

Shocks, the State, and Support Under Electoral Authoritarianism



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Abstract

The literature on authoritarian politics emphasises the threat unexpected shocks such as economic downturns or political and security challenges pose for regime stability. However, we know relatively little about how incumbents can influence the process by which citizens evaluate government performance and attribute blame in non-democratic regimes. To gain insights into these questions, I study how government responses to collective shocks to citizen income and security influence support for electoral authoritarian regimes, i.e. those that combine authoritarian practices with multiparty elections. I propose that when shocks make information about government performance publicly observable, illiberal governments can take action that moderates or ameliorates their effect on the levels of support they enjoy. Little constrained by constitutional rules, critical media or coalition partners, electoral authoritarians can use tactical redistribution to appease the discontented electorate on the one hand and propaganda to manipulate attributions of responsibility for the shock on the other. Repression against opposition parties and activists in this context is used rarely, and only after targeted transfers and propaganda have failed to prevent support from eroding and crowds from taking to the streets. The thesis illustrates arguments with the case of contemporary Russia – an electoral authoritarian regime with high levels of personalist rule – and leverages evidence from government and citizen responses to natural disasters, economic downturns, terror attacks and electoral protests. Empirical analysis combines original datasets on the framing of economic news in Kremlin-controlled media, the forced dismissals of government actors, the provision of tactical redistribution, and the use of repression against opposition parties and activists with over 60,000 responses from nationally and regionally representative public opinion surveys. Bringing new data and evidence from individual-level surveys to bear on the debate of how non-democratic governments manage public opinion, the thesis makes an original contribution to scholarship on authoritarian vulnerability and resilience.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Collective shocks to citizen income and security make information about government performance publicly observable. A large literature recognises the threat these pose to the popularity and stability of electoral authoritarian regimes, i.e. those that combine authoritarian practices with multiparty elections.¹ However, the empirical evidence suggests that mass support for illiberal incumbents is quite resilient. The expectation that economic, political and even stochastic shocks such as natural disasters should undermine support for incumbents under electoral autocracies has been repeatedly shown to be false. Indeed, the disconnect between illiberal incumbents' performance in office and the levels of support they enjoy presents one of the most persistent questions in the literature on authoritarian politics.

Examples abound. The Mexican Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) continued to govern for two decades after the onset of the debt crisis in the early 1980s compromised its ability to distribute public goods and patronage.² Political and economic crisis in many African countries after 1990 did not lead to regime change either, allowing parties such as Frelimo in Mozambique and ZANU-PF in Zimbabwe to sustain their hegemonic position.³ Recep Erdoğan of Turkey and Hugo Chavez of Venezuela are also two examples of illiberal incumbents who – despite experiencing political shocks in the form of coups and counter-revolutions – have been able to amass and maintain high levels of popular support for themselves and their parties. In recent years, Russia's Vladimir Putin also made headlines

¹ See for example: (Flores and Smith 2013; Gasiorowski 1995; Geddes 1999a; Haggard and Kaufman 1995; Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland 2015; Magaloni 2010; Remmer 1991; Rose and Mishler 2010)

² (Magaloni 2006, 13)

³ (Levitsky and Way 2012)

for enjoying approval ratings as high as 89% during a period of economic contraction, and even shortly after the value of the national currency collapsed.

According to Milan Svolik, popular support for illiberal incumbents such as Erdoğan, Chavez and Putin has facilitated the most prevalent form of democratic breakdown since the end of the Cold War: the subversion of democracy by incumbents.⁴ Popular support for themselves and their regimes has enabled initially democratically elected incumbents to enact constitutional reform and adopt legislation that consolidated electoral authoritarianism with the consent of the governed. But while the existing scholarship finds that popular support for incumbents plays a critical role in democratic erosion and authoritarian regime stability, the mechanisms that make support so resilient to collective shocks to citizen income and security remain poorly understood.

Why then do illiberal incumbents' approval ratings traditionally exhibit little responsiveness to shocks – be it economic, political or stochastic – that take place under their watch?⁵ Is it because citizens fail to update their assessments of government performance in response to actual conditions? Or is the effect of shocks on support weak because citizens systematically misappropriate blame, so that evaluations of poor performance do not colour political assessments, and support for government? Moreover, what role do government policies, such as the provision of targeted aid or the use of propaganda, and repression play in moderating or ameliorating the political consequences of shocks, and helping incumbents sustain high levels of support? These are some of the central questions I address in this thesis. Answers to them have important implications not only for

⁴ (Svolik 2017)

⁵ (Geddes 1999b; Magaloni 2006, 13)

how we understand regime stability under illiberal rule but also for how we think about the origins and consequences of government approval outside of established democracies.⁶

1.1 The Point of Departure

For many years, the study of authoritarian politics was the study of elites, of dictators' ruling coalitions and of the institutions they established.⁷ The views and opinions of ordinary citizens remained one of the silent voices in this scholarship, which understood regime support and approval as insincere or driven predominantly by fear of repression.⁸ For many years it was assumed that fear encouraged citizens in electoral autocracies to hide their true dissatisfaction with the regime, give false statements to pollsters and keep away from the streets.⁹

There is no doubt that non-democratic incumbents far more readily engage their repressive apparatus against opponents and electorates than is the case with democratically accountable governments.¹⁰ Yet, there are several problems with the view that support for illiberal incumbents, as documented in public opinion surveys for example, is the result of social desirability bias alone, driven predominantly by fear of repression. First, novel survey methods have enabled scholars to document that the popularity of electoral authoritarian incumbents does in fact reflect public opinion. In a series of survey experiments that took place in Russia in early 2015, for example, Tim Frye and his co-authors documented that President Putin's popularity accurately reflects the views of Russians. Second, and despite government-imposed limitations, citizens under illiberal rule do not necessarily shy away

⁶ (Enikolopov, Petrova, and Zhuravskaya 2011; Guriev and Treisman 2015a; Magaloni 2006; Przeworski et al. 2000)

⁷ (Geddes 1999b; Magaloni 2010; De Mesquita et al. 2003; Svoboda 2012; Svoboda 2009)

⁸ (Magaloni 2006, 13)

⁹ (Kuran 1989, 1991, 1995; Lohmann 1994)

¹⁰ (DeNardo 1985b; Kricheli, Livne, and Magaloni 2011; Lohmann 1994)

from the streets.¹¹ Lankina and Voznaya for example estimated that from March 2007 to December 2012 alone, just under 5,000 protest events with a combined total of about 2 million protesters took place in Russia, a classic example of an electoral authoritarian regime.¹² Finally, existing research shows that compared to their predecessors, modern electoral autocracies use violence to intimidate public opinion and opponents only sparingly. Guriev and Treisman for example, document that the share of non-democracies engaging in mass atrocities against their populations declined from 22% in 1975 to 6% in 2012.¹³

For these reasons, my theoretical argument stems from the assumption that the support many illiberal incumbents enjoy today is neither a reflection of social desirability alone nor the single result of repression. Drawing on influential research on the origins of support for illiberal rule, I propose that it is incumbents' ability to deliver growth, stability and security that makes the masses better off uniting with the ruling regime rather than rebelling against it.¹⁴ Like voters in advanced democracies, I assume that citizens under electoral autocracies care about economic performance, street order and protection from security threats and attacks as a means of assessing incumbent competence.¹⁵ And, just like in democracies, positive portrayals of the status quo in national media and a consenting opposition play a key role in sustaining mass support for illiberal rule.¹⁶

¹¹ (Robertson 2011, 2013)

¹² (Lankina and Voznaya 2015, 332)

¹³ (Guriev and Treisman 2015a, 3)

¹⁴ (Desai, Olofsgård, and Yousef 2009; Geddes 1999b; Guriev and Treisman 2015a; Haggard and Kaufman 1995; Hansen 1974; Magaloni 2006)

¹⁵ See for example: (Ansolabehere, Meredith, and Snowberg 2014; Fiorina 1978; Kinder and Kiewiet 1981)

¹⁶ The literature from advanced democracies suggests that when the opposition does not contradict the incumbent's rhetoric at times of crisis, popular opinion is more likely to rally round around the flag – and the government. See for example: (Brody and Shapiro 1991; Lai and Reiter 2005)

Yet, if it is illiberal incumbents' ability to deliver that makes them popular, the challenge is not to explain 'why citizens support regimes they disapprove of'¹⁷ but to understand why citizens approve of illiberal incumbents even when shocks make information about government malpractices publicly observable. To address this question, my thesis shifts the focus away from elites and their institutions. Reflecting a recent trend in the study of authoritarian politics,¹⁸ I study the interaction between power-holders and their constituents, as this takes place under electoral authoritarianism. In electoral authoritarian regimes, which constitute the modal form of non-democracy today, a democratic façade in the form of multiparty elections, some pockets of independent media, and a semi-independent judiciary and legislature cover authoritarian rule.¹⁹

1.2 The Argument in Brief

Illiberal incumbents care about the levels of popular support they enjoy. Waning levels of support increase the costs of holding on to power, encourage elite defections and could force governments to use widespread fraud to win elections. To win the support of the governed, Guriev and Treisman argue, electoral authoritarians need to convince the masses that they are competent, i.e. that they are able to promote citizen wellbeing, street order and security. In deciding whether to support the government or not, citizens draw on evidence from their own living standards, information in the national media and the opposition's rhetoric.²⁰ While restrictions on fundamental rights to expression and assembly, state control over the national media and offline and online censorship prevent information about

¹⁷ (Magaloni 2006, 13)

¹⁸ (Cantoni et al. 2017; Chen, Pan, and Xu 2016; Neundorff, Gerschewski, and Olar 2017; Pan 2015; Stockmann and Gallagher 2011)

¹⁹ (Brownlee 2007; Linz 2000, 34)

²⁰ (Guriev and Treisman 2015a, 3)

malpractices from becoming known, unexpected shocks ensure that information about government performance is publicly observable.²¹

In the context of this thesis, I see shocks as collective and unexpected events with negative consequences for citizen income and security. Natural disasters, economic downturns, security and political challenges such as terror attacks and electoral protests for example, emerge often unexpectedly, and could destabilise the equilibrium on which stable electoral autocracies rely. I assume that shocks reveal two types of information: information about the factors that have led to the emergence of the shocks – the collapse of the national currency, for example, can reveal poor economic management – and information about government efforts to address the consequences of the shock. However, as far as the masses are concerned, I do not need to and do not assume that for shocks to undermine support citizens should blame the government for causing the shocks to occur. I do, however, assume that citizens observe government responses to shocks and decide whether their grievances have been satisfactorily addressed.

Shocks, however, can also reduce the resources autocrats have available in order to invest in public goods and services. Natural disasters, financial crises and terror attacks for example, disrupt economic production. Moreover, shocks compromise incumbents' ability to either lie or censor information about the shock. Evidence from citizens' lower consumption or heightened sense of insecurity, for example, constitutes a reality that cannot be easily dismissed by government propaganda. Finally, by making information about a government's record in office publicly observable, and exposing malpractices, shocks allow opposition parties and activists to voice concerns about government performance. When citizens perceive that the regime is failing to deliver growth, security and stability – either

²¹ (Brownlee 2007; Levitsky and Way 2002; Magaloni 2010; Ross 2015)

because of rent extraction or because of government incompetence – they are more likely to defect from the ruling party and mobilise against the regime.²²

Yet illiberal incumbents are not powerless in the face of adversity. My theoretical argument proposes that, in response to collective, negative shocks to citizen income and security illiberal governments can take action that moderates or ameliorates its effect on the levels of support they enjoy. I attribute incongruence between shocks and unfaltering support for government to power-holders' strategic response to shocks, and to their ability to manage public opinion. More specifically, I propose that, little constrained by constitutional rules, critical media or rival factions and coalition partners, electoral authoritarians can use propaganda to manipulate the attribution of responsibility for any shock on the one hand and tactical redistribution to appease the discontented electorate on the other. However, while the government always uses propaganda, its ability to invest in tactical redistribution is subject to budget constraints. Repression against opposition parties and activists in this context is used rarely, and only after targeted transfers and propaganda have failed to prevent support from eroding and crowds from taking to the streets.

Propaganda, the first strategy under scrutiny, is understood here broadly as 'any action taken by the government to make the message that the incumbent is competent more convincing to the public'.²³ Propaganda could thus involve censorship, the manipulation of information in state-controlled media or the dismissals of lower-rank officers involved in the management of shocks or crises. *Tactical redistribution* – i.e. the provision of goods, benefits, or relief aid to individuals or regions adversely affected by shocks – is another strategy of interest. Redistribution in this context is tactical in the sense that it is partly used to ameliorate the effect of shocks on the levels of support incumbents enjoy, and is directed

²² (Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland 2015, 766)

²³ (Guriev and Treisman 2015a, 5)

to regions and individuals not based on objective criteria but rather on political considerations. *Repression* is the last policy tool the thesis considers. Relying on Tilly, I view repression as obstacles used by the state or its agents to obstruct individual and collective action by challengers.²⁴ As such, repression is conceptualised along a continuum, with direct physical force marking its most severe or ‘high-intensity’ end. Constraining the opposition’s right to assembly, confiscating opposition resources and denying opposition activists the right to seek office could be classified as ‘low-intensity’ categories of repression.²⁵

The first two policy tools, or instruments considered serve complementary purposes. As already noted, propaganda and tactical redistribution help shore up support for the incumbent. Tactical redistribution not only directly appeases the aggrieved electorate but also helps incumbents claim credit for their response to the shock, thus eliciting both short- and long-term citizen gratitude.²⁶ Propaganda can also help incumbents claim credit for their decisive response to the shock, and shift the blame for its emergence or poor management to other political actors either at home or abroad. If successful, power-holders at the top rungs of a country’s ruling coalition could also eschew punishment and continue to enjoy high levels of approval. Repression, as a substitute for tactical redistribution and propaganda, emerges only after despite government actors’ best efforts incumbents are unable to prevent citizens from withdrawing their support and switching to the opposition. However, repression does not generate support for the regime, as it does not convince the masses that the incumbent is competent. It should thus be used sparingly and only when incumbents have failed to shore up support, so as to prevent unrest from spreading.

²⁴ (Tilly 1995, 136)

²⁵ (Davenport, Johnston, and Mueller 2005)

²⁶ (Bechtel and Hainmueller 2011)

The next section considers alternative theories to understanding authoritarian regime resilience in the face of shocks, and illustrates how the argument advanced here incorporates and builds on insights from previous research.

1.3 Alternative Theories

The existing literature reviews a series of factors that could plausibly offset the political consequences of various shocks on the levels of support illiberal incumbents enjoy. While mainly focused on the political consequences of economic crisis, an influential body of scholarship proposes that dictators can withstand shocks if they have proven to be ‘capable’ in earlier times. According to Beatriz Magaloni for example, if the economy has historically been growing under an autocratic regime, voters will be tolerant of economic crises.²⁷ Guriev and Treisman also endorse a similar proposition when they suggest that reputation for incumbent competence can ‘withstand temporary economic downturns if these are not too large’.²⁸ In a work on the consequences of the 2008/09 recession in Russia, Richard Rose and his co-authors also suggested that the passage of time adds to the robustness of a political system, be it democratic or not. These contributions generate the expectation that political support will be less responsive to shocks in long-established regimes, whether democratic or not.²⁹

There are several issues with these propositions. To begin with, evidence from the political consequences of the Great Recession in Europe challenges the assumption that diffuse support for political institutions for example, is resistant to economic downturns – even in long and stable democracies.³⁰ The economic crisis in Greece, for example, one of

²⁷ (Magaloni 2006, 59–60)

²⁸ (Guriev and Treisman 2015a, 6)

²⁹ (Richard Rose and Mishler 2010, 55)

³⁰ The term diffuse support comes from David Easton (Easton 1975). It describes favourable orientations toward domestic institutions and the country’s system of governance. It is different from that of *specific* support, which describes citizens’ positive evaluations of political leaders

the European countries with the richest democratic traditions, saw citizens not only withdraw support from various administrations but also downgrade confidence in parliamentary democracies' ability to deliver as well.³¹ Similarly, masked by theories proposing that the regime's ability to withstand challenges is determined by its historic record, or the passing of time, is the question of how concrete regime performance during periods of crisis affects the electorate's propensity to punish incumbents. To put this differently, should two different regimes – let us simply call them A and B – that have previously exhibited positive economic performance for the same number of years, be equally affected by a comparable economic downturn if incumbent A invests in policies that protect the most socially vulnerable strata but incumbent B does not?

Another account suggests that shocks such as natural disasters, political challenges and economic downturns do not result in political punishment; in fact, regardless of how incumbents respond to them, voters will not defect to opposition parties they do not know well. For Magaloni, voters' defection dilemmas are augmented when the political opposition has rarely – or indeed has never – in the past exercised power. Even if citizens acknowledge that the government was to blame for a shock, or that its response to the shock was poorly coordinated, citizens will ignore or forgive malpractices in the face of such doubts.³² As the saying goes, 'better the devil you know, than the saint you do not'. The greatest challenge this second account presents us with, however, is this: even if citizens do not want to vote for the opposition in the polls because they think opposition leaders are either inexperienced or lack credibility, why do they not simply withdraw attitudinal support for the incumbents? Put differently, why does attitudinal support for the regime or executive approval as recorded

and of their policies, and often translates to high rates of incumbent approval, or trust in their ability to govern.

³¹ (Magalhães 2014; Teixeira, Tsatsanis, and Belchior 2014)

³² (Diaz-Cayeros, Magaloni, and Weingast 2003; Magaloni 2006, 68)

in public opinion surveys and polls remain stable or even increase in the aftermath of collective and negative shocks to income and security?

According to a third approach, for shocks to affect evaluations of government, the national media and the opposition must clearly tell citizens that performance is poor and that the government is to blame.³³ It should therefore come as no surprise that shocks might not affect support under illiberal rule, given that opposition elites are co-opted and censorship could prevent information about the shock from even reaching citizens.³⁴ The simplicity of this argument makes it particularly attractive, especially in an age where illiberal governments enjoy overwhelming control over the press and national media outlets. Yet even in close autocracies, shocks could compromise the government's ability to effectively censor and manipulate information. Failure to inform citizens and evacuate settlements in response to information about impending natural disasters, for example, could increase the death toll from them and aggravate their political consequences even further. The Soviet government's decision not to let its own citizens and the rest of the world know about the disaster in Chernobyl in 1986, for example, increased the death toll due to radiation and harmed the government's reputation internationally. Lying about or downplaying the extent of a shock could also occur a direct cost on government, as personal experience of shocks offers citizens a rare benchmark against which to evaluate the credibility of state propaganda.³⁵ Finally, and despite operating in a field that renders political competition unfair, opposition parties, social movements and independent media under electoral

³³ (Atkeson and Maestas 2014; Maestas et al. 2008)

³⁴ (Guriev and Treisman, 2015)

³⁵ See for example: (Ansolabehere, Meredith, and Snowberg 2014; Atkeson and Maestas 2014; Gartner and Segura 2000; Gartner, Segura, and Wilkening 1997; Guriev and Treisman 2015a; Rosenfeld 2016)

authoritarianism could nonetheless manage to disseminate information about government malpractices, thus spreading awareness about shocks and their consequences.

To summarise, while my approach concurs with the view that (economic) performance plays a paramount role in enabling governments overcome the effects of shocks, I attribute incongruence between objective performance and regime approval to political manipulation and government policies. My argument advances an alternative to approaches that explain the resilience of illiberal incumbents' approval ratings by emphasising the role of prior performance, uncertainty about the opposition and lack of alternative information sources. Nevertheless, I also try to build on the key insights these alternative theories generate. In extensions of my baseline proposition which suggests that government responses to shocks can ameliorate their effects on the levels of support incumbents enjoy, I suggest that state-led propaganda will be more successful in contexts where the media environment is more tightly placed under state control and where the opposition is successfully co-opted. In a similar vein, my argument acknowledges that, at least in some domains and policy areas, the opposition to the regime could enjoy a reputational advantage over the government. Domestic terror attacks and protests over electoral fraud, for example, place opposition groups in the spotlight, allowing them to openly criticise government actions and even compete with power-holders for the support of public opinion. Finally, to account for the effect of prior performance, the empirical analysis controls for objective indicators of prior economic growth, as well as for respondents' pre-shock affinities toward the regime as well as subjective evaluations of prior incumbent performance.

The section that follows offers a review of the literature on authoritarian politics. In offering a broad yet succinct overview of this literature, I situate my argument in the context of existing theoretical debates in the scholarship of autocratic politics.

1.4 Literature Review

The study of democratisation's third wave has been characterised by a pro-democratic bias. Informed by the assumption that regimes combining elements of authoritarian rule with democratic institutions were in fact in transition toward democracy, earlier scholarship placed emphasis on explaining the factors leading to the breakdown of authoritarianism,³⁶ partially overlooking variations between transition outcomes.³⁷ It was not until the early 2000s, with the publication of works by Thomas Carothers and others, that the transition paradigm began to shift. A new body of research has since sought to classify and understand the stability of regimes that combined some legitimate political competition with institutions and practices that rendered this competition unfair.³⁸ Elucidating the logic of institutions such as elections and parliaments in explaining hybrid regime stability and resilience has been a major contribution of this new body of work.³⁹

However, while the end of the transition paradigm placed renewed emphasis on explaining the stability of hybrid or electoral authoritarian rule, it did not shift a long-standing disciplinary focus on incumbents and on their ruling coalitions. This elite-centred bias reflected a broader understanding that the key political conflict in dictatorships was in fact among regime insiders.⁴⁰ Barbara Geddes, in her seminal study about types of dictators, for example, suggests that the main danger to dictators comes from divisions within the ruling elite. The selectorate theory as advanced by Bueno de Mesquita and his co-authors is also grounded on a similar understanding of dictators facing little threat from outside of their selectorate.⁴¹ Moreover, Beatriz Magaloni argues that intra-elite politics within the dictator's

³⁶ (Beissinger 2007, 2013; S. S. Levitsky and Way 2010)

³⁷ (Collier and Levitsky 1997, 433)

³⁸ (Bogaards 2009; Carothers 2002; Levitsky and Way 2002; Robertson 2011, 6)

³⁹ (Geddes 1999b)

⁴⁰ (Svolik 2012)

⁴¹ (Geddes 1999b; De Mesquita et al. 2003)

ruling coalition rather than with groups within society is the most important factor determining authoritarian regime durability.⁴² As a result, public opinion, the views and opinions of citizens living under illiberal rule, has traditionally received little attention.

When engaging with public opinion, this earlier scholarship did seek to effectively understand why citizens tolerated regimes of which they disapproved.⁴³ Three sets of factors received particular attention, aptly summarised in Przeworski's words as 'lies, fear and economic prosperity'. Regimes that built support based on lies, or ideological indoctrination in the form of phrases and rituals that were 'echoed but not believed' were the least stable. 'Once the king is announced to be naked', Przeworski writes, 'this equilibrium is destroyed instantaneously'.⁴⁴ Fear of repression also ensured that citizens would falsify their preferences, misrepresent their views on the regime and shy away from the streets. For Kuran and Lohmann, among others, popular dissatisfaction with government would be brought to the fore only when first-mover activists took to the streets and encouraged others to do the same.⁴⁵ And while support based on *economic prosperity* ensured that citizens relinquished freedom in exchange for growth, performance legitimacy also exposed incumbents to economic downturns and fluctuations in the global economy. Such expectations, crystallised in the authoritarian contract thesis,⁴⁶ led to the expectation that illiberal regimes should prosper when they delivered and collapse when they did not. My approach concurs with the aforementioned contributions in that it recognises the importance of positive performance and incumbents' ability to deliver growth, order and stability for sustaining illiberal rule. Yet, as the opening sections to the thesis note, many illiberal regimes persisted despite deteriorating economic conditions. Attributing support to economic performance alone,

⁴² (Magaloni 2006, 2010)

⁴³ (Magaloni 2006, 13)

⁴⁴ (Przeworski 1991, 58)

⁴⁵ (DeNardo 1985a; Kuran 1995; Lohmann 1994)

⁴⁶ (Desai, Olofsgård, and Yousef 2009; Hansen 1974; De Mesquita and Smith 2010)

then, does not allow us to explain why regimes remain popular when performance drops, and the economy declines.

In the last few years the scope of the discussion of how dictators ensure compliance has expanded considerably. Drawing on evidence showing that modern dictators are less likely to engage in violent repression than their predecessors, Guriev and Treisman for example have linked regime survival not to ideological indoctrination but rather to dictators' ability to manipulate popular beliefs.⁴⁷ Their recent work on how modern dictators survive joined an expanding literature that shows how by using pro-regime media to signal strength and censor politically sensitive information illiberal incumbents could extend their tenure.⁴⁸ Be it through the production and broadcast of distorted news or indeed the hiring of internet 'trolls' to post pro-regime comments online, modern dictators aim to prevent citizens from coordinating in the political domain and to signal to audiences at home and abroad that they are competent and popular.⁴⁹ Regime responsiveness to social demands, especially in the form of tactical redistribution, has also been examined in the context of contemporary China.⁵⁰ One of the most important contributions of contemporary scholarship on the drivers of regime responsiveness has been to expand our understanding of the factors that motivate the behaviour of authoritarian regimes. As Jennifer Pan has emphasised, regime strategies and policies aiming to manage public opinion under illiberal rule are indeed broader in aim and purpose than the need to ensure regime survival. Tactical redistribution and propaganda should thus be understood as not motivated by the threat of revolutionary mobilisation and regime overthrow alone. Fear of social and economic disruption resulting from social unrest could also encourage government efforts to manage public opinion, and appease the

⁴⁷ (Guriev and Treisman 2015a)

⁴⁸ See for example: (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013a; Lankina, Watanabe, and Netesova 2016; Stockmann 2013; Stockmann and Gallagher 2011)

⁴⁹ (Chen and Xu 2015; Gehlbach, Sonin, and Svolik 2015; Stockmann 2013)

⁵⁰ (Chen, Pan, and Xu 2016; Pan 2015; Wallace 2013)

discontented electorate.⁵¹ My argument owes a great intellectual debt to these contributions. More specifically, building on this research, I frame regime responses to shocks as also motivated by incumbents' fear that the levels of popular support they enjoy will erode, and that the likelihood of unrest will increase.

Beyond a general notion that illiberal incumbents respond to popular demands to placate discontent, however, our understanding of *how* governments affect the process by which citizens receive and process information about worsening conditions remains limited. And while a large body of literature recognises the threat that periods of poor performance pose to the stability of non-democratic forms of government,⁵² we know relatively little about how illiberal incumbents can moderate, or ameliorate the negative effect of shocks on the levels of support they enjoy. While understanding the political conditioning of public opinion constitutes an expanding field in political behaviour research in advanced democracies, our understanding of the factors that condition public opinion formation under illiberal rule is still lacking.⁵³ The argument advanced in this thesis joins several studies in revisiting the effects of government policies on citizens' attributions of responsibility in democracies⁵⁴ and extends the agenda to electoral authoritarianism. Building on several works that stress the behavioural incentives actors face to remain loyal to hegemonic regimes, I focus on the strategic interaction between the regime and the masses to study how government responses to shocks influence evaluations of government performance on the one hand, and attributions of blame on the other.⁵⁵

⁵¹ (Pan 2015, 26)

⁵² See for example: (Flores and Smith 2013; Gasiorowski 1995; Geddes 1999a; Haggard and Kaufman 1995; Magaloni 2010; Remmer 1991; Rose and Mishler 2010)

⁵³ (Duch and Stevenson 2010; Evans and Andersen 2006a; Pardos-Prado and Sagarzazu 2016; Tilley and Hobolt 2011)

⁵⁴ (Bechtel and Hainmueller 2011; Cole, Healy, and Werker 2012a; Healy and Malhotra 2009; Manacorda, Miguel, and Vigorito 2011)

⁵⁵ (Geddes 1999b; Magaloni 2006)

In emphasising the role of government effort in ameliorating the negative effect of shocks on the support illiberal incumbents enjoy, the thesis builds on work by Graeme Robertson, whose research on how hybrid regimes manage protests has expanded our understanding of the ways governments can implement policies that defeat-proof elections and the streets, and in doing so to extend authoritarian rule.⁵⁶ However, I also try to contribute to the existing literature by expanding the agenda to consider explicitly how regime responses to shocks could ameliorate their political consequences. My approach also owes a lot to Guriev and Treisman, who show that support for autocracy depends on incumbents' ability to manipulate popular beliefs about the incumbent's competence, as well as to Chen and Xu who highlight how authoritarian regimes interactively use information manipulation and policy improvement to maintain social order and control.⁵⁷ I bring new individual-level data to bear on the debate regarding how illiberal incumbents maintain support, empirically illustrating how government responses to natural disasters, downturns in the economy, terror attacks and electoral protests can moderate or ameliorate their effect on the levels of support illiberal incumbents enjoy. All these are important examples of shocks that make information about malpractices and poor performance publicly observable.

1.5 Why Russia?

My thesis illustrates the above arguments by leveraging empirical evidence from contemporary Russia. Contemporary Russia is a classic example of an electoral authoritarian regime and also a very important case because of the country's political importance in global affairs. The empirical analysis focuses on the period after 2008, and as such covers the years when Russia's 'presidential tandem' was in power. More specifically, from 2008 to 2012 Putin occupied the post of the prime minister and Dmitry Medvedev the post of the president.

⁵⁶ (Robertson 2011; Robertson 2007)

⁵⁷ (Chen and Xu 2015; Guriev and Treisman 2015a)

In 2012, the two men switched places. According to constitutional reform enacted under Medvedev's presidency, the two men are expected to serve six years in office instead of four. A new presidential election is scheduled to take place in Russia on March 18th, 2018.

Russia during the period under investigation in the thesis, which runs from 2008 to 2016, presents several features central to the analysis of how electoral authoritarians seek to manage and manipulate public opinion: state control over the national media landscape, a fully-consolidated 'power-vertical' that has executive control and oversight over important decisions such as regional appointments, and discretionary allocation of federal transfers. These among other features make Russia representative of several electoral authoritarian regimes elsewhere. While distinct from closed dictatorships, electoral autocracies restrict political freedoms and media independence and impose severe constraints on the opposition's right to compete in elections, take to the streets and challenge incumbents. Moreover, in the period under scrutiny, the imperatives of domestic legitimacy and the desire for control have been coupled with great variation in economic performance. The 2008/09 recession, for example, was followed by another downturn in 2014, this time coinciding with the collapse in global oil prices and the imposition of international sanctions in the aftermath of the Crimean annexation. Such fiscal constraints led to much experimentation in the techniques Moscow used to shore up and maintain the support of the electorate.⁵⁸ For example, Russia is currently seen as a great innovator in the use of media campaigns that not only manage public opinion at home but also project soft power and achieve political influence abroad.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ (Robertson 2011, 8)

⁵⁹ (Van Harper 2016)

Russia's incumbent party, United Russia, has dominated Russian politics since 2004.⁶⁰ Yet United Russia is not comparable to other hegemonic regimes such as the PRI in Mexico, for example. To paraphrase Geddes, the party-organisation does not exercise power over the leader, does not control the career paths of officials, and is not a mobilising force that could drive citizens to vote and show support for party leaders.⁶¹ From the early 2000s onwards, the regime 'rejected a clear programmatic linkage to its voters in favour of personalist appeals'⁶² and since then Putin has been the single politician who could secure an electoral victory either for United Russia or for those candidates he would lend his name to.⁶³

Writing on Russia's current ruling regime, Milan Svolik notes the following: 'In contemporary Russia, it has become apparent that the effective head of the Russian government is neither the president of the Russian Federation, nor its Prime Minister. Rather, it is Vladimir Putin, regardless of the official post that he holds. As a consequence, Putin's potential successor cannot expect to genuinely assume power by the mere symbolic act of inauguration. He will have to wrestle power away from Putin publicly and personally, by exiling, imprisoning or killing him'.⁶⁴ This short extract gives a representative depiction of post-2004 Russia, which has seen power being increasingly concentrated in the hands of Putin. Moreover, several policies implemented throughout recent years lend further credence to the assertion that contemporary Russia has been becoming increasingly personalist. Ahead of the 2018 election, for example, President Putin created a new internal security force that answers directly to himself and is headed by loyalist Victor Zolotov, Putin's personal

⁶⁰ (Reuter and Remington 2008)

⁶¹ (Geddes 1999b, 124)

⁶² (Smyth 2014, 570; White and McAllister 2008)

⁶³ (Smyth 2014, 569)

⁶⁴ (Svolik 2014, 72)

bodyguard for over 13 years.⁶⁵ Similarly, the creation of the ‘All-Russian People’s Front’, the movement Putin started in 2011 to provide United Russia with ‘new ideas and faces’, is also speculated to have been designed to replace United Russia when the party’s popularity wanes.

In conclusion, while contemporary Russia during this period resembles a dominant-party regime – where multiparty competition exists but the party of power enjoys an indisputable advantage – it also displays a high degree of personalism, which translates into discretionary rule and the concentration of power in the hands of a single person. As either president or prime minister, Putin has occupied office since August 1999, when he was appointed as Yeltsin’s prime minister. But whether we choose to label contemporary Russia a personalist regime or a dominant-party regime with a high degree of personalism is an open question, the answer to which links back to whether we choose to treat personalism as a regime type, as Geddes does for example, or as a ‘secondary’ or ‘supplementary’ feature of a regime, as Slater and Hadenius and Teorell do instead.⁶⁶ Fortunately, engaging in this debate is not important for this thesis. What is instead central to the analysis is that the while personalist regimes present clearer lines of responsibility, making it easier for citizens to identify who the person in charge of government decisions is, they also enable the leader to engage in a wider array of blame-shifting policies. When power-holders know that not all expressions of discontent have the same consequences or the same gravity in a system that is synonymous with the leader, their response to shocks and crises is driven primarily by the need to protect how the personalist leader himself is perceived. Faced with few constraints from coalition parties, national media or cabinet members, personalist leaders can choose to deflect responsibility for policy failures, even to members of their ruling coalition. By

⁶⁵ (Grove 2016)

⁶⁶ (Geddes 1999b; Hadenius and Teorell 2006; Slater 2003)

dismissing coalition partners and allies, or hand-picked governors, for example, personalist incumbents can distance themselves from poorly performing authorities.

1.5.1 Selection of empirical cases

The empirical cases in this thesis are used to examine my theoretical argument's main implications in light of evidence from government and citizen responses to a plethora of shocks emerging from the economic, political and security domains. A study of how Moscow tried to ameliorate the political consequences of a stochastic shock in the form of a natural disaster comes first. Looking at how the Russian government responded to the 2010 wildfires that burnt down entire settlements and forced Moscow to ban grain exports for several months, I test whether targeted redistribution on the one hand and government propaganda on the other influence how citizens evaluate government responses to shocks, and who they blame for them. Next, I shift focus to the well-studied economic domain. My second empirical chapter considers how the government dealt with the effects of the economic downturn that followed the decline of global energy prices and the imposition of sanctions in the aftermath of the Crimea annexation. This chapter allows me to study how the Kremlin-controlled media framed news of the downturn, and whether government propaganda can moderate the effect of economic deterioration on approval. Thirdly, I turn my attention to consider how security threats influence support for executives under illiberal rule, as well as evaluations of incumbent responses to them. More specifically, I study how the use of targeted redistribution toward the belligerent Caucasus and low-intensity repression against a very active opposition in metropolitan Russia influenced the political consequences of domestic terrorism. The thesis concludes by discussing whether and how the use of violence and physical repression against protesters that took to the streets to protest

widespread fraud in the 2011 Duma and 2012 presidential election influenced the opposition's ability to generate support.⁶⁷

As the thesis does not engage with any learning effects on the part of either the government or the electorate, the presentation of the empirical chapters follows a thematic as opposed to a chronological order. This setup allows me to test the different steps of my argument, which predicts that low- and high-intensity repression against opposition leaders and protesters should only be used after propaganda and tactical redistribution have failed to ameliorate the effect of shocks on public opinion. As the thesis is organised, the first two empirical chapters treat the electorate as homogenous. The wildfires chapter assumes no competition over the distribution of resources, while the economic recession chapter assumes that media propaganda aims to affect the views of all Russians. The other two empirical chapters take a different approach, however, as they relax the assumption that the electorate is homogeneous. The terrorism chapter examines government responses to shocks when metropolitan Russia and the Caucasus compete over the distribution of resources. The protest chapter, which comes last, studies how the strategic interaction between the regime

⁶⁷ There can be three potential objections to the decision to treat protests as shocks. *First*, one could reasonably argue that protests are not unexpected. While shocks carry by definition an element of surprise, the occurrence of protests in the aftermath of fraud-rigged elections can be anticipated. Yet as several commentators have argued, the size, and geographical spread of the 2011-12 electoral protest wave took the government, as well as international observers, by surprise (see for example: Robertson 2013; Gel'man 2015). *Second*, one could question whether protests constitute negative shocks to citizen income or security. I propose that protests can compromise protesters' and bystanders' sense of security as they signal the potential for disruption, street disorder violence. This is true of protests in democracies, and much more so in autocracies. *Third*, one could plausibly argue that protests are the outcome of citizen dissatisfaction with regime malpractices and not a shock per se. While consensus backs the view that the 2011-12 protests in Russia were triggered by widespread fraud in the December 2011 election, it is impossible to discount that other factors were also at play. Yet, in the context of my protest chapter, where I treat the electorate as heterogeneous, protests initiated by activists constitute a shock on bystanders and indeed on government. Just like any other shock, protesters taking to the streets reveal information about the unpopularity of the status quo and can prompt critical evaluations of government among bystanders, the spectators of the protest events.

and its rivals – anti-regime protesters who took to the streets across the country – influences protesters’ ability to win the support of bystanders, i.e. spectators who witnessed the protests but did not join in.

The different cases are each theoretically important in their own right. Not only do they represent some of the most critical tests the Russian government has faced in its recent history, they also constitute key challenges electoral authoritarians must negotiate in their decision-making. Unanticipated protests fuelled by electoral fraud, for example, have in recent decades brought about the collapse of autocratic regimes in Eastern Europe and the Middle East. Moreover, terror attacks and economic decline have been associated with elite turnover resulting from insider coups under autocracy. Crises in the international economic system, such as the second oil crisis of the 1970s for example, increased the rate of authoritarian regime breakdown.⁶⁸ Similarly, natural disasters, such as the 1972 earthquake in Somoza, have brought about the breakdown of dictatorships.⁶⁹

In the context of the thesis, the selection of cases also offers important variation in background conditions – namely in the nature of the budget constraints the government faces. Budget constraints are important because they shape whether, in addition to propaganda, the government can invest in tactical redistribution. Recovering state finances, for example, allowed Moscow to provide generous relief aid to crisis-affected regional budgets and households during the 2010 wildfires. However, a declining economy and scarcity effects prevented investments in social transfers that could have helped vulnerable groups cope better with the economic downturn from 2014 onwards. In the case of domestic terrorism, which I examine in Chapter 6, competition over the distribution of economic

⁶⁸ (Geddes 1999b)

⁶⁹ See for example: (Aksoy, Carter, and Wright 2015; Beissinger 2007; Landry and Stockmann 2009; Weyland 2012)

resources between the North Caucasus and metropolitan Russia constrains investments in Moscow's policy of fiscal appeasement.⁷⁰ In the case of the 2011/12 protest wave, the government's ability to target protesters or the parties and political movements that led people to the streets with generous transfers in order to purchase their loyalty was compromised. Offering generous transfers to bystanders, i.e. the spectators of the protest events, in order to isolate them from the influence of the movement was also difficult given that, according to public opinion surveys, 70 percent of Russians were aware of unfolding anti-regime mobilisation.⁷¹

Finally, the case selection offers important variation in Moscow's ability to deflect blame for the shocks. When the country is threatened from within – as is the case with domestic terrorism – and not 'attacked' from abroad – as Moscow tried to portray the imposition of western sanctions – rallying public opinion round the (national) flag is challenging. Likewise, while the federal government shifted the blame to the regions in the case of the 2010 wildfires, it could not easily deflect responsibility for its federally designed and executed counter-terrorist policy. Domestic terrorism has voters looking toward the government in Moscow for help – and when attributing blame.⁷²

1.5 Methodology

This section addresses some of the methodological challenges the thesis as a whole is facing, and how I have tried to address them. Some concerns such as the difficulty in inferring government intent under autocracy are inherent in the study of authoritarian politics. Other concerns, such as the reliability of survey items and our ability to infer causal

⁷⁰ (Judah 2013)

⁷¹ (Colton and Hale 2012)

⁷² (Nikolsky 2010)

relationships by relying on survey data, are endemic to studies of public opinion and behaviour in democracies and non-democracies alike.

Inferring government intent

My argument proposes that government responses to shocks are partly motivated by the need to ameliorate their effects on public opinion. Put differently, I assume that when Moscow declares some regions in a state of emergency in response to a natural disaster for example, it does so not only in order to practically help the regions deal with the disaster. When responding to shocks, electoral authoritarians - just like their counterparts in democracies⁷³ - want to signal that they care about the electorate and that they are competent in order to attract support and long-term gratitude.

Understanding what factors motivate government action is a challenging task even in democracies. Inferring government intent in the context of an illiberal regime, where policymaking is opaque, government sources are less reliable and details of administration are concealed⁷⁴ is even more challenging. To infer illiberal incumbents' preferences, scholars often engage in speculation. When Putin announced that he was running for the presidency in September 2011, for example, analysts noted the absence of the government's 'liberal' ministers from the campaign launch event, which they interpreted as evidence of an unfolding rift in the government. Similarly, in the summer of 2017, Putin's decision to take a holiday with Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu resulted in speculation that Shoigu could in fact be the man to succeed Putin in the presidency. In the context of this thesis I shy away from such speculations. In trying to infer government intent, I study government actors' revealed behaviour instead. As Gary King and his co-authors remind us, studies of authoritarian politics may be somewhat better able to produce useful measures of intent 'by

⁷³ (Besley and Prat 2006; Cole, Healy, and Werker 2012b; Healy and Malhotra 2009)

⁷⁴ (Ezrow and Frantz 2011)

providing more information about the state's revealed preferences through its actual (censorship) behaviour' – in relation to the event, or process under scrutiny.⁷⁵

I thus study what Russia's presidential tandem concretely said and what policies it enacted when responding to shocks, looking at official statements, primary reports and media coverage of their statements and actions. While it would be naïve to assume that there is no bureaucratic infighting or competing sectoral interests within the Russian government, there should be little doubt that during the period under scrutiny in the thesis power is largely concentrated in the hands of Putin. In some of the empirical cases, government actors are open about the need to manage public opinion. The Russian government has repeatedly linked preferential transfers to the North Caucasus to the need to appease local populations, for example.⁷⁶ Similarly, consensus backs the view that governments use repression against protesters to prevent unrest from spreading, and the opposition from amassing support. At other times, however, it is more difficult to show that government responses to shocks are driven by political motivations. I thus perform several empirical tests that help me determine whether redistribution, for example, is tactical in nature. In the wildfires chapter, I therefore examine whether, in addition to fire-inflicted disaster, a region's or a group's political characteristics and previous-year support for government affect the levels of investment or aid they receive. Likewise, in the terrorism chapter I investigate if the frequency and intensity of attacks predicts federal transfers toward regions, as well as the imposition of constraints on press freedom and opposition activity over time, across regions. Thus, even with the caveat that inferring state intent under illiberal rule is challenging, examining state responses to shocks appears to be a task worth pursuing.

⁷⁵ (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013a, 2013b, 2)

⁷⁶ (Pervyi Kanal 2011)

‘No study of public opinion can be better than the data on which it is based’⁷⁷

Leading works on authoritarian politics advise that, as fear encourages respondents to hide their true dissatisfaction with government, responses to survey questions outside of democracies are not necessarily meaningful.⁷⁸ As I have already noted in the introduction to the thesis, however, evidence from recent survey experiments in Russia increases confidence in the claim that indicators of government approval under illiberal rule are not motivated by social desirability bias alone.⁷⁹ Moreover, in the Levada Centre’s approval time-series, non-response rates are traditionally very low, and they do not significantly vary over time. This suggests that any bias, if present, has largely remained constant over time. Finally, and as previous studies of Russian public opinion have reported, self-censorship is unlikely to have significantly distorted answers to public opinion surveys in the country.⁸⁰

The empirical analysis for this thesis uses a variety of public opinion resources, all conducted by independent, reputable and professional institutions such as the European Bank for Reconstruction and Recovery (EBRD), the Public Opinion Foundation (FOM) in Moscow, the European Social Survey (ESS) and the Levada Centre. Answers to cross-sectional surveys were collected in face-to-face interviews in respondents’ homes, and control interviews, by the organisations followed after numerators left. The professionalism of the institutes involved and the verification methods employed increase confidence in the ways the surveys were conducted and the samples were selected. In addition, and because elections in Russia are routinely falsified, this thesis rarely uses evidence from electoral outcomes as an indicator of regime support.

⁷⁷ (Treisman 2014, 373)

⁷⁸ (Kuran 1995; Yurchak 2006)

⁷⁹ (Frye et al. 2016)

⁸⁰ (Rose 2007; Treisman 2014)

Nonetheless, concerns raised by scholars such as Feldman and Zaller in the context of democracies regarding the cognitive tasks involved in how survey respondents answer questions remain relevant.⁸¹ It could be possible, for example, that ‘individuals do not possess ‘true attitudes’ on the regime, but just a series of inconsistent, and independent ones’.⁸² This is a legitimate and valid concern, yet it is not central to the analysis. What is critical is that citizens update their evaluations of government performance in response to shocks and government interventions. Moreover, and in order to partly address concerns regarding the formulation of survey questions, I also use a variety of survey items that capture government evaluations, political approval and responsibility attributions in the aftermath of shocks.

Within-country comparisons

While the thesis relies on evidence from a single country alone, the empirical analysis incorporates many comparative elements. By comparing patterns of regime support sub-nationally, i.e. across Russia’s 83 federal subjects (the equivalent of the US states), I exploit to the maximum extent the possibilities for comparison that exist in a country as diverse as Russia. Subnational variations in democracy as well as civic practices are pronounced in democracies⁸³ and under electoral authoritarianism.⁸⁴ Subnational analysis is also popular within the broader field of comparative politics, as scholars highlight the importance of political and economic contextual variables in shaping perceptions of government performance at the national level.⁸⁵ Moreover, leveraging geographic variation in media

⁸¹ (Feldman 1989; Zaller and Feldman 1992; Zaller 1992)

⁸² (Zaller 1992, 93)

⁸³ (Almond and Verba 1963; Putnam 1993)

⁸⁴ (Frye, Reuter, and Szakonyi 2014; Gel’man and Lankina 2008; Lankina and Getachew 2012; Lankina, Libman, and Obydenkova 2016a, 2016b; Lankina and Skovoroda 2016; Moraski and Reisinger 2014)

⁸⁵ (Escobar-Lemmon and Ross 2014; V. Gelman 2010; Reisinger, Miller, and Hesli 1995)

independence, repression and targeted redistribution, I am able to compare variation in the effect of government policies across a single country. This setup of within-country comparisons also allows me to avoid the main criticism of cross-country analysis, namely the failure to account for a variation in institutions and cultures. Finally, two of my empirical chapters use over-time and across-space variation in protests and terror attacks in order to facilitate identification and study the effect of shocks on public opinion.

1.6 Data

Attempting to explain how state interventions ameliorate the effect of shocks on support is a complex task and requires a carefully chosen methodology that will allow me to study government responses to shocks, and public opinion responses to shocks and government policy. Each empirical chapter has three key tasks. *First*, it has to identify the extent of every shock, and its effect on public opinion. *Second*, it needs to identify how the government responded to the shock. *Finally*, empirical chapters should study public opinion responses to the shock, and to government effort to alleviate its effects.⁸⁶

To identify the extent, location, or timing of the various shocks considered in the thesis, I rely on a plethora of sources. My first empirical chapter on the 2010 wildfires

⁸⁶ One could ask whether the actual occurrence of any shock relates to the expected behaviour of government and its expected to respond to it. In the case of the wildfires for example (Chapter 4), we could wonder whether individuals did not burn their properties in order to benefit from government action. In the case of the 2011-12 protests (Chapter 7), we could ask whether protesters do not provoke the government to use repression. In engaging in provocations, activists could expect that the support they enjoy will increase, as bystanders turn away from incumbents engaging in repression. Yet, in Chapter 4, which discusses the consequences of the wildfires, the analysis is based at the regional level. This addresses some concerns – even if individuals in already burning villages chose to burn their homes on purpose, the results would not change. I am in no in a position to address concerns regarding protesters’ incentives to engage in violent action. These concerns must be acknowledged, yet they are not consequential for the analysis. What is key for the purposes of the thesis is that unexpected and collective shocks to income and security make information about the incumbent publicly observable. As such, shocks could also destabilize the authoritarian equilibrium on which stable authoritarian regimes reside.

leverages evidence from NASA collected satellite data, and reports from Russia's Ministry of Emergency Situations. In my second empirical chapter, regional economic indicators and survey items of respondents' evaluations of household and national economic performance allow me to study the effect of (perceived) economic decline on government approval. Data on terror attacks come from the Global Terrorism Dataset, while evidence on the frequency and size of subnational protests comes from the Lankina Protest-Event Dataset. All data sources used to identify the various shocks are presented in the thesis are summarized in Column 2 of Table 1.1 below.

To study government responses to shocks, I combine quantitative and qualitative approaches. My first empirical chapter constructs an original dataset on the dismissal of political and military officers in relation to the 2010 wildfires, and studies government decrees to determine the amount of federal aid regional budgets received in relation to the shock. My second empirical chapter studies the coverage of economic news in *Pevriy Kanal* (Channel One) from 2013 to 2015. This is Russia's leading and Kremlin controlled TV channel. My third empirical chapter leverages evidence from federal transfers towards the North Caucasus, and indicators of restrictions on media independence and opposition activity as imposed by the government across Russia's regions. My final empirical chapter studies the use of repression against protesters during the 2011-12 electoral protest cycle. State responses to shocks are summarized in the third column of Table 1.1.

The final task of every empirical chapter is to link shocks and government responses to the levels of support incumbents enjoy. Survey responses that capture attitudinal support for incumbents come from a variety of sources. The International Center for the Study of Institutions and Development (ICSID) at Moscow's Higher School of Economics (HSE) has generously shared regionally and nationally representative indicators of executive and regional approval with me. Subnational protest indicators as used throughout the thesis also

function as an indicator of support for the regional, and federal authorities. Overall, the empirical chapters rely on individual-level survey responses to the 2010-2011 European Social Survey; the August and September 2010 Levada Surveys; the February 2011 survey of the Russian Public Opinion Foundation (FOM), the second and third wave of the Life in Transition surveys (LITs) of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development conducted in 2010 and 2015 respectively; the 2010 and 2012 Stephen White surveys, and the 2012 wave of the Russian Election Study directed by Tim Colton and Henry Hale. The empirical chapters discuss each of these surveys in length. The various support indicators the thesis considers are finally presented in Column 4 of Table 1.1 below.

Table 1.1 **Overview of empirical chapters**

<i>Chapter</i>	<i>Shock Indicators</i>	<i>State Response</i>	<i>Support Indicators</i>
<i>4: Wildfires</i>	NASA satellite data and reports by Russia's Ministry of Emergency Situations on the number and extent of fires	Redistribution: Federal transfers towards regions Propaganda: Dismissals and responsibility framing in state-controlled media	Government evaluations, Blame attributions, Gubernatorial and executive Approval <i>Source:</i> Levada public opinion surveys & quarterly FOM approval indicators
<i>5: Recession</i>	Regional growth indicators Subjective evaluations of economic performance	Propaganda: Framing of economic news in state-controlled media	Evaluations of government performance <i>Source:</i> Survey data from the EBRD, Life in Transition Surveys
<i>6: Terrorism</i>	Terror attacks data from the Global Terrorism Dataset (GDT)	Redistribution: Federal transfers to the North Caucasus Low-intensity repression: Limits on political competition and media freedom	Executive, gubernatorial approval and vote intentions <i>Source:</i> 2010 ESS module; 2011 FOM and 2012 Stephen White surveys
<i>7: Electoral Protests</i>	Protest and repression data from the Lankina protest-event dataset	Physical Repression: Use of violence against protesters	Fraud awareness, support for the demands of the opposition and Medvedev approval <i>Source:</i> 2012 Stephen White and RES surveys

1.7 Overview of the thesis

The sections that follow introduce my empirical cases in detail. Chapter 2 develops the theoretical argument. Chapter 3 introduces the Russian case and helps situate the different empirical cases. Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 develop the analysis, providing empirical tests of my argument. Chapter 8 concludes.

Empirical Chapter 4: Propaganda and (Tactical) Redistribution Amid Plenty

When government performance under electoral authoritarianism is poor, who do citizens blame? Furthermore, how do government interventions influence these assessments? To gain traction in these investigations, my first empirical chapter exploits exogenous variation in fire damage across Russia's regions during the 2010 wildfires. Merging survey indicators of government evaluations and responsibility attributions with original datasets on Moscow's response to the disaster, I study whether tactical redistribution and propaganda in the form of forced dismissals allowed the federal government to deflect accountability. The analysis suggests that while fire-inflicted disaster resulted in people's evaluations of government deteriorating, generous federal transfers toward regions and dismissals of people from certain positions allowed Moscow to claim credit and deflect blame. Evaluations of Moscow's response to the disaster were more favourable in regions receiving federal transfers and in places where officers left their position in response to their poor response to the fires.

Empirical Chapter 5: Propaganda Amid Recession

My argument suggests that when economic constraints prevent incumbents from investing in tactical redistribution, the government is more likely to extensively use propaganda. In this chapter, I leverage evidence from the economic domain and Russia's post-2014 economic downturn to examine the nature and effectiveness of government propaganda. By studying the coverage of economic news in the Kremlin-controlled *Perviy Kanal*, I am able to identify which actors the Russian media blamed for the downturn, and how they tried to

prevent the Executive's approval ratings eroding. Survey evidence from the Life in Transition Surveys also allows me to test how exposure to the regime's dominant framing of the crisis in state-controlled media outlets affects who Russians blame for the downturn. The empirical analysis shows that, while the Russian government does not necessarily censor information on the decline of the economy, it does try to shift the blame abroad while portraying the president as undertaking costly actions to address its consequences. Results also suggest that exposure to the government's framing of the crisis reduces the extent to which citizens blame government for economic deteriorations. These results are robust to tests designed to account for the fact that viewers could self-select Kremlin-controlled media to begin with.

Empirical Chapter 6: Tactical Redistribution, Repression, and the Divided Electorate

My third empirical chapter examines whether the political consequences of domestic terrorism are moderated by state-imposed constraints on political freedoms on the one hand and by federally sponsored investments in public goods and infrastructure on the other. The chapter, which relies on the variation of Chechen-led terror attacks across space and time in Russia and leverages evidence from regionally and nationally representative surveys of over 57,000 respondents, allows me to relax the assumption that the electorate is homogenous. In this context, Moscow tries to appease the North Caucasus and to ameliorate the effect of terror attacks by investing in generous federal transfers toward regional republics. However, Moscow's policy of fiscal appeasement is met with intense criticism outside of the region. Persistent terrorism brings dissatisfaction with the government's policy of appeasement to the fore, and allows the opposition to criticize incumbents. Responding to heightened scrutiny, Moscow then strengthens the use of low-intensity repression against opposition parties and activists. Results reveal that low-intensity repression, in the form of government-imposed limitations on the opposition's ability to criticise incumbents dampen the effect of terror attacks

on public support for the government. Generous federal transfers toward the North Caucasus are also associated with greater support for Moscow, even when terrorism strikes.

Empirical Chapter 7: Repression, and the (Colour) Revolution that Never Was

The thesis concludes by examining instances of high intensity repression against anti-government protesters. More specifically, my final empirical chapter studies how the use of repression against protesters in the streets of Russia enabled President Putin's regime to overcome its most challenging hour to date. High intensity, or physical repression, the theory proposed in the thesis suggests, is used after all other policy tools have failed to pre-empt the threat of a revolution. When the government is unable to purchase loyalty by buying off the millions of citizens who take to the streets or isolate spectators of the events from the influence of the opposition, and where propaganda does not prevent mobilisation from spreading, the likelihood of physical repression increases. Consistent with this argument, this chapter shows that the use of repression against protesters intensified during the last few months of the 2011/12 protest wave and just before the March 2012 election, which saw Putin return to the presidency. Consistent with my theoretical argument, the empirical analysis suggests that while repression does not increase support for incumbents, it can dampen support for the opposition. When protests are associated with street disorder and violence, bystanders are less likely to support the demands of the opposition, and by extension to take to the streets themselves.

Chapter 2

Theory

This chapter develops my theoretical argument in detail. The following sections look at two areas in particular. First, I discuss why popular support for illiberal incumbents matters and how electoral authoritarians amass support in equilibrium, that is during the ‘state of nature’ in stable regimes. Under this equilibrium phase, elites and masses agree that they are better off uniting with the power holders – dictators, monarchs, the leader, or the ruling party – than rebelling against them.⁸⁷ Next, the discussion shifts to consider in detail how negative shocks to citizen income and security can undermine the popularity of electoral autocracies. I conclude by discussing the importance of government effort in ameliorating the political consequences of shocks and how the policies implemented by electoral authoritarians may differ from those of their democratic counterparts.

