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The buck stops elsewhere: authoritarian resilience and the politics of responsibility for COVID-19 in Russia

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ABSTRACT

How did the Russian government deal with popular dissatisfaction from the effects of COVID-19 and the policies it adopted in its wake? And how successful was President Vladimir Putin in evading blame given that Russia is *de facto* highly politically centralized under the president? We analyze data from a national probability sample of Russians conducted following the first wave of the pandemic in July/August 2020. Our results indicate that Putin's blame-deflecting strategy appears to have been broadly but not entirely successful.

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Introduction

COVID-19 has raised enormous challenges for the Russian government, not only to manage the health dimension of the pandemic but also its economic and political consequences. But what do we know about the relationship between the health outcomes of the management of COVID-19 and how the Russian government has been judged by its citizens? We consider this question through the lens of blame attribution. Supposing that politicians seek to divert responsibility for negative outcomes of their policy choices to other actors, we ask: how did Russian citizens attribute responsibility for COVID-19?

Our study focuses on the public response to President Putin's efforts to shift responsibility for the pandemic to regional authorities in an electoral authoritarian context (Golosov 2011). Despite being formally a federal state, Russia's politics are strongly centralized under President Vladimir Putin, who pursued what he termed the "power vertical" on coming to power in 2000 (Golosov 2018). How in these conditions, we ask, does blame attribution operate? Normatively, political authorities should be blamed for their failures (credited for their successes) as part of the accountability process. But under the institutional and partisan conditions that are associated with electoral authoritarianism in Russia, this chain is interrupted with consequences for accountability. In this article, we consider how the personalization of power and the relative weakness of ideological and partisan divisions enabled Vladimir Putin to shift blame onto weaker regional institutions during the first wave of COVID-19.

The global COVID-19 crisis, which has confronted all countries with the competing challenges of protecting both public health and economic activity, provides a rare opportunity to examine how accountability and blame attribution operate in Russia. Previous challenges to the Russian system have largely concerned the economic domain, and have been the focus of much of the extant work on accountability in Russia (e.g. Beazer and Reuter 2019; Rosenfeld 2018; Sirotkina and Zavadskaya 2020). The extra complexity of the challenges posed by COVID-19 presented an even greater test for

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the resilience of the regime's blame avoidance mechanisms. It was a directly observable reality affecting millions of Russian citizens, which could not be so easily dismissed by the authorities. More particularly, it presented the possibility to analyze how citizens judged the Russian authorities given three specific characteristics of COVID-19 outcomes and policies: (1) that the country had suffered among the highest infection rates of any in the world, and high death rates; (2) that, after an initial delay, it chose a policy that involved an extended "non-working period" of lockdown, with comparatively little compensating support for the economy; and (3) that Putin publicly pursued a policy of blame deflection, by making regional authorities carry responsibility for health and economic outcomes while seeking to stand above the fray himself. Given the evident costs to citizens, did Putin's political strategy work to avoid responsibility? And if so, what were the factors that shaped public blame attribution?

We address these questions in the next section by highlighting how Putin was quite explicit in his blame attribution strategy. Following that, we develop our theoretical priors about blame attribution in the Russian context. We then test the resulting hypotheses using data from a nationally representative sample of Russians conducted after the height of the first wave of the pandemic in July–August 2020. Our findings suggest that Putin may well have achieved his political goals on a number of fronts by the end of the first wave. His voters were more likely to criticize regional authorities for poor performance, and there is little evidence that the pandemic mobilized ideological divides. However, those respondents with personal experience of the economic costs of COVID-19, as well as those who prioritized the protection of jobs, were more likely to evaluate his performance negatively. This highlights the difficulty that Putin faces in evading blame in a political system where political power is highly centralized, and raises interesting questions about the ongoing challenges facing the Russian authorities as they continue to balance the economic and public health risks associated with the pandemic.

Blame attribution during the first wave of the pandemic

The first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Russia followed a pattern seen elsewhere in Europe. As in many states, the wave lasted approximately eight months.¹ Reports of the first cases of infection emerged at the start of 2020 in Russia's Far East; Russia recorded its first official death from COVID-19 in March, and new infections reached a daily high of over 11,000 cases in early May. By June, case numbers had started to fall, and regional authorities eased their COVID-suppression policies. In August, new infections fell to 5,000 daily cases before increasing as the second wave took hold in September 2020.

The first wave placed great strain on Russia's stagnating economy and under-resourced health infrastructure. The Russian authorities were slow to appreciate the threat of domestic infection, and the spread of COVID-19 was rapid. By the peak of the wave in mid-May, Russia was second only to the United States in terms of the rate of infections, and the crisis exposed regional inequalities in healthcare provision and capacity shortcomings – notably in the area of staffing (middle and junior staff), testing, ventilators, and protective equipment (Gershkovich and Sauer 2020; Gubernatorov 2020; Politcom.ru , 2020a; Twigg 2020).

As the pandemic spread nationwide, a sense of economic crisis took hold. By early May, economic activity had fallen by 33%, and the International Monetary Fund mid-year forecast predicted that the economy would contract by 6.6% during 2020 (BOFIT 2020). Nonetheless, the federal government resisted the temptation to bail out the economy substantively. The overall level of economic support amounted to only 2.5% of GDP – orders of magnitude lower than the 10–12% provided by the US, the UK, and most European Union countries. In the absence of anything akin to a furlough scheme, Russians had little option but to continue working (Åslund 2020).

The response of the authorities was the focus of growing criticism. Unlike previous crises (Alexseev and Hale 2016; Hale 2018), Russian citizens did not "rally around the flag" in support of their leaders, and public criticism of the health service increased (Politcom.ru , 2020a). Protests took

place against the COVID-suppression policies of the authorities and the limited levels of state support (Politcom.ru 2020b), and trust in President Putin fell by 10% between January and May, exceeding declines seen during the global financial crisis of 2008–2009 (Snegovaya, Volkov, and Goncharov 2020).

Facing this challenge, Russia's regional authorities became the main target of President Putin's blame attribution strategy (Busygina and Filippov 2021). From the start of the pandemic, regional authorities had been assigned responsibility for localized COVID-suppression policies, and as the crisis progressed, President Putin placed greater demands on regional governors to deliver (Kalyukov 2020). Putin blamed regional leaders for the negative economic consequences of their actions, leading to the replacement of several regional governors: Vladimir Ilyukhin (Kamchatka), Sergey Gaplikov (Komi), and Igor Orlov (Arkhangel'sk). Increasingly, Putin distanced himself from the shortcomings of the healthcare system, while taking the lead in proposing economic assistance policies and measures to ease the partial lockdown measures.

In sum, Putin played the role of the "good tsar": reprimanding regions for their healthcare failures while bestowing support on the Russian population through moderate financial assistance allied with orders to reopen the economy. How was this blame attribution strategy received by Russian citizens? Before answering this question, we first introduce the theoretical backdrop for our understanding of blame attribution, and how it applies in the Russian case.

