Conservative-traditional values, he argued, were core popular values around which the Russian 'people' could unite in opposition to the 'other' of cosmopolitanism and its domestic and international representatives. For Putin (2013a), Russia is an example of a 'state-civilisation' in which the state is underpinned by a particular set of values that make up a civilisation. In Russia's case, these values are a common belief in traditional social values that unites the various religious faiths that exist within Russia (Putin, 2013a). State and civilisation are mutually supportive. The task of the state is to protect civilisation as the values that are held by the people. When the state protects these values it ensures its own survival because it creates and preserves popular support for the state. This preservation of popular support for the state is a form of democracy; as it builds up popular support the state is also representing the people's organic social values and interests, enabling the people to live in a political community that is true to their deepest interests and beliefs.

The official populist frame delegitimises actions other than those taken by the state to protect the people and their relationship to the state by arguing that there are structural, foreign policy and domestic threats to the state as the vehicle for the protection and articulation of traditional values. There is an equivalence between these internal and external threats in that they are all based on a veneration for abstract values that stands in antagonistic opposition to the 'real', organic, traditional values of the people. The structural threat comes from globalisation. For Putin, globalisation is a new form of international competition because it involves population movements and these initiate ideational changes that threaten traditional values and 'state-civilisation'. Population movements and attempts to deal with them give rise to multiculturalism. Multiculturalism is not based on any organic intellectual foundations like the mixture of religions that underpin Russia's 'state-civilisation'. Multiculturalism is founded on abstract principles like 'tolerance', abstractions that Putin argues (2013b) are 'neutered and barren'. Multiculturalism and preference for abstract principles means that ethnic traditions and differences between cultural groups are being eroded in many nations. As this happens, as different traditions and beliefs are asserted as having equal value, distinctions between good and evil are lost, and democracy is imperilled because 'abstract, speculative ideas' are 'contrary to the will of the majority, which does not accept the changes occurring or the proposed revision of values' (Putin, 2013b). The erosion of traditional values – and hence democracy – is especially advanced in Europe, which used to share the same values as Russia but has abandoned them. European multiculturalism is failing, Putin argued, and the 'failure of the multicultural project is a crisis of the model of the national state – a state that was historically constructed exclusively on the basis of ethnic identity' (Putin, 2012a).

For Putin (2013e), the contemporary experience of Europe, and Russia's historical experience, both show that traditional values can no longer be relied on to renew themselves as they have in the past. The 'cultural code' that has historically underpinned state building 'has been attacked ever more often over the past few years; hostile forces have been trying to break it, and yet, it has survived. It needs to be supported, strengthened and protected' (Putin, 2012a). The structural threat that globalisation poses is reinforced by the external threat to Russian 'state-civilisation' that comes from Russia's foreign policy enemies and their use of 'soft power'. 'Soft power', according to

Putin (2012b, 2013c), uses 'illegal instruments' (Putin does not specify what these 'illegal instruments' are) to directly interfere in the domestic policy of sovereign countries. This serves the foreign policy aims of states using soft power. They manipulate public opinion in target countries, altering social values and forcing sovereign governments to adopt 'supposedly more progressive development models' (Putin, 2013b). Target countries' states are weakened and the result can, Putin (2013b) has claimed, be a breakdown of political order as in the Middle East after the Arab Spring. The threat from external forces is not just to individual states; broad civilisational regions are threatened too. As these broad civilisational regions are threatened the ability of any one state within them to resist soft power is diminished. In Russia's case this means the weakening of the links that it has with other post-Soviet states, particularly Ukraine. Ukraine was supposed to be a part of the wider Russian 'state-civilisation', as Putin (2013d) explained before the demonstrations that led to the fall of the Yanukovych regime in 2014. Ukraine should, therefore, have been a part of the Russian-led Eurasian Union, the economic bloc that was supposed to include Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine. This bloc was supposed to help maintain 'the identity of nations in the historical Eurasian space in a new century and in a new world' (Putin, 2013a). Ukraine, however, fell victim to plots from abroad and weakened Russia's ability to resist soft power as a result.

Internally, protecting the organic democracy of Russia's 'state-civilisation' means that the state needs to defend against elite and intellectual arrogance, and mono-ethnic nationalism. Both elites and nationalists base their political proposals on what are for Russia abstract notions that are not derived from Russia's historical experience and development as a 'state-civilisation'. The Russian elite, and in particular the intelligentsia, Putin has argued, stand apart from the people and this leads them to adopt positions that are detrimental to the real interests of the people and organic, true democracy. The intelligentsia in particular is keen to 'emphasise their civility, their level of education; people always want to be guided by the best examples'. Being 'guided by the best examples' means copying policies and institutions from abroad. Imported ideas from abroad, whether they be revolutionary or reformist ideas, are necessarily abstractions when brought to Russia since they are derived from the experience of other cultures. The intelligentsia is therefore dangerous as a social force since any abstract idea that it seeks to introduce is a 'bacillus that destroys this social or public organism'. The introduction of such ideas in the past has been one of the main causes of Russian state failure as it has undermined the connection between state and popular civilisation; it has, Putin has argued, caused the 'loss of the state self-identity' for the Russian Empire and the USSR (Putin, 2013c). Mono-ethnic nationalism is likewise threatening to state-civilisation since putting one nationality above another, Putin (2012a) argues, 'was the formula used by those who paved the way to the collapse of the Soviet Union', and works against the longer-standing cultural values of Russia that have been reaffirmed over the centuries. Promoting 'Russia first' is a Western idea based on 'the notorious concept of self-determination, a slogan used by all kinds of politicians who have fought for power and geopolitical dividends, from Vladimir Lenin to Woodrow Wilson'. The idea of self-determination for one ethnic group, or of the superiority of one ethnic group over others, makes no sense for Russia since it would fracture the union based on common traditional values that Russia has built up amongst its multi-ethnic people as 'the historical foundation of our society and the Russian statehood' (Putin, 2015b).