2.1 The State and Support⁸⁸

Writing in the late 1960s, Hannah Arendt suggested that even the most horrendous autocracies need popular support.⁸⁹ Illiberal incumbents, she proposed, depend on the support of the governed in order to signal strength and lower the costs of staying in power. These propositions were echoed in an influential body of scholarship over the years.⁹⁰ We

⁸⁷ (Geddes 1999a, 1999b, Magaloni 2006, 16, 2010)

⁸⁸ It would possibly be more accurate to describe this section as ‘the “consolidated” state and support’. My thesis does not deal with how electoral authoritarian regimes emerge, or with the factors that enable electoral authoritarians to gradually expand control over the national media, or the commanding heights of the economy. I study how governments behave assuming that they have already consolidated their control over the national media, established centralized institutions, dominant parties, and expanded control over the economy. These are important conditions that allow them to use tactical redistribution, propaganda and repression during periods of shocks and in equilibrium.

⁸⁹ (Arendt 1968, 306)

⁹⁰ See also: (Magaloni 2006; Richard Rose, Mishler, and Munro 2011; Simpser 2013, 5)

can broadly think of popular support for illiberal incumbents as an important bargaining resource that increases their power vis-à-vis other groups at home, such as political parties and unions, and reduces the rents they need to provide to regime insiders in order to ensure their loyalty.⁹¹ Popular support for incumbents can also prevent elites from defecting, and could reduce the likelihood that coups will be successful, should they occur. The attempted coups of 11 April 2002, and 15-16 July 2016 against Chavez and Erdogan respectively for example, were met with popular resistance.⁹² Beyond the domestic realm, high levels of popular support for illiberal incumbents enable them to deflect international criticism regarding power abuses, and the violation of civil and political rights that take place in the country.⁹³ As far as the masses are concerned, high levels of popular support for incumbents could prevent citizens who oppose the regime from protesting. As existing literature shows, the willingness of any citizen to take to the streets depends on their beliefs about the popularity of the regime, and the likelihood that others will also mobilize.⁹⁴

In regimes with high levels of personalism, where the leader and the regime are often seen as synonymous, approval of the leader's record in office could also increase support in the country's political system as a whole, and confidence that this is the most suitable system of government for the country. Using evidence from contemporary Russia for example, studies document a positive link between personalism and support for dominant institutions. White and McAllister among others, show that votes for the party of power, United Russia, tend to increase on Putin's coattails.⁹⁵ Similarly, Regina Smyth shows that during the 2011-

⁹¹ (Simpser 2013, 18–19)

⁹² (Ellner 2003; Mortimer 2016)

⁹³ (Lankina, Libman, and Obydenkova 2016b; M. Svolik 2017)

⁹⁴ (Chen and Xu 2015; Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland 2015, 5; Kuran 1991)

⁹⁵ (Colton and Hale 2009; Smyth 2014, 574; White and McAllister 2008)

12 electoral protest wave, President Putin's personalist appeal kept many moderate Russians at home.⁹⁶

Declining levels of support could act as a coordinating device for regime insiders to coalesce and ask for the replacement of the incumbent. Additionally, information that power-holders' popularity is eroding could encourage opposition parties to come together and ask for the overthrow of the regime.⁹⁷ In a similar vein, declining levels of popular support and overwhelming votes against the regime make street unrest more likely and electoral falsifications either impossible, or so obvious and outrageous that people will oppose them.⁹⁸ Going back to personalist regimes, it is possible to anticipate that when support for the leader declines, discontented citizens are more likely to take to the streets asking for leader turnover on the one hand, and political change on the other. Yet, unrest is important even when it does not threaten the survival of electoral autocracies, i.e. when it is not associated with the threat of a revolution. Protests and strikes whether larger or smaller could still result to political instability and economic disruption that incumbents wish to avoid. Thus, and as Jennifer Pan reminds us, illiberal incumbents' need to generate and maintain support is indeed broader in aim and purpose than the need to ensure survival alone.⁹⁹

To monitor whether they are liked or not, illiberal incumbents invest a great deal of resources in polling, information extraction, and surveillance. The KGB in the Soviet Union, the *Stasi* in the GDR, and the Information-Sociological Centre in Communist Bulgaria among others, tracked levels of political dissent for decades.¹⁰⁰ And as Tim Frye suggests, Russia's current administration is the largest client for survey companies in the country.¹⁰¹

⁹⁶ (Smyth 2014, 586)

⁹⁷ (Hale 2005; D. Treisman 2014)

⁹⁸ (Colton and Hale 2014)

⁹⁹ (Pan 2015, 14)

¹⁰⁰ (Dimitrov 2008)

¹⁰¹ (Frye 2017, 3)

The Kremlin has access to weekly opinion polls that rely on nationally representative samples and to quarterly polls using regionally representative samples of about 500 respondents in almost all of Russia's 83 subnational units - the administrative equivalent of U.S. states. One of the few questions the Public Opinion Foundation (FOM) consistently includes in all of its polls asks respondents to evaluate the likelihood of unrest in their locality.

It is worth clarifying that just like in democracies, citizens who live under electoral authoritarianism are not homogeneous in their political preferences towards the regime. Drawing on classic models of tactical redistribution in democracies, we can think of the electorate as consistent of three groups: *Incumbent Supporters*, *Moderates*, and *Opposition Supporters*.¹⁰² Incumbent, or regime supporters accept the status quo as the 'only game in town' and are more likely to campaign, fund-raise and take action in order to sway moderates in favour of the incumbent. Core opposition supporters are the farthest away from the regime, and the ones most likely to take to the streets and protest against the incumbent. While unrest signals that dissatisfaction with the regime is widespread, it could also trigger a wave of defections, swaying moderates against the regime.¹⁰³ Moderates are indifferent between the regime and the opposition. From the regime's standpoint, it is optimal to maximize the number of regime supporters and minimize the number of opposition loyalists. Yet, if increasing the number of regime supporters is not possible, incumbents are likely to concentrate their efforts at preventing support for the opposition from increasing. To put this differently, incumbents would prefer that regime supporters joined the ranks of the

¹⁰² (Dixit and Londregan 1996)

¹⁰³ In this thesis, the term 'defections' is used to describe withdrawals of public support from a regime, or dominant party. And, just like Colton and Hale, I am less interested in whether original support for the ruling regime or the dominant party were either strategic or sincere (Hale and Colton 2017, 322–23)

moderates, as opposed to those of the opposition.¹⁰⁴ As existing research reminds us, the resigned acceptance, or behavioural compliance of the moderates could indeed lead to regime stability.¹⁰⁵ Empirical examples of how moderates have helped regimes sustain their rule abound. Russia's contemporary leadership for example, relies on the acquiescence of the urban educated voters, whose support is otherwise difficult to mobilize.¹⁰⁶ Abstention from country-wide elections was also fundamental in enabling the PRI in Mexico to win elections and maintain a dominant position during the party's 'golden years'.¹⁰⁷

To conclude, these sections have highlighted why support for illiberal rulers is important, and why from the regime's standpoint, it would be optimal to maximize its supporters. The section that follows discusses how illiberal governments generate support in equilibrium.

How the state generates support in equilibrium

According to Henry Hale, managing public opinion is a key challenge confronting contemporary illiberal incumbents.¹⁰⁸ Drawing on influential research on the origins of support for illiberal rule, I propose that to gain the support of the governed, incumbents need to convince the masses that they are competent, i.e. able to deliver growth, stability and security.¹⁰⁹ I assume that just like their counterparts in advanced democracies, citizens under electoral autocracies rely on information from their living standards and the state of the national economy as a means of assessing incumbent competence.¹¹⁰ In general, when wages

¹⁰⁴ Existing literature describes the resigned acceptance of the regime, or the large number of moderates as a type of 'suboptimal political equilibrium' (Gel'man 2015b, 23–24; R Rose, Munro, and Mishler 2004)

¹⁰⁵ (Colton and Hale 2012, 5; Richard Rose, Mishler, and Munro 2011, 1)

¹⁰⁶ (Gel'man 2015b)

¹⁰⁷ (Dominiguez and McCann 1996, 164)

¹⁰⁸ (Hale 2015)

¹⁰⁹ (Desai, Olofsgård, and Yousef 2009; Geddes 1999b; Guriev and Treisman 2015a; Haggard and Kaufman 1995; Hansen 1974; Magaloni 2006)

¹¹⁰ See for example: (Ansolabehere, Meredith, and Snowberg 2014; Fiorina 1978; Kinder and Kiewiet 1981)

and employment grow, and citizens feel secure, i.e. not threatened by street unrest and security challenges, they are more likely to support the incumbent ‘sincerely’.¹¹¹ Ample resources also allow incumbents to invest in tactical redistribution and transfers that generate ‘strategic’ support.¹¹² It has been shown for example, that poorer citizens – i.e. the ones more willing to compromise their political preferences for additional private consumption, also tend to offer overwhelming levels of support for power-holders.¹¹³ Yet even the provision of public goods under electoral autocracies is often tactical, i.e. it takes into consideration the need to win over certain sections of the population, and not driven by economic criteria alone.¹¹⁴ For example, political considerations, namely the fear of unrest, motivated the Soviet leadership to extend welfare, and encouraged Brazil’s and Argentina’s military regimes to provide social security and pensions.¹¹⁵

In a similar vein, positive portrayals of the status quo in national media and a consenting opposition could play a key role in generating and sustaining mass support for illiberal rule.¹¹⁶ Using state-controlled media incumbents can claim credit for positive economic

¹¹¹ (Magaloni 2006, 71)

¹¹² Strategic support stems from the provision of private goods, and erodes when the regime is no longer able to deliver. Yet, sincere support also erodes when the economy collapses, or when wages collapse, as the regime can no longer provide public goods. In this thesis, I am interested in examining whether citizens withdraw support from government in response to a shock – and whether government effort can moderate such withdrawals – regardless of whether support is sincere, or strategic. One can, however, argue that support is more resilient to shocks when it is not based on performance but ideology, i.e. deep beliefs about the legitimacy of the regime, or its authority. This is a valid argument. Yet, as existing research from democracies shows, shocks and crises could prompt even the strongest partisans – or the most ideologically committed voters – to withdraw support from their party, or the leader who has failed to deliver. The theory section develops this point in length. It is also important not to confuse strategic with insincere support, which is a term used in theories of cascading defections to describe preference falsifications due to fear. I believe that fear generates compliance, as opposed to support, thus I do not engage with this outcome.

¹¹³ (Dixit and Londregan 1996, 1144; Magaloni 2006)

¹¹⁴ (Chen and Xu 2015; Pan 2015; M. Svolik 2012)

¹¹⁵ (Forrat 2012; Haggard and Kaufman 1995; Pan 2015)

¹¹⁶ Existing literature from advanced democracies suggests that when the opposition does not contradict the incumbent’s rhetoric at times of crisis, popular opinion is more likely to round

performance, forge national consensus on the basis of broad appeals, and signal to elites and the masses that the status quo is supported by many.¹¹⁷ Censoring information about rent-seeking and government malpractices could also prevent citizens from holding incumbents to account. As Hollyer *et al.* show for example, economic transparency, or the disclosure of economic data by the government is often associated with an increase in the frequency of protest.¹¹⁸ Drawing on Guriev and Treisman, we can broadly think of propaganda as ‘any action taken by the government in order to make the message that the incumbent is competent more convincing’.¹¹⁹ Therefore beyond the coverage of news in a way that is favourable to the incumbent and the censorship of important facts and information, propaganda could include the hiring of internet trolls to post pro-regime comments online, or the staging of pro-regime rallies.¹²⁰ In illiberal regimes where power is personalised and a single actor maintains a near monopoly over policy and personnel decisions, propaganda could also involve actions that aim to convince the masses that the leader is the only guarantor of social, and political stability in the country.¹²¹

The empirical evidence suggests that contemporary electoral authoritarians use tactical redistribution and propaganda inter-changeably. As Chen and Xu note for example, while economic growth in China has improved citizen living standards, the Chinese Communist Party has also used propaganda and censored information in ways that benefited the regime.¹²² The Chinese leadership’s censorship programme is indeed notorious for targeting online posts, or offline information that aims to inspire collective action and encourage

around the flag – and the government. See for example: (Brody and Shapiro 1991; Lai and Reiter 2005)

¹¹⁷ (Chen and Xu 2015; Guriev and Treisman 2015a; Stockmann 2013; Stockmann and Gallagher 2011)

¹¹⁸ (Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland 2015)

¹¹⁹ (Guriev and Treisman 2015a, 5)

¹²⁰ (Guriev and Treisman 2015a, 5)

¹²¹ (Smyth 2014, 567)

¹²² (Chen, Pan, and Xu 2016; Chen and Xu 2015)

citizens take to the streets. Similarly, while President Putin's ability to amass high levels of support during his first two terms in office, and the 'consolidating phase' of electoral authoritarianism in Russia, i.e. from 2000 to 2008, was credited to the growth the Russian economy, the same decade also saw the government expand its control over TV, and print media outlets.¹²³

In conclusion, when economic performance and propaganda allow electoral authoritarians to generate popular support, electoral fraud and repression are not needed.¹²⁴ And as Beatriz Magaloni reminds us, repression under this equilibrium phase of electoral authoritarianism tends to be 'very selective' and directed against elite opponents, or opposition parties alone.¹²⁵

2.2 Shocks and the downside of dominance

Existing scholarship recognizes the threat unexpected shocks such as natural disasters, or economic, security, and political challenges pose to the stability of non-democratic forms of government.¹²⁶ In the context of this thesis I see shocks as collective and unexpected events with negative consequences for citizen income and security. Shocks can be either man-made, or linked to stochastic factors, such as extreme weather conditions for example. Regardless of their origins, however, shocks are political events. They command attention of the masses and government, and make citizens pay more attention to politics. Moreover, by making information about government performance publicly observable, collective shocks to citizen income and security could stimulate national-level conversations about a

¹²³ (Enikolopov, Petrova, and Zhuravskaya 2011; Lankina, Watanabe, and Netesova 2016; D. S. Treisman 2011)

¹²⁴ (Magaloni 2006, 22)

¹²⁵ (Magaloni 2006, 22)

¹²⁶ See for example: (Flores and Smith 2013; Gasiorowski 1995; Geddes 1999a; Haggard and Kaufman 1995; Magaloni 2010; Remmer 1991; Richard Rose and Mishler 2010)

government's role in society.¹²⁷ Finally, shocks can compromise the effectiveness of government policies used to generate support in equilibrium, and encourage opposition parties and activists to coalesce and challenge the government. I discuss each of these effects in turn.

As I have already noted in the Introduction, we can think of shocks as making two types of information publicly observable; information about the factors that led to the emergence of the shocks – the collapse of the national currency for example can reveal poor economic management – and information about government efforts to address the consequences of the shock. I do not need and do not assume that for shocks to undermine support citizens should blame the government for causing the shocks to occur. I do, however, assume that citizens observe government responses to shocks and decide whether their grievances have been satisfactorily treated or rectified. As Rudolph reminds us, in times of crisis citizens ask not just whether the government was the source of their grievance, but also whether it is the government's job to remedy it, and how successfully the government will do so.¹²⁸

Moreover, as existing research reminds us, citizens can infer more about government competence by observing how shocks unfold on the one hand, and how governments respond to them on the other. Such signals are less noisy and less plagued with inference challenges than other indicators – such as noisy movements in the business cycle for example.¹²⁹ Publicly observable information about poor performance, or regime malpractices does not come easily under illiberal rule. Government control over the national media, internet censorship and weak, or co-opted opposition parties ensure that citizens rarely learn of

¹²⁷ (Atkeson and Maestas 2014, 23)

¹²⁸ (Rudolph 2003)

¹²⁹ (Cole, Healy, and Werker 2012a)

political failures, or scandals involving government actors.¹³⁰ Natural disasters, terror attacks, economic recessions and coordinated protests for example, present some of the very rare opportunities that could make information about the incumbent directly observable.

Unexpected shocks also create an environment that permits changes in public opinion that would be unlikely during times of normal politics. Research on the effects of natural disasters on public opinion in democracies for example, shows that even the strongest partisans can feel disappointed by their party's actions during periods of crisis and withdraw support from those leaders who have failed to deliver.¹³¹ Drawing on evidence from Americans' response to Hurricane Katrina, Atkeson and Maestas also show that heightened anxiety resulting from a disaster allows citizens to engage in accuracy-based reasoning, and update their preferences in ways less influenced by partisan rationalizations.¹³² Going back to the distinction of citizens under autocracy as divided between regime and opposition loyalist and moderates, we can think that shocks encourage regime supporters to withdraw support from the regime at a first step, and join the ranks of the moderates or the opposition at a second. Shocks could also increase the likelihood that moderates will defect to the opposition. Shock-related casualties, deteriorating living standards, and large numbers of citizens taking to the streets asking for political change signal not only the incumbent has failed to protect collective security and wellbeing, but that dissatisfaction with the status-

¹³⁰ Scandals are also political events, yet they result from the disclosure of some act of wrongdoing or norm violation. Whether they will be made known to the public, however, depends on the strength of the political opposition, and the overall political and news environment within which they take place. As Nyhan shows for example, when the political and news environment is unfavourable, scandals may erupt in the press, despite thin evidentiary support. By contrast, under more favourable conditions, even well-supported allegations can languish (Nyhan 2014, 436). Visible national shocks, however, are more difficult to either ignore, or bury. They can thus generate high levels of public awareness and attention, independent of whether, or how the media cover the event or not.

¹³¹ (Mutz 1992, 1994)

¹³² (Atkeson and Maestas 2014) On the political conditioning of economic perceptions see for example: (Chzen, Evans, and Pickup 2013; Evans and Pickup 2010)

quo is be widespread. Such knowledge is documented to facilitate coordination in the political domain and increase citizens' propensity to air their grievances by taking to the streets.¹³³

Shocks also compromise traditional tools the government uses to manage public opinion in equilibrium. They hinder the effectiveness of propaganda on the one hand, and dampen the government's ability to invest in redistribution on the other. In the context of natural disasters for example, any effort to censor information could backfire. Failure to evacuate settlements ahead of hurricanes or spreading wildfires could increase the death toll from the disaster, and exacerbate citizen dissatisfaction with government.¹³⁴ Moreover, evidence from citizens' lower consumption, or increased sense of insecurity constructs a reality not easily dismissed by government propaganda.¹³⁵ Even if incumbents choose to lie about the extent of an economic downturn for example, citizens can effectively benchmark information they consume in state-controlled media with evidence from their own pocketbook, or the living standards of their friends and neighbours. When household members, or people citizens know and care about are unemployed, when wages are delayed, local factories close, and the provision of welfare goods declines, any attempt to either deny or censor information regarding the existence of an economic downturn could backfire. As Robert Dahl reminds us, 'direct experience is a persuasive teacher; often too, it is a stubborn enemy of government propaganda'.¹³⁶

Similarly, shocks could directly limit the resources a government has available to invest in tactical redistribution. When the performance of the economy is poor in equilibrium, and

¹³³ (Chen and Xu 2015; Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland 2015)

¹³⁴ (Ansolabehere, Meredith, and Snowberg 2014; Duch, Palmer, and Anderson 2000; Fraile and Pardos-Prado 2013; Gartner, Segura, and Wilkening 1997; Rosenfeld 2016)

¹³⁵ (Birkland 2009)

¹³⁶ (Dahl 1974, 263)

federal sovereign wealth funds are declining, or when shocks directly harm economic performance and disrupt economic production, the resources available to purchase support are limited. Likewise, when the size of the discontented group is large, the government cannot credibly target everyone with benefits. When millions took to the streets in Russia to protest against fraud-rigged elections from December 2011 to May 2012 for example, there was little room for the government to target protesters, or protest spectators ad hoc in order to purchase their loyalty. Last but not least, tactical redistribution implemented in the aftermath of shocks, and which benefits only a narrow segment of the electorate could trigger competition effects. Dissatisfaction with government could thus increase among social groups or entire regions that do not stand to benefit by government policy.

Finally, shocks can also have an indirect effect on approval. By disrupting routines of bureaucratic control, they enable opposition elites and activists to voice concerns about regime performance, and publicly challenge the incumbent's rhetoric.¹³⁷ Collective shocks to citizen income and security can also encourage an otherwise divided opposition to coalesce and mount an orchestrated attack against the incumbent. And as previously noted, the opposition's ability to challenge government policies and rhetoric is greater when traditionally, the opposition enjoys a reputational advantage in the domain the shock emerges from. Right-wing parties in autocracies, just like right-wing parties in democracies, enjoy a reputational advantage in the security domain.¹³⁸ As such, they could stand to benefit when terror attacks expose weaknesses in the design, and implementation of the government's counter-terrorism programme for example.

¹³⁷ (Flores and Smith 2013)

¹³⁸ (Getmansky and Zeitzoff 2014)

The downside of dominance

The centralization of authority under illiberal rule and the concentration of power in the hands of the leader in personalist regimes, could further facilitate citizens' task of assigning political responsibility for collective, and negative shocks to their income and security. As Powell and Whitten remind us, institutional configurations that concentrate power facilitate attributions of responsibility and encourage economic voting.¹³⁹ Under illiberal rule, parliamentary supermajorities and appointed governors for example, provide clear responsibility signals that further facilitate attributions of responsibility to the leader who embodies the regime and its stability. Resultantly, even in federal systems with decentralized institutions and regional Parliaments, power centralization can expose incumbents at the top rungs of the country's ruling coalition to shocks at the regional, and even local levels of power. Recent evidence from Russia which is a federal country, shows that the dominant party, United Russia, receives greater punishment for local economic conditions in cities where mayoral elections have been abolished on the one hand, and where the party dominates regional legislatures on the other.¹⁴⁰

Yet the deterioration of personalist links both between the leader and the voters, as well as the leader and the elites, can also be associated with an increase in anti-regime action.¹⁴¹ When a personalist leader becomes a focal point for citizen discontent and popular grievances in the aftermath of shocks, the leader's tenure and the stability of the regime are compromised.

¹³⁹ (Powell and Whitten 1993)

¹⁴⁰ (Reuter and Beazer 2016; Rosenfeld 2016)

¹⁴¹ (Smyth 2014, 573)

2.3 Government responses to shocks, and voter responses to government policy

The previous sections have highlighted the threat shocks pose for illiberal rule. Yet non-democratic incumbents are not powerless in the face of adversity. Indeed, my theoretical argument attributes incongruence between negative shocks to citizen income and security and unfaltering support for government to incumbents' ability to manage public opinion. More specifically, I propose that by colouring citizen evaluations of government performance on the one hand, and attributions of responsibility for any shock on the other, incumbents could moderate, or ameliorate the effect of shocks on the levels of support they enjoy.

As existing research on the origins of public opinion in advanced democracies reminds us, for worsening (or improving) conditions to affect political evaluations, two conditions should be met. *First*, objective conditions and individuals' subjective evaluations of them should be congruent. Put differently, citizens should be able to monitor how the government is doing in office, or how well the economy is performing performance and update their political, or economic evaluations accordingly. *Second*, individuals should hold national governments accountable for developments in the economy, effectively blaming, or crediting incumbents for economic downturns or growth for example. Support should be less affected by shocks when citizens incorrectly interpret objective conditions. Alternately, or additionally, when citizens misattribute blame for worsening conditions support for government will be less affected, and the accountability mechanism will be breached.¹⁴² Moreover, as Debra Javeline has demonstrated, attributions of blame influence not only how citizens evaluate government performance, but also individuals' propensity to protest, and strike in order to air economic and political grievances.¹⁴³

¹⁴² (Anderson 2007; Fraile and Pardos-Prado 2013; Tilley and Hobolt 2011)

¹⁴³ (Javeline 2003)

By investing in propaganda and targeted redistribution, incumbents can claim credit for efforts to alleviate the effect of the shock and deflect blame for malpractices and poor performance that either led to the shock, or failed to effectively address its consequences. When incumbents successfully claim credit, and deflect blame, citizens are less likely to downgrade their assessments of incumbent performance in response to negative shocks and worsening conditions. The policy tools examined here, however, are not only used in the aftermath of shocks but also in equilibrium. The government, for example, does not only manipulate information or manage the coverage of news in state-controlled media in the aftermath of economic recessions or after natural disasters alone. Yet shocks undoubtedly increase the likelihood that the masses will start withdrawing their support from government. Fear that their approval will wane therefore encourages incumbents to increase the baseline or equilibrium provision of redistribution, propaganda and repression.¹⁴⁴

Generating support through propaganda and tactical redistribution

Propaganda and tactical redistribution are two key strategies incumbents implement in order to ameliorate the negative effects of shocks on the levels of support they enjoy. Even when – as already noted - shocks compromise the government’s ability to censor, or falsify hard information, incumbents could use propaganda to claim credit for efforts to alleviate the consequences of downturns, and shift blame for their emergence – or even for the government’s poor response to them.

When used to claim credit for ‘good news’, government propaganda could ameliorate evaluations of government performance. By making citizens aware of government-led efforts to alleviate the effects of various shocks, and portraying government as undertaking every possible action in order to assist shock affected individuals, incumbents

¹⁴⁴ (Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland 2015)

could elicit support, and generate long-lasting gratitude. I also propose that when used to deflect blame away from the actors who embody the regime and its stability, propaganda could dampen attributions of responsibility for the shock on government and ameliorate the effect of shocks on the levels of support, or approval leaders enjoy.

Blame shifting could take various forms. Just like governments in democracy, powerholders under electoral authoritarianism can shift the blame for bad news to actors abroad. Economic interdependencies in the context of a globalized economy, or binding commitments to supra-national organisations could be framed as either leading to economic downturns, or as constraining national governments' ability to rectify their consequences.¹⁴⁵ Illiberal incumbents could also claim that international hostility is causing stagnation at home. In personalist regimes in particular, where the leader often embodies the regime and its stability, government rhetoric and policies could also shift the blame to actors at the lower rungs of the country's ruling coalition. Sacking government officers involved in the management of various shocks for example, could enable the leader to distance himself from subordinates who have failed to deliver, or indeed in the case of natural disasters, invest in preparedness spending. Seen as restoring order following poor management, incumbents could downplay responsibility for poor policy planning and prevent their own approval ratings from eroding.¹⁴⁶

As existing research reminds us, however, manipulating information in state-led media could incur a direct cost on government, as the more the government lies, the less credible its rhetoric will be. In a theoretical model, Chen and Xu propose for example, the lower the manipulation of information, the more credible a government's rhetoric about the

¹⁴⁵ (On attributions of blame to the EU see for example: Hellström et al. 2015; Hobolt and Tilley 2014)

¹⁴⁶ (Dewan and Dowding 2005; Szakonyi 2012)

popularity of the status quo is.¹⁴⁷ Moreover, in order to keep viewers' attention and discourage them from turning to independent media, the information state controlled media project has to reflect reality at least to some extent.¹⁴⁸ Other tools of propaganda, such as the dismissals of government officers involved in the (poor) management of shocks are also costly, and it would be naïve to assume that even all-powerful Presidents can dismiss others at will. Russia's Vladimir Putin for example, has found it extremely difficult to dismiss ill-performing governors who had nonetheless produced order and stability in their regions. Despite violations of power, human rights abuses, and evident corruption in Chechnya, Kadyrov's removal from power has been permanently put on hold, as this could potentially endanger the stability of the North Caucasus.¹⁴⁹ Considerations about political actors' ability to deliver the vote, order and stability could significantly compromise the government's ability to shift the blame to other elites at home.

When budget constraints are such that permit investments in tactical redistribution, the government releases aid and generous transfers in order to directly placate shock-affected regions or groups. Like relief aid in equilibrium, generous spending consisting of direct payments to local and regional budgets, or even individual accounts in the aftermath of shocks is visible, immediate, and easily attributed to the incumbent.¹⁵⁰ Generous transfers and redistribution can therefore help illiberal incumbents signal that despite adversity, they remain able to promote collective well-being.¹⁵¹ Several examples highlight how generous relief aid in the wake of natural disasters in particular can help governments shore up support. Using evidence from the German government's response to the 2002 Elbe flooding for

¹⁴⁷ (Chen and Xu 2015, 2)

¹⁴⁸ (Gehlbach and Sonin 2013; Gehlbach, Sonin, and Svolik 2015; Stockmann and Gallagher 2011)

¹⁴⁹ (Judah 2013)

¹⁵⁰ (Harding 2015; Healy and Malhotra 2009)

¹⁵¹ (Bechtel and Hainmueller 2011; Cole, Healy, and Werker 2012a; Healy and Malhotra 2009; Manacorda, Miguel, and Vigorito 2011)

example, Bechtel and Hainmueller show that generous aid could increase both short, and long-term support for the party leading the relief efforts.¹⁵² Similarly, Landy and Stockmann show that the Chinese government's response to the 2008 Sichuan earthquake helped increase short-term approval of the country's authorities.¹⁵³

Yet the decision to increase the equilibrium level of targeted redistribution does not come cheap. Every additional unit of redistribution used in order to mitigate the effect of shocks on support has to be paid for by the government, either by raising the tax rate, or by using existing state reserves. While higher tax rate will reduce after-tax income and therefore citizen consumption signalling that the incumbent is less competent than assumed, drawing on existing reserves could also dampen the amount of rents incumbents themselves are able to extract.¹⁵⁴ Assuming standard budget constraints, any money spent on purchasing citizen support is not invested in increasing the autocrat's own personal consumption on the one hand, and in ensuring the support of regime insiders on the other. It would therefore be possible to anticipate that the cost a government is willing to tolerate in trying to ameliorate the effect of various shocks is endogenous to the threat of citizens' collective action, and increases as the likelihood of defections away from the ruling regime also increases.¹⁵⁵

Overall, the relationship between propaganda and tactical redistribution could be seen as complementary.¹⁵⁶ And as Chen and Xu remind us, a government's ability to purchase support through redistribution and generous transfers reduces its incentives to manipulate information, and by extension improves its credibility, as the more a government lies, the less credible it becomes.¹⁵⁷ Anticipating a lower degree of information manipulation,

¹⁵² (Bechtel and Hainmueller 2011)

¹⁵³ (Landy and Stockmann 2009)

¹⁵⁴ (Guriev and Treisman 2015a, 5)

¹⁵⁵ For a similar assumption see: (Chen and Xu 2015; Guriev and Treisman 2015a)

¹⁵⁶ See also: (Gerschewski 2013)

¹⁵⁷ (Chen and Xu 2015, 2)

citizens are also more likely to believe the information the government provides.¹⁵⁸ As such, we could expect that the use of propaganda could be intensified when the government's ability to purchase support by investing in tactical redistribution is limited, and vice-versa.

To facilitate interpretation, we could think that the following interactions take place every time a negative shock to citizen income or security is realised. In a first step, the government observes the shock, and releases a moderate degree of propaganda. At a second step, the government decides whether it can afford to target those affected with targeted redistribution. If the government can transfer money or goods to purchase loyalty it does so – complementing propaganda with a moderate degree of tactical redistribution. If providing tactical redistribution is not possible, then the government uses propaganda alone. If citizens accept the government's offer of either moderate propaganda and moderate redistribution, or of propaganda alone, the game ends. The game continues only if citizens reject the government's offer.

Preventing defections through the use of repression

My argument predicts that repression should only be used when tactical redistribution and propaganda have failed to pre-empt the erosion of support for incumbents. Relying on Tilly, I view repression as obstacles by the state, or its agents to individual, and collective action by challengers.¹⁵⁹ As such, repression is conceptualized along a continuum with direct physical force marking its most severe end. Pre-empting mobilization, whether by constraining the opposition's right to assembly, or by confiscating opposition resources is also another category of repression.¹⁶⁰ And, while 'high intensity' repression is used less frequently, lower intensity repression is more frequent, but also more subtle and discreet. Its

¹⁵⁸ (Chen and Xu 2015)

¹⁵⁹ (Tilly 1995, 136)

¹⁶⁰ (Davenport, Johnston, and Mueller 2005)

concrete measures include harassment and intimidation, as well as the curtailment of the opposition's right to assembly and campaign.¹⁶¹

Acts of repression, differ from earlier policies aiming to persuade citizens of the incumbent's competence and to purchase support in one key respect. Repression does not convince the masses that the incumbent is competent, and does not generate loyalty or support.¹⁶² More often than not, repression aims to prevent voters from switching to the opposition and to end ongoing mobilization. Activists perceived to be engaging in violent and destabilizing battles, are less likely to elicit the support of risk-averse citizens, or of those who value order and stability more broadly.¹⁶³ By heightening spectators' anxiety, and conveying the image of a country gradually regressing towards chaos, violent clashes between the regime and its opponents have the potential to undermine support for the demands of the protest movement and to dampen perceptions of electoral unfairness.

Several factors make either low, or high intensity repression a very costly tool to use. To begin with, acts of either low, or high intensity repression also come received intense criticism by the international community. Following legislation that limited the opposition's right to campaign and abolished gubernatorial elections in 2004 for example, the European Union condemned what at the time appeared as a 'backsliding on democracy' in Russia. Since 2004, Freedom House reports on political and civil rights in the country have been citing the use of low and high intensity repression, as driving factors behind Russia's democratic backsliding. International condemnation might not only result in reputational losses for the targeted country, but also in the imposition of international economic sanctions with the potential to harm growth and economic development.

¹⁶¹ (Gerschewski 2013; S. Levitsky and Way 2002)

¹⁶² See also: (Wintrobe 1998)

¹⁶³ (Magaloni 2006, 2010)

Dependence on the military to carry out acts of either low, or high intensity repression also makes this a very costly tool to use.¹⁶⁴ Far from discrediting the opposition, the use of physical violence against protesters could highlight that the regime is trying to hide regime abuses, and that it is under pressure.¹⁶⁵ Kricheli, Livne and Magaloni for example, show that although active repression reduces the risk of protests, it also increases their effectiveness. This is because citizens who protests in a repressive environment send a strong signal that they oppose the regime.¹⁶⁶ Likewise, studies of incumbency advantage in non-democracies predict that when a regime with the capacity to use repression against anti-regime protesters does not do so, the masses could think that the incumbents are sure of their popularity. The use of violence could instead signal that the government knows that the status quo is only supported by a few, and that the protest movement could be crowned with success.¹⁶⁷

These caveats further suggest that active repression against citizens and opposition activists should only be used scarcely, and only after despite government efforts, support for incumbents in the aftermath of shocks continues to erode. In concluding this section, Table 2.1 below summarizes the tools associated with every policy choice.

¹⁶⁴ (Gehlbach, Sonin, and Svolik 2015; Wintrobe 1998)

¹⁶⁵ (Schedler 2002)

¹⁶⁶ (Kricheli, Livne, and Magaloni 2011)

¹⁶⁷ (Egorov and Sonin 2014; Gehlbach, Sonin, and Svolik 2015)

Table 2.1 **Summary of policy instruments**

<i>Aim:</i>	Shore up regime support		Prevent defections	
<i>Policy options:</i>	Propaganda	Tactical redistribution	Low intensity repression	High intensity repression
<i>Tools:</i>	Media coverage	Relief Aid	Limit political rights	Physical violence
	Censorship	Block Grants		Imprisonment
	Internet Trolls	Fiscal Transfers	Restrict freedom to campaign	Exile
	Internet control	Emergency Declarations		Torture, concentration camps
	Dismissals		Deny protest permission	

The four quadrants of Table 2.2 below show when each of the different policies is more likely to emerge. The upper left quadrant shows that when constraints to redistribution are low, the government uses propaganda and redistribution. When citizens accept this offer, the game ends. This is an outcome I test in the first empirical chapter of the thesis, which considers government and citizen responses to the 2010 wildfires. The lower left quadrant shows what happens when the government cannot redistribute – it uses propaganda alone. When successful at shoring support, propaganda is not complemented by repression. This outcome I test in my second empirical chapter, which deals with the effects of Russia’s recent economic downturn. The upper right quadrant shows what happens when redistribution constraints are still low, but citizens reject the government’s offer of redistribution and propaganda – here the government adds repression to the mix. This is an outcome I test in the third empirical chapter of the thesis, which discusses the political consequences of persistent terrorism. The lower right quadrant shows what happens when the government cannot redistribute, and citizens reject propaganda, i.e. its use does not pre-empt support from eroding. In this case, propaganda is used hand-in-hand with repression. I test this outcome in my final empirical chapter, which looks at Moscow’s response to the 2011/12 protests.

Table 2.2 Summary of government responses to shocks

	<i>At t+1 citizens accept government offer</i>	<i>At t+1 citizens reject government offer</i>
<i>Constraints to redistribute at t, Low</i>	Propaganda Redistribution <i>Wildfires Chapter</i>	Propaganda Redistribution and Repression <i>Terrorism Chapter</i>
<i>Constraints to redistribute at t, High</i>	Propaganda <i>Recession Chapter</i>	Propaganda and Repression <i>Protest Chapter</i>

In conclusion, when successful, government responses to shocks could not only neutralize any negative effects shocks have on support, but even rally public opinion around the autocrat and elicit citizen gratitude that translates in higher approval ratings for incumbents and more favourable electoral outcomes for incumbents and ruling parties. It is also possible that whilst government efforts pre-empt support from eroding, they are unable to shore up support. When voters remain ‘loyal’ to their pre-shock attitudes towards the regime, aggregate support for government does not shift, i.e. it neither increases nor does it drop. This outcome is still positive for incumbents who have successfully pre-empted the levels of support they enjoy from declining in response to negative shocks to citizen income and security. When efforts to address the political consequences of shocks fail, voters could defect to the opposition. Dissatisfied with either government malpractices that led to the emergence of a shock in the first place, or with government responses to shocks, citizens could switch loyalties and initiate action against ill-performing incumbents. Citizens who previously supported the incumbent could now offer lower assessments of power holders’ performance in office, and even coordinate in the political domain, turning out in the streets and protesting against the authorities.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁸ (Hale and Colton 2017, 323)

Comparisons with democracies

Before concluding, one final note is warranted. As the preceding discussion makes clear, propaganda and tactical redistribution are tools not exclusively available to illiberal incumbents. Credit claiming, and blame shifting for example, two central elements of government propaganda in the aftermath of shocks are also widely employed by democratic governments as well.¹⁶⁹ Governments in developed and developing economies are also well-known to engage in tactical redistribution and favour either supporters or swing-constituencies with relief aid in the aftermath of natural disasters.¹⁷⁰ More broadly, we can think that non-democratic and democratic incumbents are not only motivated by similar objectives - such as the need to maximize survival, ideology and rents - but that they also employ similar tools in pursuing these goals.¹⁷¹

Electoral authoritarians, however, are much less constrained by how they pursue their goals, and in how they use various tools in order to shore up support when performance is poor. The essence of dictatorship, Gehlbach, Sonin and Svolik argue in a recent review of the field, is precisely that ‘non-democratic incumbents are able to exercise powers beyond any constitutional, or intra-party constraint’.¹⁷² Non-democratic incumbents’ control over the national media for example, offers them a putative propaganda advantage and allows them to construct the dominant narrative across media outlets that powerfully shape evaluations of incumbent performance. Moreover, illiberal incumbents enjoy great discretion over the allocation of fiscal transfers, and federal donations in the case of multi-level governments. In the absence of legislative or media oversight, incumbents could more easily engage in tactical redistribution and target either supporters, or swing voters with

¹⁶⁹ (Hood 2011)

¹⁷⁰ (T Besley and Burgess 2002; Timothy Besley and Prat 2006)

¹⁷¹ (Gehlbach, Sonin, and Svolik 2015, 5)

¹⁷² (Gehlbach, Sonin, and Svolik 2015, 5)

generous aid and transfers. Similarly, faced with few constraints by coalition parties, rival factions and the national media, non-democratic incumbents can more easily deflect responsibility for policy failures even among members of their ruling coalition. By sacking elected or appointed officers, incumbents could aim to distance themselves from poor performing authorities. Last but not least, non-democratic incumbents will far more readily engage their repressive apparatus against opponents than would democratically accountable governments.¹⁷³ Despite the costs involved in its use, repression is always on illiberal incumbents' menu of choice. The game in which incumbents and citizens interact in the aftermath of shocks, and which I introduced earlier, could thus end with repression either achieving its objectives and putting an end to ongoing mobilization, or instead by repression failing to achieve its purposes, and unrest escalating to a full-blown revolution.

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter has developed the theoretical argument the thesis advances in detail. I have explained why popular support for authorities is important, and why even the most illiberal governments need to respond to negative shocks to citizen income and sense of stability in order to ameliorate their effects on the levels of support they enjoy.

I have made three claims. First, I have proposed that shocks are important, as despite illiberal incumbents' propaganda advantage, they make information about government malpractices and poor performance publicly observable. Second, I have argued that government responses to shocks aim to moderate, or ameliorate their negative effect on the levels of support incumbents enjoy. By investing in propaganda and targeted redistribution, incumbents can claim credit for efforts to alleviate the effect of the shock and deflect blame for malpractices and poor performance that either led to the shock, or failed to effectively

¹⁷³ (DeNardo 1985b; Kricheli, Livne, and Magaloni 2011; Lohmann 1994)

address its consequences. When incumbents successfully claim credit, and deflect blame, citizens are less likely to downgrade their assessments of incumbent performance in response to negative shocks and worsening conditions. Targeted redistribution and propaganda are seen as complements – the state’s ability to appease the aggrieved electorate with monetary transfers should reduce incentives to lie, as the more a government lies, the less credible its rhetoric becomes. I have finally suggested that when incumbents fail to prevent support from eroding and unrest from spreading, the likelihood that the regime will use repression against those taking to the streets increases. Yet, contrary to tactical redistribution and propaganda, repression does not help incumbents shore up support. It can, however, prevent citizens from joining the ranks of the opposition. As the preceding sections also note, while control over the media and the ability to engage in targeted redistribution ameliorate the state’s ability to shore up support in the aftermath of shocks, the opposition’s reputational advantage over certain issues, or policy areas, could challenge the government’s rhetoric, and its ability to offset the consequences of shocks.

Chapter 3

Introduction to the Russian Case

This chapter offers a succinct overview of Russian politics since the early 2000s and paves the way for the empirical chapters that follow. It serves to provide some basic facts about the origins and dynamics of popular support for the Russian leadership. The discussion also documents how prior to 2008, that is prior to the ‘consolidated’ phase of electoral authoritarianism in Russia, Putin’s administration centralized power, subordinated business and regional elites to the Kremlin and extended the government’s influence over the media. These developments conditioned the Kremlin’s response to the shocks the thesis considers. Power centralization and media control for example, offered the government great discretion over the use of repression, the coverage of news and the allocation of budgetary transfers.

3.1 Russian politics in the last two decades: A brief overview of events

In 2016, and for the fourth year running, Forbes magazine declared Vladimir Putin as the world’s most powerful person. According to editorial staff, this decision reflected Putin’s immense influence over Russian politics and international affairs.¹⁷⁴ Looking at this image of Putin today, one could easily forget that when he came to power in 2000, he was just the first among equals. Anatoly Chubais for example, the person in charge of Russia’s privatization and First Deputy Prime Minister from 1994 to 1998, commanded as much – if not more - respect and support among Kremlin insiders as Putin did.¹⁷⁵ To understand how Vladimir Putin came to exert the influence he currently does, it is important to examine how

¹⁷⁴ (Forbes List 2016)

¹⁷⁵ (Chapkovski 2011; Gel’man 2015b, 91)

soon after coming to power, Russia's second President established his so-called 'power vertical'.

In the early 2000s, President Putin brought a new ruling coalition to power. Shortly after he assumed office, his trusted friends and allies made their way into the boards of national TV channels and major companies. Up to this day, three of Russia's biggest TV channels are either directly owned by the state, or owned by subsidiaries of *Gazprom*, Russia's largest oil and gas company. TV channels *NTV* and *Russia 1* for example are owned by Gazprom Media and the Russian state. The Russian government also has a majority 51% stake in *Perviy Kanal (Channel 1)*, regarded by many as the country's leading TV channel.¹⁷⁶ In the early 2000s Putin's allies also stepped into the boards of large energy companies. In 2001 for example, Alexey Miller, Putin's close confidant, was appointed as the CEO of Russia's biggest natural gas company, *Gazprom*. In the early 2000s, and following the purchase of oil fields in the Northern European part of the country *Rosneft*, Russia's state oil company expanded, while the state's share of *Gazprom* gradually increased to over 50%. In 2003, the arrest of energy tycoons Platon Lebedev and Mikhael Khodorkovsky on accusations of tax evasion marked a full-force attack against some of the most prominent winners of the 1990s privatization process.¹⁷⁷ These developments were seen by many as interconnected episodes in the Kremlin's effort to redistribute assets and power in exchange for elite loyalty and support.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁶ (See also: Lankina, Watanabe, and Netesova 2016)

¹⁷⁷ (Hanson and Teague 2005; Luong and Weinthal 2004; Sakwa 2009, 85)

¹⁷⁸ It is important to acknowledge that the power business groups amassed during the 1990s had enabled them to appoint their trustees in key posts of the state and government, and use the legislature to either ignore, or selectively implement regulations regarding private company taxation. These strategies had severely compromised the state's ability to extract taxation, so even when energy prices were soaring, the Russian taxpayers were not benefitting from them.

State control over the economy and its most strategic resources also increased taxation-generated income, and partly restored the Russian state's redistributive capacity. As Figure 3.1 illustrates with data from Russia's Federal Service of Government Statistics (ROSSTAT), from 1999 onwards, Russia experienced ten consecutive years of positive growth. Positive economic performance coincided with an increase in wages and living standards, which eventually turned Russia into a consumer society. The IMF for example estimates that in 2014 Russia had more ATMs per person than either Japan, or even the UK.¹⁷⁹ The trend in positive growth was only reversed in 2009, when amidst the Great Recession, Russia's GDP dropped by approximately 8%. And, having swiftly recovered to over 4% in 2010, Russian GDP started to decline again from 2013 onwards. In 2015 for example, growth dropped to about -3.7%.

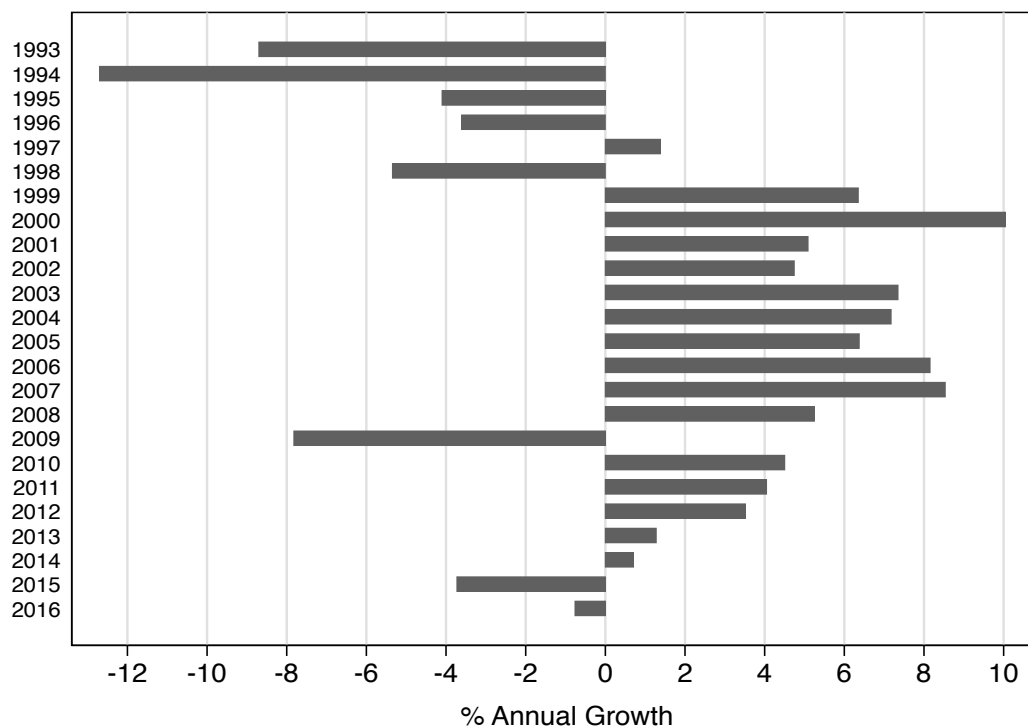


Figure 3.1 **GDP growth (annual %): 1993-2016**

Source: ROSSTAT, Federal Service of Government Statistics

¹⁷⁹ (IMF 2014; Treisman 2017)

Insurgency in the North Caucasus was another issue Putin had to deal with during his first term in office. Developments in the region also had a complex set of legacies on the new administration. The invasion of Dagestan by the Chechnya-based Islamic International Brigade in August 1999, and a series of apartment bombings in Moscow and Rostov oblast in September spread fear and anxiety among the Russian electorate. Thus, Putin's support for the second Chechen campaign and the promise he gave as Prime Minister to 'chase the terrorists everywhere' resonated well with Russians at the time.¹⁸⁰ Yet, the Beslan school siege in September 2004, when Islamist militants occupied a school in North Ossetia, led to a series of political and administrative reforms that fundamentally restructured politics in Russia.¹⁸¹ Described by members of the opposition as a 'constitutional coup d'état', reforms enacted only ten days after Beslan included among others the creation of seven federal districts headed by appointed plenipotentiary representatives, changes in the composition of the Federal Council, the abolition of elections for regional governors, and a ban on regional political parties.¹⁸²

Debates about the drivers of these reforms are still ongoing.¹⁸³ Yet, consensus backs the view that the reforms' main outcome was the subordination of regional authorities to the Kremlin's power vertical, and the creation of a disciplined, dominant party.¹⁸⁴ It is often

¹⁸⁰ (Oliphant 2015)

¹⁸¹ (Baker 2004)

¹⁸² (Kynev 2008, 120)

¹⁸³ A number of scholars have suggested that regional reform was an integral and crucial part of broader state reform efforts, and have pointed to Putin's intention to enhance the regime's internal consolidation and to reassert Russia's status as a global power in international affairs (Sharafutdinova 2010, 681; Wegren and Konitzer 2007, 1026). Gulnaz Sharafutdinova for example, suggests that these reforms aimed at enhancing administration and management, adding that it is difficult to separate the political logic of Putin's reforms from their administrative rationale. Similarly, for Chebankova, Putin's reforms were essential in the drive to enhance state capacity and rationalize inter-budgetary relations (Chebankova 2008). Fiona Hill argues instead that Putin's reforms served national security interests, threatened by secessionism and terrorism in highly unstable areas such as Chechnya, and suggests that such convictions were only reinforced by the tragedy of Beslan in 2004 (Hill 2005)

¹⁸⁴ (Gel'man 2015b; Gel'man and Lankina 2008; Wegren and Konitzer 2007, 1026)

argued for example, that the abolition of gubernatorial elections in 2004 greatly enhanced United Russia's electoral success, as the appointment and survival of governors has been since directly linked to their loyalty to the party of power.¹⁸⁵ Responding to these developments, Freedom House downgraded Russia from 'partly free' to 'not free' in 2005.¹⁸⁶ At the time, Russia was the only country to register a negative category change since the preceding year worldwide. Russia's classification as a 'Not Free' regime remains unchanged to present. Despite democratic erosion, however, President Putin's share of the popular vote increased from 53.4% in 2000 to 71.9% in the 2004 Presidential election. United Russia, which offered its support for Putin's legislative agenda also scored a major victory in the 2003 election, receiving over a third of the popular vote (37.5%). Following this election, efforts to make United Russia a dominant party intensified, and a few years later, they were crowned with success. In the December 2007 Duma election, and led by a non-party member, Vladimir Putin himself, United Russia increased its support to 64.30% of the electorate.

In March 2008 Vladimir Putin was succeeded in the Presidency by Dmitry Medvedev, a close ally and his former chief of staff. Described as 'the presidential tandem', or just 'the tandem' the period 2008-2012 saw an unusual combination of power between the country's third President Dmitry Medvedev, and Vladimir Putin, who assumed the post of prime minister. While according to the Constitution Medvedev was responsible for providing the main guidelines of Russia's domestic and foreign policy, Putin remained in control. Important decisions still needed his approval.¹⁸⁷ And, before his first year as President came to an end, Medvedev signed a constitutional amendment extending presidential terms in Russia from four years to six. In line with this reform, Vladimir Putin,

¹⁸⁵ (Gel'man 2015a, 103–4; Reuter and Remington 2008)

¹⁸⁶ (Freedom House 2004)

¹⁸⁷ (Monaghan 2011, 3)

who returned to the Presidency in 2012, is scheduled to stay to power until 2018. Putin's 2012 re-election to power, however, was more challenging than ever before. Fraud-rigged parliamentary elections for the state Duma that took place in December 2011 led thousands to the streets all across Russia. Protests taking place during the 2011-12 electoral cycle remain the largest demonstrations Russia witnessed since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

With the protest cycle over, pressure on Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) intensified. In line with legislation passed in 2012, several civil rights groups were branded as 'undesirable organisations'.¹⁸⁸ While the Russian government presented the new law as aiming to protect the country from foreign interventions into domestic politics, commentators noted that the new legislation was the first step in a long effort to prevent civil society from condemning fraud-rigged elections and manipulations in the future. State-led pressure over independent media also ensued. It is estimated that from 2011 onwards, 12 newsrooms in Russia have had to 'battled resignations, restrictions and closures'.¹⁸⁹ In the last 5 years, *Kommersant*, one of Russia's largest media holdings, also lost several chief editors under rumoured pressure from the Kremlin, and many of the reporters who covered the 2011-12 elections for *Gazeta.ru* have since also lost their jobs. Yet the 2011-12 protests also led to a series of reforms and political openings, most of them announced whilst Medvedev was still in the Presidency. Direct elections of regional governors abolished in 2004 were restored in 2012, while the registration of political parties and the procedure to get on the ballot paper were made easier.

The most recent economic downturn of 2014-2016 coincided with the sharp fall in global oil prices and the imposition of international economic sanctions against Russia,

¹⁸⁸ A similar piece of legislation aiming to isolate 'undesirable, or non-wanted' organisations was signed by President Putin in 2015. See: (Gosudarstvennaya Duma 2015)

¹⁸⁹ (Benyumov 2016)

resulting from the annexation of Crimea in March 2014. Despite the wave of patriotic euphoria that swept the country in the aftermath of the annexation, economic performance deteriorated considerably. In 2016 Russia's GDP fell by 3.7%, marking the steepest decline since the 2009 recession. It is estimated that between 2014 and 2015, 2.3 million Russians fell into poverty, while rising inflation drove a 9.5% decline in real wages across the country.¹⁹⁰ Economic decline coincided with the imposition of renewed pressure on civil society. In September 2016 for example, even Russia's leading independent polling agency, the Levada Centre, was labelled as a 'foreign agent' by the justice ministry. This decision was upheld two months later by a court in Moscow.¹⁹¹ In response to these developments, Freedom House further downgraded Russia's civil liberties rating.¹⁹²

Figure 3.2 summarizes how Russia's Freedom House civil liberties and political rights score fluctuated since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Evidence suggests that since President Putin's accession to power in 2000, rights and freedoms in Russia have diminished considerably. Unfree and unfair elections, the consolidation of a dominant party of power and the consolidation of state control over the national media provide ample evidence of democratic backsliding. While scholars disagree about the exact year in which Russia's experiment with open politics was over,¹⁹³ consensus backs the view that popular support for Putin was instrumental in facilitating the erosion of democracy with 'the consent of the governed'.¹⁹⁴ In a textbook example of 'executive takeover', democracy in Russia was subverted by a democratically elected, and very popular President. Such executive takeovers,

¹⁹⁰ (Moscow Times 2015)

¹⁹¹ ("Russia's Levada Centre Polling Group Named Foreign Agent" 2016)

¹⁹² (Freedom House 2016)

¹⁹³ Fish for example proposes that Russia's experience with democracy was over in 2004 when Putin was re-elected in the Presidency (Fish 2005). Yet for others, it was the 2007 parliamentary election, and United Russia's triumph that actually marked the apogee of Russia's electoral authoritarianism (Gel'man 2015b). I side with Gel'man, and thus focus the empirical analysis on the period following this election.

¹⁹⁴ (Gel'man 2015b; Gel'man and Lankina 2008)

Milan Svolik writes, have since the early 1990s represented the modal form of democratic breakdown around the world.¹⁹⁵ Understanding what made Putin so popular is the task I turn to next.