Theorizing COVID-19 blame attribution in the Russian electoral authoritarian system

Self-interested governments in all societies wish to maximize credit and minimize blame from their citizens. They may prefer to minimize blame over maximizing credit (Weaver 1986), and they pursue this actively via their own resources and abilities to set agendas. However, politicians' efforts to divert responsibility are constrained by the characteristics of the political system (e.g. the structure of the executive and the unitary or federal nature of the state), and also by the frames that citizens use to make judgements about politics (e.g. partisanship or ideology), and how they experience particular events and policies. These factors are likely to vary across both democratic and authoritarian political systems, with consequences for blame attribution during times of crisis. Given these constraints, how would we expect governments to deal with the political challenges presented by COVID-19?

In democratic settings, three mechanisms in particular are commonly cited that enable governments to evade responsibility, which appear relevant for the COVID-19 crisis. First, political partisanship may play a major role (Lyons and Jaeger 2014; Bisgaard 2015; Sievert et al. 2021). Indeed, performance estimates may be highly endogenous to partisan attachments, so that supporters (opponents) of the government – their voters – may be much less (more) likely to view a government negatively (Pickup and Evans 2013), especially in polarized party systems (Malhotra 2008). In the case of COVID-19, this might entail that governments will be much more positively evaluated by their own voters. Secondly, voters make judgements about the success of government policies via normative and ideological frames, which also inform government policy. The issue that arises in a crisis therefore may quickly embed in other ideological and policy divisions in a country. In fact, one voter's perceived negative effects may be another voter's positive ones, precisely because governments have implemented policies that match those views. In the case of COVID-19, the policy response has often been framed as a choice between a concern for health and a concern for the economy, which may map relatively well – but not perfectly – onto existing left (health) versus right (economic) stances. Thirdly, democratic governments have found – perhaps increasingly in recent decades – institutional mechanisms for blame and responsibility avoidance (Ennser-Jedenastik 2016). For example, governments may wish to avoid dealing with politically divisive issues by delegating them to the courts or to other agencies

(central banks) (Goodman 1991). In the case of COVID-19, governments may seek to divert responsibility for difficult decisions to scientists, public health officials, healthcare bodies, or other levels of government.

Authoritarian governments are no less vulnerable to national crises like COVID-19. As with weakly established democratic systems, authoritarian governments may be more likely to be judged by their performance. This is for several reasons. First, their legitimating strategies – so far as these exist – may be much more connected with outcomes than with process. Governments in such contexts are less able to claim authority because of how they came to power and so may be much more dependent on results (Von Soest and Grauvogel 2017; Tannenberget al. 2021). Second, because authoritarian governments are generally highly centralized, citizens' judgements may be much more focused on dominant leaders who often publicly magnify their powers. As such, failure may be more easily assigned to such leaders by citizens, even if they lack the means to hold them to account. Third, while authoritarian leaders may have additional resources that are not available to democratic ones – chiefly perhaps greater control over the media (Guriev and Treisman 2020) – they may lack some others that help build support among citizens. In particular, authoritarian systems often display very weak party development and party identifications that assist voters (positively and negatively) to arrive at their policy evaluations. Moreover, in the absence of a developed party system, ideological divisions among voters may be relatively weakly established (Chaisty and Whitefield 2018), so that, rather than seeing a government's response to a national crisis like COVID-19 in terms of broader policy divisions between left and right, voters may be more inclined just to judge on performance, and indeed on regime performance.

This does not mean of course that authoritarian leaders lack any means of deflecting blame. Importantly for our argument, the absence of democratic resources available to authoritarian regimes that we just considered – weak partisanship and policy politicization (and polarization) as well as a controlled media – may be considerable *strengths* that authoritarian leaders are able to exploit because citizens lack cues and heuristics that will lead them to negative judgements. Citizens are much less likely to be informed by opposition parties, civil society organizations, and the media about who should be blamed and thus its leaders may more easily pass the buck. Individuals may therefore rely more exclusively on their own often isolated personal experiences. The absence of serious opposition to the regime may mean that alternative policies to deal with a crisis like COVID-19 are only weakly articulated, leaving citizens struggling to understand whether negative outcomes were avoidable.

These authoritarian conditions are highly appropriate for understanding the Russian case. The democratic process is flawed; power is highly centralized in the hands of President Putin; the party system and party attachments are weakly developed; and ideological divisions that translate into policy differences are also comparatively weak.² Yet, political authority hinges on performance. Notwithstanding the regime's willingness to deploy such force as is necessary to prevent a direct challenge to its rule, it has faced significant popular disapproval driven by performance estimates in the past (Chaisty and Whitefield 2013). This would suggest that the Russian government would be potentially vulnerable to the multiple performance challenges posed by COVID-19. Moreover, given the regime's authoritarian characteristics, any negative assessments might be expected to be directed at the country's powerful president. Therefore, we ask, who took the blame for the multiple performance challenges posed by COVID-19 and why?

Given that Putin deliberately sought to deflect responsibility onto regional authorities, as we outlined above, how successful was he in doing so? The answer to this question may provide a good indicator of the relative force of the factors that we have outlined pushing Russian citizens towards or away from attributing blame to the president, with concomitant implications for the resilience of Russian electoral authoritarianism to other major policy shocks and subsequent waves of the

pandemic. First, we consider what would Russian public opinion regarding institutional performance look like if Putin's strategy of blame deflection was successful? And, second, what evidence might we find for some of the drivers of that success if found?

We address the first question with two hypotheses concerning the relative blame assigned to Putin versus the regional authorities.

Most obviously (H1), Putin should be relatively more positively assessed than regional authorities for his performance during the pandemic.

But also (H2), even direct experience of COVID-19 and of its economic effects will have a differentially negative effect on evaluations of regional authorities as compared to Putin.

Then we address the second question about the likely mechanisms underpinning blame attribution with three hypotheses.

First, the centralization and personalization of power in the Russian context would lead us to expect that Putin's personal popularity might act as a proxy for weak partisan ties, in which case (H3), *Putin's own supporters should be less likely to hold positive performance evaluations of regional authorities as compared to their evaluations of Putin.*

Second, the relative absence of partisan competition and the personalisation of politics should be expected to reduce the importance of ideological divisions over policy in general, which means that citizens will lack the ideological tools and the partisan cues that are widespread in democratic systems when they come to make judgements about COVID-19 policies and who might be blamed for them. The corollary of this proposition is that (H4a), *ideological divisions will not form the basis for citizens' evaluations of Putin's performance.* Indeed, if Putin's efforts to shift blame to regional authorities were successful, we would expect (H4b), *if ideology is to divide evaluations, this should be found at the regional level to which Putin has passed responsibility.*

Third, the general weakness of partisan and ideological structure in shaping citizens' views on policy is also likely to entail that the sharp trade-offs in policy preferences, which were so typical of many Western democracies between those with preferences for the economy over health and vice versa (however false a dichotomy that might be), would be largely absent in the Russian context, so (H5), *those opposing his suppression strategy were not more likely to evaluate Putin negatively than they were the regional authorities who were charged with implementing it.*

Method, data, and findings

We address these issues using data from a nationally representative sample of Russians conducted in July–August 2020, when the first wave of the pandemic and its associated policy responses were already well known in the country. The first wave of the pandemic captures many of the dynamics associated with the challenges that test authoritarian systems: exposure of the state's limited capacity to perform in a key area of public good provision, economic crisis, and the political costs resulting from failure to perform.