The idea of 'state-civilisation' as something based on shared traditional values as a product of the 'indivisibility and integrity of the thousand-year long history of our country' (Putin, 2014) creates a populist logic of equivalence to discredit both 'Western' ideologies of reform and revolution, and unofficial nationalist conceptions of Russianness. They are essentially the same regardless of any difference that proponents of reform, revolution or nationalism might imagine exists between them. Moreover, the threats that they pose domestically are equivalent to the external threats that Russia faces. Proposals from the elite and from nationalists are as grounded in abstract concepts as are threats from globalisation or 'soft power' since their ideas do not come from the lived

experience of the Russian people. They are thus undemocratic and dangerous, and cannot establish legitimate forms of political agency. They should either be combatted or subordinated to the needs of the state-civilisation. Nationalism has to be subsumed to the defence of traditional values; reform policies should be secondary to a politics that secures Russia's difference as a particular cultural community. When nationalism is mono-ethnic, or reformist or revolutionary ideas are not subordinated to the needs of the Russian state-civilisation, the result is disasters such as those that beset Russia in the twentieth century. Moving away from the traditional values that are the core of the 'state-civilisation' creates division, and

> when we were divided, we faced tragedy, disintegration, disasters, and the suffering of millions of our citizens, and we found ourselves at the mercy of false values, criminal ambitions and national catastrophe. This is why, despite our great diversity, it is essential that we have a sense of ourselves as a united nation. (Putin, 2015a)

Securing this unity is the chief task of the state. As the state acts to create unity through the protection of traditional values it sustains the people, who would otherwise be vulnerable to hostile forces from outside and inside Russia, and recreates the conditions for the reproduction of both state and people as a 'state-civilisation'. Putin's official populism thus focusses political agency on the state as both representative and protector of the people. This gives Russia an official populist frame that both places the people at the centre of political discourse and at the same time denies them agency independent of the state. The people are a subject of populism as much as they are its source or change agent. They can only be active as a people when they act in concert with the state since it alone represents the people and their civilisation as a totality.

Conclusion

The development of populism under Vladimir Putin was initially slow, but picked up over time and accelerated rapidly after 2012 to become an official populism. Events in Ukraine and Crimea added to the emotional appeal of official populism and were presented as affirmation of one of official populism's premises, namely that there is an existential struggle between Russia and the West. This has brought short-term benefits. Official populism has been easier to sell during confrontation with the West. Crisis has been externalised, moved away from Russia, after the 'internal' crisis of 2011–2012. This has helped make Putin more popular and marginalised opposition even further, allowing the regime to proclaim that it has achieved the unification of the people. This unity of the people has even been proclaimed by Putin (2016) as the reason why Russia has avoided regime change, despite its sluggish economy; popular unity has (ironically) meant that Russia has developed 'stronger immunity against populism and demagogy' than has been the case elsewhere.

However, the development of official populism has also removed the flexibility that the Putin regime had in the earlier stage of populism's development to support regime hybridity. Between 2004 and 2008, the idea of 'sovereign democracy' was articulated alongside and competed with other ideas about politics. This allowed for reformist possibilities, even if those possibilities were not realised. Putin was able to both work for change through the development of the political and economic system, and use populist themes to support his regime's power. Official populism, in contrast, justifies a diminution of pluralism by constricting what is legitimate political agency, but gives no guidance on how to reconstruct state and public administration to solve the material problems that Russia faces. As a means of developing policy, Russia's official populism is a more or less empty vessel. The only 'positive' things that official populism recommends are the preservation of Russian culture and its increased celebration and use in education, and the persecution of those who are not part of Putin's community of values.

Beyond this in policy terms, official populism has little to recommend since the antagonism that defines it is cultural rather than socio-economic or political. It does not identify any redistributive priorities nor a reform agenda for administrative renewal. A redistributive project or a project of administrative renewal would be something that the regime could point to as a work in progress and use to explain why there might be conflicts between people's material needs and the polity's ability to satisfy them. Instead, neither the organisation of the state nor the political economy of Russia are brought into question by ideas of state-civilisation and conservative-traditional values (see also Robinson, 2017).

These conclusions lead us to doubt whether official populism can be a universal solution to the problems of stabilising hybrid regimes by squaring the dominance of elites and the need for electoral support. Official populism, where cultural themes are used to define the populist political community, appears to be a weak form of populism since it is constructed on a single theme of cultural values. The absence of an economic 'other' in particular means that the extent to which official populism can fully be recognised by social groups as a full articulation of their desires is limited, and that potentially there are many social groups who might find themselves set against it for material reasons. This finding needs to be tested further for Russia, a test that time will probably provide, and across a broader range of polities where an official populism based on cultural understandings of the 'people' is supporting regime hybridity.

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Notes

1. For an overview of some of the issues in defining regime hybridity and electoral authoritarianism see Bogaards (2009). For discussion of Russia as an electoral authoritarian polity see Gel'man (2013), Golosov (2011), Way (2005), White (2013).
2. See, for example, Yeltsin's 1997 address to the Federal Assembly, *Rossiiskie vesti*, 11 March 1997.
3. Following Soviet practice, many welfare benefits, mostly to pensioners, were (and are) made in kind. The move to monetise them – replacing in kind benefits such as rights to free transportation with cash payments – was regarded as a welfare cut and therefore protested against.
4. The intellectual substance of the idea need not detain us since it has been discussed widely and critically as political theory. See, for example, Kazantsev (2007).

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