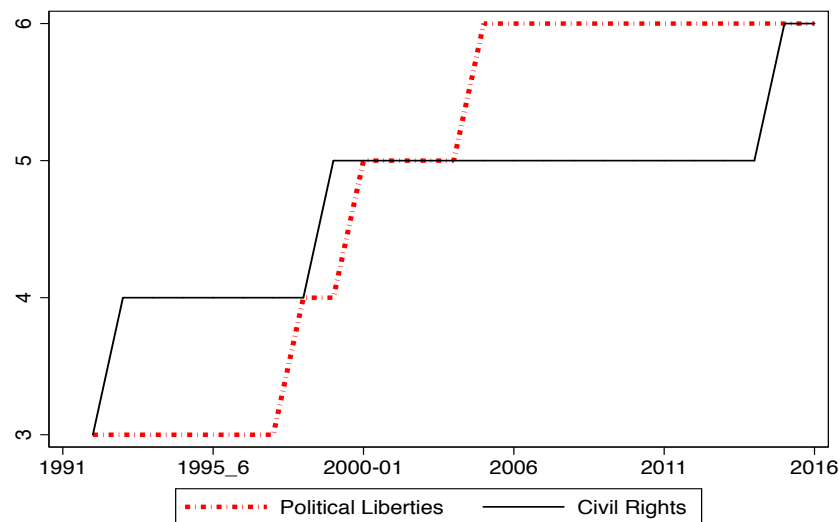


Figure 3.2 **Democratic retrenchment: 1991-2016**

Notes: Freedom House (FH) political rights scores are presented in the red dotted line. The continuous black line represents FH civil liberties scores. FH political rights and civil liberties scores range on a scale from 1 to 7, one being the best and 7 being the worst. After Putin came to power in the early 2000s, the political rights indicator received a downward assessment in 2004. This was also the year Russia moved from being assessed as ‘Partly Free’ to ‘Not Free’. The civil rights’ indicator was downgraded in 2015.

3.2 Support and the State in Equilibrium

3.3.1 Descriptive Evidence: Aggregate Trends in Support

Vladimir Putin assumed duties as acting President of the Russian Federation on December 31st, 1999. He was elected to the Presidency three months later, in March 2000. From the early 2000s, until the time this chapter was being re-written for the last time in the summer of 2017, Putin’s approval did not drop below 60% of the electorate. This is also

¹⁹⁵ (Svolik 2017)

illustrated in Figure 3.3, which plots the percentage of respondents who in monthly, nationally representative surveys by the Levada Foundation reported to approve of Vladimir Putin's performance in office. Approval ratings cover the period during which Putin served as President (from 2000 to April 2008 and then from May 2012 onwards), as well as Prime Minister (from May 2008 to April 2012). Vertical lines situate the empirical chapters of the dissertation in context. The first vertical line marks the onset of the 2010 summer wildfires. The second vertical line marks the January 2011 terrorist attack in Moscow's Domodedovo international airport. The third vertical line marks the onset of the 2011-2012 protests in December 2011, and the last the collapse in the value of the rouble in December 2014.

Looking at descriptive evidence provided in Figure 3.3, we can see that from early 2000s onwards, Putin's approval followed an upward trend. This was interrupted around the first half of 2004. In January of that year, and at the time of the energy dispute with Belarus, Putin's approval dropped by seven percentage points, moving from 86% to 79% of the electorate. In August 2004, and shortly after a terrorist attack which caused the lives of ninety passengers on board two aircrafts taking off from Moscow's Domodedovo airport, Putin's approval dropped by a further 4 percentage points. The monetization of social benefits, which led pensioners and other social groups to the streets of Russia in January 2005, coincided with a decline in support for Putin, whose approval dropped to 65% of the electorate. Since early 2005, however, support for Putin trended upwards. Between July and September 2008, Putin's approval jumped from 80.4% to 88% of the electorate, a development coinciding with the Russian invasion in Georgia in the summer of the same year. While experiencing a 7-percentage point decline in approval in the beginning of 2009, Putin was able to maintain approval ratings of over 75% during the 2008-2009 recession.

Between 2010 and 2011, support for Putin dropped by 16 percentage points, moving from 79% to 63%. According to Daniel Treisman, this decline in Putin's approval was due

to increased disappointment with the country's leadership, and a 'general loss of faith that the Kremlin team would address the sources of Russians' discontent'.¹⁹⁶ It is in this broader context of waning support that the 2010 wildfires broke out. Between 2010 and 2011, Russians also experienced some of the deadliest terrorist attacks the country had seen. The Moscow metro bombings of March 2010 and the Domodedovo attack of January 2011 caused the lives of 77 people and have since been deeply engrained in Russian collective memory. Yet from 2012 onwards, and following a short-lived drop in approval which coincided with the 2011-2012 electoral protests, support for Putin stabilized around 60%. The annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and the patriotic euphoria that followed were associated with a spectacular increase in support for the President. Between 2014 and 2016 President Putin's approval ratings did not drop below 75%.

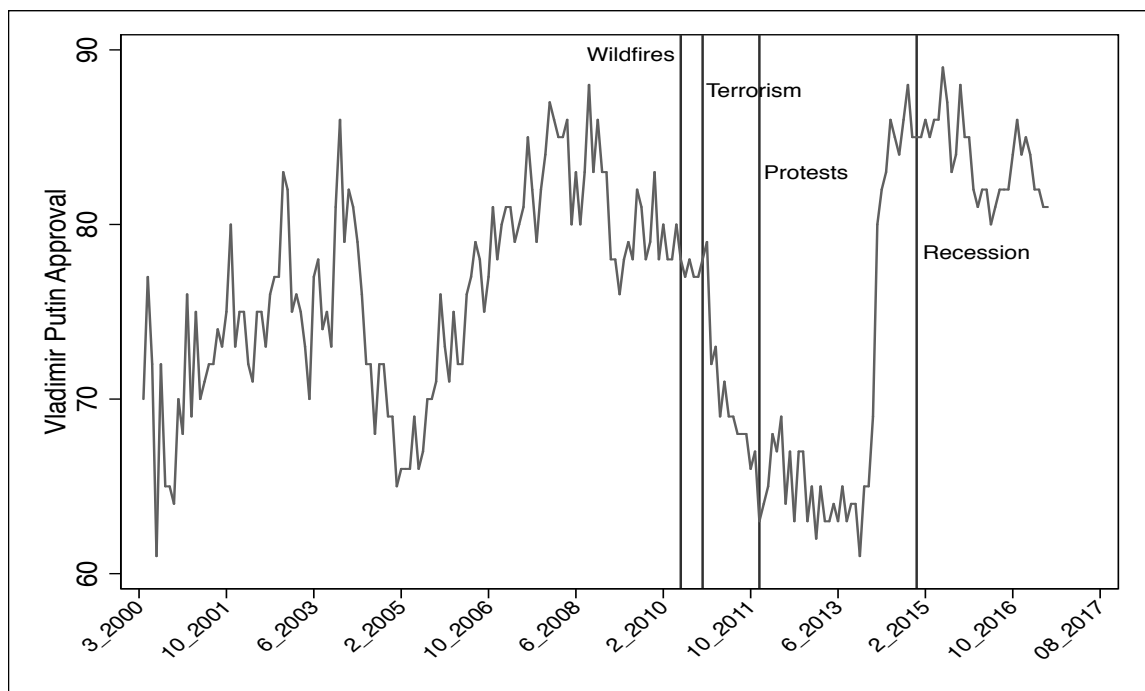


Figure 3.3 **Vladimir Putin's approval: 2000-2017**

Notes: The time series presents how Vladimir Putin's approval fluctuated from the early months of 2000 until the summer of 2017. Putin's approval is measured monthly in

¹⁹⁶ (Treisman 2014, 23)

nationally representative public opinion surveys conducted by the Levada Foundation. Vertical bars chronologically place the 2010 summer wildfires, the January 2011 Domodedovo attack, the onset of the 2011-12 protests, and the collapse in the value of the currency in December 2014. Figure 1 in the Supplementary Information (S.I.) for Chapter 3 presents the same graph using a non-linear smoother to identify the trend in the series.

Before moving on to explaining what factors could be driving these trends in Putin's approval it is worth noting two things. *First*, approval of Putin's performance in office has been consistently higher than approval of Medvedev's performance, or support for regional governors and the Russian government.¹⁹⁷ *Second*, support for Putin has been positively correlated with assessments of political authorities in general, and evaluations of Russia's political regime as a whole.¹⁹⁸ This is also supported by descriptive statistics presented in Figure 3.4 below. Relying on approval indicators collected by the Levada Centre and measured in monthly intervals from 2000 to 2017, Figure 3.4 presents the association between Putin's approval and support for other domestic political actors and institutions.

The association between support for Putin and the Government is the strongest ($r=.6$, $p<.01$), closely followed by the association between support for Putin and the governors ($r=.5$, $p<.01$).¹⁹⁹ The correlation between Putin's and Medvedev's approval is also positive, but it is somewhat weaker, at $.3$ ($p<.01$). There is only a weak link between support for Medvedev and the regional governors ($r=.2$, $p<.01$). The strong correlation between support

¹⁹⁷ Monthly approval data from the Levada Foundation suggest that up until the third quarter of 2012, Dmitry Medvedev remained the second most popular political figure in the country, when his approval ratings dropped below of those of regional governors. Support for the Russian government, headed by the country's Prime Minister and staffed by the deputy PM and federal ministers, lags behind support for the country's governors and other political authorities. See Figure 2 in SI 3.

¹⁹⁸ (Rose, Mishler, and Munro 2011, NRB datafile)

¹⁹⁹ These correlations remain positive and statistically significant even when we restrict the sample to the period after January 2007 to facilitate comparisons with Medvedev, as this is when approval data on Medvedev first become available. The correlation between the approval ratings of Putin and the government after 2007 is positive at $.6$ ($p<.01$), and between Putin and the governors is $.49$ ($p<.01$)

for Putin, the government and the governors does not come as a surprise. From the post of the country's Prime Minister Putin headed the government from 2008-2012, and from 2004 to 2012 was either responsible for, or heavily involved in the appointment of regional governors. Federal involvement in the selection of candidates to run for governors also ensued even after elections were restored in the country in 2012.²⁰⁰ What is surprising, however - given the ideological and programmatic convergence between the issue positions, and policies pursued by Putin and Medvedev - is the lack of a stronger correlation between the approval ratings of the two men.²⁰¹

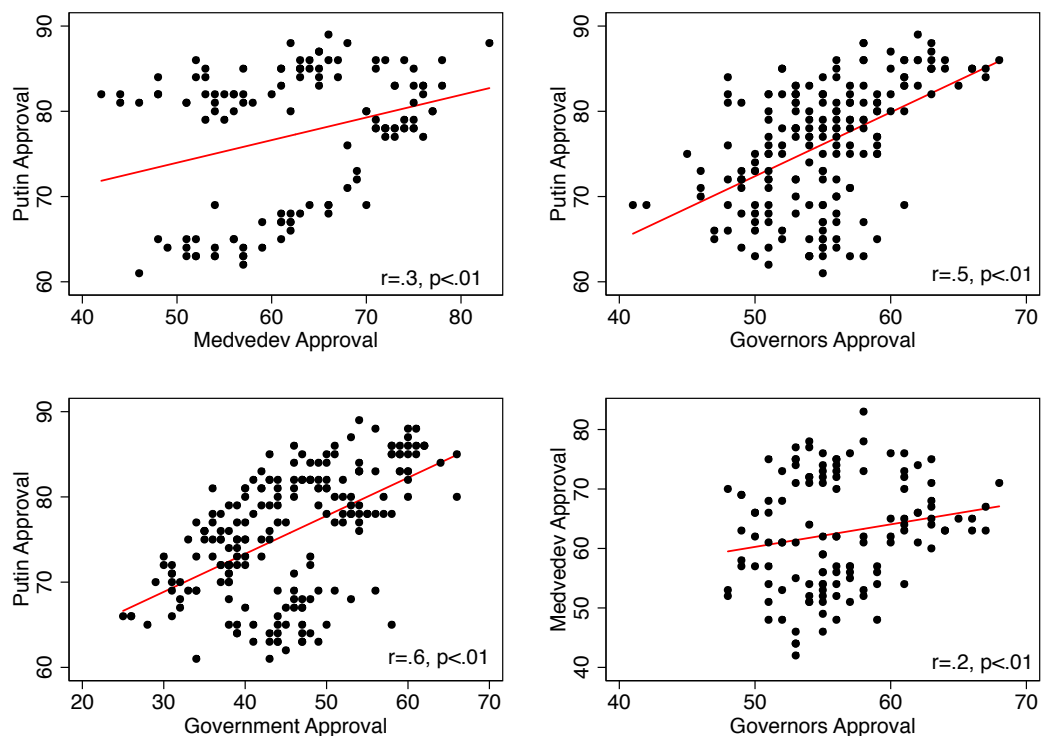


Figure 3.4 Associations between support for Putin and other actors and institutions

Source: Levada Centre Monthly Approval Series

²⁰⁰ The so-called 'municipal filter' demanded that candidates for the post of the governor had to previously secure signatures from 5-10 % of all municipal deputies in the region. This clause favoured incumbent governors.

²⁰¹ While Medvedev has been traditionally seen as pursuing a more liberal agenda, public opinion polls in the country up to 2010 noted that Russians saw no substantive difference between the two leaders (Monaghan 2011)

To take a closer look at the instances at which Medvedev's and Putin's approval time series diverge, Figure 3.5 below plots support for the two leaders from 2007 onwards. This is the year Russia's Levada Centre began to ask respondents about Medvedev's approval. To identify the underlying trend in the time series, I use nonlinear smoothers. Vertical lines denote periods during which the approval series diverge.

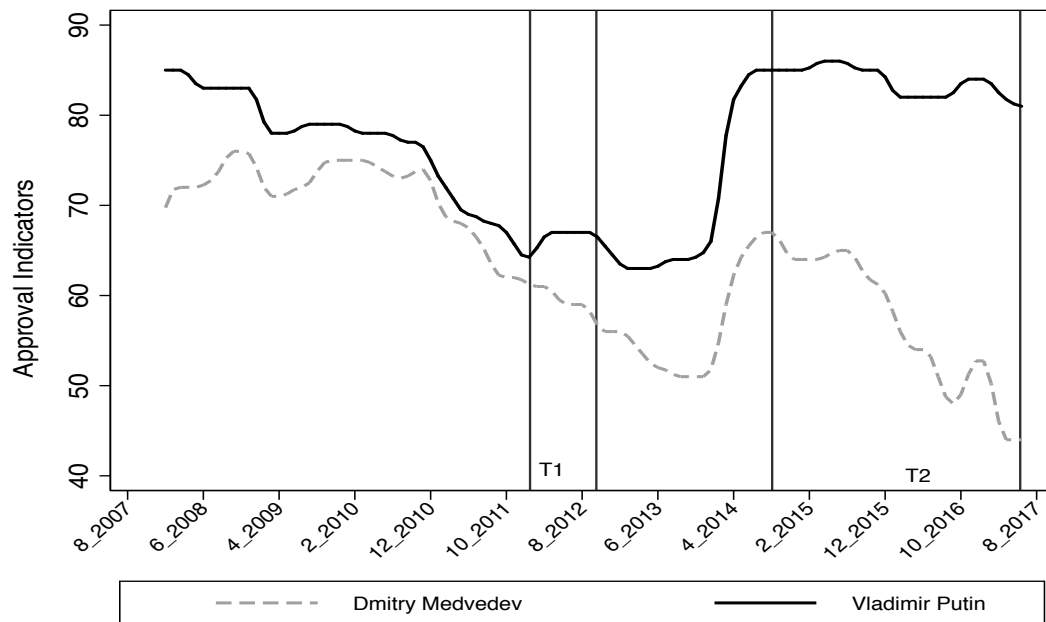


Figure 3.5 **Putin and Medvedev approval: 2007-2017**

Notes: The time series present how Dmitry Medvedev's (interrupted line) and Vladimir Putin's (continuous line) approval fluctuated from 2007 until the summer of 2017. The approval indicators are measured monthly in nationally representative surveys conducted by the Levada Foundation.

As Figure 3.5 illustrates, both time series respond similarly to events such as the Russian-Georgian war in the summer of 2008 and the global financial crisis of 2008-9. Between December 2010 and December 2011 for example, Medvedev's approval dropped by 18% and Putin's by 16%.²⁰² Both time series also jump in the aftermath of Crimea's

²⁰² (Treisman 2014)

annexation. A first, albeit short-lived disconnect in the two-approval series is observed shortly after the onset of the 2011-2012 protest events - this is the period marked as T1 in Figure 3.5. While between February and March 2012 support for Putin increased by three percentage points, Medvedev's approval continued to decline. The increase in support for Putin is noteworthy given that in the winter and spring months of 2012 thousands were still in the streets of Russia asking for political change, and calling for Putin to resign. The connection in the two approval time series begins to wane for a second time from the first half of 2015 onwards - this is the period marked as T2 in Figure 3.5. In just eight months, from December 2015 to August 2016, Medvedev's approval dropped from 61% to 48% of the electorate. Support for Putin shifted very little. The decline in support for Medvedev is consistent with evidence from the literature on economic voting, predicting that political support should be tainted as economic performance declines. Between February and March 2017, Medvedev's approval dropped by an unprecedented 10%. In opposition rallies organised in March, Medvedev was personally accused of corruption. These protests, however, had a small influence on Putin's approval.

To conclude, while closely related to evaluations of government and regional performance, support for Putin (i) is greater than that of any other political actor or institution in the country, (ii) appears resilient to economic downturns, and (iii) shows the ability to recover quickly in the face of shocks such as the 2011-12 protests. Understanding what factors could explain these trends in general, and the 'resilience' of Putin's approval in particular is the key task of this thesis.

3.3.2 Macro-level determinants of support: It is not (always) the economy

Consensus backs the view that in the early 2000s, support for the new President was closely linked to the war against domestic terrorism. 'People believed that he, personally,

could protect them [...] That's what explains his surge in popularity', Yeltsin wrote in his memoirs.²⁰³ Public opinion surveys and evidence from focus groups also document that many Russians see Putin as a 'strong and decisive leader', able to decisively deal with domestic terrorism, or security threats in general.²⁰⁴ Moreover, according to Daniel Treisman, support for military action in the North Caucasus helped shore up support for Putin during his first few months in office, and could help explain why his approval surged when it did.²⁰⁵ Yet, support for the new leadership on the basis of the Chechen campaign was short-lived. Evaluations of Putin's performance during his first terms in office were more closely linked to public perceptions of economic performance. These in turn mirrored developments in the real economy, as the authorities were rewarded for the increase in real wages and the improvement in living standards in the country.²⁰⁶

In 2009, however, and for the first time in Russia's post-Soviet history, economic performance did not predict approval. The disconnect between declining economic performance and unfaltering support for Putin is also depicted in Figure 3.6, which draws on monthly GDP indicators from ROSSTAT and the Levada Centre approval time series.²⁰⁷ A mismatch between economic performance and approval is also evident in 2010, as despite economic recovery, support for Putin declined. As already noted, this development has been attributed to wider disenchantment regarding the regime's ability to address popular

²⁰³ (Yeltsin 2000, 338)

²⁰⁴ (Oates 2006)

²⁰⁵ (Treisman 2011, 600, 603)

²⁰⁶ (Hesli and Bashkirova 2001; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2008; Rose, Mishler, and Munro 2011; Treisman 2011)

²⁰⁷ Relying on survey data Rose and Mishler (2010, p.52), concluded that during the Great Recession, pocketbook concerns did not have a considerable effect on approval. Writing in 2011, however, Chaisty and Whitefield argued that voters affected by the recession were less likely to approve of the country's leadership, and the ways it had managed the downturn. The authors also propose but do not test a relationship between the 2008-9 recession and the 2011/12 electoral protests (Chaisty and Whitefield 2012; Richard Rose and Mishler 2010, 52)

grievances.²⁰⁸ A similar disconnect between declining economic performance and unflinching support for Putin is evident after the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

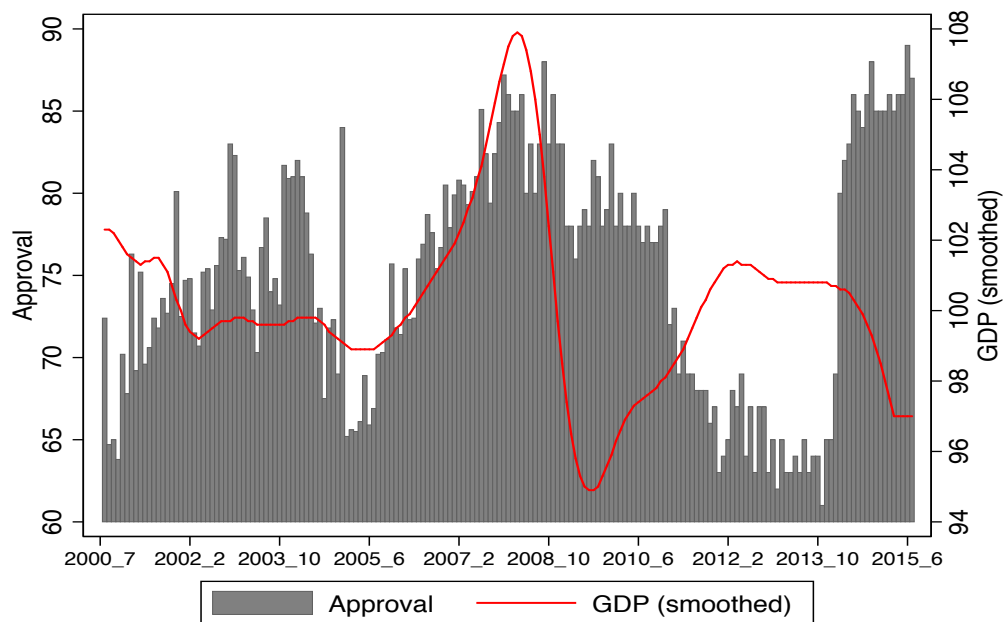


Figure 3.6 **Economic performance and presidential approval: 2000-2015**

Notes: Vertical bars represent Putin's monthly approval. They are measured on the left-hand y-axis. The red line, measured on the right-hand y-axis plots Russia's GDP. The baseline for the transformation of this indicator is the year 2000, where GDP is set equal to 100.

In trying to explain what factors could drive the disconnect between declining economic performance and robust support for Vladimir Putin, several studies have pointed to the importance of government effort.²⁰⁹ Responding to the 2008-9 recession for example, the Russian government increased average pensions by almost 60% and boosted expenditures. Both in 2008-9 and in recent times, state-controlled media also shifted the blame for the recession on foreign banks and the international economic system.²¹⁰ While a

²⁰⁸ (Chaisty and Whitefield 2012; Treisman 2014)

²⁰⁹ (McAllister and White 2011; Treisman 2011)

²¹⁰ (Chaisty and Whitefield 2012; McAllister and White 2011; Rose and Mishler 2010)

connection between government responses to economic downturns and approval is often assumed, however, there are very few – if any- empirical tests of this. To the best of my knowledge, existing scholarship has yet to bridge the micro and macro levels of analysis, showing whether, or how state responses moderate the political consequences of recessions.

3.3 Conclusion

In order to situate the empirical cases in the broader context in which they occurred, this chapter has offered a short background to Russian politics in the last two decades. It has discussed trends in democratic retrenchment in Russia and described the resilience of Putin's approval to shocks and crises taking place under his watch. The chapter has also discussed how prior to the 'consolidated' period of electoral authoritarianism, that is prior to 2008, the Russian government consolidated its control over the media landscape and the commanding heights of the economy. Power centralization and media control are important, as they enabled the Russian government to respond to negative and collective shocks to citizen income and security the way it did. Exploring how government responses to shocks moderated their effect on political support is the task my empirical chapters now turn to.

Chapter 4

Propaganda and Tactical Redistribution Amid Plenty

This chapter provides a first empirical test of the hypothesis that government responses to shocks can moderate their effect on the levels of support incumbents enjoy. The analysis leverages evidence from Russia's response to a natural disaster, the 2010 wildfires. In the sections that follow I investigate whether propaganda and tactical redistribution influenced assessments of government performance in relation to the disaster. More specifically, I examine whether attribution of responsibility for the emergence and poor management of the wildfires was moderated by i) the Kremlin's decision to dismiss poorly performing government and military actors and ii) the provision of generous federal assistance to regional budgets.

For the empirical analysis, I follow Szakonyi in using NASA satellite data to identify the extent of the disaster, and further employ estimates on the extent and material costs of the fires collected by the Russian Ministry of Emergency Situations.²¹¹ The analysis also gathers evidence on government and military actors dismissed in relation to the events and constructs detailed measures of federal transfers to regional budgets. I analyse these sources along with individual-level survey evidence from two nationally representative public opinion surveys that were in the field during in August and September 2010. The two Levada surveys I rely on include detailed items asking respondents to evaluate government performance in response to the wildfires and allow me to connect government interventions to public opinion. I complement these results with evidence from quarterly, regionally and nationally representative indicators on presidential and gubernatorial approval.

²¹¹ (Ministry of Emergency Situations 2010; MODIS Collection 6 NRT 2016; Szakonyi 2012)

Results reveal that the dismissals of actors involved in the management of the crisis and generous relief aid improved evaluations of Moscow's response to the disaster and dampened attribution of blame toward the federal government. Controlling for the extent of the fires, respondents in regions where officials left office in response to the fires were 10% less likely than the rest of the electorate to report that the government's response to the disaster only served government self-advertisement purposes. Likewise, respondents in regions in receipt of generous federal transfers were by approximately 5% less likely than the rest of the electorate to report that federal policies were to blame for the outbreak of the disaster. Finally, the analysis shows that government responses to the disaster were politically consequential and did influence presidential and gubernatorial approval functions.

4.1 Introduction

At the end of every year, the Yury Levada Centre – one of Russia's most reputable public opinion firms – publishes an annual review of public opinion in the country. This offers a snapshot of Russians' key concerns in the preceding year, summarises how people think about politics and the economy, and presents their hopes and expectations for the new year. In 2010, there was little disagreement about what the most memorable event in the country was. 43% of Russians indicated that 'the unprecedented heat, and the forest fires taking place in July and August' were the most important event the country, and its leaders, had faced that year.²¹²

The 2010 wildfires, which started burning in July 2010, destroyed more than a million hectares of land, killed 52 citizens and left another 3500 homeless. In August 2010 alone, the heavy smoke that blanketed Moscow raised carbon monoxide levels 30% above the normal in the city. Air pollution was also reported in other larger cities such as Nizhny

²¹² (Levada Centre 2010)

Novgorod, Ryazan, Tula, Vladimir and Voronezh in South-Western, and Central Russia.²¹³ Using data from NASA's MODIS C6 satellite, Figure 4.1 geo-locates active fires burning in Russia from July to September 2010.²¹⁴ This makes it easier to observe the spread of the disaster in the south-western and central parts of the country. As existing research demonstrates, the allocation and spread of the 2010 wildfires was stochastic, dictated by the direction of the wind. Neither their location, nor their intensity were predicted by regions' past experience of fires.²¹⁵ The wildfires also had a major impact on the Russian economy, destroying over a third of cultivable land in the country and ravaging crops. Looking to protect Russia's own food supply in the face of the disaster, Putin banned the export of grain for over four months. After the ban, wheat prices hit a 23-month high on international markets.

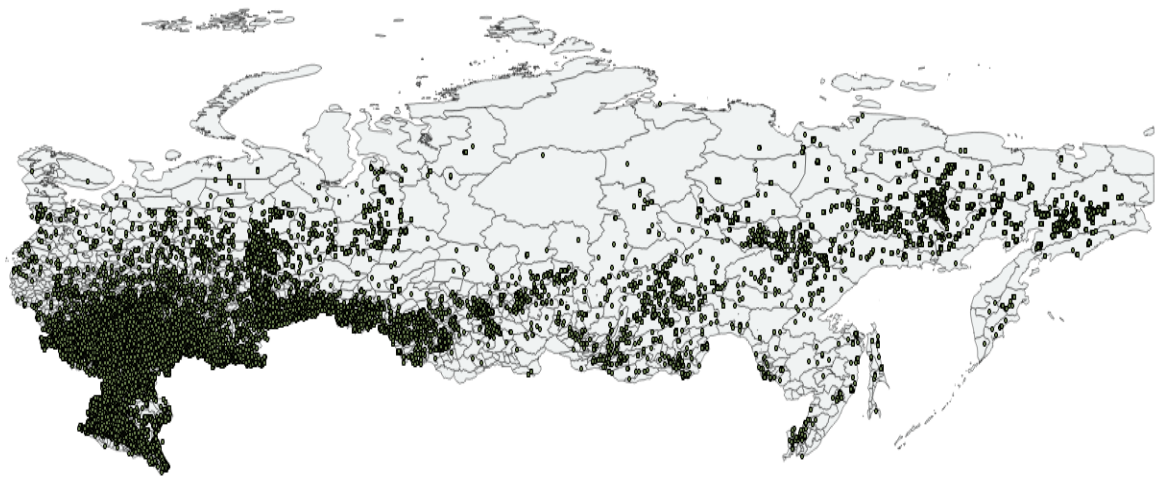


Figure 4.1 **Fires burning: July 1st – September 30th, 2010**

Source: NASA, MODIS C6 Satellite Data, Geocoded with QGIS software

²¹³ (Konovalov et al. 2011, 10032)

²¹⁴ (MODIS Collection 6 NRT 2016)

²¹⁵ (Schultz and Libman 2015)

While the fires were still burning in the summer of 2010, journalists and commentators described the disaster as ‘Putin’s Hurricane Katrina’. A similarly devastating natural disaster, Katrina had led President Bush’s approval ratings to drop down to 42 percent – the lowest of his presidency.²¹⁶ In a piece appearing in the *New Yorker* on August 5th, for example, Julia Ioffe asked whether Putin, who was the country’s prime minister at the time, would be blamed for the shock – just like President Bush before him. In another article appearing in the *Washington Post* on August 15th, political analysts Lilia Shevtsova and David Kramer asked whether Putin ‘will get burned in the wildfires’.²¹⁷

Several factors led analysts to conclude that Russia’s presidential tandem and United Russia, the party of power, would receive punishment for the disaster. Prime Minister Putin, in consultation with the timber industry, was behind legislation that since 2007 had left poorly equipped local authorities responsible for forest management. Reforms taking place from 2008 onwards also left the country’s Ministry of Emergency Situations severely underfunded.²¹⁸ Moreover, commentators speculated that the presidential tandem would be held responsible for the poor performance of its hand-picked governors, who were at the time – and from 2004 onwards – still appointed and not elected. With several governors, mayors and ministers away on their August holiday break, initial response to the fires was poorly coordinated. Fire-affected villages did not always receive a fire warning and firefighters’ arrival was often delayed. As a result, many rural centres, wooden houses and settlements were burnt within minutes.²¹⁹ When Vladimir Putin visited *Verkhnyaya Vereya*, for example, one of the fire-affected villages in Nizhny Novgorod, citizens who had lost

²¹⁶ (Fletcher and Morin 2005)

²¹⁷ Articles drawing the parallels with Katrina also appeared in the Russian press, yet the Russian media focused on the economic, as opposed to the political ramifications of the disaster instead. In early August for example, *Vedomosti* predicted that just like Katrina, the wildfires would cause a decline in Russia’s GDP of about 1%, and a loss of about US\$ 15 billion (Smirnov 2010)

²¹⁸ (Ioffe 2010)

²¹⁹ (Giuliano 2013; Ioffe 2010)

their homes in the fires blamed him for failing to coordinate the government's response to the disaster and for doing 'too little and too late'. The video of Putin's visit was later posted on YouTube and viewed by over 2 million Russians in the space of weeks.²²⁰ Finally, the wildfires had affected the regime's core supporters: rural populations whose support the Putin regime had tried to consolidate. Heat, pollutants and smoke from the wildfires also reached large urban centres, including Moscow. As citizens of Moscow and other major cities inhaled increasing levels of monoxide gas, and the number of casualties caused by the heat and smoke from the fires increased, citizen frustration with government grew.²²¹ Between June 11th and August 1st 2010, for example, the percentage of Russians who 'strongly supported' President Medvedev's performance dropped from 59% to 52%. Putin's approval also declined. During this period, the percentage of Russian's who 'strongly approved' of the prime minister's performance dropped from 65% to 61%.²²²

While appealing, however, these accounts omit reference to the government's response to the shock. As the argument articulated in the introduction of the thesis suggests, shocks and crises do not automatically translate into political or electoral outcomes.²²³ Government responses, the argument proposes, could strongly moderate not only how citizens evaluate government performance but also who they blame for either causing, or for failing to prevent and/or treat the consequences of any given shock. And, as also argued earlier, illiberal incumbents' ability to moderate and/or ameliorate the effect of shocks could be greater compared to their counterparts in democracies. Less constrained by rival factions, opposition parties and critical media, illiberal incumbents could more easily allocate budget transfers at will, for example, thus appeasing an aggrieved electorate. By setting the dominant discourse

²²⁰ (Giuliano 2013, 3)

²²¹ (Shevtsova and Kramer 2010)

²²² (Levada Analytical Centre 2010) See also: Figure 1 in the SI for Chapter 4

²²³ (Healy and Malhotra 2009; Rudolph 2003; De Vries and Giger 2014)

in the national media and dismissing elected and unelected actors for their poor response to shocks, illiberal incumbents could also influence who citizens blame for the event and who they credit for trying to address its consequences.

4.2 Theory and Hypotheses

The Extant Literature

The political science literature has long treated natural disasters as political variables.²²⁴ Wildfires, floods or hurricanes bring into question government investments in preparedness spending and allow citizens to directly observe whether the government is able to respond urgently and effectively to their needs or not. Unlike economic performance, which is often difficult to monitor and attribute to incumbents, government interventions in the wake of a natural disaster are directly observable and attract great levels of media attention.²²⁵ And, as studies of voter responses to shocks and government policy in India remind us, it is possible that voters are able to infer *more* about government competence by observing state response to a crisis than they can from other indicators, like noisy movements in the business cycle, or the budget deficit that are plagued with inference challenges.²²⁶

Similarly, studies suggest that governments are punished for a variety of exogenous shocks that take place under their watch – be it earthquakes, floods, or droughts. As Achen and Bartels remind us, ‘as long as responsibility for any event or for its amelioration can be attributed to the government, in a story persuasive with the folk culture, the electorate will take out its frustration on the incumbents’.²²⁷ When government responses to natural disasters are found wanting, the likelihood that the masses will withdraw support from

²²⁴ (Abney and Hill 1966)

²²⁵ See for example: (Bechtel and Hainmueller 2011; Healy and Malhotra 2009; Malhotra and Kuo 2008)

²²⁶ (Cole, Healy, and Werker 2012a)

²²⁷ (Achen and Bartels 2004, 1)

incumbents and punish them at the polls increases. Several studies of electorates in advanced democracies for example, show that voters often punish elected officials for natural disasters at the local, state and federal levels.²²⁸ When governments decisively respond to disasters, however, they can moderate, or ameliorate any negative effects they could have on government popularity. By investing in generous relief aid and redistribution for example, incumbents could elicit not only short-term support but also long-term gratitude. Drawing on evidence from the German government's response to the 2002 Elbe flooding, Bechtel and Hainmueller showed precisely that German voters responded to relief spending by showing gratitude that lasted at least up to three years later, i.e. up until the 2005 election.²²⁹ To summarize, natural disasters do not automatically translate into political outcomes. Their effect on incumbent approval and the vote - whether positive or negative - depends on governments' response to them.

As I have also noted in the theory section of the thesis, the political science literature predicts that institutional configurations with strong executives and dominant parties could concentrate blame for poor performance in the hands of the country's executive. It is expected that when clarity of responsibility for policy outcomes is high, citizens should be more likely to evaluate government on the basis of objective performance and to blame the country's executive for policy failures. Resultantly, as recent evidence from Russia shows, individuals residing in cities where mayoral elections have been abolished are more likely to punish the ruling party for economic deterioration at the local level.²³⁰ Finally, political punishment as a result of a natural disaster, is according to Flores and Smith, greater under autocracies, as opposed to democracies. This is because the concentration of crisis-affected citizens in camps and settlements reduces collective action problems and increases the

²²⁸ (Achen and Bartels 2004; Cole, Healy, and Werker 2012, 167; Neil Malhotra and Kuo 2008)

²²⁹ (Bechtel and Hainmueller 2011)

²³⁰ (Powell and Whitten 1993; Reuter and Beazer 2016)

likelihood of unrest.²³¹ The collapse of the Somoza dictatorship following the 1972 earthquake illustrates precisely how natural disasters can result in political punishment, accelerating political change even under illiberal rule.²³²

While an influential literature recognises the threat natural disasters pose to the stability of non-democracies, we know relatively little about how citizens form perceptions of incumbent performance and how they attribute blame in these regimes. To present, very few works have combined evidence from policy interventions and public opinion data to study how governments moderate the political consequences of natural disasters outside of established democracies. The theoretical setup I propose in the next sections joins several studies in revisiting the effects of government responses to shocks on attributions of responsibility in democracies and extends the agenda to electoral autocracies.²³³

The Argument and Observable Implications

The argument articulated in the theory section of the thesis suggests that incumbent responses to shocks enable them to ameliorate the effect of shocks on the levels of support they enjoy. In this chapter I test whether propaganda and targeted redistribution provided in the aftermath of shocks – here a natural disaster - could ameliorate evaluations of government performance on the one hand, and dampen attributions of blame to the executive on the other.

As my theoretical argument proposes, illiberal governments' ability to censor, or downplay information about shocks such as natural disasters, is constrained by the magnitude and visibility of the shocks. Citizens whose friends, relatives and family are

²³¹ (Flores and Smith 2013)

²³² (Landy and Stockmann 2009, 4)

²³³ (Bechtel and Hainmueller 2011; Cole, Healy, and Werker 2012b; Healy and Malhotra 2009; Manacorda, Miguel, and Vigorito 2011)

affected by the wildfires, or even those exposed to pollutants emitted from the fires for example, do not need to rely on the media to infer that there is an ongoing disaster in the country. Moreover, failure to evacuate settlements threatened by fires could also increase the death toll from the disaster, and further exacerbate dissatisfaction with government. Finally, when threatened from within, illiberal government's ability to deflect the blame abroad, as they often do when economic stagnation strikes for example, is compromised.²³⁴ My theoretical argument anticipates that in solving this dilemma – as censorship could backfire and shifting the blame abroad is difficult – illiberal incumbents are likely to influence the framing of bad news instead, and shift the blame to political and military actors at home.

As the 2010 wildfires spread across Russia, President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin dismissed ill-performing mayors, local officials and even military officers. I theoretically propose and empirically demonstrate that these dismissals were politically motivated. Just like any other tool of government propaganda, they aimed to shift blame for inadequate preparedness spending and mismanagement away from the presidential tandem. My theory anticipates that by distancing themselves from subordinates who have failed to deliver, powerholders at the top-rungs of a country's ruling coalition could downplay responsibility for poor policy planning and insufficient investment in disaster preparedness spending.²³⁵ Attribution of blame for the disaster could also be weaker when the federal government is seen to be acting decisively in order to correct poor management in the localities. Finally, dismissals could also confuse the electorate, hindering effective attributions of responsibility. As existing research reminds us, when voters do not know who to blame for any given event, or outcome they experience, they are less likely to factor

²³⁴ (Weeks 2012)

²³⁵ (Dewan and Dowding 2005; Hood 2011)

considerations related to that event into their voting decisions.²³⁶ The logic of the argument is rooted in political psychology research which suggests that perceptions of either good, or poor management should only influence assessments of political actors when responsibility is attributed to the target of the evaluation.²³⁷ Thus, when dismissals increase confusion about whom citizens should blame, executive approval might be less tainted as a result.²³⁸ In either case, we could expect that dismissals reduce attributions of blame to power-holders, and ameliorate evaluations of government. With these caveats in mind, the first two hypotheses to be tested in this chapter predict the following:

Hypothesis 1: Voters in areas where local officers left office in relation to the disaster will offer better assessments of the federal government's response to the wildfires

Hypothesis 1a: Voters in areas where local officers left office in relation to the disaster will be less likely to blame the federal government for the wildfires

In 2010, recovering state finances also enabled Moscow to respond to the wildfires by providing generous federal assistance to regional budgets and direct payments to crisis-affected individuals. As the fires were still burning, the budgets of several crisis-affected regions received generous transfers from Moscow and many of the worst affected areas were placed in a state of emergency. Generous emergency transfers to local budgets assisted regional governments deal with the fires, and increased the visibility of the federal centre's involvement in the fire-fighting effort. The federal government also provided direct relief aid to individuals affected by the wildfires. Putin personally oversaw the execution of decrees promising generous compensation to individuals affected by the disaster. According to Article 4 of the federal order issued on July 30th 2010, Putin kept oversight responsibilities

²³⁶ (Abney and Hill 1966, 978–80)

²³⁷ (Rudolph 2003, 699)

²³⁸ (Dewan and Dowding 2005; Szakonyi 2012)

to *‘himself and himself alone’*. A poster distributed across regions to urge individuals seek compensation read: ‘The PM has pledged that new housing for those affected by the wildfires, will be built before the end of the year –the distribution of aid for those affected, the Prime Minister is taking under his personal control’ (please see also Figure 2 in the SI for Chapter 4). The reconstruction of housing and infrastructure in two of the hardest hit regions, Voronezh and Lipetsk was already under way by August 10 2010. The first properties to individuals who had lost their homes were delivered in *Verhnyia Beryia*, a village in Voronezh as early as August 20th. Cities and villages affected by the wildfires also received public goods, such as new roads, internet connection, and other infrastructure.²³⁹

If the theoretical argument laid out in the thesis is correct, then we should expect that federal transfers towards regions could improve assessments of federal performance, especially in areas that benefited from them. The observable implication of the ‘redistribution’ hypothesis is that citizens who reside in areas that are in receipt of federal aid, and who can observe infrastructure projects develop in their region, should be less likely to blame the executive for the disaster. These voters should also report greater support for government than their counterparts who reside in areas that did not receive federal aid. Like relief aid in democracies, generous spending consisting of direct payments under authoritarianism is visible and immediate, and could generate the positive returns to approval incumbents wish to achieve. In addition, relief expenditures at times of crisis could be easily attributed to the incumbent, which makes it easier for powerholders to claim credit for their provision.²⁴⁰ As such, the second set of hypotheses to be tested here predicts the following:

²³⁹ (Boy 2010; Giuliano 2013; Lazarev et al. 2012)

²⁴⁰ (Harding 2015; Healy and Malhotra 2009)

Hypothesis 2: Voters in areas that were in receipt of federal aid will offer better assessments of the federal government's response to the wildfires

Hypothesis 2a: Voters in areas that were in receipt of federal aid will be less likely to blame the federal government for the wildfires

4.3 Data: The shock and state responses

The sections that follow provide detailed information about the data sources used in this chapter. I first describe the indicators I use to capture the extent of the disaster and the federal government's response to it. Next, I discuss the public opinion surveys and survey items the empirical analysis relies on. Summary statistics for all the variables used in the analysis are provided in the Supplementary Information (SI) section for Chapter 4 (Tables B1-3).

The shock: To capture the extent and impact of the 2010 wildfires, the empirical analysis relies on two different indicators, published by the Russian Ministry of Emergency Situations in its 2010 statistical yearbook.²⁴¹ The first indicator, *number of fires*, represents the number of fire-fronts burning in each of Russia's eighty-three regions (the equivalent of U.S. states) from July to September 2010. During this period, Russian regions had to deal with an average of 2150 active fire fronts. The second indicator I rely on, *fire cost*, also comes from the Ministry of Emergency Situations and represents the material cost of the fires. This indicator is also available at the regional level. Unlike the *number of fires* indicator, which is specific to the period between July and September alone, the *fire cost* indicator covers the entire year, i.e. it tells us the material cost of fire-inflicted damage from January to December 2010. This is measured in thousand roubles, and ranges from just over

²⁴¹ (Ministry of Emergency Situations 2010)

150 thousand roubles in the North Caucasus Republic of Karachay-Cherkessia to over 500 million roubles in Sverdlovsk. To deal with the skew this measure, I follow Healy and Malhotra, and convert this measure into a logarithm.²⁴² In conclusion, both indicators have advantages and disadvantages. While the *number of fires* indicator is more specific to the period of the fires, evidence of the fires' material damages could be more informative of their impact on regional infrastructure and on the local economy.

State Responses: To capture government responses to the 2010 wildfires the empirical analysis employs (i) a dummy indicator of forced dismissals taking place across regions, and (ii) an indicator of federal fiscal transfers, or aid provided to crisis-affected regions. These indicators were constructed as follows:

Dismissals indicator: To identify who was fired in relation to the fires, I studied the coverage of the wildfires in two leading Russian TV channels (*NTV Novosti* and *Rossiia Odin*) and two newspapers (*Izvestiya* and *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*). Using the online database Integrum, I downloaded the corpus of stories that included the word wildfires (*pozhar**) between July and September 2010. Carefully reading stories on the events, and corroborating their validity across different media outlets, I was able to identify who was dismissed in relation to the wildfires, who dismissed them, and what the reasons cited for their dismissal were. A detailed summary of actors leaving office in relation to the fires is provided in Table 4.1 below.

²⁴² (Healy and Malhotra 2009, 392)

Table 4.1 **Officials leaving office in relation to the 2010 wildfires**

Region	Leaving Office	Cause of removal
Nizhny Novgorod (Viksunskyi rayon)	Head of rayon- Medvedev dismisses him	Inefficient preparation to prevent the fires
Volgograd (Kotosvkiy rayon; Rudnyianskiy rayon)	(i) Representative of regional committee for emergency situations; (ii) Representative of the governor (iii) Head of Kotovskiy rayon/area (iv) Head of Rudyinski rayon/area	Between September 2 nd and 3 rd , more than 500 houses were burnt in the region
Moscow Oblast (Kolomna)	5 officers from the naval army- Medvedev dismisses them	Fire destroys equipment in military basis
Moscow City	(i) Head of the forestry agency - dismissed by the minister of agriculture ²⁴³ (ii) Head of <i>Rosleshoz</i> (Federal Forest Agency) ²⁴⁴ - Putin announced his dismissal (iii) Moscow's mayor - Dismissed by decree ²⁴⁵	Did not promptly return from holiday 'In relation to the 2010 wildfires' – no specific reasons cited' Multiple reasons cited - did not promptly return from holidays during the disaster

²⁴³ In relation to the event, Medvedev expressed his frustration that the Head of the Moscow City and Moscow Oblast Forest Agency had not resigned, given that on August 4th, when Moscow oblast was declared in a state of emergency the officer was away on a holiday. According to Medvedev 'whoever did not resign, would be sacked'. See also: (*"Medvedev: Kto Ne Vishel Iz Otpuska- Uvolit"* (Those who did not return from their holidays - Will be fired)" 2010)

²⁴⁴ The forest agency was completely put under state control on August 27th 2010

²⁴⁵ Yury Luzhkov, Moscow's long-standing mayor was fired from his post in late September 2010. While it would be naïve to assume that the wildfires were the only reason leading to his dismissal, President Medvedev clearly cited the poor management of the crisis as also contributing to the mayor's ousting. Yet, it is important to note that as interviews for the September survey were concluded before Luzhkov was dismissed, his dismissal is not taken into account when the contextual data are merged with the survey responses.

Federal transfers: This indicator identifies i) which regions received federal aid in relation to the fires and ii) the total amount of federal aid Moscow transferred to crisis-affected regions between July and September 2010. To construct this measure, I rely on information provided in three government orders, or decrees signed by Vladimir Putin between July and September 2010. The first government order was signed in July 30th, 2010 while the second and third government decrees were signed on August 20th and September 3rd respectively.²⁴⁶ These documents determined which regions would receive aid, and how much aid they would receive. Federal transfers aimed to balance the budgets of regions battling the fires and to facilitate the provision of relief aid to crisis-affected households. This indicator is measured in thousand roubles.

Figure 4.2 and Table 4.2 below provide descriptive statistics, illustrating how federal aid was distributed across regions during this period, and by which government order the provision of aid was decided. As both Figure 4.2 and Table 4.2 suggest, 50% of all emergency transfers were directed to Nizhny Novgorod where by July 30th, the fire had completely destroyed 2 villages. Stars next to a region's name signify that the region was also declared in a state of emergency. Declared in a state of emergency during this period were the oblasts of Moscow, Nizhny Novgorod, Ryazan, Vladimir and Voronezh, as well as the Republics of Mordovia and Mari-El.²⁴⁷ In these regions, federal troops and armed forces actively participated in the fire-fighting and relief efforts.

²⁴⁶ (Government of the Russian Federation 2010a, 2010b, 2010c)

²⁴⁷ Mari-El is the only Republic declared in a state of emergency but not show in Figure 4.2 as it was not in receipt of federal aid

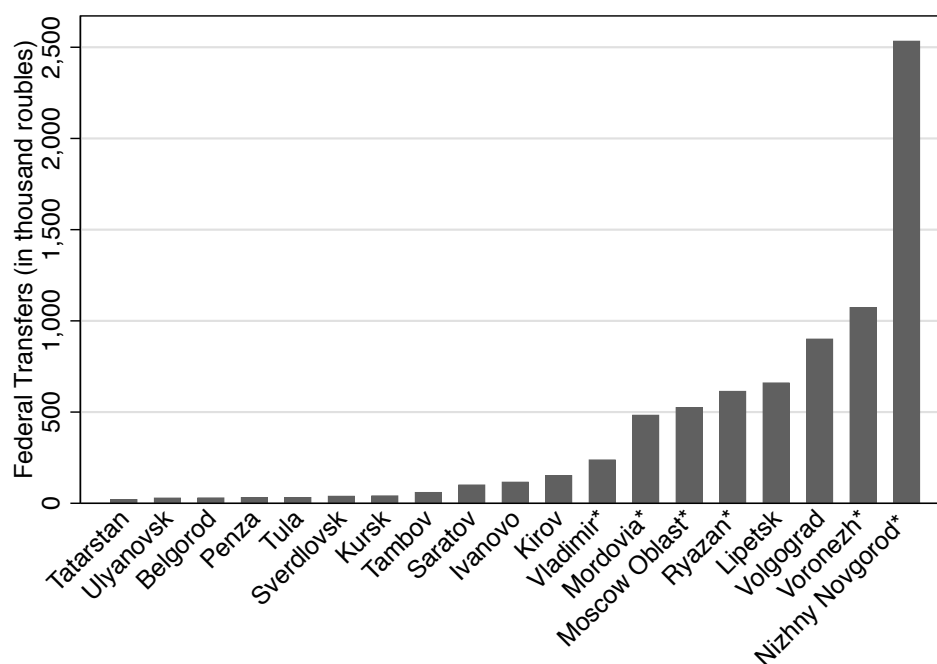


Figure 4.2 Federal aid provided towards regional budgets: July – September 2010

Table 4.2 Federal transfers to regional budgets

		July 30, 2010	August 20, 2010	September 3, 2010
1	Mordovia*	237	245.4	
2	Tatarstan	20		
3	Belgorod	28	1.1	
4	Vladimir*	131	106.3	
5	Voronezh*	1073		
6	Ivanovo	32	83.4	
7	Kirov	24	127	
8	Lipetks	158	501.3	
9	Moscow Oblast*	174	350.5	
10	Nizhny Novgorod*	2533		
11	Ryazan*	499	114.3	
12	Tambov	59		
13	Tula	24	7.5	
14	Ulyanovsk	8	20.2	
15	Kursk		40.3	
16	Penza		31.1	
17	Sverdlovsk		38.3	
18	Volgograd			900
19	Saratov			100
20	Mari El*			

Notes: Regions declared in a state of emergency with an asterisk next to their name. All amounts are in thousand roubles.

Indicators of support: To connect the micro and macro levels of analysis, I combine the indicators that capture government responses to the fires with evidence from survey data. These allow me to explore whether dismissals and federal transfers influenced evaluations of incumbent performance on the one hand, and attributions of blame on the other. In the sections that follow I provide details about the surveys and present my outcome and independent variables.

Levada Centre Surveys: Individual-level survey data employed as part of this chapter come from two nationally representative public opinion surveys conducted across 44 regions in Russia by the Levada Centre in August and September 2010. The two surveys have a combined sample of over 1,600 respondents. The Levada Centre is a well-respected public opinion firm in Russia. Its surveys are often employed by analysts and researchers in the West, and have over the years been published in leading political science journals.²⁴⁸ Interviews for the two surveys were conducted face-to-face, in respondents' homes. The two surveys include several questions on citizens' evaluations of incumbent performance during the wildfires, and detailed measures on whom citizens blamed for the disaster.²⁴⁹

The empirical analysis relies on three different outcome measures from the August and September Levada surveys. The first outcome variable comes from the August survey, and asks respondents whether in responding to the fires, the President and Prime Minister 'were trying to build political capital, exploiting people's misfortune and tragedy'. Respondents can either agree, or disagree with this statement, answering yes or no. Positive responses to this question, which suggest that people agree with the statement are coded as one, and negative responses, which indicate that respondents disagree are coded as zero. Missing observations and do not know responses are not included in the analysis. Almost

²⁴⁸ See for example: (Reuter and Szakonyi 2015; D. Treisman 2014; D. S. Treisman 2011)

²⁴⁹ (Levada Analytical Centre 2010)

20% of all respondents agreed with this statement, the dependent variable has a mean of .19 and a standard deviation of .4. The second dependent variable, which also comes from the August 2010 survey, asks respondents whether ‘the wildfires are the result of the federal authorities’ decision to deprive the regions from the means needed to protect the forests and extinguish the wildfires’. As with the previous survey item, respondents can either agree or disagree with the statement. Respondents who agree with this statement are assigned a value of one, and those who disagree are assigned a value of zero. Missing observations and do not know responses are not included in the analysis. Approximately 11% of all respondents agreed with the statement. The final survey item I rely on comes from the September survey. It asks whether respondents felt that ‘the country’s leadership had done everything possible to protect and help those affected by the fires and those affected by heavy smoking’. Response categories include the following two options: ‘the authorities did everything possible to protect the people from the wildfires and from their effects’ and ‘the authorities engaged in PR, self-advertisement’. Positive evaluations of government performance are assigned a value of one, and negative ones a value of zero. 46% of respondents evaluated government effort in a positive light in September. Missing observations and do not know responses are not included in the analysis. Altogether, the three outcome variables capture evaluations of government and attributions of blame specifically as a function of the wildfires. They are very detailed, and have considerable advantages over a general measure of government approval, or indeed vote intentions, often used in retrospective voting models.

The Levada surveys also have detailed questions on respondents’ socio-economic status and political preferences. This allows me to present well-specified models. Beyond standard demographic controls (age, gender, education), the analysis of the individual-level survey data also controls for a respondent’s voting behaviour in the 2008 presidential election, in order to partly account for the fact that partisanship bias could colour evaluations

of government in the aftermath of the disaster. The ‘prior vote’ variable is coded as one if a respondent voted for Medvedev and zero if they did not. The analysis also allows me to control for respondents’ evaluations of household economic conditions. This is a continuous variable, measured on a four-point scale. Higher values denote greater satisfaction with pocketbook conditions. Finally, the analysis controls for respondents’ settlement status, as residents of rural settlements and villages were more severely affected by the disaster, and clusters respondents by regions.

Public Opinion Foundation Surveys (FOM): To explore whether government responses to the 2010 wildfires affected the president’s and the governors’ approval function, I draw on quarterly, regionally representative public opinion data collected in June and September 2010, that is prior and after the outbreak of the wildfires. Table 4.3 below provides summary statistics. The outcome variables represent the percentage of Russians who reported that (i) the President’s, and (ii) the regional governor’s performance was positive. Approval indicators are based on quarterly surveys conducted by the Russian Foundation for Public Opinion (FOM), face-to-face, in respondents’ homes.²⁵⁰ The Russian Foundation for Public Opinion is also a well- respected public opinion firm both in Russia and abroad. Its surveys include national samples of approximately 34,000 respondents. In this sense, the data could be described as 66 different surveys conducted in each of two months with a minimum sample size of n=500. Aggregate indicators of presidential and gubernatorial approval, as they are used in this chapter, have been generously provided by the International Centre for the Study of Institutions and Development (ICSID) of the Higher School of Economics (HSE).²⁵¹

²⁵⁰ (VCIOM 2011)

²⁵¹ (International Center for the Study of Institutions and Development 2013)

Table 4.3 **Summary statistics: Presidential and gubernatorial approval**

Indicator	Survey	Observations	Range	Mean & SD
Presidential Approval	June 2010	66	48-82	70.75 (6.3)
	September 2010	66	51-81	70.72 (5.7)
Gubernatorial Approval	June 2010	66	12-74	31.43 (12.42)
	September 2010	66	15-78	33.89 (13.95)

4.4 Empirical Analysis and Results

The sections that follow introduce the empirical analysis. This is presented in two steps. The first step of the analysis studies the determinants of the government's response to fires. Next, I explore how voters responded to the fires and to government policy. As the different models rely on different datasets, and different estimation techniques, I introduce each in turn. In all models presented below, the empirical analysis focuses at the regional level. The units of analysis are Russia's federal regions (the equivalent of U.S. states). These units are also the lowest level at which representative approval data are available. It also makes sense to focus at the regional level given that regions as a whole were either declared in a state of emergency, or targeted to receive assistance from the federal government.