COVID-19 restrictions meant that face-to-face surveys were not possible. Instead, we deployed a national telephone (CATI) survey based on random-digit dialing (RDD) sampling.³ The sample was stratified by federal districts, population strata within rural and urban settlements, and gender-age groups, plus additional weighting on education attainment to align the sample distribution with the "micro-census" conducted by the Russian State Statistical Service (Rosstat) in 2015. The sampling details and response rates are included in Appendix B.

Our analysis focuses on questions asking respondents to evaluate the performance of, first, President Putin and subsequently the regional authorities during the first wave of the pandemic:

Now let's think about how the governing authorities have responded to the COVID pandemic. How would you rate the performance of President Putin and regional authorities in handling the crisis?

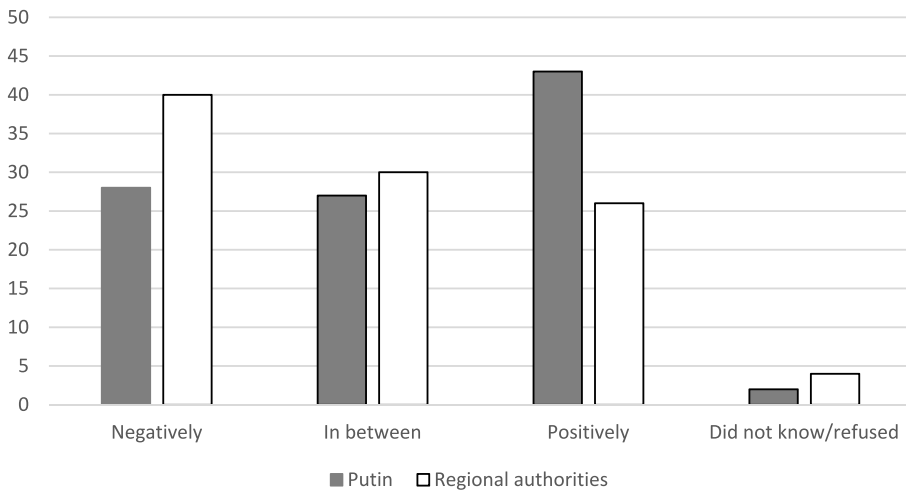


Figure 1. Distribution (in percentages) of responses to the question: “How would you rate the performance of President Putin and the regional authorities in handling the crisis?” *Note:* Pearson chi-2 = 385.0690; Pr = 0.000.

Responses to the performance questions provide the main test of H1: *Putin should be relatively more positively assessed than regional authorities for his performance during the pandemic.* As can be seen from the aggregate responses in [Figure 1](#), they support that hypothesis. President Putin’s performance was more highly evaluated than that of the regional authorities. Over 40% percent of respondents were positive about President Putin’s handling of the pandemic, compared to just one quarter who evaluated the performance of regional authorities positively. The obverse was true for negative attitudes: only 28% of those surveyed viewed President Putin’s performance negatively compared to 40% percent of respondents who evaluated the performance of local authorities negatively.

We also analyze the attitudes of those respondents (roughly half of the sample) whose responses differed across both questions. [Figure 2](#) summarizes the distribution of respondents whose attitudes moved in a positive or negative direction when asked about the performance of regional authorities.

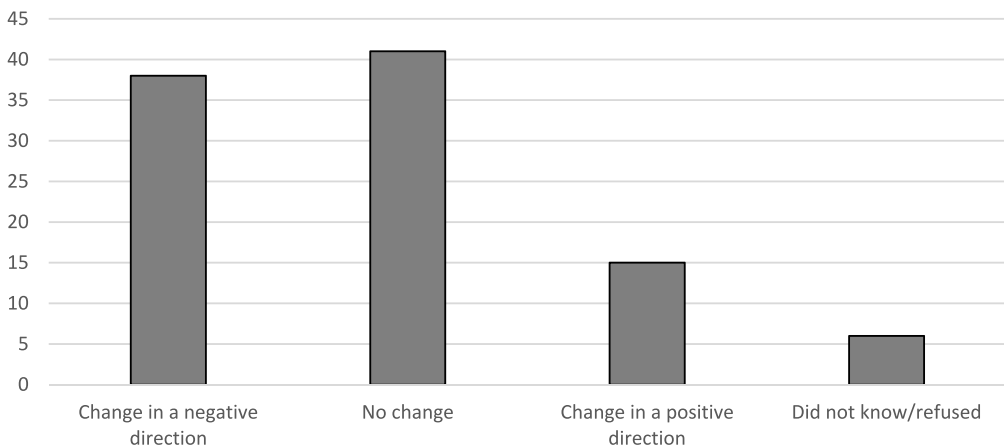


Figure 2. Difference in respondents’ assessment (in percentages) of the performance of regional authorities compared to their assessment of President Putin’s COVID-19 performance. *Note:* “Did not know/refused: includes answers to one or both questions.

Consistent with the distribution of frequencies in Figure 1, the largest increase (38%) was amongst those whose attitudes became more negative when asked about the performance of regional authorities. This reinforces support for H1.

Given the ordering of the response categories for both performance questions, we use ordinal logistic analysis to regress the responses on a variety of explanatory attitudinal, political, and socio-economic predictors, which we use to operationalize H2–H5. We also control for a range of political efficacy (internal and external) as well as socio-tropic (prospective attitudes about Russia's future economic prosperity), socio-economic, and demographic variables – age, religiosity, state – versus private-sector employment, wealth, health, education, gender, and place of residence – which feature in the extant comparative research on public responses to pandemic policies. Results from this research suggest that these variables affect public responses to pandemic policies (DiGiovanni

Table 1. Ordinal logistic regression of the performance of president Putin and regional authorities in handling the COVID-19 pandemic.

	Putin	Regional authority	Difference in responses
<i>COVID-19 impact (H2)</i>			
Negative impact on finances	−0.46** (.167)	−0.59*** (.155)	−0.09 (.158)
<i>Political support (H3)</i>			
Support Putin	1.90*** (.226)	0.42* (.185)	−1.12*** (.182)
<i>Ideological division (H4)</i>			
Support traditional values	0.43* (.165)	−0.01 (.151)	−0.13 (.157)
Support isolation from West	0.35 (.189)	0.10 (.175)	−0.15 (.180)
Support democracy and market	0.11 (.186)	0.58** (.176)	0.52** (.151)
Support individual responsibility (health)	0.31 (.180)	0.32* (.166)	0.16 (.174)
<i>COVID policy (H5)</i>			
Protect economy	−0.60*** (.157)	−0.47** (.146)	−0.09 (.152)
<i>Controls</i>			
No political influence (internal efficacy)	0.10 (.160)	0.41** (.147)	0.19 (.148)
Government is not responsive (external efficacy)	−1.20*** (.180)	−0.54** (.172)	0.34* (.171)
Country worse off (prospective)	−0.70*** (.179)	−0.61*** (.161)	−0.16 (.161)
Young (18–24)	−0.71* (.295)	0.34 (.283)	0.79** (.300)
Churchgoer	0.30 (.158)	0.12 (.149)	−0.29 (.149)
Poor	0.20 (.179)	0.11 (.179)	0.12 (.182)
State official	1.05** (.308)	0.47 (.316)	−0.11 (.212)
Sick	−0.50 (.290)	0.02 (.271)	0.46 (.301)
Higher education	−0.05 (.150)	−0.02 (.139)	0.00 (.138)
Women	0.30 (.162)	0.13 (.152)	−0.22 (.151)
Rural	0.35 (.205)	0.23 (.179)	−0.05 (.171)
Number	1,172	1,151	1,133
Pseudo r-square	0.27	0.10	0.07

P < 0.05 *; P < 0.01 **; P < 0.001***. Respondents who did not know or refused to answer are excluded from the analysis.

et al. 2004; Blake, Blendon, and Viswanath 2010; Kumar 2012; Bol et al. 2020; Soderborg and Muhtadi 2020). These variables appear in binary form, and we provide definitions and descriptive statistics of each variable in Appendix C. The results for hypotheses H2–H5 are summarized in Table 1.

First, we consider the results for H2, in which we posit that *even direct experience* of COVID-19 and of its economic effects will have a differentially negative effect on evaluations of regional authorities as compared to Putin. This provides a stronger test of the overall character of blame attribution, in that we consider whether Putin was more successful than regional authorities in avoiding blame from those most affected by the COVID-19 strategy. We assess this with the question:

What has been the COVID pandemic's direct impact on the economic situation of you or your family?

Here, the evidence is mixed. As can be seen from the statistically significant negative coefficients in Table 1, Putin did not avoid criticism for the economic hardship that COVID-19 created. At the same time, however, even greater blame was directed at regional authorities. In substantive probabilistic terms, citizens whose finances were adversely affected by COVID-19 were 14 percentage points more likely than those unaffected to evaluate the performance of regional authorities negatively, as opposed to 6 percentage points more likely to evaluate Putin's performance negatively (see Figure 3). Therefore, our survey provides some support for H2, but reveals a weakness of Russia's electoral authoritarianism in entirely deflecting blame on economic questions. Putin was not able to escape blame in a system where power is highly centralized and personalized, and where regional authorities ordinarily enjoy little independence from the federal executive.

However, as we noted above, reliance on personal experience may be of greater magnitude in electoral authoritarian regimes where other powerful heuristics are absent. We turn next therefore to the theorized underpinnings of how Russians attribute blame, beginning with the importance of the personalisation of politics in electoral authoritarian regimes. From this perspective, views of the president may act as a proxy for the sort of partisan and ideological/policy divisions that structure opinion in established democracies. Thus, to explore H3 (*Putin's own supporters should be less likely to hold positive performance evaluations of regional authorities as compared to their*

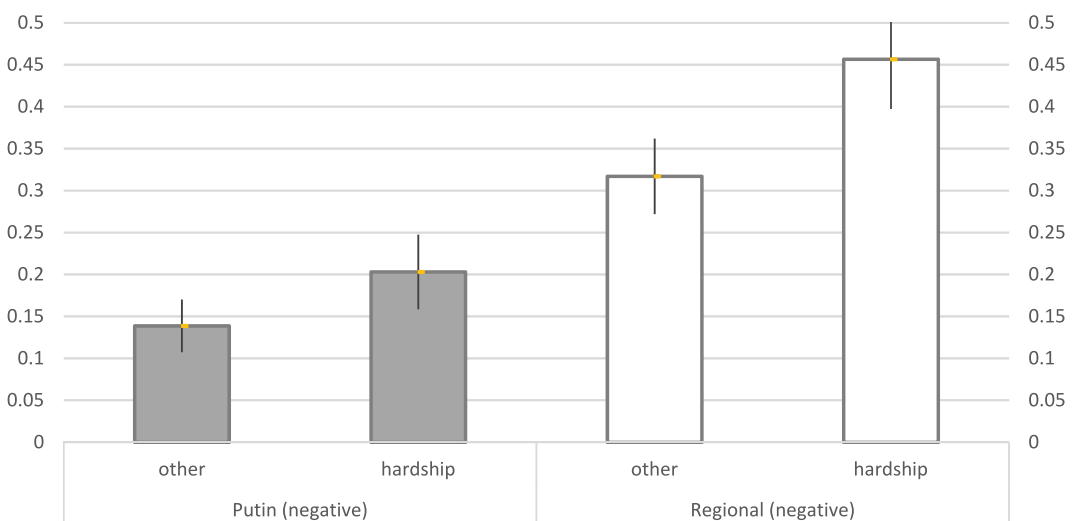


Figure 3. Probability that respondents who experienced economic hardship would evaluate Putin and regional authorities negatively (margins with 95% confidence intervals [CIs]). Note: "Other" includes respondents who were enriched or unaffected financially by COVID-19. In the text, we report the difference in the predicted probabilities between "hardship" and "other".

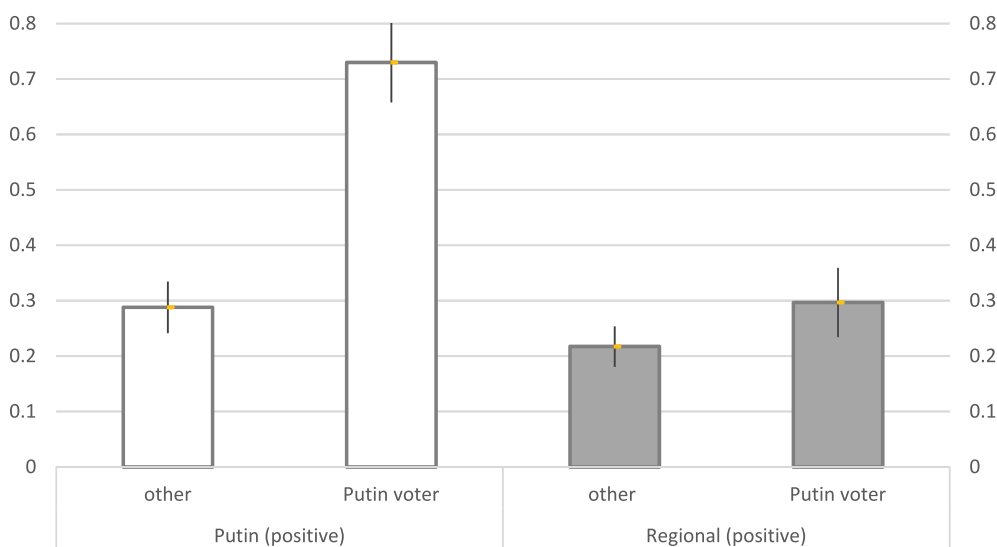


Figure 4. Probability that Putin’s voters would positively evaluate the performance of Putin and regional authorities in handling the COVID-19 pandemic (margins with 95% CIs). *Note:* “Other” includes respondents who support alternative candidates, are undecided or do not intend to vote. In the text, we report the difference in predicted probabilities between “Putin voter” and “other”.