4.4.1 Government responses to the fires

The Model and Estimation

My argument suggests that government responses to shocks are tactical, i.e. motivated not only by material interests, but also by the need to generate support and build political capital. To test this assumption, I regress three dependent variables which capture federal government responses to the disaster on a set of political and disaster-related indicators.

The three different models estimating the federal government's response to the fires in each of Russian's eighty-three regions r , and at time t , are as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} Gov\ response_{rt} = & \alpha + \beta_1 Fire\ Cost_{rt} + \beta_2 GRP_{r(t-1)} + \beta_3 temp_{rt} + \beta_4 Approval_{r(t-1)} \\ & + \beta_5 Newspaper\ Circulation_{rt} + \epsilon_{rt} \end{aligned} \tag{4.1}$$

$Gov\ response_{rt}$ is defined alternately as dismissals, and federal transfers. The *dismissals* indicator is a binary variable that assigns regions where military or political officers left office in relation to the fire a value of one. Regions where no actors were dismissed are assigned a value of zero. The second and third outcome variables capture whether a region received assistance from the federal budget, and how much money it received. The *federal transfers* indicator is first coded as a dummy variable, assigned a value of one if a region was in receipt of aid and zero if it was not. The same indicator is finally coded as a continuous measure. It captures how much money regions received from the federal budget and it is measured in thousand roubles.

The *fire cost* indicator describes the material cost of fire-inflicted damage in region r , at time t . This tells us the total amount of fire-inflicted fire damage per region for 2010. As already noted, to deal with the skew in the disaster measure, I follow Healy and Malhotra, and convert this measure into a logarithm.²⁵² I anticipate that this measure, which captures a region's material need for aid, will be positively correlated with all indicators of government relief effort. An indicator of regional economic performance also helps me identify whether a region's economic performance predicts the allocation of financial transfers. More

²⁵² (Healy and Malhotra 2009, 392)

specifically, the analysis controls for a region's year-to-year Gross Regional Product (GRP) index. This measure gives us the ratio of GRP volume in 2009 (i.e. a year prior to the fires), relative to its volume in 2008 (the baseline, previous year). The baseline in the index is taken to be equal to 100, and so values higher to this denote that the regional economy's performance has improved. It would be possible to anticipate that regions experiencing positive performance between 2008-2009 would have access to more resources in order to battle the fires, and hence would be less likely to need federal transfers in 2010. I also rely on an indicator of previous-year economic performance, as any indicator of economic performance from 2010 would be also capturing the fires' effect on the performance of the regional economy. Models presented below finally control for a region's average July temperature in 2010, as the summer's heatwave was a key factor contributing to the outbreak and spread of the fires.

To assess whether political incentives motivated government responses to the wildfires, the analysis also controls for previous-year government approval. In this context, I use a lagged measure for regional approval, as current-year approval would have been influenced by the wildfires. Higher values of this variable, which is measured on a scale from 1 to 100, denote that the government enjoys greater levels of support.²⁵³ Moreover, in line with Besley and Prat, who show that governments are more likely to provide generous relief aid to regions with a more competitive regional media environment, I control for the number of newspaper copies per 1000 people. This measure allows me to explore whether the Russian government is incentivized to provide larger relief to regions which could

²⁵³ The correlation between this measure and United Russia's vote share in the 2007 election is around .4 ($p < .01$), so I try not to include both in the analysis. Because the reliability of election results is often questioned, I opt for the measure of approval instead. As existing research shows, government approval indicators are meaningful, and accurately reflect public opinion in the country (Frye et al. 2015). The direction on the coefficients of interest does not change if we re-run the analysis including both variables instead.

enforce greater accountability.²⁵⁴ If political incentives motivated the government's response to the disaster, both of these measures should be positively correlated with government responses.

Results

Table 4.4 below presents the results. Because of the binary nature of the dependent variables Models 1 and 2 present coefficients from logistic regressions. Because of the continuous nature of the third dependent variable Model 3 presents OLS coefficients instead. Across Models 1-3, the variable that captures the material cost of fire damage emerges as a positive and statistically significant predictor of government action. Model 1 suggests that for a 10% increase in fire damage costs, the difference in the likelihood of dismissal will be around .37, everything else equal. A similar 10% increase in fire damage costs will increase the likelihood of a region receiving federal transfers by .11, and the amount of aid received by 270 roubles.²⁵⁵ The regional temperature indicator is also statistically significant and in the direction anticipated, pointing to a positive correlation between regional temperature, accompanying drought, and subsequent government action. In neither model does the regional gross product indicator reach statistical levels of significance.

Yet as theoretically anticipated, the government's response to the disaster was not driven by material incentives alone. In line with evidence Besley and Prat present from India, Model 1 suggests that the likelihood of dismissals is higher in regions with a more competitive regional press, i.e. in regions where newspaper circulation per thousand residents is higher. I propose that in these regions, the executive is more likely to demand or enforce the dismissal of regional and federal officers in an attempt to eschew criticism and

²⁵⁴ (Besley and Prat 2006)

²⁵⁵ I follow Wooldridge and interpret the log transformed variable in terms of percent change (Wooldridge 2016)

deflect accountability. The effect is substantive, as it suggests that when the number of newspapers by 1000 residents in circulation increases by just one, the associated likelihood of a forced dismissal in a region is roughly equivalent to .002. When regional circulation increases by a hundred new newspaper outlets, this likelihood jumps to .2 per cent.

Table 4.4 Determinants of government responses to the fires

	(1) Dismissals (Logit)	(2) Federal Aid (Logit)	(3) Aid Amount (OLS)
Fire Damage (Log)	3.906** (1.611)	1.185*** (0.392)	28.34* (15.03)
GRP index ₂₀₀₉	0.661 (0.453)	0.0645 (0.120)	1.396 (5.865)
July temperature	2.325*** (0.669)	0.659** (0.265)	18.66*** (6.637)
Regional Newspapers	0.002*** (0.001)	-0.001** (0.000)	-0.005 (0.037)
L. Executive Approval	-0.122 (0.122)	0.061** (0.029)	2.680 (2.157)
Constant	-177.3*** (52.91)	-39.37*** (14.92)	-863.8 (703.4)
Observations	83	83	83
R-squared	0.60	0.42	0.10

Robust standard errors clustered by regions in parentheses, *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Model 2, however, suggests that everything else constant, a region's accountability potential in fact reduces the likelihood that a region will receive federal transfers in response to the fires. The same coefficient fails to reach statistical levels of significance in Model 3, which looks at the amount of federal aid each region received instead. As the coefficient on government approval suggests, holding everything else constant, the Russian government is more likely to target more supportive areas with federal aid. A one point increase in previous-year executive approval for example, increases the probability that a region will receive any amount of aid by .06. This is equivalent to an odds ratio of 1.10. Evidence that the Russian government is more likely to target supporters with transfers is in line with the 'core' voter

model of tactical redistribution, and similar evidence produced by other studies on the determinants of Russian federal transfers. Marques *et al.* for example, show that during periods of poor performance, such as during times of economic contraction for example, incumbents will target loyal, or core regions with targeted benefits.²⁵⁶

4.4.2 Voter Responses to Government Policies

Evidence from individual-level survey data

The second part of the analysis investigates public opinion responses to the fires and to government policy. I first turn to individual-level public opinion data from the Levada Foundation. I complement survey responses with the indicators of fire disaster and government responses to the fires.

The Model and Estimation

Define V_{irt} as a binary outcome representing evaluations of incumbent performance by respondent i in region r and time t . Three different outcome indicators are employed. The first assigns respondents who believe that the government was building political capital exploiting victims' misfortune a value of one. The second outcome variable examines whether respondents blame the federal government for the fires, an outcome also coded as one. The last outcome variable captures overall evaluations of the government's response to the fires, with positive evaluations assigned a value of one.

The *number of fires*, and the two binary *dismissals* and *federal transfers* indicators are measured at the regional level and are sensitive to the timing of the survey interview. Respondents in Volgograd for example, where four regional officials left office in mid-September 2010, are not considered 'treated', or experiencing any regional dismissals in the

²⁵⁶ (Marques, Nazrullaeva, and Yakovlev 2016)

August 2010 survey. This survey was in the field between August 2nd and 28th, 2010. The media independence indicator is also measured at the regional level. It comes from the Petrov and Titkov index of regional democracy in Russia, and controls for a region's political characteristics and the effective penetration of the government's dominant rhetoric to voters.²⁵⁷ It is possible to anticipate that it is more difficult to access information that exposes government malpractices and reveals dissatisfaction with the federal government in regions where local media outlets are under strict state control.

The model also includes individual-level controls (X_{irt}). These include gender, education, evaluations of household economic conditions, prior voting behaviour in the 2008 election and residence status.

$$\begin{aligned}
 V_{irt} = & \alpha + \beta_1 \text{Number of fires}_{rt} + \beta_2 \text{Dismissals}_{rt} + \beta_3 \text{Federal Transfers}_{rt} \\
 & + \beta_4 \text{Media Indep}_{rt} + X_{irt} + \epsilon_{irt}
 \end{aligned}
 \tag{4.2}$$

Results

Table 4.5 presents the results. In Model 1, which predicts evaluations of government performance, only the prior voting and dismissals variables reach statistical levels of significance. The dismissals indicator suggests that everything else equal, respondents who reside in regions where at least one official left office in relation to the disaster were by 10 percent less likely to suggest that 'the government's response to the disaster was poor' than respondents in the rest of the country (95% CI: -.17, -.03). This effect is almost as strong as that of respondent's partisanship.

²⁵⁷ (Petrov and Titkov 2013)

Table 4.5 **Voter responses to government policy**

	(1) Government engaged in PR (logit)	(2) Blames government for disaster (logit)	(3) Positive Performance (logit)
Region received aid	0.370 (0.388)	-0.654* (0.373)	0.623*** (0.196)
Dismissals in region	-0.842** (0.333)	0.400 (0.775)	-0.512 (0.380)
Number of fires	4.79e-05 (4.02e-05)	0.0001*** (4.24e-05)	-0.0002*** (3.75e-05)
Media Independence	0.0689 (0.141)	0.0538 (0.175)	-0.206 (0.138)
Male	0.217 (0.207)	-0.00357 (0.243)	-0.244** (0.105)
Education	0.190 (0.132)	-0.173 (0.206)	-0.0888** (0.0430)
Household Evaluations	-0.172 (0.137)	-0.208 (0.166)	0.176 (0.120)
Voted Medvedev	-0.729*** (0.248)	-0.554* (0.314)	0.568*** (0.176)
>5000K resident settlement	-0.526 (0.486)	-0.501 (0.878)	-1.894*** (0.465)
100-500K residents	-0.706 (0.584)	0.228 (0.834)	-1.328** (0.554)
Below 100K residents	-0.342 (0.435)	0.459 (0.862)	-1.493*** (0.460)
Village	-0.580 (0.498)	0.429 (0.877)	-1.468*** (0.440)
Constant	-0.842 (0.902)	-1.393 (1.205)	1.730** (0.815)
Observations	804	804	771
Pseudo R-square	.038	.047	.06

Robust standard errors, clustered by regions in parentheses, *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

In Model 1, respondents who voted for Medvedev in the preceding election are by 11 percent less likely to suggest that the government had engaged in PR than their counterparts (95% CI: -.19, -.04). This suggests that the decision to shift the blame for the disaster had powerful and positive effects on evaluations of government performance. As already noted, when voters do not update their evaluations of government performance in line with worsening conditions, even rudimentary accountability for poor performance will

be dampened. While the dismissals indicator does not reach statistical levels of significance in Model 2, the federal aid indicator is in the direction theoretically anticipated and statistically significant in Models 2 and 3. The federal transfers indicator suggests that respondents in regions which were in receipt of federal transfers were by approximately 5% less likely than their counterparts to report that the federal government policies were to be blamed for the outbreak of the disaster. This is a robust effect, and in line with theory proposing that government interventions can influence evaluations of government performance and attributions of blame in the aftermath of shocks. The aid indicator points to a similar direction in Model 3, suggesting that fiscal transfers can influence not only attributions of blame, but also overall evaluations of government performance. The aid coefficient in Model 3 suggests that respondents in regions in receipt of aid were by 15% more likely to offer positive evaluations of government performance than their counterparts (95% CI: .06, .25). Overall, the analysis provides support for both sets of Hypotheses provided in the theory section. In line with Hypothesis 1, propaganda, in the form of dismissals appears to ameliorate evaluations of government performance. In line with Hypotheses 2 and 2a we see that respondents in regions that were in receipt of generous federal transfers offered better assessments of the government's response to the events on the one hand, and were less likely to blame the government for the event on the other.

The *number of fires* indicator reaches statistical levels of significance in Models 2 and 3. This suggests that attribution of responsibility for the disaster was greater in regions more severely affected by the fires. In Model 2 for example, we see that when the average number of regional wildfires increases by one standard deviation, the likelihood of respondents' blaming Moscow for the disaster increases from 9 (95% CI: .07, .12) to 11% (95% CI: .08, .14). The same increase in the number of regional wildfires in Model 3 reduces the likelihood of respondents' offering positive evaluations of government from 45 (95%

CI: .40, .50) to 36% (95% CI: .31, .41). In Model 3, evaluations of government performance in response to the wildfires are lower in smaller settlements and rural centres than they were in Moscow. These rural settlements were the ones most severely affected by the fires. Taken together, these indicators highlight that stochastic shocks could dampen evaluations of government performance, and in doing so to challenge the behavioural equilibrium on which hitherto stable authoritarian regimes relied.

Evidence from aggregate approval data on gubernatorial and presidential approval

The Model and Estimation

The last part of the analysis assesses whether the 2010 wildfires and the government's response to them affected presidential and gubernatorial approval functions.

The empirical analysis relies on repeated observations of the same Russian regions, measured in June and September 2010, that is shortly prior and after the outbreak of the fires. For the analysis, I use first-differences regressions, where the outcome variables represent differences in support for regional governors and the President between June and September 2010. Independent variables are also first differenced. Estimating the model in changes *within* regions allows me to estimate dynamic changes in the outcome variables and helps remove omitted variable bias, i.e. bias due to unobserved differences across regions. Omitted variable bias is a concern with random effects models, as the ones presented earlier in this chapter.

The strengths of the first-differences model include precisely differencing out unmeasured or unchanging causes of the outcome variable. In a comparison of first-differences models with more conventional, two-wave panel models with fixed effects for the unit of analysis for example, first-differences models have been found to have substantial

advantages, especially where there are unmeasured predictor variables in the model.²⁵⁸ Here, unobserved regional differences driving variation in the extent of the fires could include variation in local governments' ability to effectively deal with the fires, because of the governors' local knowledge advantage for example, as elsewhere argued by Schultz and Libman.²⁵⁹ Because the analysis relies on two periods alone, the first-differences estimator I use here is algebraically the same as the within-group fixed effects estimator for two time-points alone. In the presence of more periods, the first-differences estimator would also be more appropriate than the fixed effects models because it allows the randomness in the error terms to be correlated over time. In the context of regional characteristics such as growth for example, randomness does not dissipate between periods.²⁶⁰ Thus, and for $t=2$, I estimate the following model:

$$\begin{aligned}\Delta approval_{rt} &= approval_{rt} - approval_{r(t-1)} \\ &= \beta_1 \Delta dismissals_{rt} + \beta_2 \Delta Federal\ Transfers_{rt} + \beta_3 \Delta GRP_{rt} + \Delta u_{rt}\end{aligned}\tag{4.3}$$

Equation 4.3 shows how changes in approval for region r between time $t-1$ and t , depend on within period changes in region's r experience of forced dismissals, receipt of aid, and gross regional product. Dismissals and aid are dummy indicators, assigned a value of one for regions which at time t experienced the dismissal of a local official, and received federal aid. The final coefficient captures changes in regional product indicator between the second and third quarter of 2010. In line with previous analysis, the models presented in Table 4.6 also control for changes in the extent of regional fires' material damages, using

²⁵⁸ See for example: (Angrist J. D. and J. S. Pischke 2008; Liker, Augustyniak, and Duncan 1985)

²⁵⁹ (Schultz and Libman 2015)

²⁶⁰ See for example: (Lich-Tyler 2013)

differences in Gross Regional Product between the second and third quarter of 2010. I use this measure as a proxy for the economic effects of the wildfires, as it is reasonable to anticipate that regions which heavily rely on agriculture were disproportionately affected by the disaster on the one hand, and reported greater GRP losses on the other.²⁶¹ Δu_{rt} describes changes in an idiosyncratic error term. I keep these models parsimonious as they each rely on a small number of observations, limiting the degrees of freedom available for the analysis. Moreover, the first-differences estimator only allows me to estimate the effect of time-variant variables.²⁶² Indicators that do not vary from the second to the third quarter of 2010, such as those of media freedom or press circulation for example, and which were included in previous models, cannot be included in this part of the analysis. Standard errors are clustered by regions.²⁶³

Results

Table 4.6 presents the results. Model 2 shows a strong, positive return of federal aid on presidential approval. Between June and September 2014, presidential approval increased by approximately 3 percentage points more in regions that received federal transfers than it did in the rest of the country. Yet we find no effect of federal aid on support for the regional governors. Relief aid was provided centrally, and there is little evidence that regional governors influenced its distribution. It is possible that Moscow's intervention could have

²⁶¹The correlation between the fires and gross regional product indicators is positive, and statistically significant ($r=.4$, $p<.01$). It is therefore not advisable to include both measures simultaneously in the analysis. The gross regional product indicator is available quarterly, and thus best suited for the purpose of this analysis. The direction on the variables of interest does not change if we replicate the analysis using the fires indicator instead.

²⁶² This would be possible using the Mundlak's approach (1978) for a fixed effect model with time invariant variables. The Mundlak approach suggests that time invariant effects can be projected on the group means of the variables that do change over time (Mundlak 1978)

²⁶³ I also follow Bechtel and Hainmueller in controlling for lagged approval, yet the results do not change (Bechtel and Hainmueller 2011, 857). These are presented in Section D in the SI for Chapter 4

signalled poor performance in the localities, and to have highlighted governors' failure to invest in preparedness spending across the country. When either Medvedev or Putin needed to step in to 'correct' for malpractices taking place at the local level, or to boost the regional budget, voters could think that the local authorities are doing a poor job.

Table 4.6 Gubernatorial and presidential approval: First differences estimation

	(1)	(2)
	Changes in governors' approval	Changes in presidential approval
Federal Aid	-0.010 (1.378)	3.173** (1.391)
Dismissals	-3.503* (1.981)	-3.531 (4.109)
Changes in GRP	-5.063 (9.547)	8.986 (10.86)
Constant	3.572** (1.645)	-2.289 (1.726)
Observations	63	63
R-squared	0.033	0.075

Robust standard errors clustered by regions in parentheses *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

The negative effect of the dismissals indicator on support for the regional governors also points to a similar direction. More specifically, Model 1 suggests that in regions where at least one official was dismissed in relation to the disaster, gubernatorial approval dropped by approximately 3.5 per cent. This effect, which is statistically significant at the 10 percent level suggests that to some extent, Moscow's decision to dismiss political and military officials was successful, as it shifted the blame to regional governors. The dismissals indicator in Model 2 fails to reach statistical levels of significance. Thus, we are unable to document a direct effect of dismissals on support for President Medvedev. The gross regional indicators also fail to reach statistical levels of significance.

4.5 Addressing Concerns

We might still be concerned that the federal government's decision to dismiss ill-performing officials could represent an effort to settle intra-elite disputes, as opposed to an effort to deflect blame. To address this concern, and provide additional support for the argument that the Kremlin intentionally deflected responsibility for the fires, I perform one final piece of analysis. Conceptualizing propaganda as information manipulation, I analyse attributions of responsibility for the fires in state-controlled media between July and September 2010. Given the influence the Kremlin has over media stations' and newspapers' editorial policy, one could interpret attributions of responsibility in state-controlled media as reflecting the government's rhetoric. Results are succinctly presented below, and developed extensively in Section C of the SI for this chapter.

The media analysis proceeded as follows. With the help of the online media database Integrum, I downloaded stories in which the keyword *pozhar** (fires) appeared from the 1st of July until the 30th of September 2010. My sample of news outlets included two of Russia's leading TV channels, *NTV Novosti*, *Russiya Odin*, and two of the country's leading newspapers, *Izvestyia* and *Novaya Gazeta*. This gives me a sample of approximately 1734 stories. To identify if actors appearing in these 1734 stories, whether journalists, citizens, or other officials, explicitly responsibility for the emergence, and spread of the wildfires, I run queries with words often associated with attributions of blame in Russian. These include terms such as: '*because of*', '*the result of*', '*guilty of*', '*to be blamed for*' '*the consequence of*', '*must resign*'. Queries are also run with the target terms '*nobody*', '*weather*', '*regional authorities*', '*governor*' '*government*' '*Ministry of Emergency Situations*'.²⁶⁴ When such

²⁶⁴ In Russian, these terms are as follows: *из-за* (because of), *результат**, *следстви** (result, consequence), *виноват** (guilty), *отставк** (resignation), *освобожден** (fired). Target words are as follows: *жар** (heat), *засух** (drought), '*стихийно бедстви**' (natural disaster), *неправильн** (incorrect, wrong), *власт** (authorities), *руководств** (leadership), *руководител** (leader), *федеральн** (federal), *региональн** (regional), *губернатор**

target words are identified, I read through the stories to identify if they do indeed make references to attributions of responsibility. This increases confidence that the terms are capturing attribution of responsibility in the context of the wildfires. Next, I use a simple scheme to record whom state-controlled media blamed for the fires, i.e. whether it was the federal, or regional authorities, the weather, or any other actors or factors. Descriptive statistics are then disaggregated by month. This allows me to study whether attributions of blame varied over time.

Figure 4.3 presents the results, plotting the number of articles in each category along the y-axis. Several findings stand out. *First*, the small number of observations in each category suggests that only a small number of articles attributed responsibility for the disaster. While state-controlled media described the course and extent of the fires during the period under consideration, they did not frequently attribute blame. *Second*, the number of stories attributing responsibility increased over time. Stories attributing responsibility for the disaster were more common in August and September, as opposed to July. When the wildfires started burning in July, national media refrained from engaging in rhetoric that attributed political blame for the disaster. Media and government actors initially described the wildfires as ‘an act of God’, or the result of random weather conditions. Throughout the first weeks of July 2010, Putin himself was stating that while the fires were still burning attributing responsibility for malpractices and ill planning was inappropriate. *Thirdly*, the increase in the frequency of blame references to the federal authorities in August, as compared to July, suggests that despite power centralization, the government’s response to the disaster was also being placed under scrutiny.

(governor), МЧС – министерств* (Ministry of Emergency Situations, or just Ministry), правительство* (government). I stem these terms as the Russian language has a system of grammatical declension, where words take different endings depending on their case.

Yet, the frequency of stories shifting the blame to the regions also increased over time. Between August and September for example, the number of stories portraying the regional authorities in a negative light increased almost two-fold. This change in strategy could have been prompted by evidence of growing dissatisfaction with the federal authorities. In early August 2010, for example, the Levada Foundation reported that almost one in three Russians agreed that the fires were the result of government politics and mismanagement, as Moscow had failed to invest in the protection of the country's forestry system. While these results are merely descriptive, they provide some additional support for the argument that through dismissals and media rhetoric, the Kremlin sought to shift the blame for the disaster to other actors at home. Executive efforts to deflect responsibility intensified over-time.

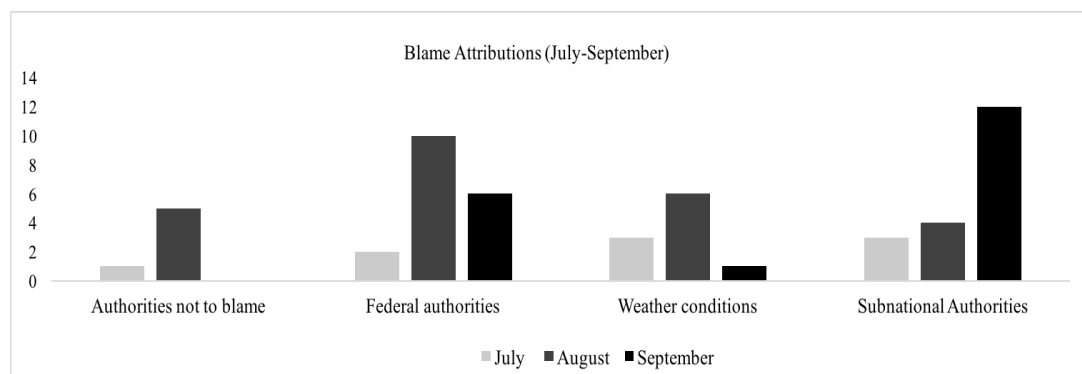


Figure 4.3 **Variation in blame attributions across state-controlled media**

Notes: The y-axis measures the number of stories that attribute responsibility for the outbreak and spread of the wildfires. Results rely on a sample of stories including the keyword wildfires (*pozhar**), and which appeared in four Russian media outlets (*NTV Novosti, Rossyia Odin, Izvestyia* and *Rossyiskaya Gazeta*) between July 1st and September 30th, 2010. Section C in the SI for Chapter 4 discusses the media results in length.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter has studied government and public opinion responses to the 2010 Russian

wildfires. In the summer of 2010 positive economic performance and power-centralization allowed Moscow to channel generous aid to crisis-affected regions and to dismiss elected and appointed officials. A key example of government propaganda, forced dismissals have helped me provide a first test of the hypothesis that strategies that shift the blame could produce a reputational advantage for actors at the top rungs of a country's ruling coalition.

The empirical setup, which relies on the combination of survey data and evidence from government responses to the 2010 wildfires, bridges the micro-macro divide and provides one of the first full tests of government accountability under electoral authoritarianism. The analysis presented here has provided additional evidence in support for the well-documented nexus between tactical redistribution and support for government. Results also reveal that, to some extent, propaganda in the form of forced dismissals can also ameliorate evaluations of government in the aftermath of shocks. By deflecting responsibility to actors at the lower rungs of the country's ruling coalition, the government in Moscow was able to improve citizen evaluations of its response to the wildfires.

At the same time, however, the analysis also calls for more work to be conducted on the importance of forced dismissals in sustaining the behavioural equilibrium that characterizes the survival of illiberal regimes. A larger sample of cases examining the effect of resignations and dismissals on Presidential approval, vote intentions and the actual vote, and a more robust identification strategy could provide a stronger test for the hypothesis that resignations can benefit actors at the top of the country's executive. Regionally representative approval indicators available over-time could enable a generalised difference-in-differences design, that would also facilitate identification. Yet, even with these caveats in mind, Moscow's decision to dismiss members of the ruling elite could be very informative of the government's intention to shift the blame, and deflect responsibility away from the presidential tandem. Coupled with evidence that dismissals were more likely in areas with a

more pluralist media environment, the analysis suggests that Moscow actively tries to manipulate attributions of credit and blame, and is well aware of the fact that not all expressions of discontent have the same gravity in political systems synonymous to the head of the executive.

That Russian citizens demand a responsive government can be interpreted as good news for ‘internal accountability’ in Russia. The correlation between regional fire damage and evaluations of government performance could motivate Moscow to link the survival of subnational authorities to their ability protect and maximize the welfare of their constituents. Overall, however, evidence from the 2010 wildfires presented in this chapter illustrates that government interventions could strongly moderate the effect of exogenous shocks on support and suggests limits on citizens’ ability to hold electoral authoritarians to account. This implies that although government popularity may drop due to shocks, the executive, which by definition embodies the regime and its stability is not powerless. By engaging in concrete policies that ‘correct’ for the effect of shocks and crises, incumbents could maintain support, even in the wake of government failure. Finally, this chapter supplements existing contributions on the 2010 Russian wildfires by investigating the determinants and political consequences of Moscow’s response to the disaster.²⁶⁵

By leveraging evidence from the economic, the security and the political domains, the ensuing empirical chapters test the generalizability of these findings, and the broader applicability of my theoretical argument. The economic recession chapter, to which I turn to next, studies how electoral authoritarians respond to shocks when budget constraints prevent them from investing in large-scale transfers and tactical redistribution.

²⁶⁵ (Giuliano 2013; Lazarev et al. 2012; Szakonyi 2012)

Chapter 5

Propaganda amid Recession

This chapter provides a second empirical test of the argument that government interventions moderate the effect of shocks on the levels of support incumbents enjoy. The previous chapter considered the political consequences of forced dismissals and fiscal transfers in the context of an exogenous shock, the 2010 wildfires. I now turn to study media effects on economic evaluations and government approval. I illustrate arguments by leveraging evidence from the Kremlin's response to the post-2014 economic downturn and from Russians' response to government rhetoric.

The empirical analysis proceeds as follows. In a first step, I study how Russia's state controlled TV channel *Perviy Kanal* (Channel One) covered news about the economic decline. Studying a random sample of 1400 news stories broadcasted between 2013 and 2015, I identify broad patterns in the coverage of economic news and discuss how the government sought to deflect blame for the downturn. In a second step, I test for media effects on evaluations of economic performance and government approval. I do so by drawing on individual-level survey data from the third round of the Life in Transition Survey (LITS). Commissioned by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the LITS survey was in the field in late 2015 and early 2016.

Results reveal that state-controlled media do not outright censor information about poor economic performance. The bivariate correlation between economic news stories and economic indicators is weak and fails to reach statistical levels of significance. Yet, an in-depth qualitative analysis of a smaller sub-sample of stories also suggests that the Russian authorities actively sought to deflect blame for the downturn and amass credit for efforts to alleviate its consequences. The Kremlin's message was clear: the economy was

deteriorating, but Western sanctions and international hostility brought about the decline. The government was taking action to fulfil its budgetary commitments and assist those sectors and social groups in need. I also find that while news consumption did not influence Russians' assessments of economic performance, it did dampen attributions of responsibility for the decline. These results are robust to a battery of statistical controls that aim to account for the fact that ruling regime supporters could be more likely to watch news on state-controlled media in the first place. Findings have implications for the literatures on economic voting and authoritarian regime survival.

5.1 Introduction

The publication of President Putin's approval ratings in the summer of 2015 baffled observers. Just six months after the value of the Russian currency had collapsed and despite predictions of the economy shrinking by more than 3.4 percent over the course of the year, the Russian president enjoyed approval ratings as high as 89 percent in June and 87 percent in July 2015. Two years later, Putin continues to enjoy approval ratings of 80 percent and over. This is despite the fact that economic decline, which coincided with the imposition of western sanctions and the fall in global energy prices, has also prevailed. It is estimated that in 2015 alone, for example, 2.3 million Russians fell into poverty. In the same year, rising inflation led real wages to decline by 9.5 percent, while wage arrears also increased by 15 percent.

Consistently, Figure 5.1 below shows that from the second half of 2013 to the second half of 2014, socio-economic protests - as a proportion of all protest events taking place in Russia - increased almost two-fold, jumping from just 28 to 58 percent. Russian citizens,

especially workers and pensioners, often chose to strike and go on hunger strikes to protest against deteriorating working conditions and the delay of wages.²⁶⁶

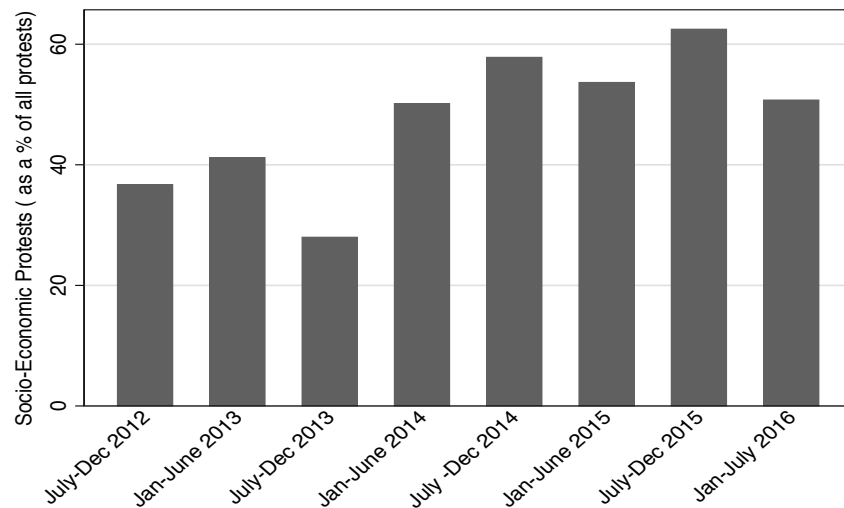


Figure 5.1 **Socio-economic protests in Russia increase as performance deteriorates**

Notes: The y-axis shows the percentage of socio-economic protests as a percentage of all protest events that take place in Russia from the second half of 2012 to the second half of 2016. The data come from the Lankina Protest-Event dataset. Protest events are coded as ‘social’ when they aim to further the goals of socially vulnerable groups of people such as pensioners, students, and people on state benefits. Protests are coded as ‘economic’ when they are staged against government economic policies, such as those affecting exchange rates and wages. Strikes also fall under this category.

The resilience of President Putin’s approval ratings to the recent economic downturn is in stark contrast with a growing literature on the economic origins of presidential approval in Russia. As the third empirical chapter of the thesis shows, up to 2010 presidential approval

²⁶⁶ Reports from Russia’s Institute of Collective action also document a similar increase in the frequency of socio-economic protest events around this period (TsEPR 2016, 22). While several of these protests were coordinated by the Communist part of the Russian Federation (CPRF), many more were spontaneous, and grass roots based.

in Russia fluctuated in parallel with evaluations of economic performance, which in turn mirrored economic indicators.²⁶⁷ Yet, according to one view, the imposition of sanctions could have led to a ‘rally effect’, shielding incumbents from popular discontent. There should be little doubt that the nature of the decline, i.e. as partly stemming from the imposition of sanctions, facilitated efforts to deflect responsibility. ‘Rally’ effects, however, do not take place *in vitro*, or in the absence of government rhetoric framing events as resulting from factors, or enemies abroad. Moreover, and as existing research reminds us, it is not always straightforward that foreign-led sanctions should coincide with increased support for incumbents at home. As Galtung and Frye remind us in studies on the consequences of sanctions in Rhodesia and contemporary Russia for example, citizens experiencing the strain of economic sanctions, could blame government for the policies that led to the imposition of sanctions in the first place.²⁶⁸ In a similar vein, Nikolay Marinov has concluded that economic sanctions destabilize the leaders that they target, and that highly-publicized cases of incumbents empowered, rather than challenged by sanctions in Iraq, Haiti, Cuba, and North Korea are ‘anything but typical’.²⁶⁹ And, as public opinion surveys that took place in recent years suggest, Russians blamed both the fall in global energy prices and the imposition of Western sanctions for the decline in the economy and the deterioration in their pocketbooks.

Thus, the question remains. Why did Russians, who evidently suffered from the economic downturn and took to the streets to air their grievances, not also withdraw support for government?

²⁶⁷ See also: (D. Treisman 2014; D. S. Treisman 2011)

²⁶⁸ (Frye 2017; Galtung 1967)

²⁶⁹ (Marinov 2005)

5.2 Theory and Hypotheses

The Extant Literature

As the introduction to the thesis highlights, an influential scholarship generates the prediction that illiberal regimes should be sustained when the economy grows and lose support when performance deteriorates.²⁷⁰ Empirical evidence also suggests that historically, the breakdown of authoritarian regimes increased in the context of exogenous economic shocks.²⁷¹ According to Barbara Geddes for example, while positive performance enables illiberal incumbents to exchange patronage and public goods for political loyalty and popular support, economic downturns make material resources difficult to mobilize.²⁷² Performance legitimacy, a key approach to understanding why autocrats who violate human rights and political freedoms sustain high levels of approval, also suggests that citizens who trade growth for democracy are more likely to defect to the opposition when performance is poor. It is precisely non-democratic incumbents' need to deliver or risk being ousted that generates according to Haggard and Kaufman 'democratic-like accountability mechanisms' even in contexts where democratic accountability is not fully institutionalized.²⁷³

For the economic accountability mechanism to work, however, two conditions should be met. These have been first introduced in the theory section of the thesis. *First*, economic performance and evaluations of economic conditions should be congruent, i.e. citizens should correctly interpret how the national economy is performing. *Second*, individuals should effectively blame or credit incumbents for downturns or growth. When citizens misattribute responsibility for downturns at home to actors abroad and vice-versa, i.e. when

²⁷⁰ (Desai, Olofsgård, and Yousef 2009; Geddes 1999b; Magaloni 2006; Pei and Adesnik 2000)

²⁷¹ (Geddes 1999b, 138)

²⁷² (Acemoglu and Robinson 2005; Boix and Stokes 2003; Desai, Olofsgård, and Yousef 2009; Geddes 1999a; Hansen 1974; Przeworski et al. 2000)

²⁷³ (Haggard and Kaufman 1995)

they reward domestic actors for economic developments abroad, the economic accountability mechanism could be breached.²⁷⁴

The economic voting literature identifies several factors that could moderate the connection between economic performance, economic assessments, and responsibility assignment. At the individual level, political attitudes, group interests and personal financial experiences are found to colour how voters perceive the state of the economy, and how they attribute blame for economic decline.²⁷⁵ The role of partisanship, or prior regime attachments occupies central place in these debates, as several studies show that partisans tend to perceive the economy in a way that credits their own party.²⁷⁶ At the aggregate level, existing research suggests that a country's economic integration into the global market could also moderate economic voting, conditioning the extent to which voters hold incumbents accountable for outcomes beyond their control.²⁷⁷ And while Duch and Stevenson suggested that voters in advanced democracies can disentangle competence from exogenous shocks, recent work by Campello and Zucco has challenged this assumption for low-information, developing country contexts. At the domestic level, scholars also highlight the importance of party discourse and media coverage in communicating economic indicators to the general public, and transmitting signals of economic growth or decline to a broad audience.²⁷⁸ A series of articles examining the content and consequences of economic media coverage for example,

²⁷⁴ (Anderson 2007; Campello and Zucco 2015; Fraile and Pardos-Prado 2013)

²⁷⁵ Existing scholarship shows that self-interest drives heterogeneity in economic perceptions, as differently situated individuals are exposed to systematically different economic experiences that help determine how they perceive the state of the economy (Anderson 2007; Holbrook and Garand 1996; Weatherford 1983). In this vein, research has emphasized the role of employment (Duch, Palmer, and Anderson 2000), socio-economic status and income (see in particular: Fraile and Pardos-Prado 2013) in determining understandings of economic performance

²⁷⁶ (Evans and Andersen 2006b; Evans and Pickup 2010; Pickup and Evans 2013)

²⁷⁷ (Campello and Zucco 2015; Duch and Stevenson 2008; Hellwig and Samuels 2007)

²⁷⁸ (Chzen, Evans, and Pickup 2013; Gavin and Sanders 1997; Heatherington and Hetherington 1996; Pardos-Prado and Sagarzazu 2016)

documents strong media effects on evaluations of economic performance, incumbent approval and even policy preferences.²⁷⁹ Yet such studies have been predominantly focused on democracies. As a result, we know very little about the transportability of these arguments across political regimes. This is problematic, not least because over 85% of the world's citizens today live in countries with partly or not free media.

Drawing on contributions regarding the political conditioning of public opinion in democracies, the research design I present in this chapter extends the agenda of media effects on public opinion to electoral authoritarianism.

The Argument and Observable Implications

Economic shocks create a series of strategic dilemmas for incumbents. On the one hand, they compromise governments' ability to censor and manipulate information. Shocks with a sizeable effect on citizen living standards and welfare make information that performance is poor publicly observable. Moreover, overtly censoring information about the downturn could lead citizens to question the objectivity of news coverage in the country. A mismatch between citizens' own experiences of economic decline and information presented in state-controlled media could thus undermine the effectiveness of government propaganda, both in the short and long run.

By imposing significant constraints on the state budget, economic downturns also reduce governments' ability to invest in tactical redistribution or clientelism. This has certainly been the case with the Russian government in the aftermath of the 2014 economic downturn. As the Kremlin used sovereign funds to stabilise the budget, the country's sovereign reserves declined from 87 billion US dollars 2014 to just over 16 billion US dollars in 2016. Plans to use one third of the sovereign funds to cover long-term deficits in the

²⁷⁹ (Goidel and Langley 1994; Hetsroni et al. 2014; Soroka, Stecula, and Wlezien 2015)

pension system were also overhauled when the Finance Ministry decided that reserves had to cover the budget deficit instead.²⁸⁰ Thus, in the case of the post-2014 economic decline, the Russian government was unable to complement propaganda with targeted redistribution, or generous social transfers.²⁸¹ This stands in sharp contrast to the government's response to the 2010 wildfires and indeed the 2008-2009 economic downturn, when Moscow used its reserves to boost social spending.

My theoretical argument anticipates that in solving this dilemma – as censorship could backfire and tactical redistribution is unaffordable – illiberal incumbents are likely to increase investments in propaganda.²⁸² Concretely, I propose that while incumbents will acknowledge the extent of the downturn, they will also engage in blame shifting and credit claiming strategies. In the context of Russia's recent economic downturn, we could concretely anticipate that state-controlled media will place great emphasis on stories, reports and coverage that (i) deflect blame for the economic performance abroad (blame shifting), and (ii) portray the Russian government as taking efforts to alleviate the consequences of the decline (credit claiming).

If successful, rhetoric that acknowledges the extent of the downturn but manipulates attributions of responsibility should have three observable effects on public opinion. *First*, because the government does not lie about the extent of the downturn, voters' perceptions of economic performance should closely track objective economic indicators. For this reason, it is also unlikely that news consumption will increase economic optimism. *Second*,

²⁸⁰ (Korsunskaya 2016)

²⁸¹ See for example: (McAllister and White 2011)

²⁸² Contrary to tactical redistribution, the use of propaganda in this context should not be interpreted as providing evidence of regime responsiveness to social demands. Propaganda does not enhance collective well-being, neither does it improve citizen living standards. It could, however, convince the electorate that the incumbent is competent and that actors outside of the country are to blame for the downturn.

I anticipate that the effect of news consumption on approval will be positive across citizens who are more, and less satisfied with economic performance. This effect should be strongest when economic satisfaction is at its lowest, and decline in magnitude as satisfaction increases. This is precisely because during the period under investigation, state-controlled media presented the economy as being in decline, and actively engaged in rhetoric that shifted the blame for the downturn. *Thirdly*, because the government manipulates attributions of responsibility, subjective assessments of economic performance may be less consequential for informing citizens' evaluations of incumbent performance. Thus, I anticipate that attribution of responsibility for economic performance will be weaker for voters who are more frequently exposed to the framing of economic news in state-controlled media. To put this on starker terms, let's consider a hypothetical scenario of two otherwise similar voters, who equally believe that economic performance has deteriorated. Attribution of responsibility for the economic downturn to incumbents at home, my theory predicts, will be stronger for the voter who is less frequently exposed to the framing of the downturn in state-controlled media, everything else equal.

The empirical analysis unfolds in two parts. In a first step, I review the coverage of economic news in *Perviy Kanal* from 2013 to 2015. In a second step, I estimate media effects on economic and political assessments using individual-level responses to the third round of the Life in Transition survey. Using individual-level survey data, I test whether controlling for local economic performance, news consumption influences economic evaluations and government approval. By interacting the variable that captures news consumption with the indicator of economic assessments, I also explore whether news consumption moderates the effect of economic assessments on evaluations of government performance. As the two parts of the empirical analysis rely on different data sources and estimation techniques, I introduce each of them in turn.

5.3 Media Analysis: Propaganda amid Recession

Data and Empirical Setup

The first part of the empirical analysis studies the framing of economic news in Russia's *Perviy Kanal (Channel One)*. Using Integrum, an online media analysis database, I traced all stories using the words economy and Russia (*ekonom** and *rossiy**), and which were broadcasted from January 2013 to December 2015. To increase the specificity of the corpus to the performance of the economy, I filtered these stories by their relevance to the economy, using Integrum's online media analysis platform, thus retaining stories which above the 70% "relevance" threshold. The ensuing sample consists of 1400 stories that report on the performance of the Russian economy.

This timeframe presents important variation in economic performance. While in 2013 the economy experienced a period of timid growth, output decline in the third quarter of 2014, and did not recover until the second quarter of 2015. I restrict the analysis to *Perviy Kanal*, as this is Russia's largest state-owned TV channel. The Kremlin has a majority 51% stake in the company, and both in Russia and abroad, *Perviy Kanal* is well known for its positive coverage of Kremlin news stories. As such, analysing economic news coverage from this source could give us a good snapshot of how Kremlin-controlled media framed the economic downturn.

The analysis presented below develops in three steps. *First*, I examine whether the coverage of economic news declines as economic performance deteriorates. I do so by looking at the correlation between the quarterly volume of stories on the economy on the one hand and quarterly economic performance on the other. Quarterly growth data for Russia come from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Evidence that *Perviy Kanal* was less likely to report on the economy when economic

performance was poor would possibly suggest that illiberal media engage in censorship. *Second*, and by collecting summary statistics on which economy-related topics received coverage over time, I trace how Kremlin-controlled media discussed the causes and consequences of the downturn. *Finally*, by providing an in-depth, qualitative analysis of a random sample of 80 stories, I paint a clearer picture of whom the media blamed for the decline. While qualitative analysis considerably restricts the sample of stories considered, it has a number of advantages over automated text-analysis methods. To the best of my knowledge, automated text analysis methods, be it supervised or unsupervised, would not allow me to discern stories that present ‘mixed’ messages about the economy on the one hand, and would not permit identifying whether the Kremlin is engaging in blame shifting and credit claiming strategies on the other.

Results

Figure 5.2 below aims to investigate if state-controlled media outlets are more, or less likely to report economic news when the economy is contracting. It does so by plotting the bivariate correlation between quarterly growth, and the number of stories appearing in *Perviy Kanal* over the 2013-2015 period. The x-axis plots Russia’s quarterly growth rate – compared to the previous quarter – for the period from January 2013 to December 2015, and the y-axis plots the number of economic news stories that appear during the equivalent quarter. Economic data come from the OECD. The bivariate correlation between the two indicators reported in Figure 5.2 is positive, but not statistically significant ($r=.28$ (.37)). Descriptive analysis provided below suggests that economic reporting does not decline when the economy deteriorates. Moreover, the number of stories on the Russian economy peaks in the first and last quarter of 2014, and in the second quarter of 2015. The first quarter of 2014 saw the imposition of Western sanctions in relation to the Ukrainian crisis, and in the last quarter of the same year the value of the Russian currency collapsed. In the second

quarter of 2015 the economy grew by .9 percent and for the first time after three consecutive quarters of negative growth. Overall, there is little evidence to support that in recent years the Kremlin has either censored, or crowded-out information on (poor) economic performance.

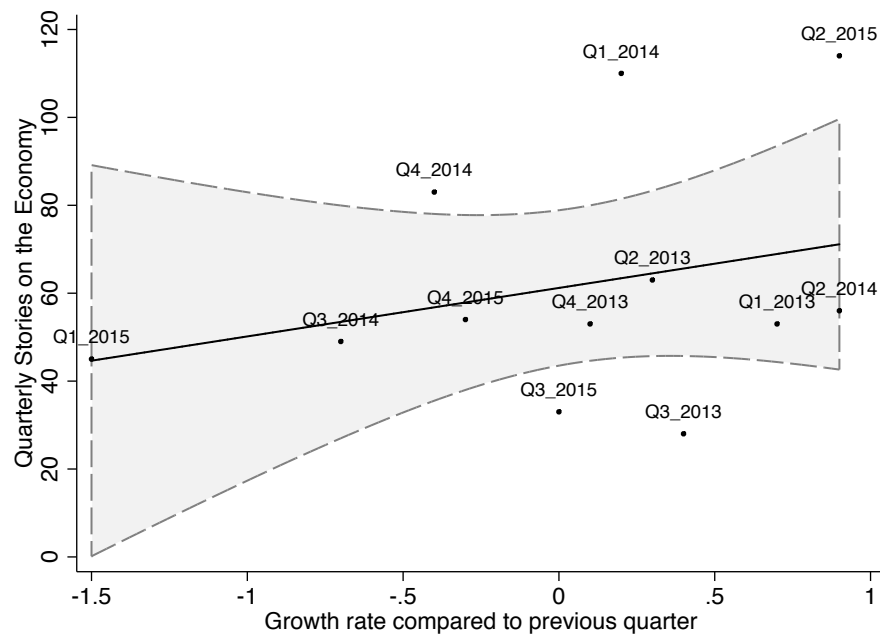


Figure 5.2 **Bivariate correlation between economic performance and economic news**

Notes: The plot presents the correlation between the quarterly economic growth – compared to the previous quarter- (x-axis) and the frequency of stories on the economy published from January 2013 to December 2015 (y-axis). The sample of economic news stories consists of the 1400 *Perviy Kanal* stories downloaded from Integrum. Data on growth come from the OECD. The black line demonstrates the linear fit, with 95% confidence intervals.

Descriptive evidence presented in Figure 5.2, however, tells us very little about the types of economic issues state-controlled media covered as economic performance deteriorated. To get an idea of the types of questions *Perviy Kanal* covered, I run analysis identifying which issues received coverage this time. The results are presented in Figure 5.3.

The left-hand panel plots the frequency of bi-annual references to the causes of the downturn, as stemming either from the drop in global energy prices, or from the imposition of coordinated EU and US sanctions against Russia. The right-hand panel plots references to instances of poverty, or wage reductions. As noted in the introduction, the increase in poverty and the reduction in wages were two of the key consequences of the downturn. The y-axis of both panels plots references to energy prices, sanctions, poverty and wages as they appear in the same sample of stories.²⁸³ I disaggregate references bi-annually, so that the six different bars cover the first, and second half of 2013, 2014, and 2015 respectively.

Several findings stand out. To begin with, references to economic sanctions and energy prices outnumber references to poverty and wage reductions. Across the entire sample of stories, the word ‘poverty’ is mentioned 63 times. There are over 900 references to the imposition of economic sanctions instead. Focusing on the left-hand plot of Figure 5.3 alone, we see that from the second half of 2014 onwards, references to economic sanctions also outnumber references to energy prices. Overall, references to the imposition of Western sanctions and Russian counter-sanctions dominated the coverage of economic news throughout 2014, before gradually declining by the second half of 2015. It is finally worth noting that throughout this period, references to sanctions correlated strongly with references to the United States ($r=.92$, $p<.01$). Such a negative portrayal of the United States, inevitably had an impact on how Russians viewed the country. According to the Levada Foundation for example, the percentage of Russians mentioning the United States as the country with the most hostile relations towards Russia increased from 38 percent in 2013 to 69 percent in

²⁸³ It is important to clarify that this latter axis measures how many times the keywords: *нефть** *neft**, *санкции** *sanks**, *бедность** *bednost**, *сокращен** *sokrashen** *доход** *doxod**, i.e., oil, sanctions, poverty, reduction (wages) appear in the corpus of economic news stories, and not the total number of stories per se. It is possible for example that one story mentions the word “sanctions” 60 times. I assume that the more times a keyword is mentioned, the greater its visibility.

2014 and 73 percent in 2015.²⁸⁴ Such an increase in the percentage of Russians reporting hostile views towards the United States is in the direction we would anticipate if media framing influenced public opinion. Descriptive evidence on the coverage of the downturn is also in line with the argument that by portraying the economic decline as the result of Western interventionism, the Russian government sought to shift the blame abroad and rally public opinion around the national flag.²⁸⁵

Turning to the right-hand panel of Figure 5.3, we see that *Perviy Kanal* actually makes limited references to the social consequences of the downturn. References to poverty - whether actual poverty, or the fear and danger that the living standards of a large part of the country will fall under the poverty line - are much rarer in the second half of 2014, when the value of the Russian currency collapses. References to poverty, and wage reductions increase in the second half of 2015. This partly reflected the fact that between 2014 and 2015, wage arrears in Russia increased by 15 per cent, and that rising inflation drove a 9.5 percent decline in real wages across the country. Moreover, and as already noted in the introduction to this chapter, in the first months of 2015 over two million Russians fell into poverty. To conclude, descriptive evidence presented here suggests that while *Perviy Kanal* did not necessarily censor information on the extent of the downturn or its social consequences, it did attribute responsibility for its emergence to actors abroad.

²⁸⁴ (The Levada Center 2017) On the effect of sanctions on attitudes towards the United States see also: (Frye 2017)

²⁸⁵ (Frye 2017; Kazun 2016) It would also be possible to argue that by presenting Russia as a country under siege, the government also pre-empted opposition criticism from emerging. While opposition parties and activists – among whom prominent Kremlin critic Alexey Naval’ny for example - challenged several of the measures Kremlin adopted in response to the economic downturn, they did not oppose the annexation of Crimea. Navalny’s presidential programme for example, still does not mention Crimea - not even once (Klimeniouk 2017).

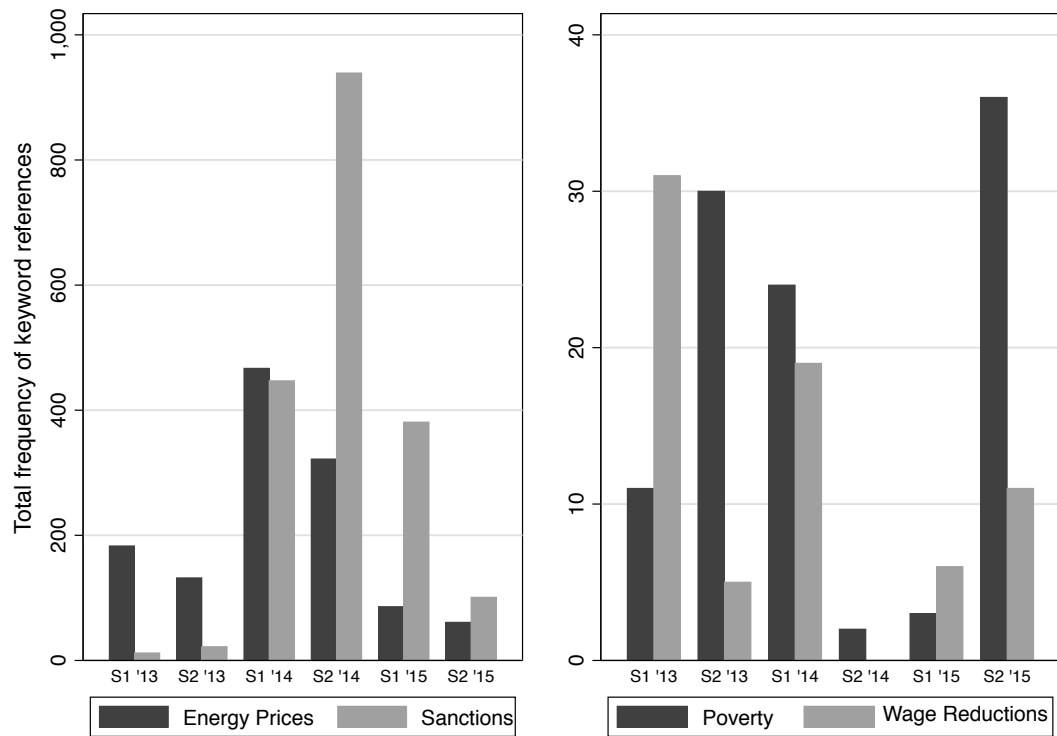


Figure 5.3 **References to the causes and consequences of the downturn**

Notes: Vertical bars capture references to ‘energy’ prices, ‘sanctions’, ‘poverty’ and ‘wage reductions’ in the sample of 1400 *Perviy Kanal* stories reporting on the economy. Descriptive statistics disaggregated across the first and second half of 2013, 2014 and 2015.

Before I move on to examine media effects on public opinion, I perform one last piece of analysis. Returning to the corpus of stories on the economy, I select a random sample of 80 stories, which I read carefully in order to identify whether economic performance is portrayed in a positive or negative light, or whether stories contain ‘mixed’ messages about the economy instead. The coding scheme is straightforward: positive stories report that the economy is either good or growing, that living standards are improving and that the country is attracting investments. Negative stories report the opposite, while ‘mixed’ stories contain mixed information regarding economic performance – combining positive and negative economic indicators or commentary on the economy. Figure 5.4 summarizes the results,

showing the proportion of positive, negative, and ‘mixed’ stories disaggregated by years. As one would anticipate, while positive stories dominate economic reporting in 2013, their frequency declines in later years. Moreover, as reports on wage arrears, the decline in the rouble’s purchasing power, and the increase in people’s frustration with the state of the economy increase in 2014, the proportion of negative stories increases. Yet, it is the proportion of ‘mixed’ stories that appears to dominate the sub-sample of stories both in 2014, and 2015.