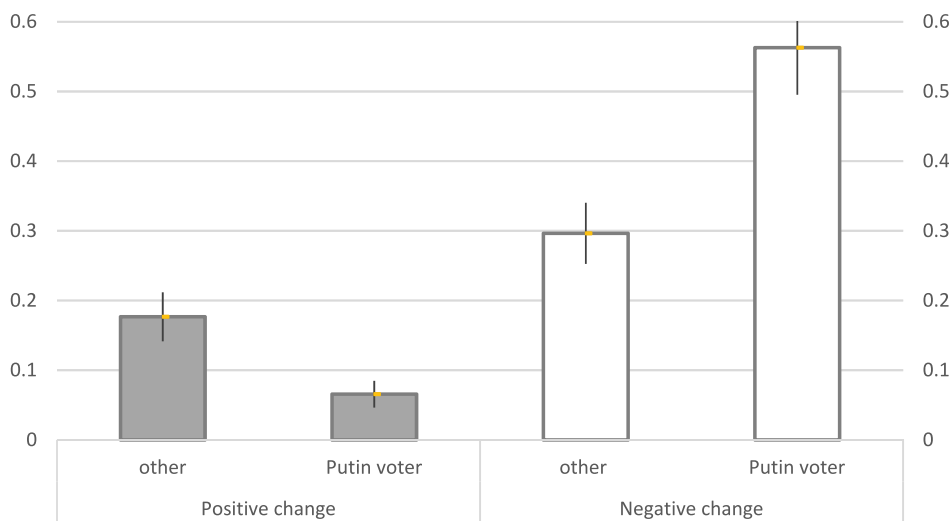


Figure 5. Probability that Putin supporters (compared to the supporters of other leaders) would change their evaluation in a positive or negative direction when asked about regional authorities (margins with 95% CIs). *Note:* “Other” includes respondents who support alternative candidates, are undecided or do not intend to vote. In the text, we report the difference in predicted probabilities between “Putin voter” and “other”.

evaluations of Putin), we estimate the effect of political support for Vladimir Putin by asking: “If there were a presidential election tomorrow, which of these candidates would you be most likely to vote for?”

We find strong confirming evidence for this hypothesis. Putin’s own voters were more likely to differentiate evaluations of the COVID-19 performance of Putin and regional authorities. As Table 1 shows, they evaluated the president’s COVID-19 performance much more positively.

The predicted probabilities of these results illustrate this clearly (see [Figures 4–5](#)). Holding all the variables in the multivariate model at their means, Putin voters were 44 percentage points more likely than non-Putin voters to evaluate his performance positively, while they were only 8 percentage points more likely than non-Putin voters to view the performance of regional authorities positively (see [Figure 4](#)). This is also evident from the results on the difference in responses across both questions. As can be seen in [Figure 5](#), Putin voters were significantly more likely to change their response in a negative direction when asked about the performance of regional authorities. In substantive probabilistic terms, they were 27 percentage points more likely than other respondents to differentiate the performance of regional authorities negatively, and 11 percentage points less likely to evaluate their performance positively. Therefore, despite the significant erosion in the power of regional authorities during Putin's time in office, Putin's own supporters appeared more willing to hold regional authorities to account for their operational responsibility for COVID-19 policy responses. This contrasts with voters who supported Putin's presidential opponents: Alexey Navalny, Grigoriy Yavlinsky, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, Gennady Zyuganov. They were significantly more likely to attribute blame to Vladimir Putin and regional authorities than all other respondents, and were especially critical of Putin's performance.⁴ In this respect, the institutional differentiation within Russia's system of electoral authoritarianism appears to have facilitated blame attribution elsewhere for his most loyal supporters.

However, as we argued above, the personalization of blame attribution that we observe is entirely compatible in electoral authoritarian contexts with the weakness of other heuristics used by citizens, particularly ideological and policy considerations. Thus we hypothesize (*H4a*), *ideological divisions will not form the basis for citizens' evaluations of Putin's performance*. Indeed, if Putin's efforts to shift blame to regional authorities were successful, we would expect (*H4b*), *if ideology is to divide evaluations, this should be found at the regional level to which Putin has passed responsibility*.

We estimate the effect of ideological divisions by analyzing support for the following statements on evaluations of the performance of Putin and regional authorities:

Young people today don't have enough respect for traditional values.

Russia should remain isolated as far as possible from the West.

Tell us, please, what do you think about the idea that a democracy, in which multiple parties compete for power, is the best system for governing Russia. And what do you think about the idea that a market economy, in which there is private property and economic freedom for entrepreneurs, is the best system for Russia?

The biggest reason people in Russia become unhealthy is because they make poor choices that affect their health.

Here, the evidence does indeed point to the weakness of partisan and ideological divisions limiting political mobilization around questions of performance (*H4a* and *H4b*). Notwithstanding high-profile incidents of protest against COVID-19 policies,⁵ none of the ideological variables capturing traditional values, anti-Western attitudes, support for democracy and the market, and anti-statist approaches to health care significantly predicted attitudes towards Putin's performance. Similarly, our control for religiosity had little effect. Only at the regional level did attitudes to democracy and the market correlate significantly with support for the performance of regional authorities (see [Table 1](#)). Holding all the variables in the model at their means, respondents who supported both the free market and democracy were 10 percentage points more likely to support the actions of regional authorities, and they were significantly more likely to change their judgements in a positive direction when asked about the performance of regional authorities ([Table 1](#)). However, even at the regional level, we find little evidence to suggest that these ideological divides were mobilized by partisan attachments. Interaction terms combining support for opposition leaders and the

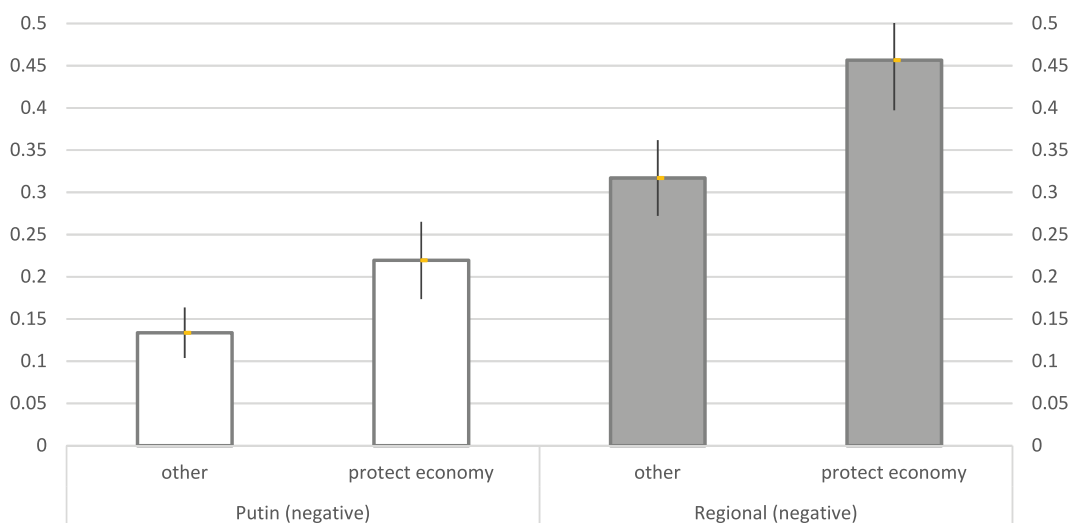


Figure 6. Probability that respondents who favored protecting jobs over health would evaluate Putin and regional authorities negatively (margins with 95% CIs). *Note:* “Other” includes respondents who support health protection measures or did not take a strong position either way. In the text, we report the difference in predicted probabilities between “protect economy” and “other”.

ideological divide on democracy and the market were insignificant determinants of attitudes towards the performance of regional authorities. One exception was the Khabarovsk region, where local opposition to Moscow over the decision to arrest its governor, Sergey Furgal,⁶ appeared to politicize evaluations of COVID-19 performance.⁷ Respondents from this region had amongst the most positive evaluations of the performance of regional authorities.⁸

Finally, we consider the effects of policy divisions over how to handle COVID-19 on blame attribution. We addressed this issue (H5) through the following question:

It is important to preserve people’s jobs even if it means risking infection from the COVID virus.

Our results indicate that Putin’s strategy to push responsibility onto regional authorities for deciding how to balance suppression versus the economy – an issue that became strongly entangled in ideological and party competition in many Western democracies – was relatively successful. Putin did not escape criticism – respondents supportive of protecting jobs were more likely to evaluate Putin’s performance negatively than those who prioritized health – but he fared better than regional authorities. Consistent with H5, respondents who prioritized the economy were 14 percentage points more likely than those who prioritized health to evaluate regional authorities negatively; the difference, in contrast, was 9 percentage points for negative evaluations of Putin’s performance (see Figure 6).

Therefore, this analysis does provide support for our theoretical expectation that blame attribution by citizens in an electoral authoritarian regime such as Russia should have distinctive characteristics: personalization of support for Putin drives blame to other actors among his supporters, and in the absence of ideological, policy, and partisan cues among citizens this gave Putin further leeway in his blame-deflection strategy.

Conclusion

The analysis we have presented has highlighted how effectively and with what limitations Putin's blame avoidance strategy has operated and how that strategy interacted with the ways in which Russian citizens have assigned institutional blame to their political leaders. In general, his political strategy to pass responsibility to regional authorities appears to have been successful during the first wave of COVID-19. Our findings generally point to the greater likelihood of citizens to apportion blame to their regional rulers. This is explained in terms of Putin's personal appeal, and the weakness of ideological divisions and partisan cues.

Our argument is that authoritarian and democratic systems have quite different and arguably mirror-image mechanisms for citizens to hold governments to account and for governments to avoid carrying the blame for policy failure. Democratic systems have a variety of strong accountability mechanisms, including a free media to inform citizens and party competition that provides alternatives, which can ultimately lead to poor performance being punished by voters. At the same time, as we increasingly witness in many democracies, intense partisanship and ideological attachment supported by a media landscape that leads ideologues and partisans to be informed only about "facts" that accord with their existing views, may play a major role in diminishing citizens' reception and perception of negative performance. Moreover, in a highly polarized policy context, one side's performance failure may be the other side's success. These democratic minuses frequently occur in an institutional landscape – federalism, coalition governments, executive-legislative "cohabitation" (Morgan 1986) – where blame for policy performance can be readily shifted to other responsible political actors. Democracy may be the best system of accountability, but that does not mean – and perhaps increasingly so – that governments will not be able to act with impunity.

Authoritarian politicians such as Putin, we have argued, have their own resources and constraints regarding performance evaluations. The relative absence of a free media and competitive party system in authoritarian systems leaves their rulers less challenged, and citizens may have to rely much more on their own often isolated experiences of a crisis to make their minds up about who should take responsibility. In this context, as we have shown, weak and dependent institutions can be used effectively to shoulder the blame. However, rulers in these systems are also left with fewer levers of citizen loyalty to draw on, such that strong evidence of performance failure may lead to rapid tipping points in public evaluations, with consequences not just for the regime's leadership but for the regime itself.

Although our results show that the Kremlin was largely able to mitigate these challenges, it did not escape blame entirely. Citizens whose finances were negatively affected by COVID-19 were still more likely to evaluate Putin's performance critically (notwithstanding the fact that their negative evaluations of regional authorities were more marked). Some authoritarian societies have proved highly vulnerable to their failures to manage major national emergencies: the Chernobyl' crisis, for instance, had a significant impact on the *perestroika* reform program advanced by Mikhail Gorbachev (Brown 1996), and the defeat of Argentina in the Falklands/Malvinas war was arguably fatal for the Galtieri regime (Pion-Berlin 1985). The first wave of COVID-19 did not provide such a trigger, but it potentially posed similar threats.

The extent of this danger is further evident in the connection between negative evaluation of Putin's performance and negative judgements of the system of power more generally. We evaluate this possibility in a further regression analysis, which brings out a nuance in the multivariate analysis presented in Table 1. Consistent with those findings, this time treating the evaluative performance questions as independent variables, we find that respondents holding negative views of Putin's COVID-19 performance were much more likely to assess negatively – to a far *greater* degree than regional authorities – the ability of the regime to deliver for society as a whole (see Appendix D for the full model). Holding all the other variables at their means,