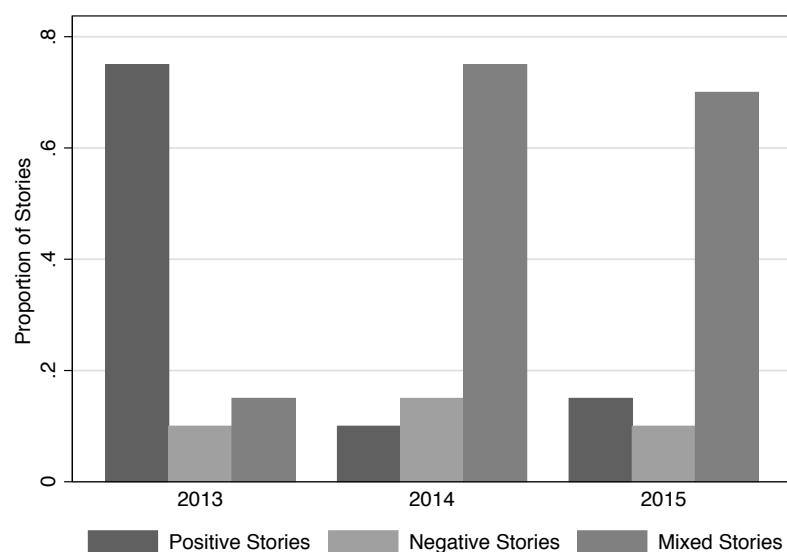


Figure 5.4 **‘Mixed’ stories dominate coverage when the economy is in decline**

Notes: Vertical bars plot the proportion of news stories reporting that the economy is performing well, poorly, and which contain ‘mixed’ messages. The analysis relies on an in-depth qualitative review of the sample of 80 *Perviy Kanal* stories reporting on the economy, randomly selected from the sample of 14000 stories downloaded from Integrum.

Qualitatively reviewing the sample of ‘mixed’ stories, three key patterns emerge. The first concerns the inclusion of both positive and negative news regarding economic performance and economic policy in a single story or broadcast. Consider the following examples. On December 10th 2014, President Putin himself was commenting on how the

decline in imports from Germany, placed 300 thousand workers – whose jobs were linked to this trade – in danger. Yet, at the very same time the President noted that trade with areas in the Asia-Pacific, and even in Europe was growing. On October 29th, 2015 Putin suggested that the situation in the economic was ‘not easy, but it was not critical either’. Echoing the sentiment at end of the same year, Medvedev stated that while the country and the economy are going through a ‘difficult, complicated phase’, the economic situation is stable. Moreover, in a story appearing on October 13th 2015, *Perviy Kanal* highlighted that the number of Asian investors attending Russia’s business forum was higher than ever before – a sign of increased confidence in the Russian market. Yet, in the same news segment, the Minister of Finances was cited to warn the rest of the government that economic performance is declining.

The second pattern that emerges in stories classified as containing ‘mixed’ messages about the economy is as follows: the presentation of economic developments in a negative light is followed by claims that the government is implementing measures to address the consequences of the downturn, and promises that the situation will improve. Consider the following example, taken from statements by the Chair of Russia’s Central Bank, Elvira Nabiullina on October 11th, 2015: “The inflation rate now exceeds 10 percent’ [...] but in two years, maximum, the inflation rate will be 4 percent, and no more [...] We will reduce the inflation rate – this is our strategic goal, and all of our policies aim to achieve this”. Earlier in 2015, a report on the decline of global oil prices to 43 dollars per barrel, highlighted how low energy prices negatively impacted the Russian economy. Yet the same report, published in August 2015, concluded by citing the country’s Finances Minister promising Vladimir Putin that in the current year, the country will fulfil all of its budgetary obligations, drawing on existing reserves. On various occasions, government officials also appear to acknowledge the extent of the economic downturn, but also promise that despite the decline,

they will increase social transfers to protect the most vulnerable, invest money to help small and medium business, and keep tax rates low. Commenting on the economy in October 2014 for example, President Putin himself stated that while the government would consider reducing expenditure, it would not cut social spending. The fact that President Putin is mainly behind statements promising support to those affected by the downturn highlights how media framing could help powerholders claim credit for efforts to address the consequences of poor performance.

The final strategy evident in stories classified as containing ‘mixed’ messages about the economy concerns the benchmarking of economic performance at home to the performance of other economies abroad. This strategy is closely linked to the framing of the sanctions. On various occasions in late 2015 for example, *Perviy Kanal* cites experts suggesting that the sanctions will not only affect Russia, but will also harm the economies of the West. Germany and Austria are two countries frequently cited as experiencing huge losses as a result of their governments’ decisions to impose sanctions against Russia. Moreover, reports on how Spanish, Italian, and Greek farmers are in a much more difficult position than their Russian counterparts abound. In stories that show Russian farmers receiving state subsidies and exploring alternative markets in Latin America and East Asia for example, Greek farmers appear to complain about experiencing ‘colossal losses’ as a result of the sanctions. Likewise, stories appearing in *Perviy Kanal* highlight how sanctions and countersanctions did not serve the interest of European and American enterprises. Commercial and business actors abroad are often reported to be greatly dissatisfied with their national governments as a result.

Consistently, when the coverage of the economy is negative, references to Vladimir Putin are limited. This is documented in the second column of Figure 5.5 below, which summarizes the proportion of positive, negative, and mixed stories that make reference to

Vladimir Putin during from 2013 -2015. During this time, the President is steadily presented as leading efforts to address the consequences of the decline. References to the Russian President abound when economic stories are positive. As Figure 5.5 illustrates, Putin is cited in around 65% of all positive and ‘mixed’ content stories.

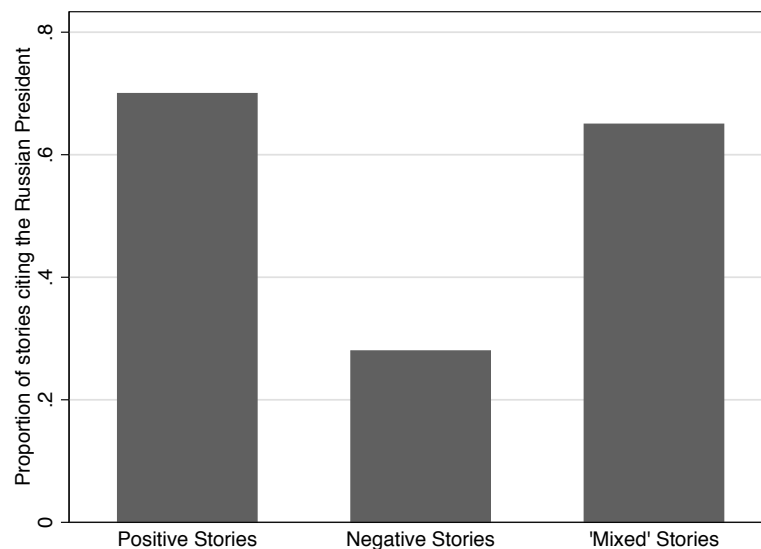


Figure 5.5 **References to Putin are rarer when economic news is bad**

Notes: Vertical bars denote the proportion of positive, negative, and ‘mixed’ economic stories that make reference to the Russian President. The analysis relies on an in-depth qualitative review of the sample of 80 *Perviy Kanal* stories reporting on the economy, randomly selected from the sample pf 14000 stories downloaded from Integrum.

5.4 Media Effects on Public Opinion

The Survey

The empirical analysis relies on survey evidence from the 2016 Life in Transition Survey (LITS III) of the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). This is ‘a combined household and attitudinal survey, which collects information on the socioeconomic status of respondents and includes asking perception-based questions on

economic, political and social topics’.²⁸⁶ The survey was simultaneously administered in 34 countries, comprising 29 transition countries in South-Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia, the Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, Greece and Cyprus. As part of this survey, which was conducted between the end of 2015 and the beginning of 2016, a total of 1500 Russian households across 75 Primary Sampling Units (PSUs) were interviewed face-to-face, in respondents’ homes. The questionnaires were designed so that they would last no longer than 60 minutes, and were conducted in Russian. A detailed description of all variables I draw on is provided in Table B1 in the Appendix for Chapter 5.

Outcome Variables

The LITS survey allows me to examine the effect of news consumption on economic optimism and evaluations of incumbent performance. My main dependent variable, ‘*evaluations of government*’ captures respondents’ satisfaction with the national government. Respondents are asked to evaluate to what extent are satisfied with the government’s current performance, and the wording of the question is standard: ‘Please rate the overall performance of the national government’. Response categories are measured on a scale from one to five, with higher values denoting greater satisfaction with the performance of the national government. In the context of this survey, only 10% of all respondents reported that the government’s performance was ‘somewhat, or very’ bad. The mean of this 5-point variable is 3.04, with a standard deviation of .5.

Another two survey items available in the 2016 survey allow me to capture evaluations of economic performance. These asks respondents how satisfied with the performance of the national economy - and with their household finances. The wording of the two questions is standard. The ‘*sociotropic assessments*’ variable, asks respondents to assess whether ‘on the

²⁸⁶ (EBRD 2016, 67)

whole, they are satisfied with the state of the economy'. The '*pocketbook assessments*' variable asks respondents whether 'all things considered, they are satisfied with their financial condition as a whole'. Both variables range on a scale from one to five, with higher values denoting more positive economic assessments. Mean satisfaction with national economic performance is around 2.27 (1.03 standard deviation). Mean satisfaction with pocketbook conditions is only slightly higher (2.6 standard deviation 1.2).

Independent Variables

My key independent variable, *news consumption*, asks how often respondents watch, or listen to political news on TV and the radio. Responses range on a scale from one to seven and are recoded so that higher values denote that respondents watch, or listen to news more frequently, and in this case daily. This variable has a very high mean, around 5.78 and a standard deviation of 1.3. While it would arguably be preferable if measures available also captured respondents' attentiveness to media coverage, the indicator available in the LITS surveys provides a more specific measure of news consumption than other items which ask whether respondents watch TV in general or not. Moreover, while this measure does not allow us to identify which TV channels respondents watch, other surveys employed in this dissertation suggest that Russian citizens obtain political news from state-controlled media. For example, in a survey conducted by Stephen White in December 2012, 93 percent of respondents reported to watch political news on *Perviy Kanal*.

The empirical analysis also controls for standard demographic controls, such as age, education, gender, residence status and income. The income indicator asks households to place themselves on a 1 to 10 scale from richer to poorer. I combine survey data regional-level indicators of regional media independence, and an indicator that captures changes in annual regional growth, from 2014 to 2015. As the survey was administered in late 2015,

early 2016 it makes sense to rely on growth changes in the previous year.²⁸⁷ The media independence indicator, which comes from the Petrov and Titkov index of regional democracy in Russia controls for a region's political characteristics and the effective penetration of the government's dominant rhetoric to voters.²⁸⁸ This ranges on a scale from 1-5, with higher values denoting a more independent media environment. It is possible to anticipate that in these regions, individuals have access to more information revealing government malpractices.

The Model and Estimation

In this section I describe the modelling strategy and recap the main hypotheses. I first predict evaluations of economic performance by individual i in region r . The continuous economic assessments indicator, ($Econ_{ir}$), is defined alternately as individual-level perceptions of national economic conditions and household finances. The primary independent variable is media exposure ($News_{ir}$), is also measured at the individual level. Higher values of this variable suggest that respondents are more frequently exposed to the framing of economic news in state-controlled media. Because national media do not hide information about the extent of the downturn, I expect this measure to be negatively related to economic perceptions. The models also include individual-level controls (X_{ir}) and regional attributes (V_r). Individual-level controls include gender, age, education, settlement status, and income. Regional-level controls include proxies for regional economic growth and democracy. My first hypothesis, and the model predicting economic assessments can be written as follows:

²⁸⁷ As I also show in Table A4 in the Appendix for Chapter 5, the results do not change if we consider growth levels for 2015 instead.

²⁸⁸ (Petrov and Titkov 2013)

Hypothesis 1. News consumption will not lead to more positive assessments of household and national economic performance

$$Econ_{ir} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 News_{ir} + X_{ir} + V_r + \epsilon_{ir} \quad (5.1)$$

Next, I predict individual survey respondents' evaluations of government performance, (Gov_{ir}), using the news consumption variable ($News_{ir}$), subjective economic assessments, ($Econ_{ir}$), and the vector of individual, and regional-level controls introduced in equation 5.1. To evaluate whether media exposure moderates the effect of economic deterioration of evaluations of incumbent performance, the news exposure variable is interacted with the indicators of subjective economic performance. My second hypothesis, and the model predicting economic assessments can be written as follows:

Hypothesis 2. Attribution of responsibility for economic assessments will decline as news consumption increases

$$Gov_{ir} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Econ_{ir} + \beta_2 News_{ir} + \beta_3 (Econ_{ir} \times News_{ir}) + X_{ir} + V_r + \epsilon_{ir} \quad (5.2)$$

Results

Models 1 and 2 in Table 5.1 are OLS models that test whether media exposure influences respondents' evaluations of economic performance. The dependent variable in Model 1 captures satisfaction with national economic conditions, while the dependent variable in Model 2 captures satisfaction with household economic conditions instead. To test whether the consumption of political news conditions the connection between economic assessments and government approval, Models 3 and 4 interact the economic assessments

indicators with the measure of news consumption to predict support for government. Just like Models 1 and 2, Models 3 and 4 also report coefficients from OLS models.

As Hypothesis 1 predicts, the news consumption indicators in Models 1 and 2 fail to reach statistical levels of significance. Evidence that news consumption does not colour, or ameliorate economic assessments is in line with evidence produced in the first part of the analysis. When state-controlled media did not censor information either on the impact of sanctions, or on the effect of declining energy prices on the Russian economy, there is little reason to anticipate that news consumption will generate economic optimism. Looking at the control variables only a handful of statistically significant variables emerge. In Model 2 for example, we see that older respondents are less likely to be satisfied with their pocketbook. More educated respondents are also less likely to be satisfied with national economic conditions than their less educated counterparts. Yet, highly educated respondents, who may also enjoy access to better paying jobs, are more likely to be satisfied with their own pocketbook, or household economic conditions. The income indicator, which asks households to place themselves on a 1 to 10 scale from richer to poorer also behaves as anticipated, with wealthier participants being more likely to be satisfied with their own pocketbook. The regional media and regional growth indicators are also in the direction anticipated, although they fail to reach statistical levels of significance. Economic satisfaction is lower in regions with a more competitive media environment, and higher in areas where economic performance is recovering.

Table 5.1 **Media effects on economic and political evaluations**

	Economic Evaluations OLS models		Evaluations of Government OLS models	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	DV: Sociotropic	DV: Pocketbook	Interaction with Sociotropic Evaluations	Interaction with Pocketbook Evaluations
News consumption	-0.039 (0.026)	-0.019 (0.024)	0.064* (0.033)	0.075** (0.033)
Economic satisfaction			0.259*** (0.073)	0.252*** (0.078)
News X Satisfaction			-0.023** (0.012)	-0.026** (0.012)
Controls				
Age Respondent	-0.003 (0.003)	-0.006** (0.003)	-9.29e-05 (0.001)	3.16e-05 (0.001)
Education	-0.079** (0.032)	0.085*** (0.030)	0.012 (0.013)	-0.007 (0.012)
Male	-0.072 (0.060)	0.026 (0.068)	-0.047 (0.032)	-0.061* (0.032)
Urban	0.014 (0.107)	0.105 (0.111)	0.069 (0.048)	0.059 (0.048)
Poorer- Richer Scale	0.061* (0.032)	0.094*** (0.028)	0.005 (0.012)	0.0042 (0.012)
Regional Media	-0.028 (0.083)	-0.046 (0.060)	0.030 (0.027)	0.032 (0.027)
Δ. GRP	0.009 (0.093)	0.057 (0.077)	0.032 (0.047)	0.027 (0.047)
Constant	2.765*** (0.962)	1.596* (0.854)	1.835*** (0.517)	1.948*** (0.526)
Observations	1,443	1,443	1,443	1,443
R-squared	0.029	0.071	0.070	0.056

Robust standard errors, clustered by respondents' primary sampling units in parentheses, *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. Table C1 in the SI for Chapter 5 replicates the analysis presented in Models 3 and 4 while omitting the interaction terms.

Models 3 and 4 test the connection between respondents' evaluations of economic performance and government approval. As predicted by theories of economic voting, we see that economic satisfaction has a direct, and positive effect on approval. The news consumption coefficients are also positive across the two models. In the presence of the interaction term, the *economic satisfaction* coefficients, capture the effect of one-unit change

in economic satisfaction when the moderator variable, *news consumption*, is absent, everything else constant. To estimate the effect of one-unit change on economic assessments on evaluations of government in the presence of the moderating condition, *news consumption*, we need to add the economic assessments coefficient with the moderating condition ($\beta_1 + \beta_3$). The statistically significant coefficients on the interaction terms in Models 3 and 4 imply that news consumption moderates the connection between economic dissatisfaction and government approval. And while the coefficient in the interaction term is negative, implying that economically satisfied respondents are less likely to support the government when they frequently consume news, the overall effect of news consumption on approval remains positive.

To facilitate the interpretation of the interaction terms in Models 3 and 4, Figure 5.6 below constructs a marginal effect plot for economic assessments. The left-hand plot in Figure 5.6 displays the substantive size of the interaction term in Model 3, and the right-hand plot does the same for Model 4. The right-hand y-axis on both graphs shows the marginal effect of economic evaluations on government approval. The x-axes cover the empirical range of the news consumption variable. Lower values denote that respondents seldom watch political news, while higher values suggest that respondents watch political news several times a week or even daily.

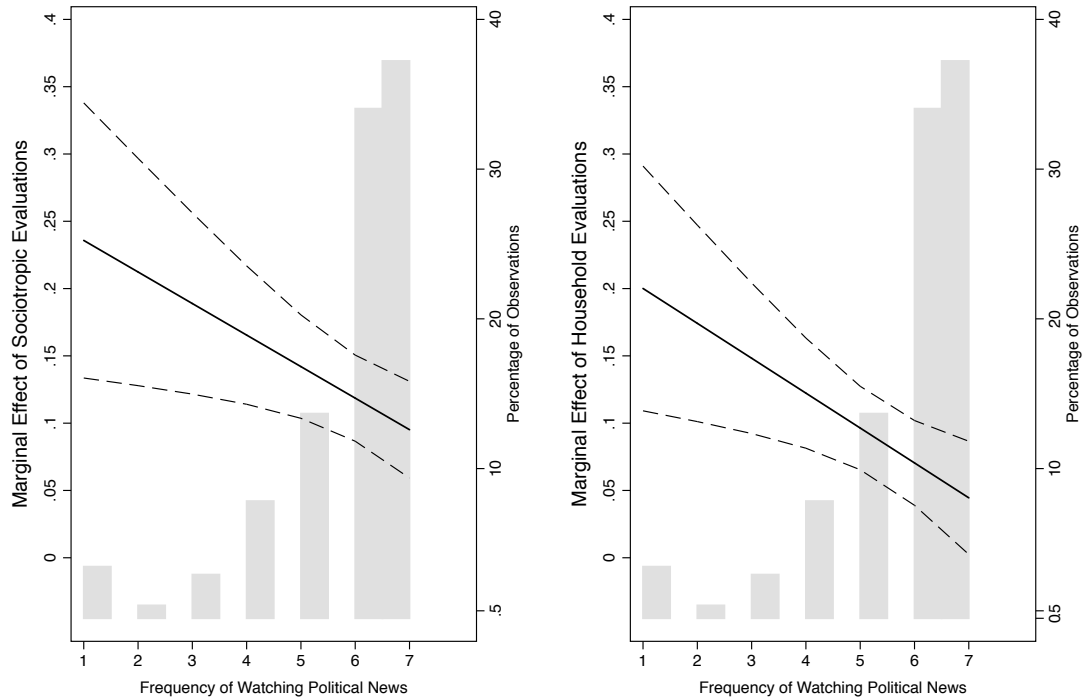


Figure 5.6 **Attribution of responsibility decreasing with news consumption**

Notes: The vertical axis on the left of both graphs is for the marginal effect of economic satisfaction on approval. The vertical axis on the right is for the histograms, which present the distribution of observations on media exposure, given in the horizontal axis (x-axis). Dotted lines represent 90% CI.

Evidence provided in Figure 5.6 is in line with the economic voting literature. It suggests that the marginal effect of economic satisfaction on approval is positive, and statistically significant across the range of the news consumption variable. What is more, the negative slope in both graphs suggests that as news consumption increases, the marginal effect of economic assessments on approval declines in magnitude. The more frequently respondents are exposed to the government's framing of the crisis in state-controlled media, the less consequential economic assessments in informing evaluations of government. Voters who watch news daily will be less likely than those who seldom watch news to 'reward' the government as economic perceptions improve. Yet, would voters more frequently exposed to the framing of economic news in state media, also be less likely to

punish the national government for deteriorating economic assessments? Existing research suggests that when the connection between economic assessments and evaluations of government is breached, voters become less likely to both punish and reward government for deteriorating and ameliorating economic conditions respectively. To test whether news consumption dampens attributions of responsibility as economic evaluations deteriorate, and not only as they improve, I perform one additional piece of analysis. Recoding both economic assessments variables so that higher values may denote greater dissatisfaction – as opposed to greater satisfaction – with national and pocketbook conditions, I re-run the analysis presented in Models 3 and 4 in Table 5.1. While the signs on the economic variables, as well as on the interaction terms flip - so that greater dissatisfaction with economic conditions now predicts lower support for government- the magnitude of these effects does not change. The coefficients on the control variables also remain identical. I present the full results in the Supplementary Information, Table C1, and show how the marginal effect of *economic dissatisfaction* on approval varies across different levels of the news consumption variable below. Just like Figure 5.6, Figure 5.7 shows how dissatisfaction with national (left-hand) and pocketbook (right-hand) conditions affect government approval across different levels of news consumption. As anticipated, economic dissatisfaction dampens support for incumbents. Yet, as the positive slope in both graphs suggests, the marginal effect of economic dissatisfaction on approval declines in magnitude as news consumption increases. In other words, as economic perceptions deteriorate, citizens who watch news daily are more likely than those who seldom watch news to approve of the national government's performance.

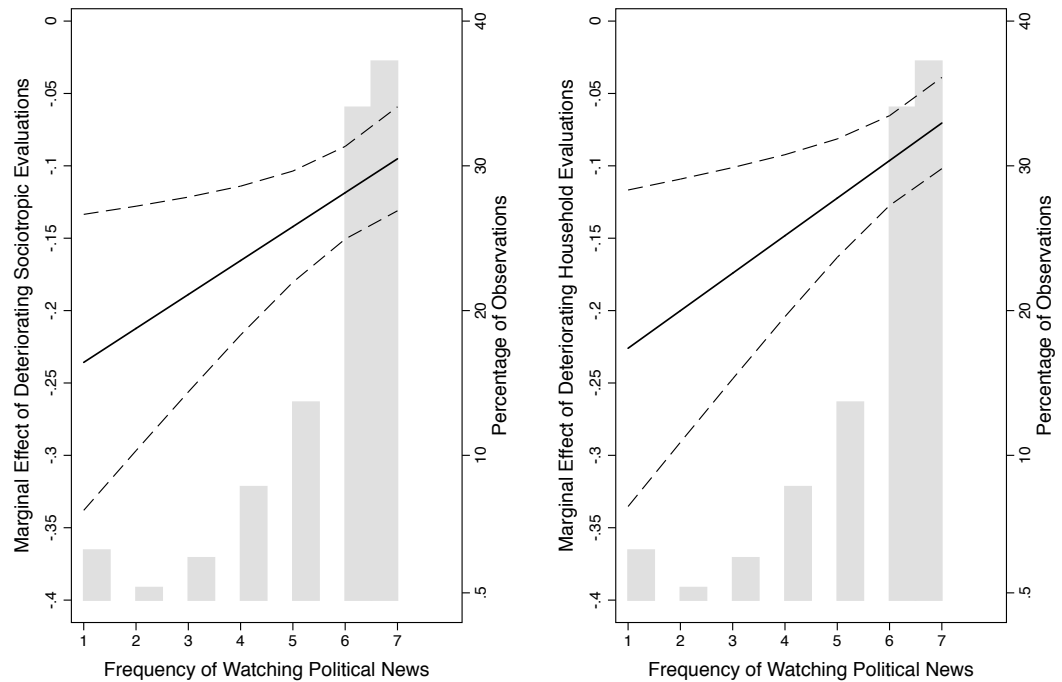


Figure 5.7 News consumption dampens economic punishment

Notes: The vertical axis on the left of both graphs is for the marginal effect of economic dissatisfaction on approval. The vertical axis on the right is for the histograms, which present the distribution of observations on media exposure, given in the horizontal axis (x-axis). Dotted lines represent 90% CI.

Does the estimated marginal effect of economic assessments on government approval change by a non-trivial amount as political news consumption also changes? Drawing on Berry *et al.*, I study how the government's approval function responds when economic assessments deteriorate, i.e. when they shift from their highest positive value to their lowest negative one, at the lowest and highest values of media exposure.²⁸⁹ Results reveal that when respondents seldom watch political news, deteriorating sociotropic evaluations result to a decline of about one percentage point in the government's approval ratings (.94). A similar change in household assessments leads approval to drop by about .90 instead. Both effects are substantively important as the dependent variable is measured on a

²⁸⁹ (Berry, Golder, and Milton 2012, 15)

5-point scale, and correspond to about 24% of the range in government approval in the sample. When respondents watch news daily, deteriorating sociotropic evaluations will only result to a .4 decline in government approval. This amounts to 10% of the range of government approval in the sample. A similar decline in household assessments, leads to a drop of about .28 in approval, yet this corresponds to an even lower range of approval in the sample (7%). Altogether, results presented here point to two main findings. First, they suggest that economic assessments are robustly associated with the government's approval ratings. Economic pessimism is associated with a decline in approval across respondents, the way that economic optimism bolsters it.²⁹⁰ Yet, changes in government evaluations, induced by deteriorating economic assessments, decline in magnitude as news consumption increases. Considering that over 70% of all respondents in the sample watch political news on radio and TV several times a week, or even daily, this suggests that media exposure can effectively cushion the decline in government support brought about by deteriorating economic evaluations.

Additional tests of the interaction between economic assessments and news consumption

Berry *et al.*²⁹¹ propose that additional tests of interaction terms, evaluated with a second marginal effect plot, are immensely valuable for testing theories positing interaction. In particular the authors encourage researchers to show not only how the effect of an independent variable (X) on the outcome (Y) is conditional on the value of another conditioning variable (Z), but also how the effect of the conditioning variable (Z) varies with the value of the independent variable (X). In this context, and as all interactions are symmetric, it makes sense to anticipate that as the effect of news consumption on approval is conditional on economic assessments, the effect of economic assessments on approval will

²⁹⁰ (see for example: Chaisty and Whitefield 2012; Rosenfeld 2016; D. S. Treisman 2011)

²⁹¹ (Berry, Golder, and Milton 2012)

also be conditional on news consumption. In this context, we could precisely anticipate that the marginal effect of news consumption on approval will be positive for all respondents, and strongest when economic satisfaction is low.

To test for this effect, Figure 5.8 below presents a second marginal effects plot, illustrating how the marginal effect of news consumption (the conditioning variable Z) on the dependent variable approval (Y) varies at different levels of economic satisfaction (the independent variable X). The left-hand panel presents the marginal effect of news consumption on approval across evaluations of national economic performance. The right-hand panel presents the marginal effect of news consumption on approval, across evaluations of household economic performance instead. As anticipated, both plots suggest that the effect of news consumption on approval, while positive across the range of economic assessments, is strongest when economic satisfaction is low.

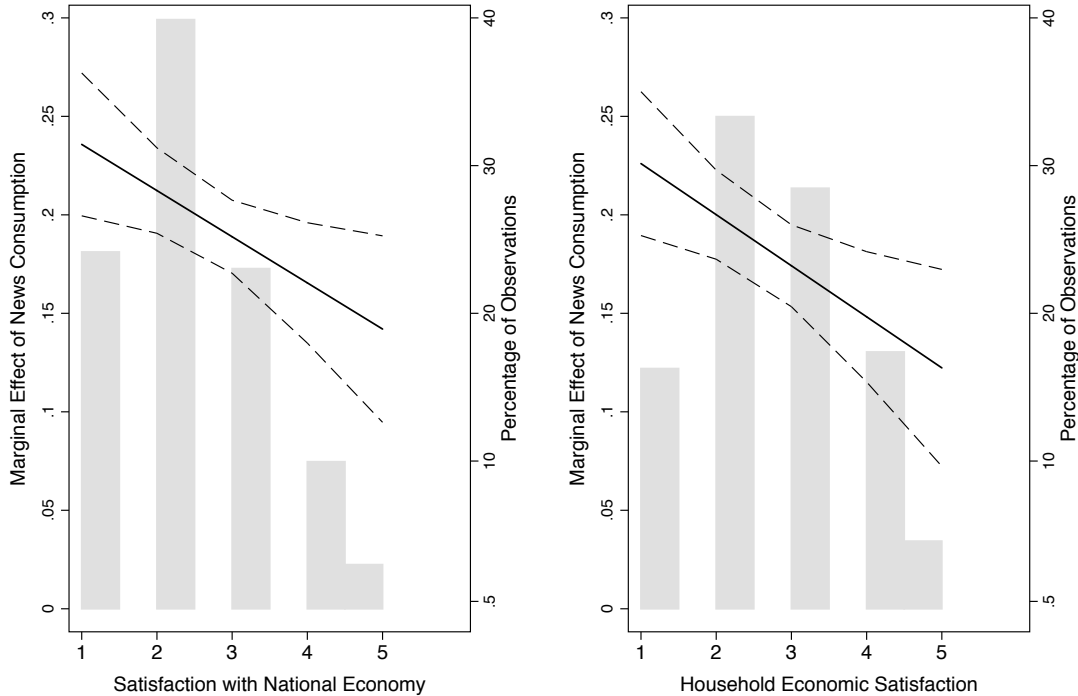


Figure 5.8 **Marginal effect of news consumption decreasing with economic satisfaction**

Notes: The vertical axis on the left of both graphs is for the marginal effect of news consumption on approval. The vertical axis on the right is for the histograms, which present the distribution of observations on economic assessments, given in the horizontal axis (x-axis). Dotted lines represent 90% CI.

A shift across the range of the media consumption variable, indicating that respondents more frequently watch political news on TV and the radio, prompts an expected increase of 1.41 in government approval when respondents believe that the performance of the national economy is poor. This effect is substantively important as the dependent variable is measured on a 5-point scale, and corresponds to about 36% of the range in government approval in the sample. When respondents believe that the national economy's performance is positive, a similar shift across the range of media consumption leads to an expected increase of .85 in support for government. This expected increase amounts to 20% of the range in government evaluations in the sample. Thus, we see that while news consumption increases support for government for all respondents, media effects are stronger for respondents who believe that economic performance is poor. In other words, government rhetoric does appear to successfully moderate attributions of responsibility, particularly when respondents think that economic performance is poor. It is possible that when voters are greatly satisfied with national and pocketbook conditions, they choose to selectively ignore, or cognitively refute government rhetoric acknowledging the extent of the downturn in national media.

5.5 Addressing concerns

As Barabas and Jerit remind us, 'the greatest strength of observational research on media effects is that it examines whether people have been influenced by real-world treatments'.²⁹²

²⁹² (Barabas and Jerit 2009, 74)

Yet, observational studies also suffer from a variety of shortcomings that need to be acknowledged upfront. A first concern has to do with the reliability of measures that document respondents' patterns of media exposure in a survey setting. Several studies for example demonstrate that measures of media exposure or news watching often suffer from measurement error and low reliability.²⁹³ Self-selection into media outlets is another concern. It is possible for example that individuals already dissatisfied with government performance, or opposition supporters more broadly would be less likely to watch news in state-controlled media, or to do so less frequently. A third concern, which is common to all studies of public opinion concerns the threat of omitted variable bias.

Building on existing research, I try to address some of these concerns by (1) demonstrating that the main effects and interaction terms remain robust to various specifications of the 'news exposure' variable (Table C2 in the SI for Chapter 5), and (2) employing a comprehensive set of demographic and regional controls to reduce threats to inference stemming from omitted variable bias. As I further show in Table C3 of the Appendix for this chapter, results remain robust when we replace the variable which captures changes in gross regional product with variables that capture levels of GRP, as well as unemployment levels and changes instead.

Yet, according to one view, people with pre-formed opinions about who is to blame for the economic downturn, could self-select in terms of how often they will be watching political news across a range of TV outlets. Opposition supporters, for example, may be less likely to watch political news on TV, as they know that information projected in national media is highly likely to be falsified. The opposition would be true for regime supporters. While existing research suggests that in present-day Russia, state-run television remains one

²⁹³ (Barabas and Jerit 2009; Bartels 1993)

of the most trusted and authoritative institutions in the country – even among opposition supporters,²⁹⁴ I perform several tests to probe the robustness of the media exposure results. While I am constrained by the absence of variables that tap into respondents’ attitudes towards government in the EBRD surveys, I start by exploring whether individuals who differ in their patterns of media consumption also differ in their political dispositions and behaviour. If the frequency of exposure to political news is a proxy for having pre-conceived ideas about the regime, then the media exposure variable should also predict other political positions that are associated with having pro-regime attitudes. For example, individuals who are less likely to watch political news on TV should equally be more likely to hold more liberal views, or to report higher levels of trust in the Russian government. I therefore follow Reuter and Szakonyi, and check whether the frequency of political news watching predicts support for liberal views and find that it does not.²⁹⁵ Table 5.2 below presents the results, while drawing on both a continuous, and a binary indicator of news consumption. The second specification of the news exposure variable assigns respondents who never, or seldom watch political news a value of zero, and those who do so more frequently a value of one. Models 2.1 and 2.2 suggests that respondents who are more frequently exposed to the framing of economic news in state controlled media are more likely to agree with the statement that ‘a strong political opposition is important for Russia’. The finding that respondents who watch news more frequently are more likely to report more liberal news runs counter to concerns regarding the likelihood of pro-conservative, pro-regime respondents choosing to watch news more frequently. The remaining models ascertain that media exposure does not predict trust in government (Model 1), support for the statement

²⁹⁴ (Smyth and Oates 2015)

²⁹⁵ (Reuter and Szakonyi 2015)

that ‘elections for Russia are important’ (Model 3), or propensity to attend a lawful demonstration (Model 4).

Table 5.2 News watching, trust, and conservative attitudes

	<i>Government Trust</i>		<i>Opposition Important</i>		<i>Elections Important</i>		<i>Affinity to Demonstrate</i>	
	1.1	1.2	2.1	2.2	3.1	3.2	4.1	4.2
News (1-7)	0.011 (0.030)		0.082*** (0.022)		0.029 (0.029)	0.137 (0.111)	0.109 (0.066)	
News (0-1)		-0.001 (0.109)		0.205** (0.086)				0.298 (0.218)
<i>Controls</i>								
Age	0.002 (0.003)	0.002 (0.003)	-0.002 (0.002)	-0.001 (0.002)	0.002 (0.002)	0.002 (0.002)	-0.02*** (0.005)	-0.0*** (0.005)
Education	-0.040 (0.033)	-0.040 (0.036)	0.030 (0.032)	0.032 (0.033)	-0.085* (0.047)	-0.085* (0.047)	0.154** (0.073)	0.155** (0.073)
Male	-0.076 (0.086)	-0.077 (0.086)	0.022 (0.061)	0.019 (0.061)	-0.093 (0.070)	-0.093 (0.070)	0.302*** (0.117)	0.297** (0.116)
Urban	0.006 (0.132)	0.005 (0.132)	0.139 (0.127)	0.130 (0.128)	0.046 (0.151)	0.044 (0.151)	0.095 (0.249)	0.079 (0.249)
Income	-0.013 (0.032)	-0.014 (0.031)	0.021 (0.019)	0.017 (0.019)	0.055** (0.026)	0.054** (0.026)	-0.117** (0.051)	-0.12** (0.052)
Reg Media	-0.026 (0.078)	-0.025 (0.078)	0.022 (0.055)	0.024 (0.056)	0.018 (0.086)	0.017 (0.086)	0.199 (0.136)	0.201 (0.133)
Δ. GRP	0.173 (0.104)	0.171 (0.104)	-0.134 (0.107)	-0.143 (0.109)	0.045 (0.107)	0.045 (0.106)	-0.097 (0.195)	-0.105 (0.198)
Constant	1.455 (1.083)	1.530 (1.068)	4.441*** (1.140)	4.803*** (1.169)	2.378** (1.106)	2.435** (1.071)	-1.047 (1.858)	-0.612 (1.844)
Observations	1,443	1,443	1,366	1,366	1,390	1,390	1,443	1,443
Robust standard errors clustered by primary sampling units in parentheses *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1								

Finally, Table 5.3 provides a placebo test of the hypothesis that media coverage dampens attributions of responsibility for deteriorating economic evaluations. It does so by exploiting the following fact that while the media presented the federal government as trying to ameliorate the consequences of the downturn, positive portrayals of government action did not extend beyond the federal level. I therefore expect that while news watching could moderate the effect of deteriorating economic evaluations on the approval of the federal government, it does not have a similar effect on assessments of regional governments.

Table 5.3 **Placebo test: Media effects on support for regional authorities**

	(1) Evaluations of Regional Government (OLS)	(2) Evaluations of Regional Government with Interaction (OLS)
Sociotropic Assessments	0.127*** (0.024)	0.141** (0.059)
News Watching	-0.014 (0.012)	-0.008 (0.030)
News X Evaluations		-0.003 (0.011)
<i>Controls</i>		
Age	0.001 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)
Education	-0.002 (0.016)	-0.002 (0.016)
Male	-0.055 (0.0349)	-0.055 (0.035)
Urban	0.067 (0.057)	0.067 (0.057)
Poorer-Richer Scale	0.017 (0.011)	0.017 (0.011)
Regional Media	0.005 (0.029)	0.0047 (0.029)
Δ. GRP	0.085* (0.047)	0.085* (0.047)
Constant	1.755*** (0.517)	1.718*** (0.496)
Observations	1,443	1,443
R-squared	0.067	0.067

Robust standard errors clustered by respondents' primary sampling units in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Results presented in Table 5.3 reveal that while economic evaluations influence assessments of regional government performance, media exposure does not moderate the extent to which regional governments are held responsible for deteriorating economic assessments. As theoretically anticipated, the interaction term between economic evaluations and news exposure in Model 2 does not reach statistical levels of significance.

5.6 Conclusion

My second empirical chapter provides another test of the hypothesis that state responses to shocks moderate their effect on the levels of support incumbents enjoy. Leveraging

evidence from the economic domain, and illustrating arguments with evidence from Russia's response to the recent economic downturn, I have examined how the government deflected responsibility for the downturn and claimed credit for efforts to address its consequences. According to the theoretical setup articulated in the introduction to this thesis, when a government's ability to 'buy off' support is low, i.e. when economic constraints prevent incumbents from investing in large-scale social transfers or clientelism, the government is more likely to extensively use propaganda.

This empirical analysis presented here has demonstrated how in response to economic deterioration Russian media shifted the blame for the downturn abroad, and sought to protect the President's image at home. While the Kremlin did not necessarily censor information about poor economic performance, it implicated the imposition of Western sanctions for the downturn. While this strategy resulted in a deterioration of views towards the West, it also partly enabled the government to weather the effects of the recession. Exposure to the framing of economic news in state controlled media, this chapter shows, did not improve Russians' views of economic performance, but it did reduce the attribution of blame for the downturn. Media exposure made government approval less responsive to perceptions of national, and just as importantly, household economic decline.

Overall, findings presented in this chapter have implications for the literatures on economic voting and authoritarian regime survival more broadly. They allow us to better understand why economic deterioration may not undermine the support illiberal incumbents enjoy, even when hardship is rife and responsibility about policy outcomes is clear. Results also suggest limits on citizens' ability to hold non-democratic leaders accountable for poor performance.

Chapter 6

Tactical redistribution, low-intensity repression, and the divided electorate

Russia's experience with domestic terrorism – that is attacks perpetrated by Caucasus-based insurgents, or separatists against targets in the North Caucasus and the rest of Russia – provides a setting against which to investigate how illiberal incumbents respond to collective shocks to citizen security. Unlike the previous analysis, my third empirical chapter involves relaxing the assumption that the electorate is homogenous. For the first time in the thesis, I am able to study government responses to shocks while taking inter-group competition effects into account. Two groups are of interest in this context. On the one hand, there are the Russians who live in the North Caucasus – the minority group. On the other hand, there are the Russians who live in metropolitan Russia – the majority group.

I propose that the Kremlin's response to domestic terrorism combines the use of tactical redistribution and low-intensity repression. I expect that in order to win the support of minority-group members, those more frequently attacked by terrorism, illiberal incumbents use tactical redistribution. If successful, generous federal transfers to the North Caucasus could dampen the effect of local terror attacks on support for federal authorities. I also expect that when terrorism affects the majority-group, incumbents' response to domestic terrorism will also involve the imposition of constraints on the local opposition's ability to campaign and publicly criticize the federal government. The imposition of constraints on the opposition's ability to challenge incumbents, through means of low intensity repression, aims to silence criticism of Moscow's unsuccessful counter-terrorism policy in general, and its decision to fiscally appease minority groups that are geographically concentrated in the North Caucasus in particular. As the empirical analysis shows, when

majority group members are affected by terror attacks in their locality, they report greater dissatisfaction with the federal government in general, and with the government's policy toward Russians who live in the Caucasus in particular. Nationalist appeals inviting the Kremlin to put an end to its policy of fiscal appeasement have over the years inspired large opposition rallies across Russia. Alexey Naval'ny, for example, a prominent opposition figure, is as famous for lashing out at Chechens as he is for his anti-corruption campaigns.²⁹⁶ Consistently, I anticipate that attribution of responsibility for terror attacks could be weaker in regions where the opposition is weak, and its ability to criticise the federal government is compromised. To test these propositions, I rely on the variation of Chechen-led terror attacks across time and space in Russia. The analysis focuses in the period from 2010 to 2012, a time of intense terrorist activity in the country.

This chapter proceeds as follows. In a first step, I propose an association between regional terror attacks, fiscal transfers to the North Caucasus, and democratic retrenchment across the country, brought about by the imposition of restrictions on local opposition groups' rights to campaign. Next, I empirically study whether federal transfers and restrictions on political competition moderate the effect of terror attacks on support for the federal government. Results reveal that generous fiscal transfers to the North Caucasus, which translate in visible investments in roads and infrastructure, moderate the effect of attacks on support for the government in Moscow. In the rest of Russia, the negative returns of terror attacks on approval are less pronounced in less politically competitive regions. Restrictions on the opposition's right to campaign on questions of national importance and state control over national and regional media, appear to dampen the effects of terror attacks on support for national incumbents.

²⁹⁶ (Judah 2013)

6.1 Introduction

Putin replaced Yeltsin as Russian president on December 31st 1999. A few hours after assuming office, the acting president visited war-torn Chechnya. Flying near the rebel-held city of Grozny in a two-man *Sukhoi* fighter jet, Putin thanked military staff for their efforts to end the break-up of the Federation. On New Year's Day, the visit was broadcasted live on national television. Putin's second visit to Chechnya came three months later, and only two days before the March 2000 presidential election. During this visit, Putin promised that war-torn Grozny would be restored and vowed to destroy rebels still fighting in the south of Chechnya. Putin's strong approach to separatism, tough talk and actions against insurgents helped him win the 2000 election and have remained a key feature of his image as a strong and decisive leader ever since.

Since the end of the second Chechen war in 2009, Moscow's policy toward the North Caucasus combined the use of military force against insurgents with the provision of generous federal transfers and donations to regional budgets. But while federal transfers have helped regional republics reconstruct critical infrastructure, Moscow has failed to appease insurgents. Domestic terrorism returned to Russia as the second Chechen war was drawing to a close. Beyond the Caucasus, terror attacks by Islamist, Caucasus-based groups have also taken the lives of many in the metropolis. The November 2009 bombing of the *Nevsky* express train, which runs between Moscow and St. Petersburg, the March 2010 Moscow attacks and the 2011 Domodedovo incident all shook public opinion in Russia.²⁹⁷

Russia's experience with domestic terrorism – attacks perpetrated by Caucasus-based insurgents, or separatists against targets in the North Caucasus and the rest of Russia – provides a setting against which to investigate how illiberal incumbents respond not only to

²⁹⁷ (Judah 2013; Nikolsky 2010)

specific terror attacks but also to persistent security threats. In line with the previous chapters, I conceive of terror attacks as a collective, negative shock to Russians' income and security that emerges unexpectedly. Attacks not only compromise the physical security of those caught in them, but also destroy infrastructure, damage properties and leave those injured unable to work. In a similar vein, terrorist violence or simply the fear that an attack is imminent can also spread anxiety among the broader electorate.²⁹⁸

6.2 Theory and Hypotheses

The Extant Literature

Studies of authoritarian politics have extensively explored the challenges that ethnically split electorates pose for illiberal regimes and discussed the importance of power-sharing as a strategy for preventing rebellion and unrest.²⁹⁹ Neither studies on authoritarian politics, nor the literature on political violence, however, provide much guidance for understanding how ethnically motivated, i.e. domestic terrorism impacts attitudes toward the illiberal regime. Recent studies on the political consequences of terrorism in dictatorships seek instead to understand when attacks are more likely to emerge, and how they affect politics within the regime's ruling coalition instead.³⁰⁰ And while consensus backs the view that terrorism related casualties and fear of future attacks influence government approval, attitudes towards out-group members, and voting behaviour in democracies, very few works actually test how domestic terrorism influences approval in illiberal democracies.³⁰¹ Existing

²⁹⁸ See for example: (Getmansky and Zeitzoff 2014)

²⁹⁹ (Cederman, Wimmer, and Min 2010; Roessler 2011; M. W. Svolik 2009)

³⁰⁰ (Aksoy, Carter, and Wright 2012, 2015)

³⁰¹ For research that explores the effects of terror attacks on public opinion in democracies see: (Berrebi and Klor 2008; Bueno De Mesquita 2008; Eubank and Weinberg 2001; Getmansky and Zeitzoff 2014; Legewie 2013). To the best of my knowledge, the only ones to discuss how terrorism affects public opinion under illiberal rule are: (Hou and Quek 2015)

theories, which often make the crude contrast between democracies and dictatorships alone, generate conflicting predictions about the effect of terrorism on approval.

On the one hand, a prominent line of research generates the hypothesis that terrorism under illiberal rule should have no effect on public opinion. Attributing blame for attacks is challenging where the national media landscape is under state control, and the opposition is co-opted. And, as earlier research documented, while terrorist attacks are accurately reported in democracies they are underreported in authoritarian systems.³⁰² Even when the coverage of terror attacks is not censored, authoritarian leaders are able to manipulate news about domestic terrorism. Given that news consumption powerfully affects public opinion in democracies and non-democracies, and that citizens often tend to regard controlled authoritarian state media as trustworthy, media framing could pre-empt the erosion of support for incumbents, even when information regarding terror attacks and their effects gets broadcasted.³⁰³

On the other hand, research into the significance of violence in shaping attitudes towards outgroup members and political behaviour shows that domestic terrorism can dampen evaluations of government competence.³⁰⁴ By sowing the seeds of fear and anxiety among targeted populations, domestic terrorism can also foster perceptions of those groups whose members are associated with the perpetration of the attacks as threatening, and draw renewed attention toward sources of conflict between different parts of the same electorate.³⁰⁵ Extending the logic of the argument that wants performance to generate legitimacy in the absence of civil rights and freedoms, one could even expect that terrorism

³⁰² (Sandler 1995)

³⁰³ See for example: (De Boef and Kellstedt 2004; Maestas et al. 2008; Reuter and Szakonyi 2015)

³⁰⁴ (Quillian 1995; Blumer 1958; Blalock 1967; Schlueter and Scheepers 2010; Eubank and Weinberg 2001; Legewie 2013)

³⁰⁵ (Legewie 2013, 1204)

will have a greater impact on approval of non-democratic regimes for whom order and stability is a key predictor of approval.³⁰⁶ Russia's Vladimir Putin is a characteristic example. In the aftermath of the 'catastrophic 1990s', and in response to the Chechen threat, the Russian President's response to separatism, and emphasis on order and stability enabled him to consolidate power. Moreover, terror attacks that bring a government's counter-terror policy to the fore of public debate could enable an otherwise divided opposition to expose government failures. High levels of opposition criticism, which increase government scrutiny, have the capacity to not only pre-empt a 'rally around the flag' effect but also increase the likelihood of electoral punishment. In the sections that follow, I build on several strands of this literature to examine the political consequences of terrorism under electoral authoritarianism.³⁰⁷

The Argument and Observable Implications

The Setup

Building on the theory presented in the introduction to this thesis, this chapter presents a simple framework to analyse the political consequences of domestic terrorism. The starting point is a political agency model, in which three key assumptions are maintained.³⁰⁸

First, the electorate is split along ethnic lines, with the various groups being concentrated across territorial, or geographic lines in country. There is a majority group and one, or more minority groups. In the Russian context, the minority group are Russians who reside in the North Caucasus, and the majority group are Russians who are spread across the country but mainly concentrated outside of the North Caucasus Republics. While the majority group holds power, one or more of the minority groups seek to change the status

³⁰⁶ (Desai, Olofsgård, and Yousef 2009; Guriev and Treisman 2015a)

³⁰⁷ (Bali 2007; Montalvo 2011)

³⁰⁸ For a similar setup see also: (i Miquel 2006)

quo. Advancing demands raging from greater autonomy to full-blown independence, various organisations emerging from the ranks of the minority group are associated with the perpetration of domestic terror attacks. *Second*, incumbents care about the levels of support they enjoy among both ethnic groups. While numerically the incumbent needs the support of the majority group in order to win elections, appeasing the minority groups is essential in order to ensure the integrity of the state and prevent violence from spreading. *Thirdly*, a different type of opposition challenges the national government as it tries to win the support of majority and minority group members. In trying to win the ‘hearts and minds’ of the minority group, the incumbent is antagonised by extremists who claim to represent the interests of their co-ethnics. In trying to win the support of the majority group, the incumbent competes with opposition parties, and activists. Majority-group competitors, whether liberals or leftists, are in a good position to expose the pitfalls of the government’s policy towards the minority group and to criticise the incumbent for policy failures.

Both contemporary Russia and China are two such cases that could help illustrate the setup. While in both countries the incumbent is drawn from the ranks of the majority group, minority group members such as Chechens in Russia’s North Caucasus and Muslim Uyghurs in China’s north-western Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, advance claims ranging from demands for greater political rights to autonomy and fully-fledged independence.³⁰⁹ In pursuing their political goals, extremists drawn from the ranks of each of these minority groups target not only members of the opposite ethnic group, i.e. of the majority group, but also co-ethnics, i.e., minority-group political opponents, and critical infrastructure in regions where minority-group members reside.

³⁰⁹ See also: (Hou and Quek 2015; O’Loughlin, Holland, and Witmer 2011; Ó Tuathail 2009)

Domestic Terrorism and Public Opinion

My argument proposes that domestic terrorism could compromise government approval under illiberal rule.³¹⁰ Voters could either rationally punish incumbents for attacks that take place under their watch or could behave in a manner consistent with the ‘blind retrospection hypothesis’.³¹¹ As I have noted several times in the thesis, Achen and Bartels remind us that ‘as long as responsibility for an event be attributed to the government, in a story persuasive with the folk culture, the electorate will take out its frustration on the incumbents’.³¹²

Two related mechanisms could be driving the effect of attacks on support. *First*, home-grown terrorism, which is a threat emerging from within and not outside of the system, may hinder nation-wide cohesion. Patriotism, or ‘rally’ effects, an influential literature shows, result when the country is facing an external threat³¹³ and voters look beyond pre-existing ideological, or party divisions to support the national leadership.³¹⁴ Fear and anxiety among targeted populations foster the perception of minority group members as threatening, and draw renewed attention toward sources of conflict between different parts of the same electorate.³¹⁵ In the Russian context, attacks could exacerbate competition over the distribution of government resources, and cause further frustration over Moscow’s policy of fiscal appeasement. Moreover, if the government seeks to gain the support of the majority group by proposing a divisive rhetoric, and capitalizing on popular discontent against the minority-group instead, national cohesion will be compromised. Instead of patriotism, terror attacks could give rise to ethno-nationalism, and further compromise the integrity of

³¹⁰ See for example: (Brody and Shapiro 1991; Lee 1977)

³¹¹ (Davis and Silver 2004; Guriev and Treisman 2015a)

³¹² (Achen and Bartels 2004, 1)

³¹³ (Lee 1977)

³¹⁴ (Hou and Quek 2015; Lai and Reiter 2005)

³¹⁵ (Legewie 2013, 1204)

the country.³¹⁶ *Second*, domestic terrorism provides a rare opportunity for the opposition to capitalize on popular discontent, and expose government weakness. Moreover, and as existing research reminds us, the opposition stands to benefit when issues related to terrorism and to counterterrorism policy become salient and gain visibility.³¹⁷ Indeed, an influential strand of thinking that links terrorism to approval suggests that rally effects are associated with the activity of the opposition, and its willingness to criticise incumbents. A sharp, yet short-lived spike in political support, in the aftermath of shocks Brody and Shapiro have argued, ‘occur only when opposition opinion leaders refrain from comment on the president’s conduct, or make cautiously supportive statements’.³¹⁸

Yet, it is also possible that the effects of attacks on support will not be homogenous across the electorate. If groups update their opinions toward government in result to terrorism, then prior opinions regarding government policy in the areas directly related to the attacks should also matter. This proposition agrees studies into the consequences of the 2004 Madrid bombings showing that the attacks mobilized opposition voters against the Spanish government’s already unpopular foreign policy.³¹⁹ It follows that, when government policies in the areas most directly related to the attacks are already unpopular, terrorism could dampen approval. Contrary, when public support for the status quo policy of ‘appeasement’ is higher, support for government should either be less affected, or increased as a result of terror attacks. As such, domestic terrorism could affect minority and majority group members differently.

³¹⁶ (Hou and Quek 2015)

³¹⁷ (Berrebi and Klor 2008; Getmansky and Zeitzoff 2014; Peffley, Hutchison, and Shamir 2015; Shamir 1995)

³¹⁸ (Brody and Shapiro 1991, 66)

³¹⁹ (Bali 2007)

To conclude, I suggest that whether motivated by voters' decision to attribute responsibility for the attacks or by blind retrospection, domestic terrorism could dampen support for the government in Moscow. Yet, I also propose that the effect of terror attacks on approval may not be homogeneous across the electorate. If evaluations of government policy in the areas related to the attacks mediate the overall effect of attacks on support, then the negative effects of terrorism on support for the federal government could be greater among majority-group members, Russians who live outside the North Caucasus. Among this group, baseline support for the federal government's decision to appease the North Caucasus by generous federal transfers is low. When terrorism strikes, frustration with policies that economically antagonise the majority group, and which have evidently failed to keep the majority group safe, may be exacerbated. Ten months after the terrorist attack in Moscow's Domodedovo airport for example, almost one in three Russians living outside of the North Caucasus 'fully, or somewhat' agreed with the statement that Moscow should stop feeding the Caucasus.³²⁰

Government Responses to Terrorism and Voter Responses to Government Policy

How could illiberal incumbents dampen the effects of terror attacks on the levels of political support they enjoy? The final part of my argument proposes that illiberal governments' response to domestic terrorism combines the use of tactical redistribution and low-intensity repression. I develop both points in the sections that follow.

Tactical Redistribution: The minority group

I propose that to appease minority group members and antagonise extremists drawn from the ranks of the minority group, illiberal incumbents provide this group with generous fiscal transfers and donations. These are subsequently invested in public goods, regional

³²⁰ (Levada Analytical Centre 2012)

infrastructure, as well as used to drive the local unemployment rate down. In the Russian context, the North Caucasus Republics are the ones most frequently and critically affected by terrorism. These are also the regions, or sub-national units attracting the largest share of federal transfers.³²¹ It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that in Russia, generous transfers and federal donations are at the heart of the behavioural equilibrium that keeps minority-group moderates better off supporting the government in Moscow than rebelling against it.³²² Behaving in a sociotropic manner, minority group members reward the national government in equilibrium.³²³ Moreover, by being directly attributed to executive action, and clearly traced back to federal funds, public goods that benefit areas affected by terrorism could dampen the effect of terror attacks on support for federal authorities.³²⁴ This hypothesis is consistent with the argument that the political consequences of terrorism are conditional on voters' prior support for government in the areas directly related to the attacks. Moscow's policy of appeasement enjoys high levels of support in the North Caucasus. If terror attacks bring this policy to the fore, and increase its salience as a predictor of presidential approval, then attacks against co-ethnics in the North Caucasus could either have no effect, or instead increase support for the government in Moscow. In conclusion, it is possible to anticipate that attributions of blame for terror attacks to the federal authorities will be weaker in regions with larger investments in public goods and infrastructure. These investments could be perceived as a clear signal of the incumbent's commitment to the minority group.

³²¹ The North Caucasus has a long tradition of attracting generous federal transfers. When the second Chechen war ended in 2008 for example, generous fiscal transfers to the region aimed to drive unemployment down, rebuild infrastructure, and restart economic growth. These also allowed regional republics to be rebuilt soon after the war.