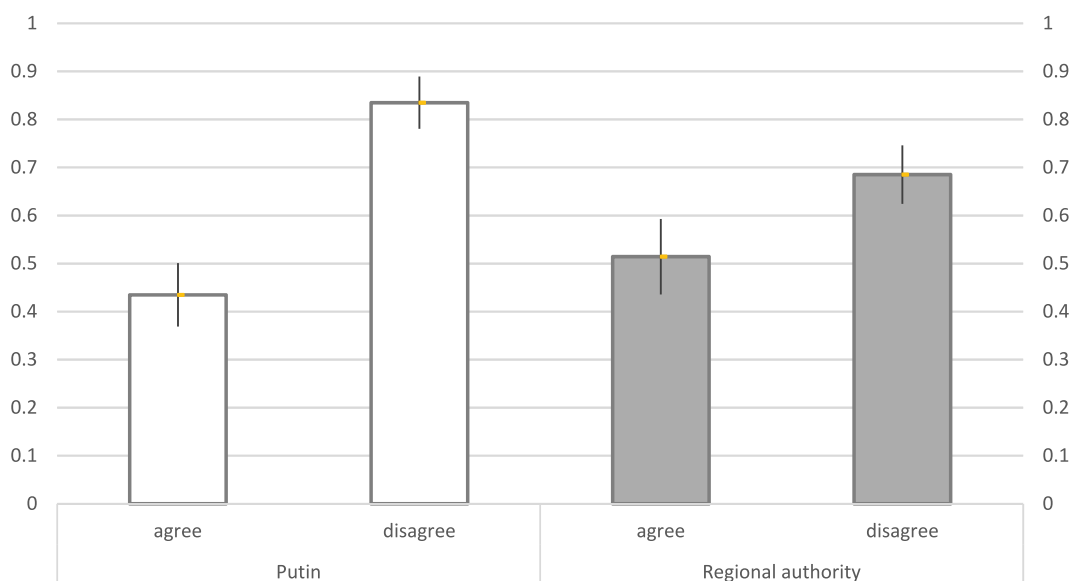


Figure 7. Probability that respondents who evaluate the COVID-19 performance of Putin and regional authorities negatively would agree or disagree that the Russian government acts for the benefit of the majority (margins with 95% CIs). *Note:* In the text, we report the difference in predicted probabilities between “agree” and “disagree”.

those who evaluated Putin’s COVID-19 performance negatively (as opposed to those who evaluated positively) were 40 percentage points more likely to disagree (than agree) that the Russian government acted for the benefit of the majority, compared to just 17 percentage points for regional authorities (Figure 7). This connection between COVID-19 performance and support for the efficacy of the regime highlights the danger that crises like this one can pose for authoritarian systems. Consistent with Easton’s analysis (1975), when diffuse support for a political system is weak, as is often the case in authoritarian polities, extraordinary challenges can undermine confidence in the entire political system. This might explain why the Russian authorities were even less willing to take an assertive position on anti-COVID-19 suppression policies during the second wave.

Consideration therefore of the vulnerability of authoritarian regimes to a major public health emergency such as COVID-19 is of significant broader interest to political scientists, as it may give an indication of the extent to which these regimes have the resources of support in society and/or are vulnerable to exogenous shocks. While Putin was largely successful in deflecting blame over COVID-19 during the first wave, he and the regime may well still lack the resilience – and impunity – that politicians, for good and bad reasons, are provided in democracies. Further waves of COVID-19 infections, coupled with a stagnating economy, have the potential to provide a sterner test.

Notes

1. For a full outline of the timeline for the progression of COVID-19 and policy responses to it, see Appendix A.
2. Aspects of political culture may also help. In the Russian context, for example, Putin may have been able to activate the “good tsar” frame (Siegelbaum 1979; Sirotkina and Zavadskaya 2020), in which both the leader and public assign responsibility to government ministers and local officials that the good tsar is trying heroically to control.
3. The RDDGen method was used to generate random numbers from open-source records of landline and mobile numbers. No quotas were set on the distribution between landlines and mobile phones.

4. Regression analysis that replaces Putin voters with opposition voters—supporters of Navalny, Yavlinsky, Zhirinovskiy, and Zyuganov—reverses the effect of presidential support. Holding all the other variables in the model at their means, opposition voters were 7 percentage points less likely than all other voters to evaluate regional authorities positively, and 23 percentage points less likely to evaluate the performance of Putin positively.
5. For example, in June 2020, ultraconservative Russian priest and coronavirus denier, Father Sergey Romanov, seized a women's monastery by force in defiance of the decision by the authorities to close churches during the pandemic. See "Fighting the 'Satanic Regime': After Falling Out with the Russian Orthodox Church over COVID-19, a Dissident Priest Seizes a Convent in the Urals" at 5. <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2020/06/18/fighting-the-satanic-regime> (accessed 16 December 2020).
6. On 9 July 2020, the governor of Khabarovsk Krai, Sergey Furgal, a member of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democratic Party, was arrested by authorities on charges of involvement in the murder of two businessmen in 2004–2005. This action provoked mass demonstrations in the region that continued for many months.
7. Our sample includes 20 regions out of 85 distributed across the eight federal districts plus the cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg. The sample included the region of Khabarovsk.
8. Forty percent (40%) of Khabarovsk respondents evaluated regional COVID-19 performance positively compared to 23% who responded negatively.

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Appendix A. Timeline of the first wave of COVID-19: January–July 2020

Date	
31 January	first COVID-19 cases reported and closure of Russia's Far East border with China
15 February	first official cases of COVID-19 reported
20 February	blanket ban on Chinese citizens entering the country
2 March	first case reported in Moscow and introduction of restrictive measures
15 March	first domestically transmitted infections confirmed
16 March	first anti-crisis package (\$4 billion) proposed to support the economy
19 March	first death recorded
25 March	President Putin announced a "non-working week" (eventually extended to 11 May), and postponed the constitutional vote
27 March	funding for loans to small and medium-sized enterprises introduced and air travel halted
30 March	all border crossings closed; Moscow announced a lockdown, which was followed by other regions
7 April	monthly support for families with children was announced
15 April	a second anti-crisis package to support regional budgets (\$2.5 billion) and small and medium-sized business was introduced
11 May	end of extended period of non-work and of nationally coordinated policy
2 June	a third anti-crisis (\$66.4 billion) package was introduced to support social welfare payments, business loans, transfers to regional governments
9 June	Moscow ended its lockdown
15 July	self-isolation was lifted for foreign visitors

Appendix B. The survey

July/August 2020	Representation: national	Stratification Method	Contact rates	29%
	Sampling frame: publications by the State Statistical Committee (Goskomstat) as of 1 January 2019	<u>Stage 1:</u> The territory of the Russian Federation is divided into 8 federal districts as used in the official statistics of 1 January 2019. 20 primary sampling units (federal subjects or regions) are selected based on probability proportional to population size. Moscow and St. Petersburg are regarded as separate stratum.	Cooperation rates	8%
	Adult population (18+)	<u>Stage 2:</u> Each region is stratified by type of location (urban/rural), with the sample allocated proportionally to each region's urban – rural population.	Completion rates (screening)	54%
		<u>Stage 3:</u> The sample is stratified by gender-age groups.	Completion rates (substantive questions)	87%
		<u>Stage 4:</u> The sample is stratified by regions, population strata, and gender-age groups to set quotas.	Completion rates (overall)	47%
		<u>Respondent Selection</u>		
		Potential respondents were contacted using landlines and mobile phones. No quotas were set on the distribution between landlines and mobile phones. The RDDGen method was used to generate random numbers from the range of landline and mobile def-codes in the selected regions and settlements (population strata) published in https://rossvyaz.ru/deyatelnost/resurs-numeracii/vypiska-iz-reestra-sistemy-i-plana-numeracii ; also mobile numbers available from open-source data bases (e.g. avito, parser, etc.) were used to reach difficult-to-contact respondents.		

Appendix C. Variables in the analysis

Variable	Mean	Median	SD
COVID-19 performance Putin (DV)	2.16	2.00	.839
Question: "Now let's think about how the governing authorities have responded to the COVID pandemic. How would you rate the performance of President Putin in handling the crisis?" 1 = very negatively, negatively; 2 = neither positively nor negatively; 3 = very positively, positively			
COVID-19 performance Regional Authorities (DV)	1.87	2.00	.815
Question: "Now let's think about how the governing authorities have responded to the COVID pandemic. How would you rate the performance of regional authorities in handling the crisis?" 1 = very negatively, negatively; 2 = neither positively nor negatively; 3 = very positively, positively			
Difference in responses (DV)	1.75	2.00	.697
1 = change in a negative direction; 2 = no change; 3 = change in a positive direction			
Negative impact on finances	.50	.00	.500
Question: "Now thinking about the economic situation of you and your immediate family (spouse/partner, parents and children). What has been the COVID pandemic's direct impact on the economic situation of you or your family?" 1 = very negative, negative; 0 = neither positive nor negative, positive, very positive			
Support Putin	.34	.00	.474
Question: "If there were a presidential election tomorrow, which of these candidates would you be most likely to vote for?" 1 = Vladimir Putin; 0 = Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, Gennady Zyuganov, Mikhail Mishustin, Aleksey Navalny, Vladimir Putin, Sergey Sobyannin, Sergey Shoigu, Grigory Yavlinsky, don't know, other			
Support traditional values	.42	.00	.493
Question: "Young people today don't have enough respect for traditional values" 1 = strongly agree; agree 0 = neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree			
Support isolation from West	.28	.00	.448
Question: "Consider the following pair of statements. Can you say which one of these two statements comes closest to your own views: Russia should integrate as far as possible with the West OR Russia should remain isolated as far as possible from the West." 1 = the second opinion rather than the first, definitely the second; 0 = in between, don't know, the first opinion rather than the second, definitely the first			
Support democracy and market	.26	.00	.439
Questions (2): 1) "Tell us, please, what do you think about the idea that a democracy, in which multiple parties compete for power, is the best system for governing Russia?" 2) "And what do you think about the idea that a market economy, in which there is private property and economic freedom to entrepreneurs, is the best system for Russia?" 1 = strong supporter, supporter (on both questions); 0 = strong supporter, supporter (on one question), neither/nor, opponent, strong opponent			
Support individual responsibility (health)	.25	.00	.435
Question: "Consider the following pair of statements. Can you say which one of these two statements comes closest to your own views? The biggest reason people in Russia become unhealthy is because they make poor choices that affect their health OR The biggest reason people in Russia become unhealthy is because things outside of their control affect their health" 1 = the first opinion rather than the second, definitely the first; 0 = in between, don't know, the second opinion rather than the first, definitely the second			
Protect economy	.44	.00	.496
Question: "Please can you say which one of these two statements comes closest to your own views: It is important to preserve people's jobs even if it means risking infection from the COVID virus OR Defeating the virus must take priority over preserving people's jobs" 1 = the first opinion rather than the second, definitely the first; 0 = in between, don't know, the second opinion rather than the first, definitely the second			
No political influence (internal efficacy)	.53	1.00	.499
Question: "People like me have no say in what the government does" 1 = strongly agree, agree; 0 = neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree			
Government is not responsive (external efficacy)	.57	1.00	.495
Question: "The government acts for the benefit of the majority of the society" 1 = disagree, strongly disagree; 0 = neither agree nor disagree, strongly agree, agree			

(Continued)

(Continued).

Variable	Mean	Median	SD
Country worse off (prospective)	.44	.00	.496
Question: "And thinking now of the country as a whole, over the next five years, do you think that standards of living will fall a great deal from their current level, fall a little, stay about the same as now, rise a little, or rise a lot from their current level?"			
1 = will fall a great deal, will fall a little; 0 = will stay about the same, will rise a little, will rise a lot			
Young (18–24)	.07	.00	.260
1 = 18–24 years of age 0 = 25–90 years of age			
Churchgoer	.56	1.00	.496
Question: "How often do you attend church services connected with your religion?"			
1 = once a week or more, less often but at least once a month, several times a year, less often than once a year, varies; 0 = never, not religious			
Poor	.33	.00	.469
Which of the following describes your family's financial situation?			
1 = not enough money to pay for food, clothes; 0 = from not enough money to pay for durables to can afford everything			
State official	.10	.00	.301
1 = state servant; 0 = public sector worker, private, self-employed, never worked			
Sick	.10	.00	.306
Question: "Tell me please, how would you evaluate your health"			
1 = very bad, bad; 0 = average, good, very good			
Higher education	.32	.00	.467
1 = Higher education, degree; 0 = vocational, secondary, low			
Women	.54	1.00	.498
1 = women; 0 = men			
Rural	.24	.00	.426
1 = rural; 0 = urban			

Appendix D. Logistic regression of the question: “The government acts for the benefit of the majority of the society.”

	Model (1)	Model (2)
Putin (COVID-19 performance)	−0.942*** (.138)	
Regional authority (COVID-19 performance)		−0.360** (.120)
Support Putin	−1.54*** (.222)	−1.950*** (.212)
Support traditional values	−0.080 (.193)	−0.212 (.192)
Support isolation from West	0.315 (.229)	0.225 (.236)
Support democracy and market	−0.265 (.204)	−0.196 (.200)
Support individual responsibility (health)	−0.181 (.215)	−0.251 (.209)
Negative impact on finances	0.133 (.196)	0.214 (.190)
Protect economy	0.150 (.196)	0.325 (.191)
Controls		
No political influence	0.161 (.191)	0.260 (.186)
Country worse off (prospective)	0.652** (.207)	0.761*** (.199)
Young (18–24)	−0.150 (.330)	0.059 (.313)
Churchgoer	−0.110 (.190)	−0.304 (.186)
Poor	0.345 (.230)	0.272 (.226)
State official	0.427 (.297)	0.210 (.316)
Sick	0.554 (.390)	0.744* (.375)
Higher education	−0.066 (.177)	−0.050 (.175)
Women	−0.400* (.191)	−0.511** (.188)
Rural	−0.531* (.224)	−0.550* (.228)
Number	1,156	1,135
Pseudo r-square	0.32	0.29

P < 0.05 *; P < 0.01 **; P < 0.001***. The dependent variable is coded 1 for those who disagree with the statement; 0 includes those who agree or take no position. We exclude respondents who did not know or refused to answer from both the dependent variable and the two explanatory variables: Model 1: Putin (COVID-19 performance); Model 2: Regional authority (COVID-19 performance).