³²² (Geddes 1999a; Magaloni 2006)

³²³ (Davis and Silver 2004; Kiewiet and Lewis-Beck 2012; Kinder and Kiewiet 1981)

³²⁴ See also: (Harding 2015)

Low intensity repression: The majority group

Appeasing minority-group members through generous federal transfers and donations funded through country-wide taxation does not come cheap. Assuming standard budget constraints, goods and services invested to placate minority group members reduce spending on public goods that could benefit members of the majority group. Thus outsiders, or minority group members may be perceived as a threat to the economic privileges of the majority group.³²⁵ Similarly, as De Mesquita reminds us, ‘expensive’ counterterrorist policies, and in this setting costly ‘appeasement’ policies, signal that in the pursuit of security, the incumbent is willing to compromise the present and future welfare of the electorate.³²⁶ I propose a similar argument, although in this setting, ‘expensive’ government policies signal that the incumbent is willing to sacrifice the welfare of the majority group at the expense of the minority. In other words, generous transfers and policies that aim to keep the country together, and members of the minority group away from extremists, threaten to compromise incumbent support among majority-group members. Terror attacks that target majority group members, among whom support for the government’s policy of appeasement is already low, could thus further compromise approval.

Competition over the distribution of resources among minority and majority group members creates a series of strategic dilemmas for Moscow. As insurgents and separatists drawn from the ranks of the minority threaten the integrity of the country, the federal government needs to appease minority group members. This means that the Kremlin cannot reverse its policy of offering generous donations to the Caucasus, nor can it attack regional governors who are successful at maintaining order – like Kadyrov, for example – for power

³²⁵ (Blalock 1967; Blumer 1958; Quillian 1995)

³²⁶ (Bueno De Mesquita 2008)

abuses.³²⁷ Yet the government also wants to isolate itself from opposition-led criticism. And as commentators have suggested in the past, when it comes to capitalising on dissatisfaction with policies in the North Caucasus, the opposition enjoys a rare and competitive advantage over the government in Moscow.³²⁸ Given these constraints, I anticipate that while the provision of fiscal appeasement toward the Caucasus continues, the government will also respond to the threat of persistent terrorism by resorting to forms of ‘low-intensity’ repression, imposing restrictions on the opposition’s right to assembly and expression. State efforts to impose obstacles on individual and collective actions by regime opponents, the thesis has already classified as repression. This definition, which draws on Tilly and Davenport, allows us to place various forms of repression along a broader continuum of state policies that aim to curtail the political influence of the opposition, and to ensure that government failures go unchallenged.³²⁹ And as already noted, measures aiming to restrict the opposition’s right to campaign could have both; a retro-active and pre-emptive nature. In constraining political competition in the aftermath of a specific terror attack, the government may limit criticism related to the occurrence and management of that event. Yet, limited political competition may also ensure that should any terror attacks occur in the future, the opposition will be in a weaker position to challenge the government’s rhetoric.

If successful, the provision of generous federal transfers and geographically targeted public goods to the North Caucasus could moderate the effect of local terror attacks on support for the federal authorities. Consistently, attribution of responsibility for terror attacks may be weaker in areas where the federal government has successfully restricted the local opposition’s ability to criticise government for policy failures.

³²⁷ (Judah 2013)

³²⁸ (Judah 2013)

³²⁹ (Davenport, Johnston, and Mueller 2005, 3; Tilly 1995, 136)

Table 6.1 summarizes the argument. It illustrates the expectation that the effect of terror attacks on incumbent approval will not be homogeneous across minority and majority group members. The upper-row illustrates the expectation that in responding to the threat of domestic terrorism, the government will provide generous fiscal transfers to minority-group regions. Generous transfers to minority group members could generate support for the federal government in equilibrium, and dampen the effect of terror attacks on support for the federal authorities. The lower-row illustrates the expectation that the federal government's response to attacks against majority group members could involve the use of low-intensity repression. This response could aim to silence criticism of Moscow's unsuccessful counter-terrorism policy in general, and its decision to fiscally appease the North Caucasus as a whole in particular.

Table 6.1 **Summary of the Argument**

<i>Group Status/ Location</i>	<i>Opposition to the Kremlin</i>	<i>Terrorism effect on support</i>	<i>Government response</i>
Minority/ North Caucasus	Extremists	No effect/ positive	Tactical redistribution
Majority/ Rest of Russia	Liberals, nationalists	Negative	Low-intensity repression

6.3 Background

Variation in the timing and frequency of terror attacks

Relying on data from the Global Terrorism Dataset (GTD), Figures 6.1 and 6.2 below present variation in the timing and location of attacks In Russia.³³⁰ Figure 6.1, which presents the monthly frequency of terror events (measured on the left-hand y-axis) together with monthly indicators of presidential approval (measured on the right-hand y-axis), shows that

³³⁰ The frequency of attacks aggregated at the annual level is presented in Figure A1 of the SI for chapter 6

the frequency of terror attacks in Russia intensified after 2007, as the 10-yearlong second Chechen war was drawing to a close. In April 2009, and just a few weeks after Kremlin declared that the operation in Chechnya had ended, the Caucasus Emirate – a decentralised terror organisation established in 2007 -reactivated its reconnaissance and sabotage Battalions. These units, which were comprised of individuals willing to die for the insurgency, have since claimed responsibility for numerous high-profile attacks in the Caucasus, and the rest of Russia. The bivariate correlation between the monthly terror attacks and presidential approval indicators is negative, and statistically significant ($r=-.02$, $p<.05$). Thus, descriptive evidence provided here is in line with the main hypothesis advanced in this chapter, which predicts that overall, i.e. across the country, terrorism dampens approval.

Figure 6.2, shows the geographical spread of terror attacks between 2009-2012. During this three-year period, there were 47 attacks in Chechnya, 511 in Dagestan, 218 in Ingushetia, and 187 in Kabardino-Balkaria. According to the Global Terrorism Dataset, of all the attacks taking place in the North Caucasus, more than 60.5% targeted police, government targets, and the military. Civilian targets also featured significantly in the mix, comprising just less than 40% of the remaining attacks.³³¹ In the North Caucasus Republics of Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Kabardino-Balkaria, violence has spiked at regular intervals. Semi-independent *jamaats*, i.e. Islamist groups fighting against the Russian state, are the primary drivers of violence. Outside of the North Caucasus, terror attacks took place in Moscow, Moscow Oblast, in Samara, Tatarstan, Volgograd, Voronezh, Leningrad oblast and Yaroslavl.

³³¹ (START 2013, 5)

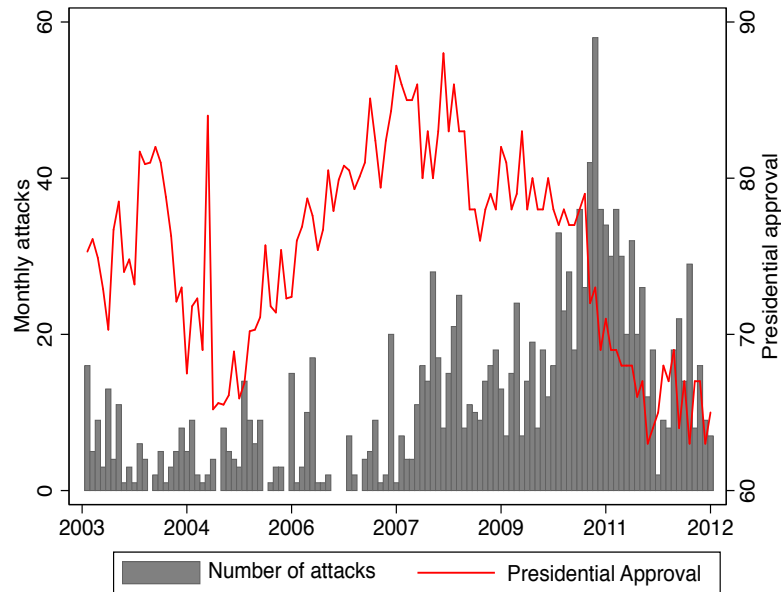


Figure 6.1 **Monthly variation in terror attacks and presidential approval: 2003-12**

Notes: Data on presidential approval come from the Levada Centre monthly approval series. Data on terror attacks come from the Global Terrorism Dataset.



Figure 6.2 **Variation in the location of terror attacks in Russia 2009-12**

Notes: Data on the location of the attacks come from the Global Terrorism Dataset. Graphs produced using QGIS software

Tactical redistribution: The minority group

Drawing on data from Russia's Federal State Statistics Service, Figure 6.3 illustrates variation in fiscal transfers provided by the government in Moscow to the Republics of the North Caucasus on the one hand, and the rest of the country on the other. Vertical bars denote federal and inter-regional donations as a percentage of a region's total budget from 2008 to 2012. Darker columns present transfers to the Republics of the North Caucasus, while lighter grey columns present transfers to the budgets of regions in the rest of the country. Descriptive statistics provide ample evidence of disparities in the allocation of budget transfers in Russia. In 2008 and 2009 for example, federal and inter-regional budget donations toward the Republics of the North Caucasus made up an average of 70%, and 71% of all regional budgets in the region. In the same period, federal and inter-regional budget donations to regions outside of the North Caucasus only made 30% and 37% of regional budgets respectively. In 2009, and while Russia was experiencing the aftershocks of the Great Recession, donations towards Ingushetia and Chechnya made 91% of the two Republics' regional budgets. Differences in patterns of redistribution increased further in 2010. In this year, transfers made up 76% of regional budgets in the North Caucasus, and just 32% of regional budgets in the rest of the country.

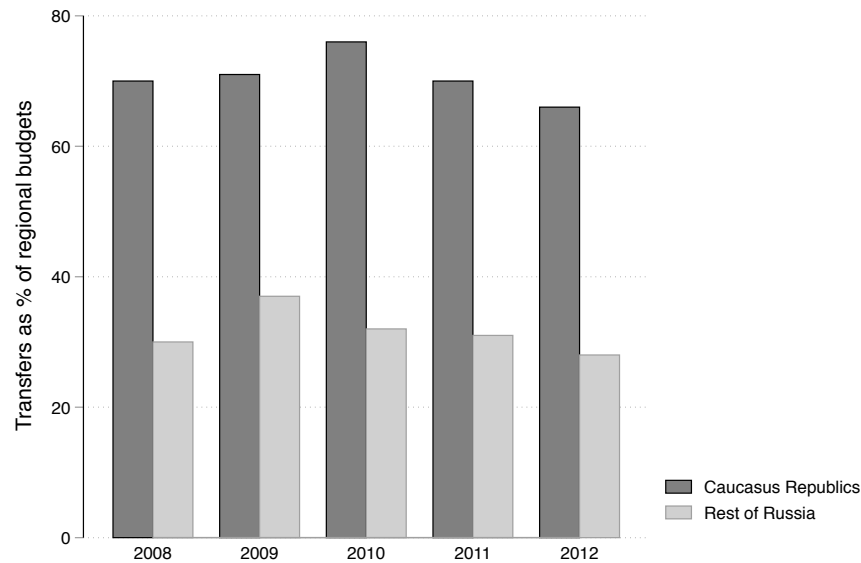


Figure 6.3 Fiscal transfers to the North Caucasus and the rest of Russia: 2008-12

Notes: Data on the percentage of federal and inter-regional transfers for all of Russia's 83 administrative units are provided by the Russian Federal State Statistics Service.

Evidence of a link between regional terror attacks and federal transfers to these regions is in line with statements issued by the Russian government on various occasions. Speaking in a meeting of the committee on the socio-economic development of the North Caucasus in December 2011 for example, Vladimir Putin defended the decision to target regional Republics with generous federal transfers and invest in the development of the local economies, and linked this question to the stability of the region and of the country. The lack of jobs in the North Caucasus, Vladimir Putin linked to an increase of instability in the region. According to Putin, unemployed youngsters would be more likely to engage in criminal gangs and organisations, thus threatening the stability of the region and the rest of the country. As Putin himself mentioned: "[...] What does it mean to 'stop feeding the Caucasus'? Does this mean not to transfer funds for the development of the regions, and the creation of new jobs? [...] Another suggestion [...] is that the North Caucasus should be split

from Russia. Well, let me tell you – that very same second, not the same hour, the same second, they will be groups that will ask for other regions to split away from the Federation. This will mean the end of Russia’.³³² Analysts and commentators have also highlighted a link between regional unrest and fiscal transfers. For the dean of Russia’s Higher School of Economics (HSE) for example, regardless of how (poorly) the national economy is performing, instability in the Caucasus ensures that the region will continue to enjoy access to generous federal transfers and investments.³³³

Low-intensity repression: The majority group

An association between domestic terrorism and a decline in political competition in Russia is supported by qualitative evidence.³³⁴ Following the school siege in Beslan in 2004 for example, Moscow eliminated regional elections. This decision was justified as aiming to ‘unify the country in the face of terrorist violence’. Commenting on this development, the European Commission noted that ‘in the fight against terrorism, one cannot leave aside human rights’.³³⁵ Moreover, since 2004 Freedom House reports on political and civil rights in Russia have been citing legislative changes introduced in the aftermath of the 2004 attacks as a key factor behind Russia’s democratic backsliding. Freedom House reports also note that in the face of domestic terrorism, the judicial process in the country has been severely compromised: since 2008 for example, Russia has ended the use of jury trials in terrorism cases.

Overall, it is possible to think of legislation related to the threat of terrorism as consisting of two parts. One part clearly targets terrorists and their accomplices. Under this

³³² (Pervyi Kanal 2011)

³³³ (Krasnov 2015)

³³⁴ Section C1 in the Appendix provides additional empirical evidence in support of the relationship between terror attacks, transfers to regional budgets and democratic retrenchment across Russia.

³³⁵ (BBC News 2004)

category, we have legislation adopted in December 2008 for example, that barred suspected terrorists from being tried by jury, and advocated that terror suspects had to be tried by selected judges. Similarly, responding to the Moscow metro bombings of March 2010, the Federation Council advocated the reinstitution of the death penalty for terrorists, and Medvedev called for tougher criminal penalties for individuals involved in terror attacks and their accomplices. Another part of terrorism-related legislation, however, targets opposition to government more broadly. Evidence that the Kremlin repeatedly responded to terrorism by cracking down on political competition, and restricting rights and freedoms abounds. After the 2010 suicide attacks in Moscow's metro for example, the Russian government enacted legislation to control the internet. Similarly, responding to the attacks on Moscow's Domodedovo Airport in January 2011, the government expanded the definition of extremism to include dissidents of every stripe, from environmentalists to historians.³³⁶

These decisions could be seen as part of a larger strategy to limit political competition, precisely because the government is concerned about the impact of terrorism, and opposition criticism on the levels of support it enjoys. In line with the hypothesis advocated in this chapter, in the absence of internal criticism, attribution of responsibility for terror attacks could be hindered.

6.4 Empirical Analysis and Results

The empirical analysis develops in two steps. First, I draw on various public opinion surveys to evaluate whether government interventions moderate the effect of attacks on support for government among majority and minority group members. Next, I estimate how much of the overall effect of attacks on support flows through a policy relevant channel.

³³⁶ (Monaghan 2010)

These two parts rely on different data, and different estimation techniques, which I introduce as I proceed.

6.4.1 Voter responses to terror attacks and government policy

The survey

I begin by leveraging evidence from individual-level public opinion surveys administered by Russia's Public Opinion Foundation (FOM). The surveys I rely on are unusually large. Put together, they have a total sample of over 54,000 respondents and are both regionally, and nationally representative. These were administered in February 2011 in 74 regions, or administrative units in Russia. Regional samples include a minimum of 500 respondents. Uniquely, for the purposes of this chapter, the February 2011 surveys interview respondents who reside in the North Caucasus republics of Stavropol, Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria, North-Ossetia, and Karachay-Cherkessya. Surveys including republics in the North Caucasus are very rare. Due to instability in the region, voters in this part of Russia are often excluded from nationally representative public opinion surveys.

Interviews for the FOM surveys were conducted face-to-face in respondents' homes. Face-to-face surveys are the norm in Russia and across the transition countries of Central Eastern Europe and Central Asia, where telephone or internet penetration have been traditionally low. And, as already discussed in the first empirical chapter of the dissertation, the Foundation of Public Opinion (FOM) is a well-respected firm both in Russia and abroad. Surveys administered by FOM traditionally include a number of questions that tap into respondents' political preferences, evaluations of national and regional government performance, as well as satisfaction with the economy, and the provision of public goods in their localities.

Survey Indicators and Contextual Data

I use three different outcome variables from the FOM surveys. The first and second outcome variables capture support for Vladimir Putin, who in February 2011 was the Prime Minister, and Dmitry Medvedev, who at the same time was the President. The wording of these two questions is as follows: ‘What do you think, is the performance (in office) of the head of the government Vladimir Putin/ of President Medvedev good, or bad? And, has this been improving, deteriorating, or remaining stable?’ Respondents can choose one of the following seven response categories ‘performance is good and improving’, ‘good and not changing’, ‘good but deteriorating’, ‘bad but improving’, ‘bad, yet stable’, ‘bad and deteriorating’, ‘No Answer/Don’t Know’. I recode this variable so that higher values denote more positive assessments, i.e. respondents’ saying that performance is ‘good and improving’, and place ‘don’t know’ answers in the middle of the distribution to avoid the loss of data. Overall, average evaluations of Putin’s and Medvedev’s performance in office, measured on a seven-point scale, are very positive. Putin’s approval is around 5.3 (standard deviation 1.75), and Medvedev’s is around 5.06 (standard deviation 1.75).

The third and final dependent variable, taps on respondents’ vote intention. Again, the wording of this question is standard, as it asks: ‘Imagine that next Sunday, there would be elections for the State Duma (Parliament). For which party would you vote for?’ I recode responses to the vote intention variable into a dummy, which takes the value of one if the respondent indicates that she will vote for United Russia and zero otherwise. Almost 49% of respondents would vote for the United Russia (standard deviation .5). The FOM surveys also contain standard demographic controls, such as gender, age, education, and settlement status, that allow me to build well-specified models.

To create a dataset that allows me to examine the relationship between terror attacks, government responses and political assessments, I merge survey responses with contextual data. To identify the effect of attacks on public opinion I leverage variation in the location of terror attacks across the country.³³⁷ The main ‘treatment’ indicator represents the number of terror attacks taking place in respondents’ regions in the twelve months prior to the survey, i.e. from February 2010 to February 2011. An average of 2.55 regional attacks took place across Russia this period (standard deviation 16.34). To study whether federally-funded investments in local public goods, housing and infrastructure (ZhKH) condition the effect of terror attacks in the North Caucasus, I control for regional efficiency in the construction, housing, and public utilities sector. This is a key area for examining the effect of fiscal transfers to the North Caucasus. The majority of federal transfers to the region is invested in reconstruction and development. Federally-funded housing and public utilities are visible, and salient indicators of the federal centre’s commitment to the North Caucasus Republics. This measure comes from the Ministry of Regional Development, and ranges from 8% to 68%. In 2011, average efficiency in the ZhKH sector across the Republics of the North Caucasus was around 32% (standard deviation 16.3). Finally, to proxy for variation in political competition across regions, I rely on a measure of regional competitiveness, available in the Petrov and Titkov Index of regional democracy in Russia. The Petrov and Titkov indicator, which reflects scores for 2010, ranges on a scale from 1 to 5, with higher scores denoting a more competitive, or pluralist political environment in Russia’s subnational units. During this period, the average competitiveness score of Russia’s regions was around 2.9 (standard deviation .96).

³³⁷ See also: (Berrebi and Klor 2008)

Estimation

Define PM_{irt} and $President_{irt}$ as two continuous outcome variables representing assessments of the Prime Minister's and the President's performance by individual i , in region r and time (or survey) t . Also define V_{irt} a binary outcome representing the intention to vote for United Russia by individual i , in region r and survey t . The continuous treatment, *attacks*, ($Attacks_{rt}$), is measured annually, at the regional level. It represents the frequency of attacks taking place in respondents' regions in the twelve-month period preceding the respondents' interview. Models presented below also include individual-level controls (X_{irt}), and regional attributes (V_{rt}). Individual-level controls include gender, age, education and settlement status. Regional attributes include investment efficiency in the construction, housing and public utilities sector ($ZhKH_{rt}$) and political competition ($Competition_{rt}$).

While the small number of level-two (regional) observations in the North Caucasus sample ($n=5$) does not allow me to use multilevel techniques to analyse the data, the large number of level-two observations in the majority-group sample ($n=69$) makes this sample very well suited for multilevel analysis. Thus, to analyse the effect of attacks on support for government among majority group members, I rely on two-level hierarchical models. Multilevel statistical techniques allow me to jointly model the macro-level and individual level determinants of support for political authorities, and to estimate separate variance structures in order to produce unbiased standard errors. Multilevel models also relax the independence assumptions of ordinary general linear models, and are well-suited for data with a large number of individual-level observations nested in groups.³³⁸ Here, I have a large number of majority-group respondents nested in Russian regions, the administrative unit equivalent to U.S. states. Random intercepts for regions (α_r) introduced in the models that

³³⁸ See for example: (A. Gelman and Hill 2007; Hox 1995)

follow allow for correlation among individual observations within regions, and also account for heterogeneity across regions.

My first two hypotheses and the models estimating the effect of attacks on support for the minority and majority groups are presented below. While I use evaluations of the Prime Minister's performance as the outcome variable, the estimation does not change when we consider the effect of attacks on evaluations of the president's performance, or on voters' intention to vote for United Russia instead.

Hypothesis 1 (Minority Group): Attribution of responsibility for terror attacks will be weaker in regions with greater investments in infrastructure

$$PM_{irt} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Attacks_{rt} + \beta_2 ZhKH_{rt} + \beta_3 (Attacks_{rt} \times ZhKH_{rt}) + X_{irt} + \epsilon_{irt} \quad (6.1)$$

Hypothesis 2 (Majority Group): Attribution of responsibility for terror attacks will be weaker in regions with limited political competition

$$PM_{irt} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Attacks_{rt} + \beta_2 Competition_{rt} + \beta_3 (Attacks_{rt} \times Competition_{rt}) + X_{irt} + \epsilon_{irt} + \alpha_{rt} \quad (6.2)$$

Results

Table 6.2 explores the effect of terror attacks on support for the Prime Minister (Model 1), the President (Model 2), as well as on voters' intention to vote for United Russia (Model 3). The analysis includes only respondents who live in the North Caucasus. The interaction terms aim to test whether generous federal transfers, which translate in investments in local infrastructure and housing projects across regions, moderate the effect of local terror attacks on support for the federal government.

Table 6.2 **Minority group responses to regional terror attacks**

	(1) PM evaluations (OLS)	(2) President evaluations (OLS)	(3) UR vote (Logit)
Attacks	0.003** (0.001)	0.002** (0.001)	0.003*** (0.001)
ZhKH	0.011** (0.003)	0.011*** (0.002)	0.02*** (0.003)
ZhKH X Attacks	5.77e-05* (2.54e-05)	0.00*** (1.67e-05)	9.64e-05*** (1.90e-05)
Controls			
Male	-0.44*** (0.03)	-0.43*** (0.02)	-0.57*** (0.07)
Age	-0.01** (0.002)	-0.01** (0.002)	-0.02*** (0.003)
Education	0.010 (0.086)	0.007 (0.052)	0.062 (0.126)
Higher Ed	0.050 (0.175)	0.074 (0.139)	0.126 (0.214)
Settlement	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.07*** (0.02)
Constant	5.494*** (0.189)	5.182*** (0.17)	0.398 (0.36)
Observations	3,798	3,798	3,798
R-squared	0.04	0.04	0.04

Robust standard errors clustered by regions in parentheses, *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Evidence provided in Table 6.2 shows that terrorism in the North Caucasus increases support for the federal authorities. Models 1 and 2 suggest that even in the absence of investments in infrastructure, a single attack increases Putin's and Medvedev's approval by .002-0.003 points respectively. These effects, which are significant at the 5% level are small. Yet, the substantive effect is much larger if we consider that Dagestan and Ingushetia experience over 100 attacks during this period, and that both dependent variables are measured on a 7- point scale. In other words, regional terror attacks could account for an approximately .2 to .3-point increase in approval, even when the efficiency of investments in infrastructure are equal to zero. General levels of efficiency in the construction, housing, and public utilities sectors also directly increase approval for the federal authorities, and

bolster the likelihood that respondents would vote for United Russia in the upcoming elections. The positive returns of regional infrastructure efficiency on support for the federal authorities is consistent with the argument that federal transfers towards the North Caucasus are both visible and salient for the local populations. In other words, voters understand the federal centre's involvement in these projects, and reward the presidential tandem, as well as the party of power accordingly.

Consistently, the effect of attacks on support is stronger among respondents who reside in regions with more efficient investment in public goods and infrastructure. Figure 6.4 aims to facilitate the interpretation of the interaction terms presented in Models 1-3. The positive slope in all three graphs implies that as investment efficiency in regional infrastructure increases, voters become more likely to support political authorities when terrorism strikes. When investments in infrastructure are just at 1%, for example, Prime Ministerial approval increases by .003 as a result of an additional terror attack. While this effect is substantively small, it appears a lot larger if we take into account the large number of attacks that occur annually in this region. Looking at the upper-left panel of Figure 6.4 for example, we see that holding attacks constant at their empirical mean, satisfaction with government increases by approximately .003 points when investments in infrastructure jump from minimum (8%) to maximum (68%). An additional attack increases satisfaction with government by .004 [95% CI .002, .005] when investment in infrastructure is around 8%, and by .007 [95% CI:.006, .009] when investment in infrastructure reaches 68%.

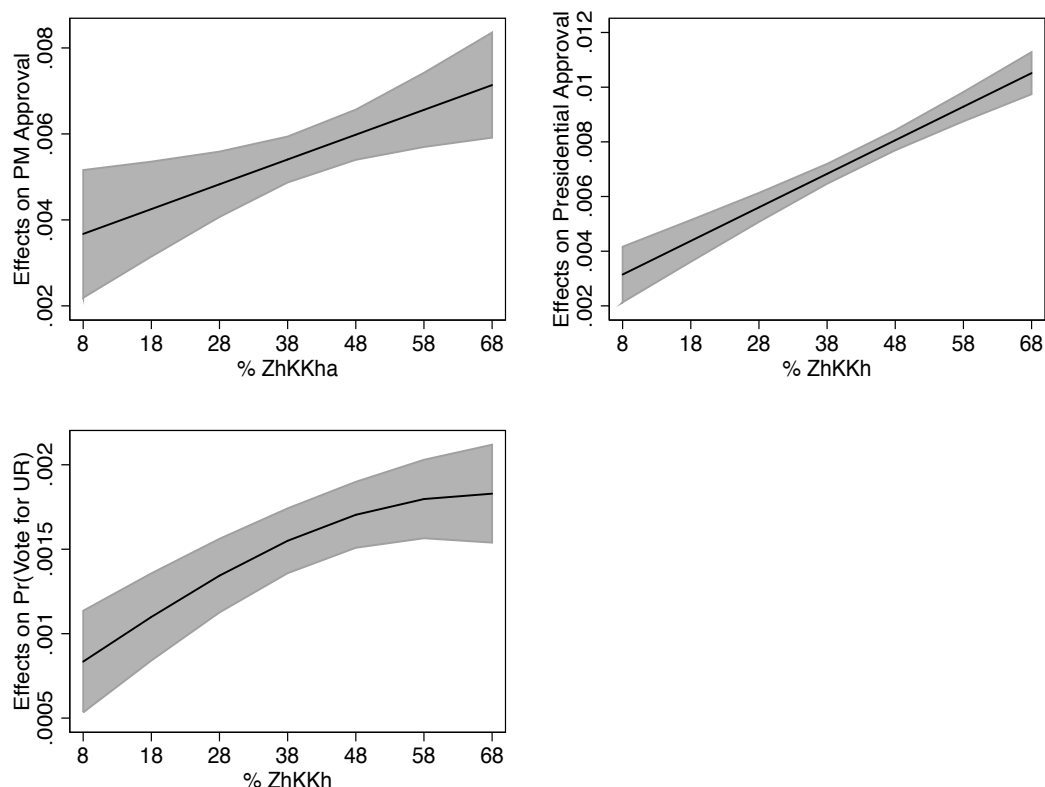


Figure 6.4 Federal transfers in infrastructure moderate the effect of attacks

Notes: Support for authorities resulting from attacks increases in investment in infrastructure and public goods. The figures plot the differences in predicted probability of supporting the federal authorities (y-axis) when the number of regional attacks is held at its mean, and as a function of regional investment efficiency in ZhKKh (x-axis). Confidence Intervals are at the 90% level. All other covariates held at their means. Results are based in the interaction terms presented in Models 1-3, Table 6.2.

Table 6.3 examines the effect of terror attacks on support for government among majority group members, i.e. Russians who live outside of the North Caucasus. To examine whether constraints on political competition dampen the effect of attacks on support, I interact the terror attacks and political competition indicators. Just like the analysis of terror effects on minority group members, Model 1 explores the effect of attacks on the Prime Minister's approval, Model 2 explores the effects on the President's approval, and Model 3 examines the effects of attacks on voters' intention to support United Russia.

Table 6.3 **Majority group responses to regional terror attacks**

	(1) PM evaluations- Two-level linear model	(2) President evaluations Two-level linear model	(3) UR vote- Two- level logit model
12 month attacks	0.143 (0.110)	0.129 (0.010)	0.024 (0.024)
Regional Competition	0.024 (0.032)	-0.005 (0.029)	0.009 (0.007)
Attacks X Competition	-0.062** (0.031)	-0.048* (0.028)	-0.011 (0.007)
Male	-0.448*** (0.015)	-0.425*** (0.016)	-0.154*** (0.004)
Age	-0.007*** (0.000)	-0.004*** (0.001)	-0.004*** (0.000)
Secondary Education	-0.101*** (0.017)	-0.114*** (0.018)	-0.011** (0.0049)
Higher Education	-0.310*** (0.023)	-0.276*** (0.024)	-0.062*** (0.007)
Settlement Size	-0.047*** (0.003)	-0.046*** (0.003)	-0.017*** (0.001)
Constant	6.070*** (0.098)	5.714*** (0.090)	0.785*** (0.022)
Individuals	51,543	51,542	51,540
Regions	69	69	69
Log Likelihood	-101053	-102852	-35996
AIC	202129	205728	72016
BIC	202235	205834	72122

Standard errors in parentheses, *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Results reveal that political competition at the regional level moderates the effect of attacks on support for the presidential tandem. Yet, we find no evidence that terrorism affects voters' intention to vote for the incumbent party. The interaction terms in Models 1 and 2 suggest that the negative effect of terror attacks on assessments of government performance is greater in more competitive regions. Figure 6.5 aims to facilitate the interpretation of the first interaction term, exploring how political competition moderates the effects of regional terror attacks on Putin's approval.

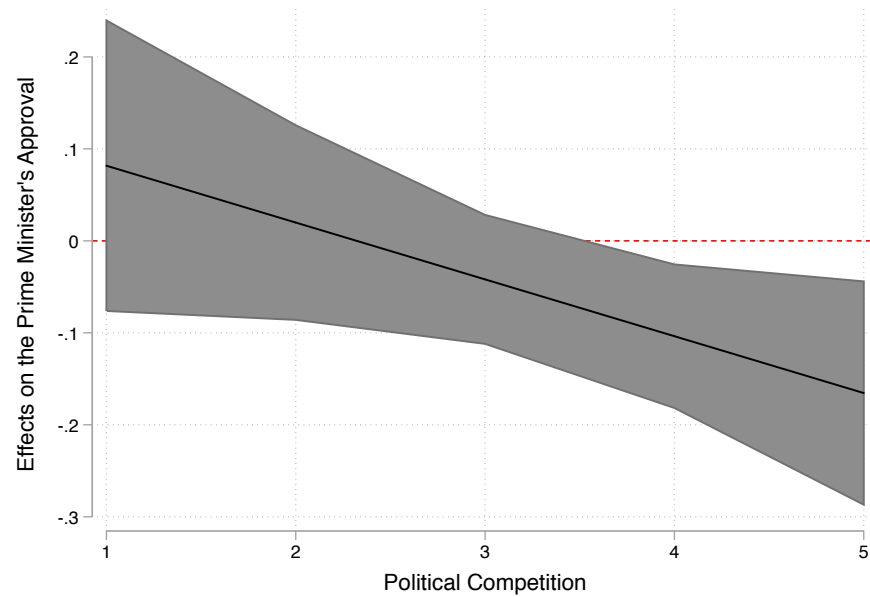


Figure 6.5 Limits on political competition dampen the effect of attacks on support
Notes: The figure plots the differences in support for the Prime Minister's performance (y-axis) as a function of regional political competition (x-axis), and when facing the average number of regional attacks. The solid line is the estimate based on the interaction term in Model 1, Table 6.3. Confidence Intervals are set at the 95% level. All other covariates held at their means.

The negative slope in Figure 6.5 implies that in more competitive regions, voters are less likely to approve of the PM's performance as a result of regional attacks. In less competitive regions, the conditional marginal effect of attacks on approval is positive, but statistically indistinguishable from zero. In more competitive regions, however, i.e. in regions which receive a score of 5 in the Petrov-Titkov index, domestic terrorism is associated with a decline of about .16 (95% CI [-.28, -.04]) in Putin's approval. Altogether, evidence provided below suggests that limits on the opposition's ability to campaign and challenge incumbents moderate the effect of attacks on support for the federal government. Low-intensity repression does appear to compromise attributions of responsibility for terror attacks.

6.4.2 Mechanisms: Policy-motivated punishment?

The theory proposed in this chapter suggests that part of the overall effect of terror attacks on support for government flows through a ‘policy-specific’ channel. I have argued that when majority-group members are affected by terror attacks, dissatisfaction with the government’s policy towards minority-group members increases. Yet, this is a hypothesis I am unable to test with the FOM data. Thus, to examine the effect of terrorism on evaluations of government policy towards the Caucasus, and from there on government approval, I turn to two other nationally representative surveys, and use a causal mediation framework. I introduce the data, estimation techniques, and results in the sections that follow.

The Stephen White surveys of January 2010 and 2012

The surveys I rely on for the final part of the analysis were led by Stephen White at the University of Glasgow. The two cross-sectional surveys, which were administered in January 2010 and 2012 (n=3,600 respondents) are nationally representative. Interviews for the two surveys were conducted face-to-face in respondents’ homes. Both surveys contain a detailed set of questions regarding respondents’ political, social and economic attitudes and evaluations.

Tapping on evaluations of government policy towards the Caucasus is a survey item that asks respondents to assess: ‘Whether, and to what extent, Putin was successful at ensuring a political resolution of the situation in Chechnya’. Response categories, which range on a scale from 1 to 5, are coded so that higher values denote greater support for policies in the Caucasus. Overall, support for Putin’s Chechnya policy across the two surveys is high. This variable has a mean of 3.3, and a standard deviation of 1.15. A different survey item captures respondents’ overall approval of Putin’s performance in office. This item also ranges on a scale from 1 to 5, and is again coded so that higher values denote greater approval. The language is standard ‘Tell me please, on the whole, looking back, do you

approve or disapprove of the performance of Vladimir Putin as President of Russia'. Average support for Putin is again high, at around 3.9, with a standard deviation of 1.2 points.

The White surveys also include a rich battery of controls, which allow me to build well-specified models. I am therefore now able to control for respondents' religiosity, which I measure with a variable that captures frequency of church attendance. This variable is measured on a three-point scale. Lower values denote that respondents never, or hardly ever attend church, and higher values suggest that respondents attend church more than once a month. Respondents' ethnicity is coded as 1 if respondents are ethnically Russian and as zero if they are not. Evaluations of household conditions and political interest are finally controlled for in the analysis. The household conditions variable represents satisfaction with respondents' household finances and is coded so higher values denote greater satisfaction with one's pocketbook. Political interest is captured with a proxy variable that describes how frequently respondents watch political news on television. This variable ranges on a scale from one to five, with higher values denoting that respondents watch political news more frequently. Neither measure is available in the February 2011 surveys.

I merge these survey items with a contextual measure of terror attacks taking place in respondents' regions in the twelve months preceding their interview. Thus, for respondents of the 2010 survey, this variable captures the number of regional attacks taking place from January 2009 to 2010. For respondents of the 2012 survey, this measure captures the number of attacks taking place in respondents' regions from January 2011 to January 2012. Data on the frequency and location of the terror attacks come from the Global Terrorism Dataset (GTD).

Estimation

The two models I fit are as follows. Define $President_{irt}$ as a continuous outcome variable representing evaluations of Putin's performance in office by individual i , in region r and time (or survey) t . Also define V_{irt} a continuous variable representing evaluations of the government's policy toward the Caucasus by individual i , in region r and survey t . The continuous treatment, $attacks$, ($Attacks_{rt}$), is measured annually at the regional level. It represents the frequency of attacks taking place in respondents' regions during the twelve-month period preceding the respondents' interview. Models presented below also include individual-level controls (X_{irt}). To account for time-invariant regional characteristics, models also include region fixed effects (γ_r). These allow me to ascertain whether terror effects should be attributed to variation in the frequency of attacks events *within* regions. To control for country-level conditions in 2010 and 2012 respectively, the models also introduce time, or survey fixed effects (η_t).

The first model I fit is for the mediator (evaluations of the government's policy towards Chechnya). This is represented by equation 6.3. The second model I fit is for the outcome variable (Putin's approval), and given by equation 6.4. The outcome model includes both the treatment (terror attacks) and the mediator variables.

$$V_{irt} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Attacks_{irt} + X_{irt} + \epsilon_{irt} + \gamma_r + \eta_t \quad (6.3)$$

$$President_{irt} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Protest_{irt} + \beta_2 V_{irt} + X_{irt} + \epsilon_{irt} + \gamma_r + \eta_t \quad (6.4)$$

Causal Mediation Analysis

Causal mediation analysis allows me to estimate if, and how much of the overall effect of terror attacks (the treatment) flows through the ‘policy-related’ mechanism (the mediator). Mediation analysis is a widely used technique that aims to ‘uncover causal pathways along which changes are transmitted from causes to effects’³³⁹ and is currently used widely across a variety of disciplines in the social and natural sciences, from politics to epidemiology and clinical research.³⁴⁰

The Intuition: Potential Outcomes Framework

In the counterfactual framework of causal inference, we can define the causal effect of the treatment, here of one single terror attack, as the difference between two potential outcomes: one that would be realized if a terror attack does take place, and the other that would be realized if a terror attack does not occur.³⁴¹ Suppose we use t to represent the treatment variable, which is equal to 1 if an attack has been realised and to 0 otherwise. We can also use $Y_i(t)$ to denote Putin’s approval under the treatment status t , that is if a terror attack does occur. For example, $Y_i(1)$ represents Putin’s approval if domestic terrorism strikes. $Y_i(0)$ represents support for Putin if the treatment, the attack is not materialized. In this setup, the causal effect of domestic terrorism could be defined as $Y_i(1) - Y_i(0)$.

Yet, only one of the two outcomes $Y_i(1), Y_{it}(0)$ is empirically observable every time. For this reason, and assuming that the treatment is randomized, researchers focus on estimating the average causal effect instead. The average causal effect can be identified as

³³⁹ (Pearl 2014, 1)

³⁴⁰ For similar applications of causal mediation analysis in political science see for example: (Becher and Donnelly 2013; Lankina, Libman, and Obydenkova 2016a; Rosenfeld 2016)

³⁴¹ (Imai, Keele, and Yamamoto 2010, 311)

the observed mean difference between the treatment and control groups, and defined according to Imai, Keele and Yamamoto using potential outcomes notation as follows:

$$\mathbb{E}(Y_i(1) - Y_i(0)) = \mathbb{E}(Y_i(1)|T_i = 1) - \mathbb{E}(Y_i(0)|T_i = 0) = \mathbb{E}(Y_i|T_i = 1) - \mathbb{E}(Y_i|T_i = 0) \quad (6.5)$$

Mediation Effects

A similar intuition applies in the context of causal mediation analysis. Yet, in a causal mediation analysis framework, the potential outcomes depend on the mediator (m) and treatment variables (t). Using observed outcomes notation, we can thus define Y_i as the observed value of the outcome variable, m as the observed value of the mediator value, and t as treatment status. Thus, we can use $Y_i(t, m)$ to denote the potential outcome that would result if the treatment and mediating variables were equal to t and m respectively. For example, in the context of this chapter, $Y_i(1, 2)$ would represent support for Putin's performance in office that would be observed by respondent i , if terrorism strikes ($t=1$), and then respondent i 'disagrees' that the government's policy towards the Caucasus was a success ($m=2$). Yet, we cannot observe what this respondent's attitudes would have been in the absence of treatment, i.e. in the absence of attacks. We are only able to observe one of multiple potential outcomes. The observed outcome Y_i may thus be defined as equal to $Y_i(T_i, M_i(T_i))$.³⁴²

Causal mediation analysis allows us to decompose the total effect of the treatment on the outcome of interest into two parts, an indirect, and a direct one. The Average Causal Mediation Effect (ACME), or indirect effect tells us how much of the 'total' effect of the treatment on the outcome operates through the 'mediation' channel, and is the primary unit

³⁴² (Imai, Keele, and Yamamoto 2010, 311)

of interest. For $t=0, 1$, the average causal mediation effect (ACME) or indirect effect of treatment on the outcome can be defined according to Imai, Keele and Tingley, using potential outcomes notation as follows:

$$\bar{\delta}(t) = \mathbb{E}[Y_i(t, M_i(1)) - Y_i(t, M_i(0))]$$

(6.6)

Equation 6.6 answers the following counter-factual question: ‘How would the outcome change if the mediator changed from the value that would be realized under the control condition to the value that would be observed under the treatment condition, while holding the treatment status constant?’³⁴³ In the context of this chapter, the average causal mediation effect (ACME), represents the impact of attacks that works through the policy channel. It effectively shows the average change in support for Putin, through changes in evaluations of his policy towards the Caucasus, when terror attacks shift from some baseline to a counterfactual level, say from 0 to 1. This precisely captures the ‘policy-motivated’ mechanism proposed in the theory.

The Average Direct Effect (ADE) describes instead the effect of attacks on approval that does not occur through the ‘policy evaluation mechanism’. This tells us how much a single attack would cause Putin’s approval to shift if evaluations of policy performance toward the Caucasus did not shift. The Average Direct Effect is defined as:

$$\bar{\zeta}(t) = \mathbb{E}[Y_i(1, M_i(t)) - Y_i(0, M_i(t))]$$

(6.7)

³⁴³ (Imai, Keele, and Yamamoto 2010, 311)

The average total effect of attacks on support captures both the average direct, and causal mediation effects, and can be defined as:

$$\bar{\tau}(t) = E[Y_i(1, M_i(1)) - Y_i(0, M_i(0))]$$

(6.8)

To statistically estimate these quantities of interest, I use the algorithm specified by Imai, Keele and Tingley (2010) and implemented in the R package mediation.

Results

Model 1 in Table 6.4 below explores how terror attacks (the treatment) affect evaluations of government policy towards Chechnya. Consistent with the theory, Model 1 shows that regional terror attacks increase dissatisfaction with Moscow's policy in the North Caucasus. Holding everything else constant, any additional attack reduces support for the statement that President Putin has been successful at bringing about a political settlement in the Caucasus by .06 points. Although the effect is substantively small, it increases to .15 if we consider that in Moscow alone, 12 attacks took place between January 2011 and January 2012. Model 2 uses the treatment and mediator variables to predict approval for Vladimir Putin (the outcome). Consistent with earlier analysis, Model 2 shows that the effect of attacks on approval is negative and robust, even after we control for the mediator, i.e. assessments of government policy toward the Caucasus. Positive evaluations of Russia's Chechnya policy likewise appear to have a robust effect on evaluations of Putin's performance in office. This confirms how important and consequential policies towards the Caucasus are for informing evaluations of government performance in Russia.

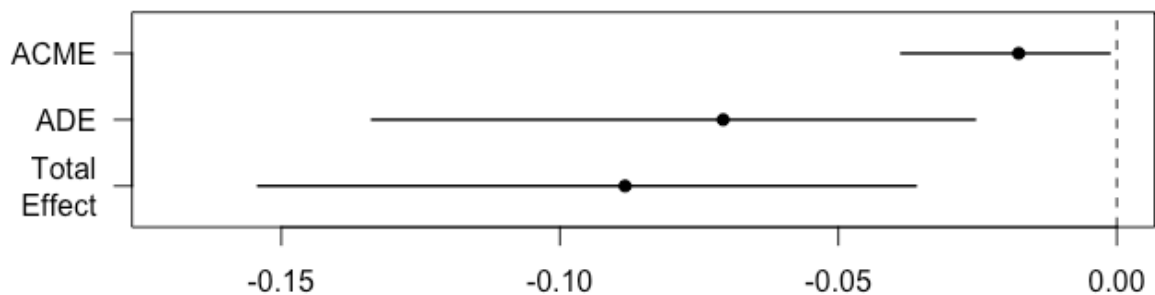
Figure 6.6 summarizes the results of the mediation analysis. Overall, the Average Total Effect of attacks on support (ATE), is roughly equal to .09, and statistically significant

at the 95% level (-0.14, -0.03). The total effect can be decomposed into a mediated and a direct effect. The average causal mediation effect (ACME), represents the mediated effect, i.e. the impact of attacks that works through the policy channel. As already noted, it shows the differences in approval that are due to the change in policy evaluations induced by the treatment, i.e. the number of regional terror attacks. Here, I set the values of the continuous treatment at 0 and 1. The effect of a single attack that flows through the policy mechanism is negative, and significant at the 95% level [-0.02, 95% (-0.03, -0.03)]. What is more, the results from the mediation analysis suggest that the ‘policy-related’ mechanism, accounts for as much as 21% [-0.02, 95% (.04, .66), of the total effect of regional terror attacks on presidential approval. In line with the theory, this implies that evaluations of performance are an important channel through which attacks influence approval. The Average Direct Effect (ADE) describes instead the effect of attacks on approval that does not occur through the ‘policy evaluation mechanism’. As discussed, this tells us how much a single regional attack would cause Putin’s approval to shift if evaluations of policy performance toward the Caucasus did not change. The direct effect of attacks on approval is negative, and statistically significant at the 95% level [-0.07, 95% (-0.12, -0.01)].

Table 6.4 **Local terror attacks, evaluations of government policy and approval**

	(1) Policy toward Chechnya successful (OLS)	(2) Putin approval (OLS)
Treatment: Terror Attacks	-0.064* (0.032)	-0.074* (0.042)
Mediator: Chechen policy		0.282*** (0.020)
Controls		
Religiosity	0.027 (0.029)	0.020 (0.025)
Male	-0.120** (0.044)	-0.085* (0.043)
Russian	-0.051 (0.082)	-0.101 (0.078)
Household Conditions	-0.012 (0.059)	0.078* (0.044)
News Watching Frequency	0.041 (0.032)	0.061*** (0.014)
Education	0.008 (0.014)	-0.014 (0.011)
Age	-0.003* (0.002)	-0.001 (0.001)
Region Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes
Year Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes
Constant	4.020*** (0.376)	3.238*** (0.414)
Observations	3,392	3,382
R-squared	0.048	0.179

Robust standard errors clustered by respondents' regions in parentheses, *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Figure 6.6 **Estimated effects of terror attacks on approval**

Notes: Horizontal bars represent 95% CI. The results are based on the analysis presented in Table 6.4.

6.5 Addressing Concerns

In this chapter, I have proposed that differences in public opinion responses to terror attacks relate to prior support for government policy in the areas more directly related to the attacks. When support for government's policy of fiscal appeasement towards the minority group is high, (and such is the case in the Caucasus), terror attacks should have a small, if any impact on approval, and vice-versa. Indeed, the empirical analysis presented here highlights that attacks against minority-group members in the Caucasus actually increase government approval among people who reside in this region. Moreover, the analysis suggests that voter responses to terrorism are moderated by government investments in regional infrastructure, and by the government's decision to limit regional, and local levels of political competition.

Yet, according to a different theory, minority and majority group responses to domestic terrorism could vary because of differences in these groups' prior exposure to violence. Prolonged exposure to violence could according to a different argument, moderate the effects of attacks on public opinion. As such, habituation to terror and not prior support for Moscow's policies could be shaping voters' behaviour as regions in the Caucasus have had a significant (and recent) experience with domestic terror attacks.³⁴⁴ To explain the mild response to the London bombings of July 2005³⁴⁵ and the Madrid bombing of March 2006 for example, researchers suggest that experience with domestic terrorism moderates the effects of new attacks on public opinion.³⁴⁶ In both cases, evidence suggests that prior experience with terrorism – IRA violence for Great Britain and the ETA attacks for Spain – played an important role in mitigating citizens' reactions to the attack. To make sure that past experience of attacks is not driving the effects of terrorism on public opinion, I rerun

³⁴⁴ (Becker and Rubinstein 2011)

³⁴⁵ (Rubin et al. 2005)

³⁴⁶ (López-Rousseau 2005)

the analysis controlling for the frequency of prior terror attacks in each region two years before a survey (Section C2 in the SI for Chapter 6). In neither model does the inclusion of additional controls change the direction of the coefficients on the variables of interest.

Similarly, and according to another theory, terror attacks could dampen support for government because citizens disapprove of the government's poor management of the crisis, and how the government uses information during the early stages of the investigation. Using a longer time frame, and exploring the cumulative impact of attacks taking place during a 12-month period prior to respondents' interview helps me alleviate concerns that relate to such short-term emotional responses to terrorism. Heightened emotional responses such as fear and anger related to an attack, which are very common in the aftermath of a terror attack, tend on average to dissipate in the longer-run.

Finally, and to further address endogeneity concerns resulting from the fact that the timing and location of terror attacks is not random, Section B2 in the SI presents the results from a quasi-natural experiment which uses the fact that the terror attack in Moscow's Domodedovo International Airport, on January 23rd, 2011 occurred during the fieldwork period for the 5th wave of the European Social Survey. Tables 1 and 2 under Section B2 of the SI for this chapter show that the Domodedovo attack dampened support for Parliament, and reduced trust toward the police authorities. The attack did not influence trust in the United Nations, which I use as a placebo test. These results increase confidence in the robustness of my results.

6.6 Conclusion

The preceding analysis, which has studied the political consequences of domestic terrorism, has enabled me to extend the agenda of this thesis in two ways. *First*, this chapter has allowed me to consider how the government responds to persistent, i.e. overtime threats,

as opposed to one-off, single events. *Second*, the chapter has allowed me to relax the assumption that the electorate is homogeneous. The first empirical chapter presented in this dissertation, on the effects of the 2010 wildfires, has shown how generous aid allowed Moscow to purchase the support of the electorate. ‘Purchasing support’, through the provision of targeted benefits, this chapter shows, often enables incumbents to directly appease a discontented electorate, and to reduce reputational losses resulting from stochastic shocks. My first chapter, however, assumed no competition over the distribution of aid, or public goods among the electorate. In this chapter, while the provision of targeted goods to the North Caucasus appeases local populations, it also aggrieves populations outside of the region. Persistent terrorism brings dissatisfaction with Moscow’s policy of appeasement to the fore, and allows the opposition to increasingly target the government for policy failures on the other. Moreover, domestic terrorism is a salient question around which an ideologically divided opposition can coalesce, and credibly challenge the incumbent’s policy record.

The setup of the chapter is similar to that of chapters presented earlier. I think of terrorist attacks as a visible, and salient informational shock that challenges the message that the incumbent is competent on the one hand, and which showcases that government policies aiming to appease the aggrieved minority group, have been unsuccessful on the other hand. Civilian casualties and terror-inflicted costs and damages signal that the government has failed to provide safety and security and raise the level of fear and insecurity across communities. As it is well understood in existing scholarship, the impact of terrorism extends well beyond its immediate victims and destruction to include a much broader target population of the entire nation.³⁴⁷ As with the wildfires Chapter, which has studied voter and government responses to natural disasters, a domestic shock to incumbent performance,

³⁴⁷ (Huddy et al. 2005)

domestic terrorism considerably constrains the government's ability to deflect blame. When the country is threatened from within, and not attacked from abroad, rallying public opinion round the national flag proves challenging. Unlike the wildfires Chapter, however, deflecting blame sub-nationally, i.e. to regional governors is also difficult. Moscow's counter-terrorist policy is not delegated to the regions, but is federally designed and executed, and terrorism across Russia has voters traditionally looking to the government in Moscow for attributing blame.³⁴⁸ As such, it could be argued, the politicization potential of terror attacks is greater than that of other types of stochastic shocks considered in the dissertation.

I have theoretically argued and empirically documented that effect of attacks on support is largely mediated by voters' assessments of government policy in the areas more directly related to the attacks. Using variation in the location of terror attacks, the analysis has allowed me to show that the provision of generous aid to the North Caucasus enabled Moscow to win the electorate in the region. Terror attacks outside of the North Caucasus, however, had the opposite effect, in that they dampened support for government. The negative effects of terror attacks on support for the executive outside of the North Caucasus, the analysis has also shown, are weaker in regions with a less competitive political environment.

These results have important implications for our understanding of the effects of domestic terrorism in illiberal democracies. They propose that incumbents' ability to amass the support of minority, and majority group members is conditional on their ability to deliver

³⁴⁸ For example, while for a long period Russian public opinion and the media framed the 2010 natural wildfires as 'an act of God', or the 'inevitable result of extreme weather conditions', public opinion in Russia consistently points to the leadership in Moscow after high profile terror attacks. Following the March 2010 metro attacks in Moscow, 88% of Russians thought that the Russian leadership was somewhat or partly responsible for the attacks, while another 55% of the population believed that the special services knew of the preparations for the attacks but could not prevent them, either because of incompetence or because of corruption.

growth and security across the country. By exacerbating divisions within the electorate, however, domestic terrorism challenges the behavioural equilibrium that keeps the majority group better off supporting the incumbent government. In the Russian context for example, we see that majority group voters hold both the party of power and the incumbent Prime Minister accountable for domestic attacks that take place in their localities. Findings also have important implications for explaining government responses to the threat of domestic, persistent terrorism. The fact that attribution of responsibility for terror attacks is lower in less competitive regions, where the incumbent has successfully imposed limitations on local media and opposition activity, further highlights the threat domestic terrorism poses to political competition in particular, and democracy in general.

Chapter 7

Repression and the (Colour) Revolution that Never Was

My theory proposes that high-intensity repression against opposition parties and activists aims to prevent voters from switching to the opposition. Yet, my argument also anticipates that high-intensity repression may not shore up support for incumbents. Repression, I suggest, does not convince the masses that the incumbent is competent and does not generate loyalty or support. This chapter empirically tests these theoretical expectations. Original datasets collected as part of the thesis allow me to explore whether the use of high-intensity repression against opposition parties and activists taking to the streets moderates the effect of protests on public opinion.

Just as was the case in the preceding empirical chapter, the analysis of government and public opinion responses to protests no longer relies on the earlier assumption that the electorate is homogenous. Contrary to the terrorism case study, however, the electorate in the case of the 2011/12 protests is divided along political as opposed to ethnic lines. Opposition supporters participate in protest events that condemn fraud and call for political change. Moderates and regime supporters do not participate in these events. Yet, they are exposed to the messages and demands of the opposition, especially when protests take place in their localities. As such, I suggest that protests initiated by activists can constitute a shock on bystanders and indeed on government. Just like any other shock, protesters taking to the streets make information about the unpopularity of the status quo publicly observable, and can prompt critical evaluations of government among the spectators of the protest events. Moreover, I argue that the scale and geographical spread of electoral protests can take not only bystanders and international observers, but also the national government by surprise. This was certainly the case during the 2011/12 electoral protests in Russia. I finally propose

that large-scale protests constitute a negative shock to citizen security, or perceptions thereof. Even when police forces do not violently move against protesters, the outbreak of protests alone could heighten spectators' anxiety.³⁴⁹ This is true of protests in democracies as well. Violent post-electoral battles also compromise the security of protest participants on the one hand and convey the image of a country gradually slipping toward chaos on the other.³⁵⁰

To test expectations about the conditioning effect of regime-led repression, I leverage original evidence on protests from the Lankina Protest-Event Dataset and two nationally representative public opinion surveys that were in the field during the 2011/12 protest wave in Russia. The Russian Election Study (RES) and the Stephen White surveys allow me to connect protest events occurring within a particular region with the political attitudes of those surveyed within that region.³⁵¹ Building on the Lankina Protest-Event Dataset, I have also collected additional data on instances of repression of protest events, and assigned protest events taking place across regions to specific cities and towns in Russia. To the best of my knowledge, this is one of the first efforts to link protest- and individual-level survey data to empirically test whether and how repression moderates the effects of protests on public opinion outside of established democracies.³⁵²

To preview the results, I find support for this work's main theoretical predictions. While demonstrations appear to raise awareness of the national protest movement and to increase the likelihood that citizens will report higher levels of electoral unfairness in prior

³⁴⁹ See for example: (Branton et al. 2015)

³⁵⁰ (Schedler 2002)

³⁵¹ (Colton et al. 2014; White 2015)

³⁵² The following studies explore protest effects on public opinion in democracies: (Branton et al. 2015; Carey, Branton, and Martinez-Ebers 2014; S. J. Wallace, Zepeda-Millán, and Jones-Correa 2014). Frye and Borisova (2016) also study protest effects on trust for government in autocracies using a survey experiment instead.

parliamentary elections, protest effects on public opinion are weaker where violence had been previously used against protesters. Citizens' exposure to the suppression of rallies by the local authorities does allow the regime to achieve the intended effects of turning public opinion away from support for the protesters and their demands.

This chapter is structured as follows. The next section outlines a theoretical framework that connects territorially dispersed anti-regime protests and regime strategies to public opinion on national politics. I then discuss my methods and empirical results. To address concerns related to the fact that some underlying preferences or grievances of citizens residing in Russia's various subnational territories could be driving the frequency and size of protests, as well as bystanders' attitudes toward the protest movement, the analysis first shows that the effects of protest on public opinion are robust to the use of an instrumental variables regression. More specifically, this work exploits variation in regional weather conditions on the day of the rallies as an exogenous source of variation in protest frequency and size. Having established that protests not only reveal but also cause a change in regional public opinion, the chapter proceeds with the analysis of repression effects on support for the opposition to the regime and its key demands.

7.1 Introduction

Amid accusations of electoral fraud in Russia's 2011 parliamentary elections, a series of anti-regime demonstrations – the largest since the collapse of the Soviet Union – took place in Moscow and various regional capitals.³⁵³ Starting in December 2011, protestors directly targeted the federal authorities for electoral abuses and advanced a variety of demands

³⁵³ I use the terms 'protests', 'mass mobilisation', 'mass demonstrations' and 'mass unrest' interchangeably

ranging from the repeat of the elections to the return to the Soviet Union, as well as the overthrow of the regime.

During this time, Prime Minister Putin, who was standing as presidential candidate in the March 2012 elections, was allegedly ‘angry, nervous, and frightened’.³⁵⁴ Drawing parallels with rebellions in the Arab Spring that brought down rulers in the Middle East and North Africa, observers described the events as Russia’s ‘white, or snow revolution’. Initial optimism, however, did not last. The support the protest movement enjoyed proved short-lived, and despite widespread accusations of fraud and violent clashes between the protesters and the police the presidential tandem saw its approval ratings recover by the first quarter of 2012. Russia’s ‘snow revolution’ melted quickly with the spring.

Making sense of activists’ ability to generate and sustain revolutionary momentum is a question not only of interest to journalists. Dominant theories of authoritarian politics emphasise that through strikes and protests the masses can impose substantial costs upon electoral authoritarians, triggering elite defections and sometimes even ousting the leadership or overthrowing the regime.³⁵⁵ For this reason, mass unrest is one of the key threats that sitting illiberal incumbents must negotiate in their decision-making. Electoral protests – that is, protests triggered in the wake of stolen elections and fuelled by popular outcry about fraud – represent a shock that makes information about regime abuses and violations publicly observable. By naming and shaming local and federal officials involved in electoral falsifications and condemning such practices, opposition activists can increase

³⁵⁴ (Osborn 2011)

³⁵⁵ (Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland 2015; Magaloni 2006; M. Svolik 2012) The Rose Revolution in Georgia (2003) and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004) provide good examples of mass street demonstration triggering the defection of the military and other regime insiders

awareness of fraud on the one hand and amass support for their demands on the other – the two strategies are undoubtedly inter-connected.

Responding to the outbreak of the protests in December 2011, the Russian government mobilised its own supporters. Staging pro-regime rallies and using Kremlin-controlled media outlets to signal that the regime was popular were strategies at the forefront of Moscow's response to the events. But as the government was unable to target protesters and bystanders with ad hoc benefits to gain their support, and propaganda had failed to prevent unrest from spreading, the authorities began to increase their use of high-intensity repression against opposition parties and activists. Moscow's violent response to the 2011-12 protests allows me to test a series of hypotheses regarding the government's ability to moderate the erosion of support when unanticipated protests break out across the country.

7.2 Theory and Hypotheses

The Extant Literature

Generating awareness of and support for their demands is a key challenging confronting opposition parties and activists under electoral authoritarianism. Restrictions on fundamental rights to expression and assembly, state control over the national media, as well as offline and online censorship aim to preclude information about regime abuses from becoming publicly observable, and the opposition from gaining support.³⁵⁶ For this reason, periods of heightened contention, such as electoral protest waves for example, represent a rare opportunity for opposition parties and activists to achieve the broad societal and political changes they desire.³⁵⁷ By naming federal and subnational officials involved in the conduct of electoral falsifications and condemning such practices, opposition activists can spread

³⁵⁶ (Brownlee 2007; S. Levitsky and Way 2002; Magaloni 2010; Ross 2015)

³⁵⁷ (Tarrow 2011, 199–201)

information about regime abuses and violations on the one hand, and build political momentum on the other.

Focusing on public opinion dynamics during periods of contention, an influential scholarship generates the expectation that when anti-regime protests expose information about regime abuses, such as electoral fraud for example, original support for the regime - whether sincere or not - will erode. By revealing that the regime is unpopular and that others are willing to oppose it, electoral protests also increase the likelihood that even hitherto passive bystanders will join in.³⁵⁸ Unfolding mobilization in the context of electoral protests, i.e. protests taking place in the aftermath of fraud-rigged elections could expose regime abuses, spread awareness of fraud, and encourage greater levels of anti-regime mobilization.³⁵⁹ And, as several influential studies demonstrate, the information about electoral abuses that protests help disseminate, creates large and outraged communities of robbed voters³⁶⁰ and generates focal points for discontent³⁶¹ that could encourage support for the demands of the protesters more broadly.³⁶²

While a large body of literature recognises the threat that electoral protests pose to the stability of electoral autocracies, political scientists know surprisingly little about how mass demonstrations shape political attitudes under electoral authoritarianism and how in turn government responses to protests could moderate their effect on public opinion. This neglect is surprising considering that activists' ability to motivate others to take to the streets is a key factor contributing to revolutionary success. And as existing literature reminds us, the outcome of several revolutionary attempts has been determined by the strategic interaction

³⁵⁸ (Kuran 1991, 1995; Lohmann 1994)

³⁵⁹ (Beissinger 2007; Reuter and Szakonyi 2015; Tucker 2007)

³⁶⁰ (Bunce and Wolchik 2011, 272)

³⁶¹ (Tucker 2007)

³⁶² (Chaisty and Whitefield 2013)

between the protesters and the regime.³⁶³ Understanding what factors facilitate or compromise the success of colour revolutions also remains a fundamental question in the comparative democratisation literature.

The Argument and Observable Implications

In this chapter, I propose that electoral protests - that is protests triggered in the wake of stolen elections – are one way through which citizens can find out about regime-led violations and abuses.³⁶⁴ My argument builds on theories of informational and reputational defections under autocracy, as I assume that available information about regime abuses and malpractices increases confidence that the regime is unpopular and that others are likely to oppose it.³⁶⁵ Such information could also encourage individuals who previously supported the regime - whether sincerely or not – to withdraw support and join the ranks of the opposition. In line with an influential literature, I ask what factors make the spread of unrest more, or less likely, and bring individual-level data to bear on the debate of how public opinion shifts in response to information about regime abuses.³⁶⁶

The eruption of anti-regime protests, however, also creates a series of dynamic incentive problems for incumbents, who are faced with the need to discredit the opposition, and distort incentives for protest spectators to join unfolding mobilization.³⁶⁷ As the theoretical argument articulated in the introduction to the thesis illustrates, to moderate the effect of protests on public opinion when millions have taken to the streets, incumbents cannot credibly and ad-hoc use redistribution, either in order to buy the support of the protesters, or that of the bystanders. Censoring information on the extent of the unfolding mobilization is

³⁶³ (Kuran 1991; Lohmann 1994; Marwell and Oliver 1993)

³⁶⁴ (Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland 2015; Kuran 1995; Lohmann 1994)

³⁶⁵ (Kuran 1995; Lohmann 1994)

³⁶⁶ (Egorov and Sonin 2014; Little, Tucker, and Lagatta 2015; Reuter and Robertson 2015)

³⁶⁷ (Chen and Xu 2015; Lorentzen 2013; Robertson 2011)

also a challenging task, as territorially dispersed protests and creative strategies on the part of the opposition increase the likelihood that bystanders will take notice. During the Russian rallies of 2011/12 for example, activists used loudspeakers to broadcast information about electoral irregularities; and set up tents in central city and town squares where bystanders could sign up to become election monitors.³⁶⁸

The visibility of the protest movement, and the salience of its accusations also compromised the government's ability to crowd out information on the protesters and the unfolding events. Large discrepancies between media coverage and events unfolding in the streets of the country could cause state-run media their credibility, thus making government propaganda even less credible in future occasions. As a result, in the case of the 2011/12 electoral rallies, and in line with the theoretical argument articulated in this thesis, the government chose to manipulate information on protest instead. We already know for example that between December 2011 and May 2012, coverage of the protest movement across Kremlin-controlled media was widespread. Yet, state-controlled media sought to primarily prevent the erosion of popular support for the regime. As several studies illustrate, state-controlled news sources underestimated the size of anti-governmental protests and muted the demands that Russia's top leadership should be held accountable for electoral misconduct.³⁶⁹ Propaganda alone, however, was not able to end anti-regime mobilization. And, as the theoretical argument articulated at the beginning of the thesis predicts, faced with waning support the Russian regime did not hesitate to engage its repressive apparatus against protesters, and to do so far more readily than would democratically accountable governments.³⁷⁰

³⁶⁸ (Lankina and Skovoroda 2017)

³⁶⁹ (Koesel and Bunce 2012; Lankina, Watanabe, and Netesova 2016; Smyth and Oates 2015)

³⁷⁰ (DeNardo 1985b; Kricheli, Livne, and Magaloni 2011; Lohmann 1994)

My theoretical argument anticipates that if successful, regime-led repression could reduce the attractiveness of unrest and prevent ruling regime voters, or moderates from defecting to the opposition. More specifically, I expect that bystanders are less likely to support opposition parties and activities perceived to be engaging in violent post-electoral battles. By conveying the image of a country gradually regressing towards chaos, violent clashes between the regime and its opponents have the potential to undermine support for the demands of the protest movement. If this hypothesis is correct, we should observe that citizens' exposure to the violent suppression of the protest events will dampen their support for opposition leaders, the protest movement, and its demands.

My argument also generates the expectation that in contrast to targeted redistribution and propaganda, the use of repression does not allow the regime to shore up support. Repression does not signal that the incumbent is competent, i.e. able to promote the electorate's best interests. I therefore propose that repression in the context of electoral protests is used to prevent defections, and not in order to shore up support. Thus, another observable implication of the same argument would predict that exposure to regime-led suppression of the protest events will not increase support for the regime and its leaders.

7.3 Background

In the winter of 2011-2012, and in response to electoral manipulations in the December 2011 Duma (parliamentary) election, tens of thousands of citizens attended protest demonstrations in Moscow and other Russian cities. Demonstrations continued after Vladimir Putin's victory in the first round of the March 2012 presidential elections, although at a smaller scale. Protests taking place during this period featured a clear target of blame: across the country protesters accused the federal regime of abuses and called for political

change. Although not all of Russia's eighty-three regions featured protests, the extent of cross-regional mobilization was unprecedented. Even regions hitherto known for delivering a pro-Kremlin result in elections and traditionally featuring low levels of political openness, comparatively smaller pools of activists and lower levels of pro-democratic attitudes, experienced street activism. While the largest number of protest events was concentrated in Moscow and St Petersburg, other regions such as Samara, Tatarstan, Nizhny Novgorod, and Krasnoyarsk also experienced great levels of unrest.

Figure 7.1, which presents how protest events were distributed across Russia, shades administrative regions witnessing a higher frequency of protest events in darker colour. Figure 7.2 further presents how the number of protests and protest participants fluctuated over time. In the time frame analysed, the number of protesters varied from one to 100,000 (Moscow, 24 December 2011; and 6 May 2012). Despite this variance, nearly fifty protest events involved more than 2,000 participants. The number of protest events spiked around three key moments. In the immediate aftermath of the 2011 State Duma elections, forty-three protest events took place across Russia on December 10. On 4 and 19 February 2012, over 50 protest events took place across the country. Finally, protests took place in early March, as a response to President Putin's re-election.

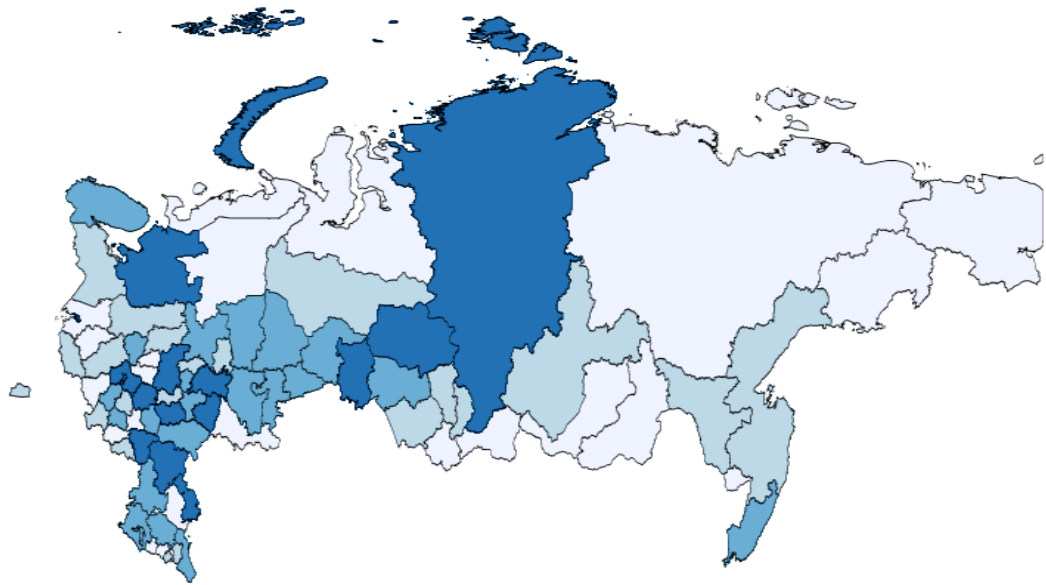


Figure 7.1 **Variation in the frequency of protest events, December 2011- May 2012**

Notes: This map plots the territorial distribution of protests across Russia. Regions in darker blue witnessed a greater number of protests between December 2011 and May 2012

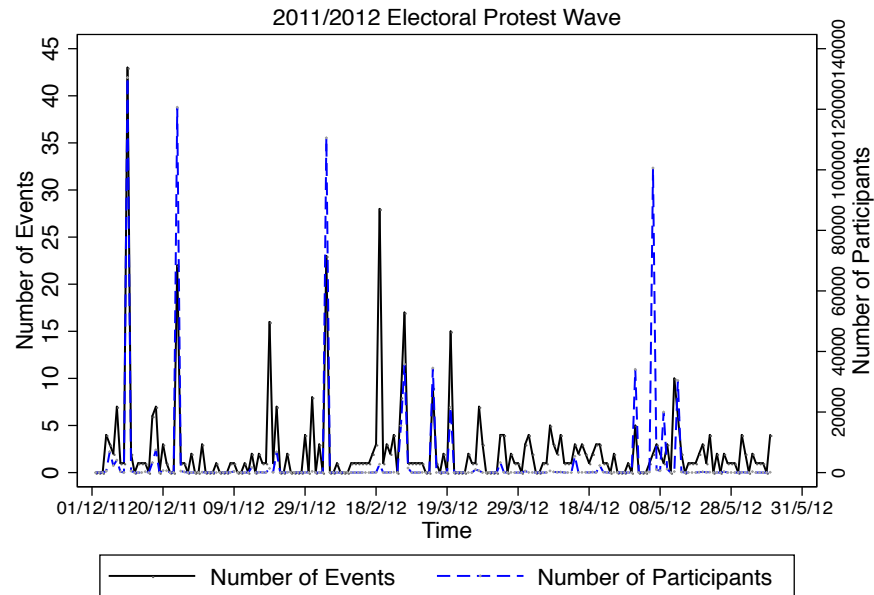


Figure 7.2 **Number and size of protest events, December 2011-May 2012**

Notes: This graph plots the frequency (left-hand y-axis) and size of events (right-hand y-axis) that took place in Russia between December 2011 and May 2012

As already noted, Moscow's response to the events combined the use of propaganda and repression. To make the message that the incumbent is competent, and the status quo supported by many, the country's leadership not only manipulated the framing of protest-related news in state-controlled media, but also mobilized its own supporters, and organised large pro-regime rallies across the country. High-intensity repression was also used against protesters and opposition activists who took to the streets. Outside of Moscow and St Petersburg, violence was used against protesters in Krasnodar, Rostov, Nizhny Novgorod, Samara, Ulyanov, Sverdlovsk, Novossibirsk, Tatarstan, Kurgan and Perm. In six of these regions, violence against protesters was used as early as December 10th, i.e. a few days after the onset of the demonstrations. The regime's harsh response to the protest events in *Balotnaya* square, of May 6th, 2012 stands out during this period. During the events, hundreds of protesters were arrested and several protesters were injured by the intervention of the police. The sections that follow describe in detail the measures this chapter relies on, and provide novel evidence on Moscow's response to the events.

7.4 Data: Protests, repression, and indicators of support

The case of the 2011-12 protest wave in Russia offers significant variation in all three parameters of interest to this chapter: territorial variation in protest events directed against the regime; experimentation in the techniques the Russian government used to manage the electorate, and variation in public opinion towards the protest movement and the political authorities. The sections that follow describe in detail these parameters of interest.

Political protests: My main independent variable, *protest frequency*, captures the number and size of anti-regime protest events that take place in each survey respondent's region between 4 December 2011 and up to the day of their interview. To identify the location and frequency of anti-regime protests taking place during the 2011-12 electoral protest wave in

Russia, I leverage evidence from the Lankina protest-event dataset. In this dataset, protests are coded as political if they raise anti-government demands related to political rights, civil freedoms and electoral fraud. Protests may include other issues, but criticism of regime, government policy, and/or demands for the protection of political rights form the crux of the event. Political protests are often organized by the political opposition, though they are not exclusive to one particular party or civic movement. Political protests thus include events like the March of the Millions, a mass civic march organized by the political opposition, and *Strategiya-31* civic meetings organized in support of the right to peaceful assembly. Both movements were particularly active during the 2011-2012 protest movement. Anti-government protests organized by activists -excluding those sponsored by the government- are also coded as political protests. During the period from December 2011 to May 2012, several of the political protests challenged electoral fraud at the local and federal level. Several protests featured calls for either the resignation of elected or appointed officials at all levels of government, condemned the use of repression against protesters and called for the release of political prisoners.

Repression: To identify instances during which the regime used repression against protesters, I turn to another variable in the Lankina Protest-Event dataset, which captures the use of regime-led violence against protesters. The repression indicator is coded as one if any of the protest events taking place prior to the respondents' interview were violently repressed. The indicator is coded as zero if protest events taking prior to the day of a respondent's interview were peaceful.

The repression indicator captures attempts by the local authorities, police or pro-government groups to disrupt a protest and carry out repressive activities, including arrests of protesting activists. The presence of police forces during the events alone is not coded as providing evidence of repression. For repression to occur, protesters have to be disrupted

either through forced dispersal, physical attacks or arrest. The dataset also includes a ‘pre-emptive suppression’ variable, which captures whether protest events are being thwarted by police before they take place. It is often the case for example that one or several activists gather in a square in anticipation of others to join, but the OMON, or police forces interfere before others join-in. One could plausibly assume that these protests were less likely to have been authorized. The correlation between this measure and the variable that captures active use of violence against protesters during the period covered in the data is positive, but small ($r=.23$, 0.01).

Figure 7.3 below shows how the use of repression against protesters over this period varied over time. It illustrates that following a short-lived decline in the use of repression between December 2011 and January 2012, the percentage of violently repressed events increased in the months around the March 2012 Presidential election. More specifically, the percentage of police-interrupted events (as a share of all anti-regime protest events taking place in Russia) dropped from 33% in December to just below 11 % in January. By March 2012 the percentage of protest events suppressed by the police increased two-fold (26.3 % of all protests were repressed in March). In April, the percentage of violently interrupted events climbed to 43%. This essentially meant that shortly after the March 2012 Presidential election, roughly one in two protest events taking place across the country would be subject to some sort of disruption. The use of violence against protesters, was heavily concentrated in Moscow and St Petersburg.

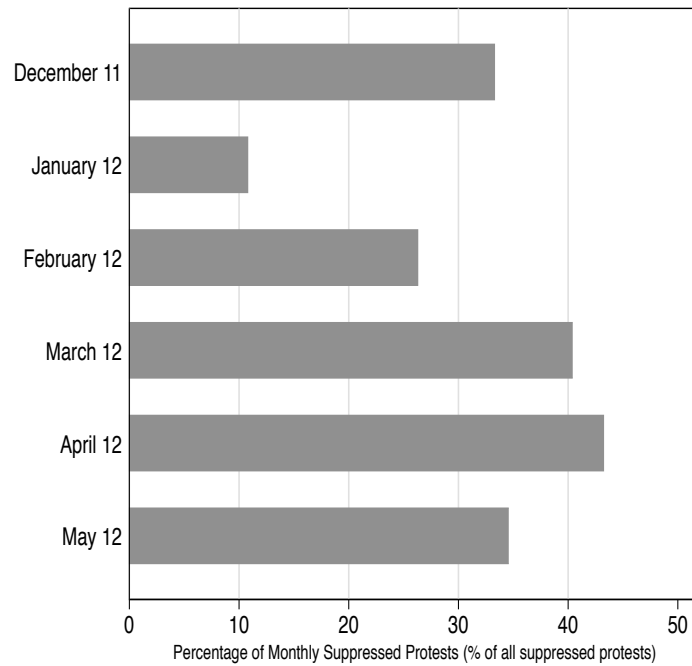


Figure 7.3 **The use of repression varies over time**

Notes: Relying on the repression indicator, this figure presents the percentage of monthly suppressed protest events (as a percentage of all protest events)

Indicators of support: Evidence on public opinion responses to the protest, and regime repression during this period comes from the 2012 Russian Election Study (RES) and the Stephen White surveys.³⁷¹ Both of these surveys are nationally representative and were in the field during the protest wave. Interviews for them were conducted face-to-face across forty of Russia's regions. The two surveys contain information about the date of every respondent's interview, the subnational district and the region in which they reside. Likewise, the surveys ask respondents a range of comparable questions on political issues.

³⁷¹ (Colton et al. 2014; White 2015)

The surveys

The first survey, led by Stephen White at the University of Glasgow, is a nationally representative public opinion that was in the field in January 2012. The survey included a sample of 1,200 respondents interviewed face-to-face, in their homes. The second survey on which the analysis draws on was led by Professors Tim Colton and Henry Hale. The Russian Election Study (RES) is also representative at the national level, and was also administered between April and May 2012. It relies on a sample of approximately 1,700 respondents and was also administered face-to-face, in respondents' homes in the second in April/May 2012. Where different coding schemes applied in the two questionnaires, the variables were recoded for consistency. Overall, however, the demographic variables the analysis controls for were asked in a straightforward way.

Outcome Variables

The analysis relies on two sets of outcome variables. The first two capture awareness of, and support for the demands of the protesters. The second set of variables captures support for incumbents instead. I introduce the first two variables here, and the remaining ones in the second part of the analysis.

'Unfair Duma': My first dependent variable records respondents' perceptions of electoral fraud. This variable ranges on a 5-point linear scale, and it is coded so that higher values denote greater awareness of fraud. In the Stephen White Survey, this question is posed as follows: 'In some countries people are sure that elections are conducted honestly and fairly. In other countries people are sure that elections are not fairly conducted. Thinking about the most recent parliamentary elections to the State Duma, please evaluate on a five-point scale how honestly and fairly they were conducted. 1: Elections were conducted dishonestly and unfairly 5: Elections were conducted fairly and honestly 6: (Hard to Say) 7: Refused to Answer.'" The same question appears as follows in the Russian Election Study

(RES) survey: ‘In some countries, people believe their elections are conducted fairly. In other countries, people believe that their elections are conducted unfairly. [...] And, if we talk about elections to the State Duma this past December, how fair in your opinion were these elections? 1: Last Duma Elections Were Fair; 5: Last Duma Elections Were Unfair; 7: Hard to Say; 8: Refusal’.

Shares the demands of the opposition: This variable is coded on a 4-point, ordinal scale. Higher values denote greater support for the demands of the protesters. I drop respondents who do not know about the protesters and their demands. Questions regarding awareness of, and attitudes towards the demands of the protesters were less consistent across the two surveys, in that the RES informed respondents that ‘during the protests elections were called dishonest and unfair, and demands were made for new, early, honest elections’, yet similar enough to allow meaningful comparisons. Most importantly, both surveys allow respondents to state (i) whether they are aware of the unfolding events first, and (ii) whether they agree with the demands of the opposition next. In the White Survey, only respondents who know about the meetings and protests that took place in Moscow and other Russian cities are asked whether they know about, or share their demands. If respondents admit to ‘knowing anything, or almost anything’ refuse, or find it difficult to answer the question on whether they know about the protest events, numerators are asked to proceed to the next set of questions. In other words, for the Stephen White survey, only respondents who know about the meetings and the general demands of the protesters are asked whether they agree with them. This is also the case for the RES. I provide the exact question wordings below: (a) *From the White Survey:* ‘Do you share the demands of the protestors?’ 1: I totally share their demands; 2: I somewhat share their demands; 3: I somewhat disagree with their demands; 4: I completely disagree with their demands. (b) *From the Russian Election Study:* ‘During the last State Duma and presidential elections, a fairly large number of street demonstrations

took place during which these elections were called dishonest and unfair, and demands were made for new, early, honest elections. What is your attitude to these demands advanced at these demonstrations?’ Response categories are as follows: ‘1: Fully agree; 2: tend to agree; 3: tend not to agree; 4: completely disagree; 5: Don’t know about these demonstrations; 6: Don’t know about these demands; 7: Hard to say; 8: Refused’.

7.5 Estimation Strategy

Define $Unfair\ Duma_{irt}$ as a continuous outcome representing reported levels of electoral fraud in the Duma election by individual i in region r , and at time t . Similarly, define $Share\ demands_{irt}$ as an ordinal outcome representing support for the demands of the protesters by individual i in region r and at time t . Finally, let $Gov\ support_{irt}$ be an indicator that captures support for government by respondent i in region r and time t . In all models presented below, the analysis includes only those respondents who reside in regions with a prior protest event.

The first independent variable, *regional protest frequency*, ($protest_{irt}$), represents the number of protests taking place in region r , up to time t , which represents the day respondent i was interviewed for the Stephen White and the Russian Election Study surveys. Thus, this continuous protest measure varies across and within regions, over-time. I expect regional protest events to be positively associated with awareness of, and support for, the national protest movement. The second independent variable, *repression*, ($repression_{irt}$), is a binary indicator. It represents whether any of the protests taking place in region r , up to respondent’s i interview time t , have been subject to violent repression. This measure also

varies across and also within regions, over time.³⁷² I expect this measure to be negatively associated with support for the opposition.

To account for time-invariant regional characteristics, models estimating protest effects on support for the opposition also include region fixed effects (γ_r). These allow me to ascertain whether protest effects should be attributed to variation in the frequency and size of protest events *within* regions. To control for country-level conditions in the winter and spring months of 2012, the models also introduce time, or survey fixed effects (η_t).

Models also include individual-level controls (X_{irt}). Standard demographic characteristics include age, gender, education and ethnicity. A variable related to respondents' participation in prior protest events is also introduced into the analysis. This helps identify possible bystanders, or protest spectators from protest participants. Empirical models further control for respondents' voting behaviour in the 2011 Duma Election. Survey items record whether individuals voted for the opposition, for the pro-Kremlin United Russia party, or abstained. Employment status is also controlled for, as are evaluations of household economic conditions, used here as a proxy for economic circumstances. A dummy variable that captures whether respondents reside in an urban or rural centre is introduced to account for variance in political attitudes attributable to the effects of urbanization.

My first hypothesis predicts that protests represent a shock to bystanders, or the spectators of the protests effects. Concretely, I anticipate that protests could increase support for the opposition to the regime. This assumption is important to test, as it partly underlines the state's decision to use repression to dampen the effects of protest on public opinion. Hypothesis 1, and the models estimating protest effects on support for the opposition are:

³⁷² For summary statistics please see Table 1, Section 1, in the SI for Chapter 7

Hypothesis 1. As the number of regional protests increases, the likelihood of reporting greater support for the opposition and its demands increases.

$$Unfair\ Duma_{irt} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Protest_{irt} + X_{irt} + \epsilon_{irt} + \gamma_r + \eta_t$$

$$Shares\ Demands_{irt} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Protest_{irt} + X_{irt} + \epsilon_{irt} + \gamma_r + \eta_t$$

(7.1)

My second hypothesis studies repression effects on support for the opposition on the one hand, and for the regime on the other. I propose that while repression will dampen support for the opposition, it will not ameliorate evaluations of government. These hypotheses, and the models used to estimate them can be summarized as follows:

Hypothesis 2a. Repression dampens support for the opposition and its demands

$$Unfair\ Duma_{irt} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 repression_{irt} + X_{irt} + \epsilon_{irt} + \gamma_r + \eta_t$$

$$Shares\ Demands_{irt} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 repression_{irt} + X_{irt} + \epsilon_{irt} + \gamma_r + \eta_t$$

(7.2)

Hypothesis 2b. Repression does not increase support for incumbents

$$Gov\ support_{irt} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 repression_{irt} + X_{irt} + \epsilon_{irt} + \gamma_r + \eta_t$$

(7.3)

7.6 Results

Protest effects on public opinion

The models presented in Table 7.1 predict awareness of fraud and support for the demands of protesters as a function of regional protest events taking place up to the day of a

respondent's interview. This part of the analysis examines whether in regions that witnessed rallies, attitudes towards the protesters and their demands will vary as a function of the number of these events. Model 1 in Table 7.1 is estimated using OLS analysis because the dependent variable measures perceptions of electoral falsifications on a five-point scale, with higher values denoting that the respondents think that there had been great unfairness in the 2011 State Duma elections. Model 2 in Table 7.2 uses ordered logistic regression due to the ordinal nature of the dependent variable. The dependent variable in this model, which captures attitudes towards the protest movement, is measured on a scale that ranges from 1 to 4. Higher scores of this variable denote that respondents are strongly supportive of the protesters' demands. For both questions, the analysis restricts the sample of respondents to those who indicated awareness of the protest events that had occurred in their region prior to the survey. The results presented in Model 1 indicate that for every additional regional protest taking place up to the date of a respondent's interview, the likelihood that he or she will report higher levels of electoral falsifications in the State Duma election increases by a magnitude of ~ 0.009 . This effect is small, however, during this period, considering that citizens in regions that did experience unrest were exposed to an average of nine protest events up to the day of their interview. At nine protest events, which is the regional average, the effect of protest increases to $\sim .07$. Similarly, for respondents in Moscow, where by May over eighty protest events occurred, the effect of protest exposure increases to $\sim .71$. This effect is substantively important, considering that the variable capturing perceptions of electoral unfairness is measured on a five-point scale.

The protest variable, however, fails to reach statistical levels of significance in Model 2. The results at this stage therefore suggest that by the end of the protest wave, regional protest events had been unable to generate or indeed to maintain the support of regional publics. The statistically significant coefficient from the survey fixed effects, however,

suggests that support for the demands of the protesters, as well as perceptions of electoral falsifications, fluctuated significantly over the protest wave. In line with survey evidence from Russia's widely respected public opinion survey agency, the Levada Center, the results presented here suggest that by spring, protesters enjoyed lower support among the public than they did in the early winter months. When the analysis is repeated using the January survey alone, the regional protest events coefficient is positive and statistically significant at the 1 percent level. Holding all other covariates at their means, every additional protest event that took place over December 2011 and January 2012 increased the likelihood of respondents "strongly agreeing" with the demands of the protesters by a magnitude of .008 (SI for Chapter 7, Table 2, Section C).

Turning to the controls, only a handful of significant variables emerge. Prior participation in protest events of any type over the course of the last two years predicts higher perceptions of electoral injustice and support for the protesters. Individuals residing in urban, in contrast to those residing in rural, settlements report higher levels of electoral unfairness, an effect which is statistically significant at the 5 percent level, but are no more likely to support the demands advanced by protesters. Exposure to state-controlled media does not have a statistically significant effect on either perceptions of fraud or on attitudes towards the protesters. As one would theoretically anticipate, when compared to opposition voters, supporters of the pro-Kremlin United Russia party are less likely to report higher levels of electoral fraud and to share the protesters' demands. Voters who abstained from voting in the 2011 election are likewise less likely to support the demands of the opposition in Model 2. Individuals who report no improvement in their household conditions are equally more likely to perceive the 2011 State Duma elections as fraudulent. They are also more likely to support the broad demands advanced by the protest movement.

Table 7.1 **Local protests, awareness of fraud and political attitudes**

	(1) Electoral Unfairness (OLS)	(2) Support for Demands (Ordered Logit)
Regional Protest Frequency	0.009*** (0.003)	-0.0052 (0.004)
Protested Previous 2 years	0.331** (0.154)	0.743** (0.319)
Secondary Education ^A	0.094 (0.071)	0.077 (0.096)
Higher Education	0.108 (0.069)	0.019 (0.131)
Male	0.061 (0.065)	0.060 (0.105)
Age	-0.001 (0.002)	-0.002 (0.003)
Russian	0.094 (0.077)	0.074 (0.186)
Urban Settlement	0.229** (0.089)	0.116 (0.235)
Political News Watching	-0.038 (0.096)	-0.012 (0.169)
Voted UR ^B	-0.945*** (0.105)	-1.618*** (0.126)
Abstained	-0.074 (0.074)	-0.449*** (0.144)
Household: Same ^C	0.225*** (0.072)	0.411*** (0.154)
Household: Deteriorated	0.544*** (0.133)	0.520** (0.235)
Out of Labor Force ^D	0.030 (0.078)	-0.143 (0.134)
Unemployed	0.059 (0.110)	0.147 (0.286)
Survey Fixed Effects	-0.439*** (0.146)	-1.539*** (0.282)
Region Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes
Constant	2.784*** (0.269)	-3.464*** (0.471)
Observations	2,123	1,660
R-squared	0.26	0.14

Notes: Robust standard errors, clustered by regions in parentheses *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. The baselines are: A: Primary Education B: Voted for the Opposition; C: Household Evaluations: Improved; D: Employment Status: Employed.

Protests and Regime Strategies: Repression Effects

The theoretical framework advanced earlier in this work anticipates that the effect of regional protest on public opinion will be contingent on the use of police repression against protesters. I therefore begin by exploring whether the cognitive effects of protests are conditional on exposure to regime-led repression across regions. During the 2011-12 electoral protests, the use of violence against protesters, whether by the Special Purpose Police Units, pro-government groups such as *Nashi*, or regional police forces had been widespread across the national territory. Citizens saw the authorities move violently against protesters outside Moscow and St Petersburg; repression was used in thirteen regional capitals. Although the suppression of protest events was rarer during the winter months, violence against protesters increased in the spring, with 43 percent of all electoral protests taking place across Russia being subjected to some sort of disruption shortly after the March 2012 Presidential election.

To examine whether the use of state violence against protesters affected the relationship between protests and political attitudes, I turn to the Lankina Protest-Event Dataset and record whether in regions with protest activity, violence was used during any of the regional rallies that occurred up to the day of a respondent's interview. The new key independent variable, which replaces the variable of count of regional protest events, is coded as 1 if violence had been used against regional protesters anytime up to a respondent's interview and 0 if respondents only witnessed peaceful, that is, uninterrupted protest events within their region. Again, this variable varies by region and by the day of the respondent's interview. It is therefore possible that within one region, several respondents are interviewed before, and several others after, the use of repression against protesters. This was for example the case in Novosibirsk, where 68 % of all respondents were interviewed prior to the occurrence of one violent event and 32 % after the event. The analysis, which relies on

models that include regional and survey, or time fixed effects and standard errors clustered by regions, helps us observe how the use of violence against protesters within regions affects public opinion on nationally-important questions. The time, or survey fixed effects also help us address the fact that the use of violence against protesters was more likely towards the end of the protest movement.

Table 7.2 presents the results, and Figure 7.4 helps with their interpretation by presenting how perceptions of electoral falsifications and support for the demands of the opposition varied among two groups of respondents: those who up to the day of their interview experienced peaceful events alone and those who had experienced the use of regime-led repression against rallies. The left-hand panel of this figure presents adjusted probabilities from a model predicting perceptions of electoral falsifications in prior elections, while the right-hand panel predicts the likelihood that respondents exposed and not exposed to violent protest events will “agree” with the demands of the opposition. As the left-hand panel illustrates, perceptions of electoral unfairness are consistently higher among respondents in regions where only peaceful protest events occurred up to the day of the interview. The differences between the two groups of respondents are statistically significant. Holding all other covariates at their means, perceptions of electoral unfairness are lower by a magnitude of $\sim .5$ among respondents in regions where violently suppressed events took place (SI Table 3.6).

Table 7.2 **Repression and support for the opposition**

	(1) Duma Elections Unfair (OLS)	(2) Shares demands of protesters (Ordered logit)
At least 1 violently repressed event	-0.471*** (0.125)	-1.049*** (0.264)
Protested Previous 2 years	0.328** (0.155)	0.758** (0.316)
Secondary Education ^A	0.0925 (0.0699)	0.0853 (0.0940)
Higher Education	0.116 (0.0688)	0.0265 (0.131)
Male	0.0625 (0.0660)	0.0647 (0.105)
Age	-0.00131 (0.00215)	-0.00225 (0.00327)
Russian	0.0827 (0.0768)	0.0751 (0.186)
Urban Settlement	0.231** (0.0940)	0.128 (0.237)
Political News Watching	-0.0233 (0.0974)	-0.0353 (0.181)
Voted UR ^B	-0.949*** (0.104)	-1.624*** (0.126)
Abstained	-0.0688 (0.0740)	-0.464*** (0.144)
Household: Same ^C	0.232*** (0.0739)	0.424*** (0.162)
Household: Deteriorated	0.560*** (0.140)	0.521** (0.246)
Out of Labor Force ^D	0.0297 (0.0782)	-0.149 (0.135)
Unemployed	0.0673 (0.111)	0.119 (0.294)
Survey Fixed Effects	-0.258* (0.132)	-1.559*** (0.238)
Regional Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes
Constant	3.580*** (0.245)	-4.277*** (0.445)
Observations	2,123	1,660
R-squared	0.255	0.144

Robust standard errors in parentheses, *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1*** p<0.01, **

p<0.05, * p<0.1 The baselines are: A: Primary Education B: Voted for the Opposition; C:

Household Evaluations: Improved: D: Employment Status: Employed.

Similarly, the evidence provided in the right-hand panel of Figure 7.4, suggests that the use of regime-led suppression against regional protest events could indeed compromise protesters' ability to generate sympathy among the wider regional publics and to sway perceptions in a manner consistent with their demands. Holding all other covariates at their means, we see that respondents residing in regions in which at least one protest event had been violently suppressed up to the day of their interview, are by a magnitude of .17 (-.25, -.08) less likely to “agree” with the demands of the opposition than citizens residing in regions with peaceful events alone.

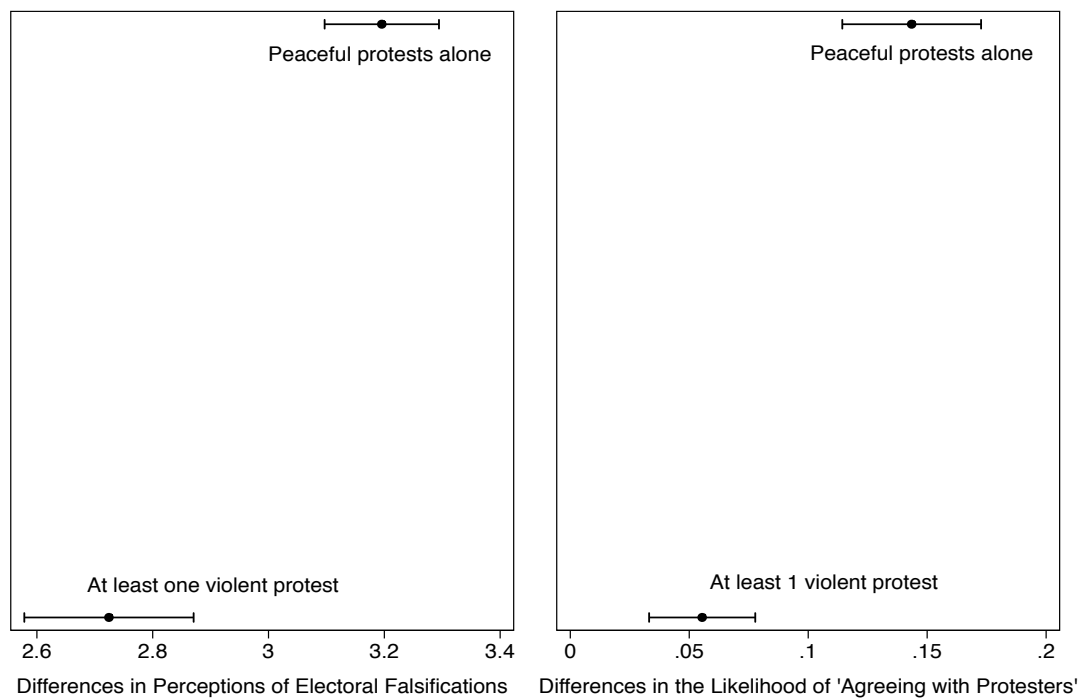


Figure 7.4 Repression and public opinion

Notes: The figure is based on the results presented in Table 7.2. It presents adjusted predicted probabilities from two models that predict perceptions of electoral falsifications (left-hand panel) and support for the demands of the protesters (right-hand panel) as a function of the nature of regional protest events taking place in respondents' regions up to the day of their interview. Respondents who reside in regions where the police used suppression against protesters at least once up to the day of a respondent's interview are assigned a score of “1.” We hold all other covariates at their means. Horizontal bars represent 95% CI.

Overall, evidence presented here provides strong support for my first hypothesis, which suggests that the use of repression against opposition parties and activists' can dampen their ability to attract the 'hearts and minds' of bystanders, or to sway public opinion in their favour. These results are robust to alternative specifications of this hypothesis presented in the SI for Chapter 7, Table 2, under Section C. Yet, there is still a possibility that since protest size traditionally predicts the use of suppression against protesters at the regional and national level, the suppression dummy could merely proxy for a larger pool of anti-regime activists in a region. The inclusion of regional and time (or survey) fixed effects help us account for differences between regions and across the two survey months. The empirical results also run counter to such concerns. Had the suppression dummy been a proxy for pro-democratic sentiment, it would be positively and not negatively associated with perceptions of unfairness and with support for the demands of the opposition.

Overall, these results suggest that protest suppression significantly compromised regional protesters' ability to generate support for their demands. Evidence provided here is in line with existing evidence from the 2011-2012 electoral protests, which suggests that Russians, while broadly supportive of street action, had been particularly critical of unsanctioned—and therefore more likely to be violently interrupted—protests.³⁷³ Results are also consistent with studies by Magaloni (2006, 2010) in that they demonstrate how risk-averse citizens may well shy away from violent protest events that endanger political order and stability in the country. Whether citizens favour order and social stability over the demand for electoral accountability is an important question with powerful public opinion consequences of electoral protests. Overall, the results presented in Figure 7.4 support the

³⁷³ (Smyth, Sobolev, and Soboleva 2012, 33)

main argument advanced in this chapter and in this thesis, about the conditional nature of the relationship between regional protest events and attitudes towards protesters. They propose that the suppression of protests has the potential to compromise regional protesters' ability to generate support for their demands. The evidence provided here speaks to a larger literature on strategies of authoritarian control during critical junctures, that is periods of revolutionary unrest with the potential to topple the regime and overthrow its leadership.

Repression and evaluations of government

The preceding analysis has presented compelling evidence in support of the hypothesis that the use of regime-led repression against protesters could dampen the effects of protest events on support for the protesters and for their demands. Yet, it has left the question of protest effects on support for the government unanswered. To examine whether the use of repression affects evaluations of government, Table 7.3 below replicates the analysis presented in Table 7.2, using three different survey items.

The first survey item comes from the combination of the White and RES surveys, and asks respondents to evaluate whether they approve of Dmitry Medvedev's performance in office. The language is standard, as respondents are asked the following: 'Some people like Dmitry Medvedev's activity in the presidency, and others do not. What about you, do you approve of Medvedev's activity in the post of President of Russia?' This variable ranges on 5-point scale, with higher values denoting greater support for Medvedev. Mean support for Medvedev is 3.35, with a standard deviation of just over 1 point. The second and third items, which are only available in the Russian Election Study (RES) of April/May 2012, tap on evaluations of Vladimir Putin instead. The first of these variables captures assessments of Putin's performance in office. Just like with the question on Medvedev's approval, this question is asked as follows: 'Some people like Vladimir Putin's activity, and others do not.

What about you, do you approve of Putin's activity in the post of Prime Minister of Russia during 2008-2012?'. This ranges on a 5-point scale, with higher values denoting greater levels of support. The mean of this variable is 3.54, with a standard deviation of one point. The third and final outcome variable also captures support for Putin in the Russian Election Study and is asked as follows: 'Please tell me, how much you agree or disagree with the following statement: When you hear someone criticize Vladimir Putin, you feel insulted'. I recode this variable into a dummy, assigning respondents who agree with this statement, a value of one, and those who disagree are assigned a value of zero. Descriptive statistics suggest that just 20% of respondents agreed with the statement.³⁷⁴ It is possible that this variable helps us better capture protest effects on support for Putin precisely as a function of protests. Throughout the protest wave, the slogan 'Russia without Putin' was echoed across Russia's eleven time zones. Protesters asked for Putin's resignation, and described United Russia – the party of power - as the 'party of swindlers and thieves'. Because there is little variation in the use of repression within-regions when I rely in the April/May survey alone, the analysis of repression effects on support for Vladimir Putin draws on both fixed (Models 2-3) and random (Models 4-5) effects models.

In neither specification, however, does the repression indicator reach statistical levels of significance. This is in line with Hypotheses 2b, and consistent with the broader theoretical argument advanced in the introduction to the thesis and of this chapter. As the theory proposes, the use of repression against protesters does not generate support for incumbents. Repression can, however, compromise the opposition's ability to generate support.

³⁷⁴ Results do not change if we treat this variable on ordinal, or continuous instead. Results remain consistent when we also treat the first and second outcome variables considered in Table 7.3, capturing evaluations of Medvedev's and Putin's approval as ordinal.

Control variables behave as follows. Prior participation in protest events of any type over the course of the last two years predicts lower support for Medvedev, yet does not influence assessments of Putin's performance. Support for Russia's presidential 'tandem' is also greater among female, as opposed to male respondents. In Models 2-4, individuals residing in urban settlements report lower support for Putin than their counterparts who reside in rural settlements. Exposure to state-controlled media only influences Putin's approval in Model 4. As one would theoretically anticipate, when compared to opposition voters, supporters of the pro-Kremlin United Russia party are more likely to approve of the tandem's performance. In Models 1, 2 and 4, individuals who report no change, or a decline in household economic conditions are equally less likely to support either Medvedev or Putin.

Table 7.3 Repression and support for incumbents

	<i>Fixed Effects Regressions</i>			<i>Random Effects Regressions</i>	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Medvedev Approval	Putin Approval	Supports Putin	Putin Approval	Supports Putin
Repression	-0.046 (0.032)	0.671 (0.420)	-1.141 (1.685)	0.022 (0.057)	-0.238 (0.265)
Protested in past	-0.229** (0.095)	-0.043 (0.103)	-0.349 (0.315)	-0.030 (0.104)	-0.120 (0.323)
Education ^A	-0.036 (0.049)	0.024 (0.067)	0.238 (0.196)	0.0242 (0.062)	0.279 (0.174)
Higher Education	-0.017 (0.051)	-0.027 (0.088)	0.401* (0.225)	-0.033 (0.078)	0.451** (0.204)
Male	-0.133** (0.051)	-0.146*** (0.045)	0.104 (0.173)	-0.150*** (0.048)	0.132 (0.167)
Age	0.002 (0.001)	0.000 (0.002)	0.012** (0.006)	-0.000 (0.002)	0.010* (0.005)
Russian	-0.133* (0.075)	-0.118 (0.080)	-0.047 (0.204)	-0.186** (0.068)	0.242 (0.271)
Urban Settlement	-0.110 (0.079)	-0.261** (0.114)	-0.802** (0.360)	-0.211* (0.106)	0.045 (0.322)
Watches news	0.091 (0.119)	0.177 (0.105)	-0.136 (0.338)	0.196* (0.105)	-0.042 (0.326)
Voted UR ^B	0.740*** (0.071)	0.903*** (0.071)	-0.174 (0.156)	0.890*** (0.066)	-0.247 (0.160)
Abstained	0.215** (0.086)	0.350*** (0.083)	-0.223 (0.263)	0.340*** (0.081)	-0.250 (0.239)
Household: Same ^C	-0.177*** (0.060)	-0.241*** (0.076)	-0.220 (0.165)	-0.264*** (0.072)	-0.236 (0.183)
Deteriorated	-0.539*** (0.077)	-0.493*** (0.096)	-0.245 (0.209)	-0.511*** (0.092)	-0.284 (0.229)
Not in labor force ^D	0.084 (0.077)	0.210*** (0.055)	0.0655 (0.218)	0.219*** (0.056)	0.103 (0.203)
Unemployed	0.120 (0.117)	0.112 (0.107)	0.123 (0.359)	0.128 (0.110)	0.163 (0.294)
Region FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Survey FE	Yes	No	No	No	No
Constant	3.260*** (0.182)	2.850*** (0.388)	-0.0345 (1.933)	3.466*** (0.165)	-2.106*** (0.693)
Observations	2,505	1,374	1,374	1,374	1,374
R-squared	0.162	0.253	0.11	0.227	0.016

Robust standard errors in parentheses, *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

The baselines are: A: Primary Education B: Voted for the Opposition; C: Household Evaluations: Improved: D: Employment Status: Employed.

7.7 Addressing concerns

A potential objection to the conclusions derived from the statistical analysis is that a region's culture of activism is likely to be correlated with the number and size of regional protest events and with regional public opinion. In politically liberal regions, one might argue, citizens are more likely to show awareness of the national protest movement and would be predisposed to support the demands made at local anti-regime rallies. Spatial variations in civic activism and democratic practices are pronounced in democracies³⁷⁵ and under electoral authoritarianism.³⁷⁶ To address these concerns, I instrument the size and frequency of protests that take place in December and January alone, using the *deviation of the daily temperature on the day of the protest from the average temperature for the respective month in the region*. I first estimate the average temperature in the region for each month, and then estimate how much warmer or colder the weather was on days of rallies, and take the 'average' deviation as an instrument. This measure varies across regions, and over-time within regions.

To better explain how the instrument is constructed we could consider the following example. Let's assume that a respondent is interviewed on January 8th in Moscow. Up to the date of that respondent's interview, 17 protests took place in Moscow on various dates: let's say December 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th, 10th, 11th, 17th, 18th, 20th, 21st, 24th, 26th, 31st, and January 8th. The instrument takes the average deviation of the daily temperature on each day with protest from the average temperature for Moscow in December – for the first set of protests – and for January – for the protest on January 8th. Now, let's assume that on January 10th, there is another protest. This means that the respondent interviewed on January 11th, is “treated” to

³⁷⁵ (Almond and Verba 1963; Putnam 1993)

³⁷⁶ (Frye, Reuter, and Szakonyi 2014; Gel'man and Lankina 2008; Lankina and Getachew 2012; Lankina, Libman, and Obydenkova 2016a, 2016b; Lankina and Skovoroda 2016; Moraski and Reisinger 2014)

18 protests. The new instrument would be different for this respondent, as it would precisely take into account the deviation of the daily temperature on January 11th from the average temperature for Moscow in January 2012.

Instrumental Variables (IV) Regressions: Key assumptions

In this setup, I think of the frequency and size of protests as an outcome that is determined by political leaders, or protest organizers on the one hand, and protest participants on the other. I also assume that when the weather forecast predicts cold weather, or when protest organisers wake up and the temperature is very low, they will be *less* likely to stage any protests. In case protests have been scheduled to take place weeks in advance, cold weather could prevent multiple, usually smaller, rallies and spontaneous protests staged in support of the ‘big’ protest in the regional capital, from taking place. Consider the following example: on December 24th, 2011, the day Gorbachev called on Putin to resign, several protest events took place across the country. On that day, 3 protest events took place in Samara, and 2 in Nizhny Novgorod. The hypothesis driving the choice of the instrument predicts that cold weather could influence not only whether protests would take place, but also how many regional protests will occur. Another plausible assumption is also that cold weather affects rally attendance. This expectation is straightforward, and it has been repeatedly documented that colder weather – as well as rainfall for example - could reduce participation in rallies. Focusing on the 2011-2012 electoral protests in Russia, Anton Sobolev also documents a positive correlation between the average regional temperature in January and participation in protests.³⁷⁷

As with every instrumental design, we need to make some additional assumptions. First, I assume that temperature shocks, or *deviation of the daily temperature on the day of*

³⁷⁷ (Sobolev 2013)

the protest from the average temperature for the respective month in the region on the day of the protests is random, that is, not necessarily correlated with other factors that affect political outcomes. Yet, one potential concern is that colder places also tend to share certain political characteristics. This would arguably be a greater concern if we relied on average monthly temperature across regions, or if we used a measure of average temperature on days of rallies, as opposed to an indicator of ‘temperature shocks’. In other words, using a measure of “temperature shocks” could facilitate identification. To address such concerns, the IV regressions presented in this chapter also control for regional democracy, using a media independence variable as a proxy. Second, I assume that cold weather affects awareness of fraud only through the number of protest events and protesters that take to the streets.

This exclusion restriction is well established in the literature, yet several concerns remain unresolved. Madestam et al. acknowledge two ways in which this assumption could be violated.³⁷⁸ First, bad weather could make a rally less pleasant for actual attendees, which would subsequently energize them less. As I am here concerned with protest effects on bystanders, this is perhaps a smaller concern for this setup. Here, I also assume that bystanders infer the power of the movement by mainly looking at the number and average size of events that take place in their region; such “exposure” could be either direct, as when people see the events themselves, or mediated as when bystanders learn about the events through word of mouth or social media. Second, Madestam *et al.* suggest that weather could directly affect the likelihood that mass media cover the protests.³⁷⁹ Although previous research has established a robust correlation between the frequency of protests in Russia and their coverage in national, state controlled media, I am not in a position to document how the coverage of protest in regional media varied over time.³⁸⁰ This is a limitation that must

³⁷⁸ (Madestam et al. 2013)

³⁷⁹ (Madestam et al. 2013)

³⁸⁰ (Lankina, Watanabe, and Netesova 2016)

be acknowledged, and a fruitful avenue for future research. Yet, even with these two caveats in mind, and in line with prior research, instrumenting protest effects on public opinion with temperature can be worthwhile.

Results

Table 7.4 below presents the results. Models 1 and 2 use average ‘weather shocks’, or regional deviations across days with rallies alone to instrument the frequency of regional protests. The dependent variable in Model 1 captures evaluations of electoral unfairness, and the dependent variable on Model 2 captures support for the protesters. To facilitate estimation, and allow the use of an IV-probit estimator, I recode this variable into a dummy, so that respondents who ‘partly, or fully agree’ with the demands of the protesters are assigned a value of 1, and those who do not agree, are assigned a value of 0. Yet, the results don’t change if we treat this outcome variable as ordered, or continuous instead. Overall, Russian citizens appeared particularly alert to the conduct of falsifications during this period – almost 35% of all respondents in the January 2012 sample reported that the election was dishonest and unfair. Demonstrators also appeared to enjoy widespread support in January, with over 70% of all respondents in our sample reporting to ‘partly, or fully agree’ with the demands of the protesters. Models presented below also include the controls presented in Models 7.1 and 7.2, and also control for media independence. While it is unlikely that places that experienced colder, or warmer-than the monthly average weather on days with rallies will also systematically shared certain political characteristics for example, the controls introduced at the regional level could further help alleviate such concerns.

Overall, the second-stage IV regressions presented below suggest that as the frequency of regional protest events increases, respondents are more likely are to report higher awareness of fraud on the one hand, and greater support for the demands of the opposition on the other. Adjusted predictions based on Model 1 suggest that while at one

protest event alone predicted awareness of fraud is around 2.9 (95% CI: 2.79, 3.030), at five events, which is the regional average in the early winter months, reported fraud awareness increased to 3.1 (95% CI: 3.033, 3.16). In Moscow, where by late January 20 events took place, predicted awareness of fraud increases to 3.8 (95% CI: 3.35, 4.25) Model 2 also suggests that holding all other covariates at their empirical mean, every additional rally increases the probability that respondents would support the demands of the protesters by .42 (90% CI: .00, .08). Results from simple OLS and logit analysis presented in Table 1 under section C for Chapter 7 reports that these results are consistent with those we get in the absence of the instrument.

Table 7.4 **IV regressions**

	(1) Unfair Duma	(2) Shares Demands
Protest Measure	0.047*** (0.015)	0.042* (0.026)
Protested previously	0.632*** (0.193)	0.630 (0.383)
Secondary Education ^A	0.137 (0.089)	0.0205 (0.154)
Higher Education	0.112 (0.108)	0.0954 (0.191)
Male	0.017 (0.066)	0.0814 (0.118)
Age	-0.000 (0.002)	0.006 (0.004)
Russian	-0.024 (0.136)	-0.016 (0.254)
Urban	-0.036 (0.081)	-0.108 (0.152)
Watches News	0.106 (0.207)	-0.770 (0.493)
Voted UR ^B	-1.031*** (0.074)	-1.021*** (0.126)
Household: Same ^C	0.251*** (0.078)	0.164 (0.137)
Household: Worse	0.839*** (0.10)	0.418** (0.187)
Employed ^D	0.072 (0.074)	-0.071 (0.136)
Media Independence	-0.152*** (0.046)	-0.082 (0.071)
Constant	3.193*** (0.335)	1.541** (0.674)
Observations	1,096	666

Notes: The table reports coefficients from two-stage least squares (Models 1.1-2) and IV-probit models (Models 2.1-2). Standard errors in parentheses *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. Baselines: A: Primary Education B: Did not vote for United Russia; C: Household: Improved: D: Not Employed. The smaller number of observations in Model 2 is due to the fact that only respondents who know about the demands of the protest movement are asked whether they agree with them or not. First stage results are presented in section C in the SI for Chapter 7.

7.8 Conclusion

The fourth, and final empirical chapter of the thesis has studied how the use of high intensity repression against protesters in the streets of Russia enabled President Putin's regime to overcome its most challenging hour yet. While the third empirical chapter considered how the use of low-intensity repression moderates the effects of terrorist violence on support for the incumbent, the thesis concludes by examining instances of high-intensity repression against opposition parties and anti-government protesters.

Russia's 'snow revolution', as the 2011-12 electoral protest cycle has been previously described, melted quickly with the spring. By illustrating how suppression dampened the effects of protests on public opinion and turned Russia's silent majority away from support for the protesters and their demands, this work shows why Russia's 'snow revolution' never was. One limitation of this chapter is that we do not really know how long the impact of the protest events on attitudes towards government, or towards the opposition really endures. Additional research is needed to identify how costly, yet unsuccessful attempts at regime change and the coinciding use of violence affect long-term support for the regime and its opposition under autocracy. Extending the research presented here into a wider sample of electoral authoritarian states who have experienced unrest in the Middle East, North Africa and Eastern Europe and carefully tracing the mechanisms through which earlier failure can affect not only attitudes but also future collective actions and regime trajectories constitutes a fruitful avenue for future research.

In conclusion, this chapter offers support for the hypothesis that while physical repression can dampen support for the organisers of the protest events, it does not increase support for the regime. Moreover, descriptive evidence presented in this chapter shows that the use of repression against protesters intensified during the last few months of the 2011-2012 protest wave, and just before the March 2012 election, which saw Vladimir Putin return

to the Presidency. This is consistent with the argument that repression should be intensified after all other policy tools have failed to pre-empt the threat of a revolution. In combining detailed protest event datasets with evidence from public opinion surveys collected during the electoral protest wave, this chapter contributes to an influential literature on the spread of revolutionary unrest, and speaks to debates about the factors that condition the success, and failure of (colour) revolutions.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

8.1 Overview

This thesis began with the puzzle of a broader disconnect between negative shocks to citizen income and security and unfaltering support for illiberal incumbents. I propose that such incongruence can be attributed to how governments respond to shocks, and to their ability to manage public opinion. By influencing how citizens evaluate incumbent performance, as well as which actors they hold responsible when performance is poor, illiberal incumbents could ameliorate the political consequences of shocks on the levels of support they enjoy. My theoretical argument predicted that, by engaging in tactical redistribution and propaganda, illiberal incumbents can appease a discontented electorate and claim credit for efforts to address adversity. Propaganda can also help incumbents deflect blame, so that shock-related grievances have little effect on evaluations of government. The regime uses repressive measures only after tactical redistribution and propaganda have failed to prevent their support eroding and citizens from taking to the streets.

To test the applicability of the argument, the thesis leverages evidence from contemporary Russia and studies government and citizen responses to shocks beyond the well-studied economic domain. Despite variation in their origins, all shocks under scrutiny in the thesis revealed negative information about the incumbent and his ability to deliver wellbeing, stability and security. Economic downturns are negative shocks to citizen income, for example, while natural disasters and terror attacks are negative shocks to both income and security. Finally, widespread protests with the potential to turn violent increase concerns about street order and about bystanders' and protesters' security. The selection of cases also presents us

with important variation in background conditions as the government faces a different set of budget constraints that either facilitates or hinders investments in tactical redistribution.

Chapter 4 studies how tactical redistribution and propaganda that shift the blame away from the presidential tandem ameliorate evaluations of government performance in response to shocks on the one hand and dampened attributions of blame on the other. Chapter 5 shows how propaganda in the form of economic news coverage in the state-controlled media can moderate the effect of economic deterioration on government approval. Chapter 6 draws evidence from government responses to the threat of persistent terrorism to show how competition over the distribution of generous fiscal transfers and an assertive domestic opposition can encourage governments to increase the use of low-intensity repression against opposition parties. Finally, Chapter 7 shows how, when propaganda has failed to prevent citizens from taking to the streets and unrest from spreading and the government cannot target everyone with benefits in an ad hoc manner, the incumbent intensifies the use of physical repression against opponents and protesters.

8.2 Contribution

Why do illiberal incumbents' approval ratings traditionally exhibit little responsiveness to shocks that take place under their watch? According to some accounts, fear of repression encourages citizens to hide their true dissatisfaction with the regime, give false statements to pollsters and shy away from street action. I disagree. Drawing on empirical evidence from recent survey experiments taking place in Russia, my thesis proposes that support for illiberal incumbents is meaningful, i.e. that it is not driven by either fear of repression or social desirability bias alone. Illiberal incumbents' popularity and its resilience to shocks and crises, I propose, also depends on leaders' ability to manage popular beliefs and convince the masses that they are competent.

My thesis thus shifts focus from existing scholarship that tries to understand ‘why citizens support autocracies, when they in fact disapprove of them’.³⁸¹ I seek instead to understand why citizens actually approve illiberal incumbents even when collective and negative shocks to citizen income and security reveal government malpractices and incompetence. I contribute to the study of authoritarian politics, as well as to existing debates regarding the survival of illiberal regimes, by proposing that incumbents’ ability to manage popular beliefs ameliorates the effect of various shocks on the levels of support they enjoy. The findings, which rely on the combination of original data on government responses to shocks and individual-level public opinion surveys, contribute to debates on both the longevity of electoral authoritarianism and on the formation of public opinion outside established democracies. Combining evidence from government responses to shocks and public responses to shocks and government policies, the thesis has sought to fill important gaps in our understanding of the links between shocks and support for electoral authoritarians, the actors who often embody personalist regimes and have far greater importance for their stability than other political actors, or even the dominant party. Overall, the evidence provided here suggests that, in seeking to understand the support non-democratic incumbents enjoy and the surprising resilience of their popularity, we ought to pay greater attention to the political conditioning of public opinion.

In arguing that the need to prevent support from eroding and unrest from spreading motivates illiberal incumbents’ responses to negative and collective shocks to citizen income and security, my thesis joins a growing body of research on the factors that motivate authoritarian regime responsiveness.³⁸² Investments in public goods, relief aid and infrastructure development provided in the aftermath of shocks and crises are some examples

³⁸¹ (Magaloni 2006, 13)

³⁸² (Besley and Burgess 2002; Chen, Pan, and Xu 2016; Pan 2015)

of illiberal incumbents acquiescing to the demands of society. Yet government responses to shocks do not take the form of targeted redistribution alone, and neither propaganda nor repression constitute forms of responsiveness to social demands. While the manipulation of information in state-controlled media prevents shocks from undermining the popularity of electoral authoritarian regimes, it does not improve citizens' wellbeing or living standards. When government responses to shocks dampen citizens' ability to sanction poor performance, weak accountability mechanisms – given that, under electoral autocracy, electoral institutions do not motivate government responsiveness – are obscured even further. To conclude, and in line with Boix and Svolik, I see government responses to shocks under electoral autocracies as motivated by the same desires that motivate responsiveness under democracy – namely, the need to maximise tenure.³⁸³ In responding to shocks, illiberal incumbents signal competence and commitment, thus reducing the incentives for people to either withdraw support from the regime or take to the streets.

The empirical analysis generates important insights into the various forms that propaganda can take under electoral authoritarianism. Most interestingly, neither of the two chapters finds robust evidence of censorship, i.e. evidence suggesting that the government sought to either ignore or crowd out information on either the 2010 wildfires or the most recent economic downturn, taking place after 2014. In my second empirical chapter, for example, economic news reporting in the Kremlin-controlled media does not decline when performance is poor. In good times and bad, state-controlled media appear to report economic indicators as they are. What does emerge, however, is a strategic effort to influence whom citizens will blame for the effects of various shocks. In the context of a dominant regime with a very high

³⁸³ (Boix and Svolik 2013) As Gehlbach, Sonin and Svolik also remind us, many models of authoritarian politics rely precisely on the assumption that autocratic rulers and their democratic counterparts 'are motivated by the same desires [...] and are similarly rational in maximizing their preferences' (Gehlbach, Sonin, and Svolik 2015, 567)

degree of personalism, as is the case in contemporary Russia, government-led propaganda also appears to be directed at preventing various shocks from undermining the popularity of the leader. In the case of the economic downturn, for example, and in order to prevent deterioration from undermining the popularity of President Putin, the Kremlin shifts responsibility to the west and pushes an image of Russia as a country under siege. Putin is seldom mentioned in news that reports poor economic performance. References to the president signal instead his commitment to protecting the most vulnerable social groups and to alleviating the consequences of the downturn. In the case of the 2010 wildfires, the government actively shifted the blame to actors at the regional and federal levels of power at home. Overall, by showing that periods of poor performance are associated with propaganda that aims to manipulate responsibility attributions – as opposed to censoring information about downturns – the thesis makes a nuanced contribution to the study of propaganda under illiberal rule.

My thesis also paints a nuanced picture of the conditions under which illiberal incumbents are more likely to use repression against regime opponents and activists. I do not challenge the argument that lack of institutional constraints or the widespread use of repression could be the essence of autocracy.³⁸⁴ There should also be no doubt that illiberal incumbents will far more readily engage their military apparatus against protesters than is seen under democratically elected governments. Yet my argument predicts that repression is not at the forefront of government responses to shocks or government efforts to manipulate popular beliefs more broadly, as it does not enable incumbents to generate the type of support they need to lower the costs of holding on to power. The likelihood that the government will use either low- or high-intensity repression against opposition parties and activists increases only when the government is unable to prevent support from eroding through other means. This finding moves away from one of the most standard images of dictatorship, as a form of government

³⁸⁴ (Gehlbach, Sonin, and Svolik 2015)

sustained by either the active use of repression or the fear its potential use spreads among the governed.

By connecting the macro and micro levels of analysis using detailed evidence from government responses to shocks and public opinion surveys, the thesis joins several studies in revisiting the effects of policy cues on citizens' attributions of responsibility in democracies and extends the agenda to electoral authoritarianism.³⁸⁵ This is an important contribution, as our understanding of the micro-level mechanisms by which governments outside of established democracies influence public opinion and generate support remain poorly understood. Very few studies empirically tackle the relationship between shocks, government responses and public opinion under electoral autocracies, while the kinds of detailed data collected for this thesis are not readily available for many electoral authoritarian governments. Overall, my results suggest that regime responses to negative and collective shocks to income and security could ameliorate their effect on public opinion, and suggest limits on citizens' ability to hold electoral authoritarians to account. By engaging in policies that ameliorate the effects of shock, incumbents can maintain support even in the wake of government failure.

Secondary Contributions

My thesis also contributes to the study of contemporary Russian politics, helping to account for the high levels of support Putin has enjoyed in recent years. Recent political developments ranging from Russia's involvement in Syria to its role over the settlement of the crisis with North Korea, as well as ongoing investigations into the country's interference in the 2016 American elections, make the task of better understanding Russia and its president a very topical and policy-relevant task. There is currently little doubt that in recent years Putin has

³⁸⁵ See for example: (Bechtel and Hainmueller 2011; Cole, Healy, and Werker 2012a; Healy and Malhotra 2009; Manacorda, Miguel, and Vigorito 2011)

come to embody (the stability of) the Russian nation and not just the office of the president. Yet this is not an outcome of Russian culture or of the popular myth that wants ‘the tsar to be good, but his boyars to be bad’. It is in fact well-crafted policies that the administration has implemented not least in response to shocks and deteriorating performance that can help us account for Putin’s popularity. As the empirical chapters highlight, when unable to invest in tactical redistribution Moscow intensifies the use of propaganda in the form of patriotic appeals and anti-western sentiment on the one hand and restricts the opposition’s ability to organise and campaign on the other. The empirical cases the thesis examines also constitute some of the most critical challenges the Russian government has faced in recent years. Understanding what factors enabled Moscow to overcome them is an important task in its own right.

The different empirical chapters also seek to make more specific contributions to the literatures of regime support and stability under illiberal rule. By combining evidence from policy interventions and public opinion data to study how government strategies affect the process by which citizens evaluate government and attribute responsibility under electoral authoritarianism, my first empirical chapter on Russia’s 2010 wildfires offers one of the first empirical tests of government accountability outside the world’s democracies. This chapter contributes to the literature by theorising and providing empirical estimates of how, in addition to generous aid, domestic ‘diversionary gambles’ such as the dismissals of federal government and regional officers enable the Executive or actors at the top rungs of the country’s ruling coalition to ward off negative political consequences of shocks and downturns.

My second empirical chapter provides evidence on the different forms Kremlin-led coverage of economic news has taken in recent years and on how exposure to this news coverage has influenced attributions of blame for the downturn. Understanding how illiberal incumbents manipulate economic news still remains a largely unexplored terrain. This chapter therefore contributes to a broader literature on media effects on public opinion outside of

established democracies, and has implications for many other non-democracies that rely on the support of the population to reduce the costs of holding on to power and need to provide positive economic growth to legitimise their rule.

Examining how domestic terrorism affects public opinion under illiberal rule is also a largely uncovered terrain. While an influential body of literature recognises the threat terrorist violence poses to the stability of illiberal democracies, we know relatively little about how citizens attribute blame in the aftermath of attacks and how illiberal incumbents try to moderate their effects. Conclusions reached in my third empirical chapter thus have important implications for our understanding of the effects of domestic terrorism in ethnically divided illiberal democracies. The findings also have important implications for explaining government responses to the threat of persistent terrorism. The fact that attribution of responsibility for terror attacks is lower in less competitive regions, where the incumbent has successfully imposed limitations on local media and opposition activity, further highlights the threat terrorist violence could pose for democratic retrenchment. Further examining whether terrorism in illiberal regimes is associated with authoritarian backsliding, as well as whether these effects are exacerbated when poor economic performance prevents large investments in tactical redistribution, constitute fruitful avenues for future research.

Finally, my last empirical chapter relies on novel protest and survey data to provide one of the first empirical tests of the hypothesis that regime repression shapes attitudes in autocracies. By revealing a conditional relationship between regime interventions and street unrest, this chapter makes an original contribution to scholarship on authoritarian vulnerability and resilience to street discontent.

8.3 Beyond Russia

Studying how the Russian government has responded to a set of critical shocks to citizen income and security, the thesis contributes to our understanding of how non-democratic incumbents manage public opinion. The arguments made here, however, could apply well beyond the post-Soviet region. As already noted in the introduction, Venezuela's Hugo Chavez and Turkey's Recep Erdoğan are two more examples of illiberal leaders enjoying great levels of popular support. High levels of approval for themselves and their regimes has enabled Chavez and Erdoğan to overcome political shocks in the form of counter-revolutions and coups, as well as permitting them to enact constitutional reforms that have eroded democracy over time. The strategies these leaders employ have also overlapped. Using pro-regime or government controlled media, they amassed high levels of support by projecting an image of strong and competent leadership. By engaging in tactical redistribution when the economy performed well, Chavez and Erdoğan also gained the loyalty of economically vulnerable social groups. A conditional cash transfer programme in Turkey, for example, is argued to have been overwhelmingly targeted toward districts where the challenger was ideologically closer to the incumbent – helping the Justice and Development Party (AKP) perform better at the polls.³⁸⁶ In Venezuela, the mobilisation of slum dwellers in response to the anti-Chavez coup of 11 April 2002 showed that Chavez's decision to halt the privatisation programme enjoyed not passive acquiescence but rather the active support of the lower classes.³⁸⁷

Similarly, enjoying high levels of popular support, Chavez was less likely to attack the political opposition in the country than his successor Nicolas Maduro is.³⁸⁸ Executive takeover of democracy in Turkey also rarely involved the threat of force or overt violence. Active or high-intensity repression of the liberal-progressive opposition in Turkey took an unprecedented

³⁸⁶ (Aytaç 2014)

³⁸⁷ (Ellner 2003)

³⁸⁸ (Neuman 2015)

turn in 2013, in the aftermath of the Gezi Park protests. The empirical evidence also suggests a complementary relationship between a government's ability to tactically redistribute and manipulate information well beyond Russia. Guriev and Treisman, for example, show that economic deterioration in Turkey between 2010 and 2012 was accompanied by an increase in censorship and the imprisonment of journalists critical of the ruling regime. Fuelled by growth, however, China's propaganda strategy has in recent years shifted from one of overt intimidation to one of where economic incentives are used to co-opt editorial staff and journalists.³⁸⁹

But does the argument advanced in the thesis pertain to modern electoral autocracies alone? And how applicable is the argument about incumbents' ability to manipulate public opinion outside of regimes with high degrees of personalism? As far as the first question is concerned, there has been a distinctive shift in the types of policies old and modern dictators use to gain support. For dictators such as Hitler and Stalin, violence clearly came first. Compared to their predecessors, however, electoral authoritarians such as Alberto Fujimori of Peru were also less likely to make use of violent repression or mass murder.³⁹⁰ Old dictators also used propaganda to indoctrinate as opposed to just convince the masses of their competence. One could plausibly argue that the spread of education and information as well as modern communication technologies have had a major influence on how contemporary incumbents manage public opinion. A large body of literature acknowledges the threat new information and communication technologies pose to the stability of electoral authoritarianism, noting how online social media has already facilitated protests in Egypt, Russia, China and the rest of the world.³⁹¹ Moreover, while illiberal incumbents could decide overnight to block access to social media platforms and independent sources of information, such a decision does

³⁸⁹ (Guriev and Treisman 2015b)

³⁹⁰ (Guriev and Treisman 2015b)

³⁹¹ (Enikolopov, Petrova, and Zhuravskaya 2011; Onuch 2015; Reuter and Szakonyi 2015)

not come cheap. Erdoğan's ban on Twitter in early 2014, for example, was met with international condemnation and street protests, leading to it being lifted just two weeks after it was imposed. By compromising incumbents' ability to effectively censor information, modern communication technologies could have also prompted incumbents to engage in blame-shifting rhetoric instead.

As far as the second question is concerned, it is possible that the level of personalism at play shapes the nature that government propaganda takes but not necessarily whether propaganda is used or not. Government responses to shocks in regimes with high levels of personalism are first and foremost motivated by the need to protect the incumbent's popularity and legitimacy. By having less to fear from coalition elites,³⁹² leaders in regimes with high degrees of personalism are also more likely to respond to shocks by engaging in policies and rhetoric that shift the blame not only abroad but also to political actors at the lower rungs of the country's ruling structure. Yet when personalist support declines, and the leader is no longer perceived as competent, discontented citizens are more likely to take to the streets asking for leader turnover or regime change. It should thus come as no surprise that the death of the leader and times of succession are two of the most difficult challenges regimes with high levels of personalist rule face.

8.4 Limitations and Future Work

As I noted in the introduction to the thesis, with their preference for opacity and low transparency autocracies make the task of inferring government intent particularly challenging. To infer state preferences in the context of the thesis, I have studied the government's and the leader's rhetoric and revealed behaviour. In carrying out the empirical analysis I was able to access a plethora of public opinion surveys and construct detailed datasets of government

³⁹² According to Geddes, the importance of the leader also gives elites and rival factions greater incentive to cooperate with one another and to remain loyal to the autocrat (Geddes 1999b, 122)

responses to shocks. Yet my ability to test hypotheses was constrained by the availability of questions and survey items in pre-designed surveys. There is no doubt that the analysis would have greatly benefitted from access to more detailed or nuanced indicators of media exposure, for example. Survey experiments would also enable me to provide a more direct test of the effectiveness of government propaganda, in general, and of how different blame-shifting and credit-claiming strategies help incumbents to ameliorate the effect of shocks on the levels of support they enjoy.

From a theoretical standpoint, there are several questions about illiberal incumbents' ability to manage popular beliefs that have not been explored in this thesis. By focusing on government responses to shocks after these have emerged, the thesis has little empirical evidence to offer about how authoritarian regimes respond to social demands during normal times, i.e. periods when the authoritarian equilibrium is not shaken. While my theory assumes that fear of collective action will be a major driver of regime responsiveness and expects that the incentives to be responsive increase as the threat of unrest also increases under equilibrium as well,³⁹³ this is nevertheless an argument that needs to be rigorously tested. Likewise, by focusing on the political conditioning of popular beliefs, my thesis has little to say about the many individual-level attributes that could drive resistance to government responses to shocks. It could, for example, be the case that government-led appeals on the need for street order and stability as protests unfold are more effective among respondents who spent their formative years in the 1990s and who thus have vivid memories of the economic decline and chaos the country experienced during that decade. This would constitute a very fruitful avenue for future research.

³⁹³ See for example: (Chen, Pan, and Xu 2016)

Furthermore, focusing on ad hoc government responses to shocks as it does, my argument does not engage with the question of regime learning effects. The decision not to engage with learning effects has also informed my decision to present the empirical chapters in a thematic as opposed to a chronological order. However, this does not mean that in the aftermath of shocks government actors and their spin-doctors do not study what worked well in shaping popular beliefs and what did not, adjusting their future responses to similar shocks accordingly.³⁹⁴ In fact, many commentators have suggested that a key factor driving Putin to invest in publicity stunts was his very poor response to the sinking of the unsinkable submarine Kursk in August 2000, which led to the death of all 118 crew members. A few months after, Putin was shamed for not returning from his holidays more promptly and for rejecting offers of international assistance.

Moreover, we are yet to observe whether protracted economic recession lasting several consecutive years will lead Russians to the streets blaming Putin. Large anti-corruption protests staged by prominent opposition leader Alexei Navalny in the spring of 2017 were attended by millions all across Russia. Yet, and this is the paradox my second empirical chapter also addresses, these events did not cause Putin's approval ratings to erode. Even while Medvedev's approval witnessed a sharp drop of 10 percentage points – the steepest in his career – these large-scale protests did not undermine Putin's popularity. Nevertheless, there should be no doubt that managing either his succession or a third term in office will be a major challenge for Putin in 2018, the year of the next presidential election.

The work I conducted for this thesis has shaped my research agenda for many years to come. My first empirical chapter highlights the importance of understanding the conditions under which the dismissals of ruling elites could act as a 'corrective device', ameliorating the

³⁹⁴ See for example: (Sperling 2015)

popularity of illiberal leaders. Survey experiments could also allow us to provide a more direct test of the argument that by managing public opinion, and conditioning expectations as well as evaluations of economic performance, incumbents could obstruct accountability. Studying whether terrorism is associated with democratic retrenchment across dictatorships is also important. While prior scholarship notes that countries beset with terrorism sustain a commitment to democracy, very few works test this hypothesis using evidence from already fragile or hybrid regimes.³⁹⁵ Examining whether terrorism in illiberal regimes is associated with democratic retrenchment, as well as whether these effects are exacerbated by a poorly performing economy, constitute fruitful avenues for timely research.

Finally, the present thesis has little to say about how long citizen gratitude for tactical redistribution lasts, for example, or what the short- and long-term legacies of high-intensity repression are. Does repression make it less likely that activists will return to the streets, for example? Or does it convince the masses that political change is possible in the country? These are critical questions, which could be fruitfully answered by collecting rich historical evidence from failed revolutions around the world.

³⁹⁵ (Eubank and Weinberg 2001)

Supplementary Information for Chapter 3

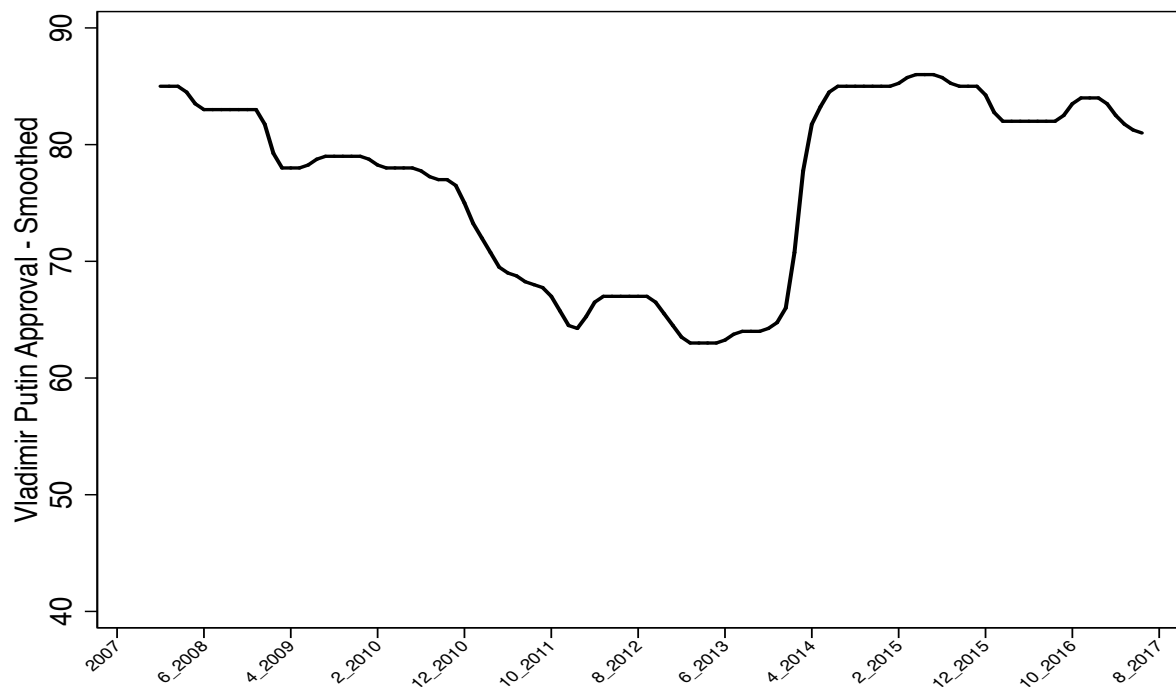


Figure 1: **I replicate Figure 3.3 in Chapter 3 using a non-linear smoother to identify the underlying trend in Putin’s approval time-series.** The time series presents how Vladimir Putin’s approval fluctuated from the early months of 2000 until the summer of 2017. Data come from the Levada Foundation.

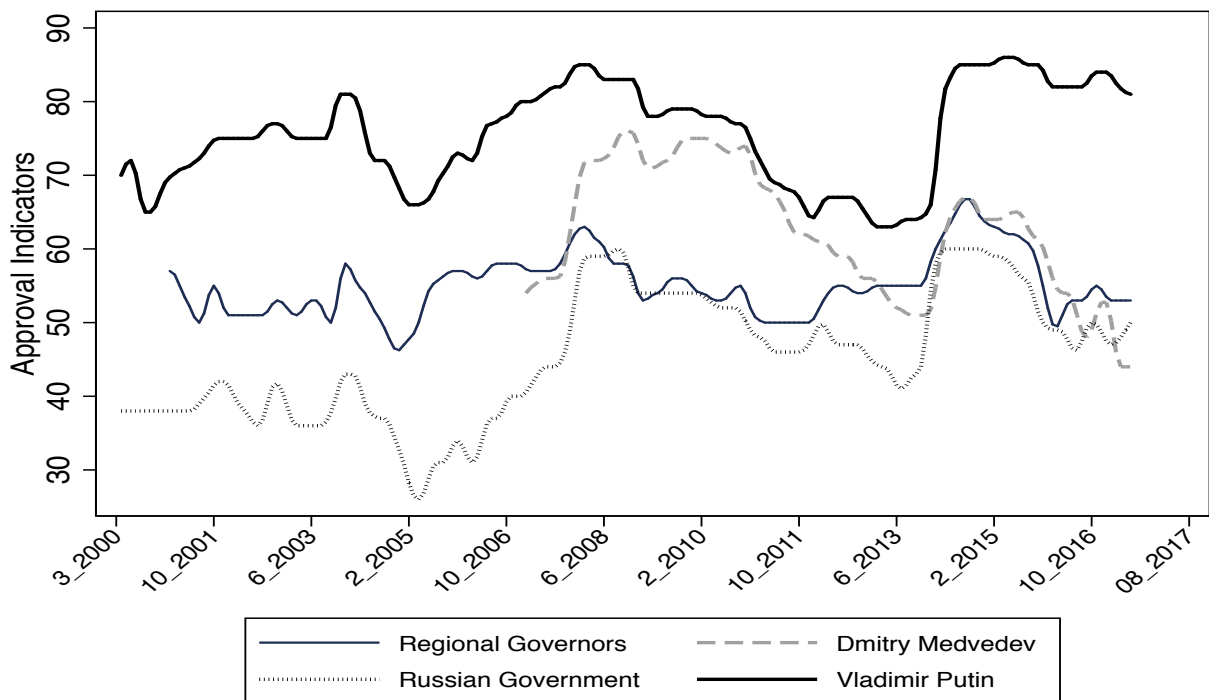


Figure 2: **How Putin’s approval compares with that of Medvedev, regional governors, and the Russian government.** The time series presents how these actors’ approval ratings fluctuated from the early months of 2000 until the summer of 2017. Data come from the Levada Foundation. I use a non-linear smoother to identify the underlying trend in the time-series

Supplementary Information for Chapter 4

Section A: Background Information

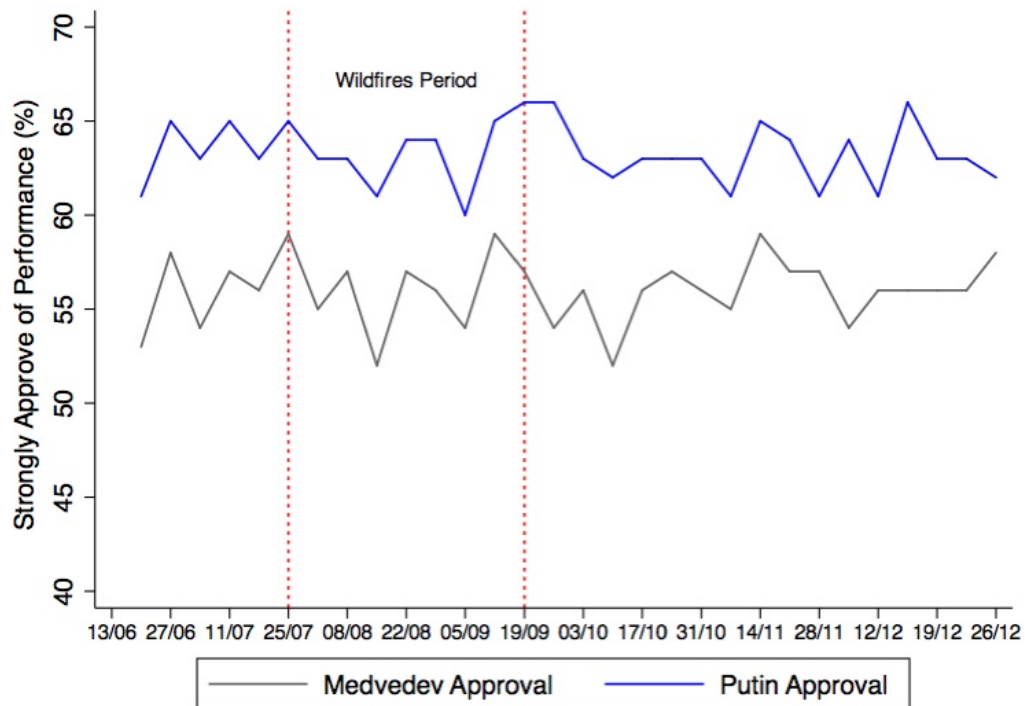


Figure 1: **Variation in Medvedev's and Putin's weekly approval.** The dates in the y-axis stand for different weeks from June to December 2012. Source: Public Opinion Foundation (FOM) (Levada Centre 2010)



Figure 2: **Victim Compensations and Contact Information at the Ministry of Emergency Situations.**

Notes: The poster, which was distributed across regions writes that the Prime Minister has ‘promised that new housing for those affected will be built by the end of the year and he is taking the provision of aid for those affected under his personal control’. Source: RIA Novosti.

Section B: Summary Statistics -Table B1: ICSDE and FOM Data

Indicator	Source	Observations, range	Mean & SD
Region Received Federal Aid	Own Calculations	89 (0,1)	.21 (.41)
Federal Aid Amount	Own Calculations	89 (0-2533)	97.27(356.61)
Regional Resignations	Own Calculations	89 (0-6)	.15(.79)
Fires Number (2010)	(MES)	83(49-9933)	2150(1780)
Log Fire-caused Material Damages (2010)	MES	83(5.1-14.6)	11.2(1.6)
Forest Fires Number, 2 nd quarter 2010	MES	76, 1-1763	200.87 (291.3)
Forest Fires Number, 3 rd quarter 2010	MES	77, 3-3088	448.26 (604.36)
Regional Newspaper Circulation	ICSID	83 (36-5629)	930.96 (1063)
Presidential Approval (2010)	ICSID-FOM	69 (0-79.45)	70.03 (9.8)
Gubernatorial Approval (2010)	ICSID-FOM	68 (0-61.7)	29.93 (10.72)
Presidential Approval, June 2010	MegaFom	67, 48-82	70.75 (6.3)
Presidential Approval, Sep 2010	MegaFom	67, 51-81	70.72 (5.7)
Gubernatorial Approval, June 2010	MegaFom	66, 12-74	31.43 (12.42)
Gubernatorial Approval, Sep 2010	MegaFom	66, 15-78	33.89 (13.95)
Region Area (Total)	ICSID	89(107-3083)	231.29 (459)
GRP, 2 nd quarter 2010 (log)	ROSSTAT	82 (16.8-22.7)	19.12 (1.11)
GRP, 3 rd quarter 2010 (log)	ROSSTAT	82 (16.8-22.8)	19.27 (1.13)
July Temperature	ICSID	84 (14-29.6)	21.39(5.3)
Regional Unemployment	ICSID	83 (1.8-49.8)	9.02(6.55)

MES= Ministry of Emergency Situations

Table B2: August 2010 Levada Survey, n=804

Variable	Question	Range/Answers	Mean & SD
q38_4	‘Authorities engaging in self-advertisement, trying to build political capital exploiting people’s misfortune and tragedy’	1: yes 0: no	.19(.39)
q36_5	‘the wildfires are the result of the federal authorities’ decision to deprive the regions from the means needed to protect the forests and extinguish the wildfires’.	1: yes 0: no	.10 (.30)
Settlement	‘Where do you live’	1: Moscow- 5: village, 1-5	3.42 (1.26)
Vote	‘Whom did you vote for in the previous election’	1: Medvedev 0: Other	.58(.49)
Gender	What is your gender	0: female 1: male	.45 (.5)
Occupation	What is your current occupation	1: employed; 2: unemployed 3: not in the labour force	1.79 (.95)
Economic Situation	How would you describe your economic situation?	1: money not enough even for food; can buy: 2: clothes with difficulty; 3: electronic devices with difficulty; 4: durable goods easily 5: we can afford expensive items	2.76(.8)
Media Independence	Regional Media Independence (Petrov and Titkov, 2012)	2-5, Higher values denote greater regional independence	3.21(.94)

Table B3: September 2010 Levada Survey, n=800

Variable	Question	Range/Answers	Mean & SD
Positive Performance	Leadership has done everything possible to protect and help those affected by the fires and those affected by heavy smoking	1: Yes, agree with statement 2: No, disagree with statement	.46(.50)
Media Independence	Regional Media Independence (Petrov and Titkov, 2012)	1-5, Higher values denote greater media independence	3.21(.94)
Education	What is your education?	1: Incomplete middle school 8: Higher Education	5.10 (2.02)
Vote	‘Did you vote in the March 2008 presidential elections and if so, whom did you vote for’	1: voted Medvedev 0: did not vote for Medvedev	.58(.49)
Settlement	‘Where do you live’	1: Moscow; 5: village	3.42 (1.26)
Gender	What is your gender	0: female 1: male	.45 (.5)
Occupation	What is your current occupation	1: employed; 2: unemployed 3: not in the labour force	1.50 (.63)
Economic Situation	How would you describe your economic situation?	1: money isn’t enough even for food; 2: clothes with difficulty; 3: electronic devices with difficulty (fridge, TV); 4: durable goods easily, but not expensive things 5: we can afford expensive items	2.74(.8)

Section C: Media Analysis

The ensuing section identifies common blame attribution patterns in 4 state-controlled media outlets: *NTV Novosti* and *Rosssia Odin*, which are both TV channel, *Izvestyia* and *Rossyiskaya Gazeta*, that are newspapers instead. Using the database Integrum I download stories that contain the word *pozhar** which stands for fires. The corpus spans the period between July and September 2010. Table 1 breaks down the monthly distribution of fire- related stories across each outlet.

Table A4: Stories containing the word “*pozhar**” across 4 media outlets, July-Sep 2010, n=1734

	July	August	September	Total
<i>Izvestyia</i>	19	131	70	220
<i>NTV- Novosti</i>	90	202	80	372
<i>Rosssia</i>	100	466	254	820
<i>Rossyiskaya Gazeta</i>	46	193	83	322

Figure 1 shows how the attribution of blame across state-controlled media varied over time. The category ‘subnational authorities’ includes references to local and regional officers and local authorities, whether political, or those tasked with the fire-fighting effort. The category ‘federal authorities’ includes references to various ministries (namely the Ministry of Emergency Situations) and the Ministry of Defence. The small number of observations is indicative of a broader attempt across media outlets to avoid references to blame and only report the events as they were unfolding.

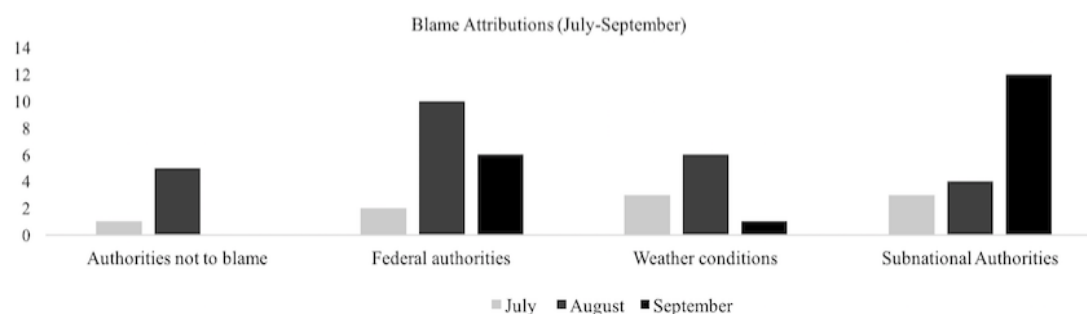


Figure A2: **Over-time variation of blame attributions across national media**

Figure A2, shows who was blaming whom during this period. To identify common blame attribution patterns across media outlets, I read through the stories to identify whether and how they make any reference to blame, and if so, who is blame and by whom.

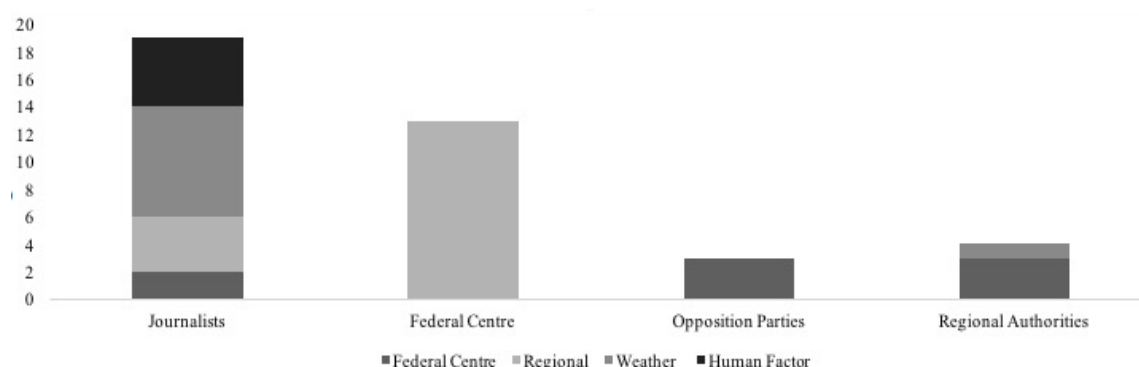


Figure A3: **Variation in Attributions of Responsibility by Actors**

Figure A3 suggests that journalist reports were more likely to make reference to poor weather conditions as having led to the outbreak of the disaster. Weather conditions were often cited as hindering the firefighters' effort to tackle the effects of the wildfires. Human error was the second more frequent cause cited as leading to the fires. Regional and federal authorities were blamed to a lower extent – in particular, there are scant journalistic references to the responsibility of federal authorities to address the disaster. The federal authorities, whether the presidential tandem, or Federal Ministries overwhelmingly blamed regional authorities for the

outbreak and spread of the disaster and on various occasions reported that responsibility for fire protection and the provision of aid falls within the merit of regional authorities. While for clarity purposes the graph groups federal actors together, intra-ministerial fighting was also not rare: on at least two occasions the Ministry of Emergency Situations blamed the Ministry of Forest Protection for the poor response to the events. Medvedev also sacked five high-ranking military officers when fires burnt military equipment in Kolomna, a military basis in Moscow Oblast. What is more, shortly after the State Duma resumed duties after the summer break, opposition parties (the KPRF, the LDPR and *Spravedlivaya Rossiya*) accused the party of power and the country's Executive for the country's forestry protection policy. In response, United Russia deputies blamed Soviet policies and the absence of environmental protection for the poor infrastructure the country inherited (not reported in the graph). Regional authorities, finally were far more cautious in blaming federal authorities for the lack of funding and equipment.

Section D

Table D1: I replicate the analysis in Table 4.6 using a lagged dependent variable for approval. The results remain consistent

	(1) Changes in Governor Approval	(2) Changes in Presidential Approval
Federal Aid	-0.322 (1.339)	2.688** (1.211)
Dismissals	-3.633* (2.028)	-4.483 (3.333)
Changes in GRP	-8.741 (9.514)	-4.966 (6.810)
Lagged Approval	0.060 (0.047)	-0.522*** (0.120)
Constant	2.444 (2.018)	37.04*** (8.895)
Observations	63	63
R-squared	0.059	0.381

Robust standard errors clustered by regions in parentheses *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Supplementary Information for Chapter 5

A: Background Information

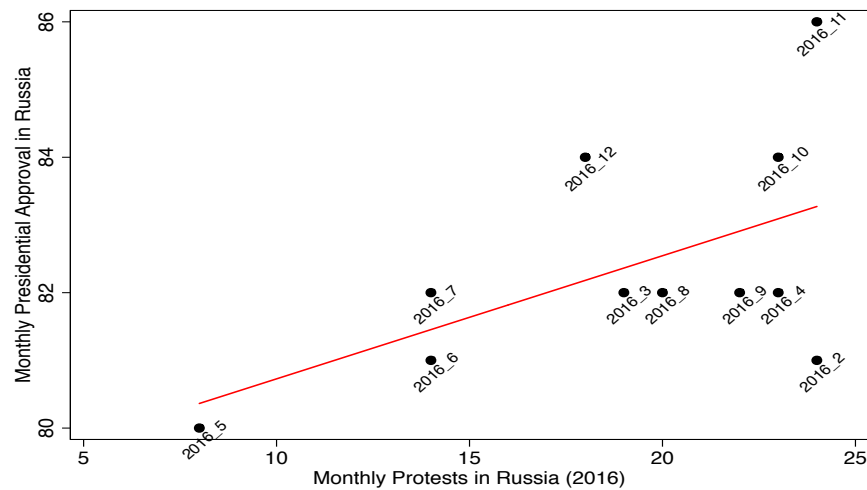


Figure A1: **The number of protests increases as Putin's approval also increases.**

Source: Lankina Protest-Event Dataset and Levada Centre, Monthly Presidential Approval Indicators for the period covering January-December 2016

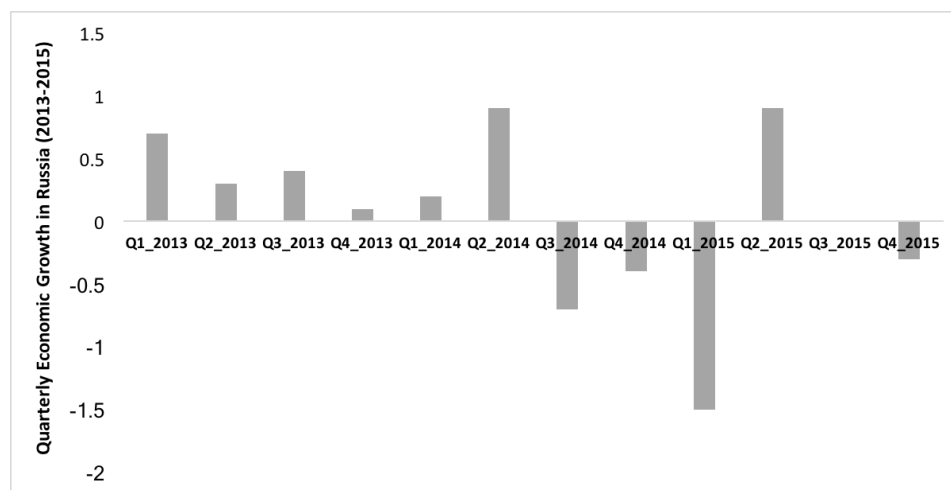


Figure A2: **Economic in Russia: 2013-2015.** Fluctuations in quarterly growth compared to the previous quarter, seasonally adjusted.

Source: (OECD 2017)

PART B: Survey Questions - Life in Transition Surveys III**Table B1: Survey Questions and Summary Statistics**

Survey Item:	Range	Mean (SD)
(8.12.c) Please rate the overall performance of the national government	1-5	3.04 (.55)
(8.12.a) Please rate the overall performance of the local government	1-5	2.95 (.72)
(2.23) What is the total net monthly income of your household at present? – Logged	3.3-13.5	10.26 (.89)
(4.01a) On the whole, I am satisfied with the present state of the economy	1-5	2.27 (1.03)
(4.01k) All things considered, I am satisfied with my financial situation as a whole	1-5	2.6 (1.1)
(4.04b) To what extent do you trust the government/cabinet of ministers	1-5	3.02 (1.2)
(4.14f) To what extent do you agree that a strong political opposition is important for the country?	1-5	3.85 (1.04)
(4.15a) To what extent do you agree that free and fair elections exist in the country?	1-5	2.99 (1.2)
(9.04) People use different sources to learn what is going on in their country and the world. Please indicate how often you use: b) News broadcasts on radio or TV	1-7	5.78 (1.43)
(9.19a) Are you a member of a church/religious organisation?	0-1	.12 (.33)
(9.21a) How likely are you to attend a lawful demonstration?	0-1	.29 (.45)
Age	18-93	45.1 (16.6)
Gender	0-1	.38 (.49)
Urbanity status	0-1	.74 (.44)
Gross Regional Status (federal districts) – Logged	12-13.5	12.9 (.34)
Primary Sampling Units (PSUs)	1-75	37.8(21.7)

C: Additional Results and Robustness

Table C1: I rerun the analysis presented in Table 5.1 of this chapter, but recoding the economic assessments variable so that higher values denote greater dissatisfaction, as opposed to satisfaction with economic conditions. The news consumption coefficient loses its statistical significance. While the signs on the economic variables, as well as on the interaction terms flip - so that greater dissatisfaction with economic conditions now predicts lower support for government- the magnitude of these effects does not change.

Dependent Variable: Assessments of Government Performance

	(1) Interaction with Sociotropic Evaluations OLS	(2) Interaction with Pocketbook Evaluations OLS
News consumption	-0.077 (0.050)	-0.081 (0.041)
Economic <i>Dissatisfaction</i>	-0.259*** (0.073)	-0.252*** (0.078)
News X <i>Dissatisfaction</i>	0.023** (0.012)	0.026** (0.012)
Controls		
Age Respondent	-9.29e-05 (0.001)	3.16e-05 (0.001)
Education	0.012 (0.013)	-0.007 (0.012)
Male	-0.047 (0.032)	-0.061 (0.032)
Urban	0.069 (0.048)	0.059 (0.048)
Poorer- Richer Scale	0.005 (0.012)	0.004 (0.012)
Regional Media	0.030 (0.027)	0.032 (0.027)
Δ. GRP	0.032 (0.047)	0.027 (0.047)
Constant	3.390*** (0.534)	3.460*** (0.528)
Observations	1,443	1,443
R-squared	0.070	0.056

Robust standard errors, clustered by respondents' primary sampling units in parentheses ***
p<0.01, ** p<0.05,

Table C2: The results presented in Table 5.1 of Chapter 5 are robust to alternative specifications of the ‘news exposure variable’. We code respondents watch political news on TV and radio one a week or more as 1 and as 0 if respondents watch news once a month or less

	<i>Economic Evaluations</i>		<i>Evaluations of Government Performance</i>	
	(1) DV: Sociotropic	(2) DV: Pocketbook	(3) Interaction with Sociotropic	(4) Interaction with Pocketbook
News Exposure	-0.170 (0.103)	0.044 (0.076)	0.193*** (0.044)	0.185 (0.121)
Economic Satisfaction			0.192* (0.112)	0.252*** (0.078)
News X Satisfaction			-0.082** (0.041)	-0.082* (0.043)
Controls				
Age Respondent	-0.003 (0.003)	-0.006*** (0.002)	-9.29e-05 (0.001)	0.000 (0.001)
Education	-0.079** (0.032)	0.083*** (0.031)	0.012 (0.013)	-0.005 (0.012)
Male	-0.072 (0.059)	0.028 (0.067)	-0.047 (0.032)	-0.060* (0.032)
Urban	0.017 (0.108)	0.107 (0.111)	0.069 (0.048)	0.055 (0.048)
Poorer- Richer Scale	0.062* (0.032)	0.095*** (0.028)	0.005 (0.012)	0.003 (0.012)
Regional Media	-0.028 (0.083)	-0.049 (0.061)	0.030 (0.027)	0.033 (0.027)
Δ. GRP	0.009 (0.093)	0.063 (0.078)	0.032 (0.047)	0.023 (0.047)
Constant	2.675*** (0.965)	1.423 (0.890)	1.835*** (0.517)	2.249*** (0.491)
Observations	1,443	1,443	1,443	1,443
R-squared	0.029	0.071	0.070	0.056

Robust standard errors clustered by primary sampling units in parentheses *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table C3: The main effects presented in Table 5.1 are robust when we replace the regional growth indicator with a variable that captures levels of Gross Regional Product (GRP) instead (Model 1), and with two different indicators that capture changes, and levels of unemployment as well (Models 2-3)

Dependent Variable: Assessments of Government Performance

	(1.1)	(1.2)	(2.1)	(2.2)	(3.1)	(3.2)
	Sociotropic	Household	Sociotropic	Household	Sociotropic	Household
News	0.062* (0.032)	0.074** (0.033)	0.061* (0.033)	0.073** (0.033)	0.060* (0.033)	0.073** (0.033)
Assessments	0.258*** (0.0726)	0.253*** (0.078)	0.257*** (0.0723)	0.253*** (0.078)	0.255*** (0.0729)	0.251*** (0.078)
Interaction	-0.023** (0.0114)	-0.026** (0.012)	-0.023** (0.012)	-0.026** (0.012)	-0.023* (0.012)	-0.026** (0.012)
GRP (log)	0.009 (0.072)	0.023 (0.073)				
Unemployment			0.007 (0.013)	0.007 (0.013)		
Δ.Unemployment					-0.019 (0.027)	-0.013 (0.031)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	2.030** (0.943)	1.930* (0.971)	2.090*** (0.271)	2.143*** (0.254)	2.167*** (0.262)	2.217*** (0.258)
Observations	1,443	1,443	1,443	1,443	1,443	1,443
R-squared	0.069	0.056	0.069	0.056	0.069	0.056

Robust standard errors clustered by PSUs, *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Supplementary Information for Chapter 6

A: Background Information

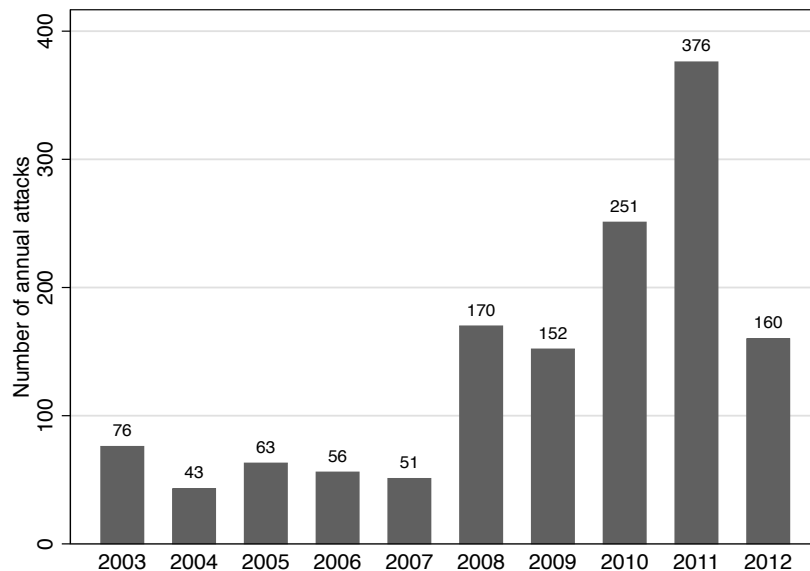


Figure 1.1: *Annual variation in terror attacks*

Source: Global Terrorism Database

B: Additional Results:

B1: I merge the surveys from the Caucasus and Metropolitan Russia to provide an additional test of whether the effects of attacks vary by minority/majority group

Table 1 below predicts regime support using mixed effects linear regression, suitable for multilevel data. I use two-level mixed effects linear models for Models 1 and 2, and a mixed effects logit model for Model 3. Multilevel statistical techniques allow me to estimate separate variance structures in order to produce unbiased standard errors. Moreover, region-year specific random intercepts help to reduce the threat of omitted variable bias from unobserved regional characteristics. The analysis also uses a random slope for attacks, and a cross-level interaction between the frequency of regional attacks, and respondents' locality. This dummy variable is coded as one if respondents reside in any of the North Caucasus Republics and zero if otherwise. The analysis suggests that terror attacks occurring up to a year prior to the respondents' interview affect support for the country's Prime Minister, who at the time was Vladimir Putin (Model 1), and colour respondents' intention to vote for the party of power

(Model 3). I find no evidence that terror attacks affected Medvedev's approval. Yet, as the interaction terms suggest, the effect of attacks on the Prime Minister's approval, and on support for the United Russia party varies across contexts. Holding everything else constant, a single attack outside of the of the North Caucasus, dampens Putin's approval by .06. The effect is substantive, considering that at 3 attacks, which is the average number of terror attacks across regions in 2010-2011, approval declines by .20, and that the dependent variable is measured on a 7-point scale. Attacks taking place in the North Caucasus, however, have a positive, albeit insignificant effect on approval. Attitudes towards the country's Prime Minister, the analysis suggests, shift very little, if at all, in response to local attacks in the Caucasus. Similarly, Model 3 suggests that while a single attack taking place outside of the North Caucasus dampens the likelihood that respondents would vote for United Russia by .014, the effect of attacks on support for the party of power in the North Caucasus is positive, although substantively very small. Turning to the controls, only a handful of statistically significant variables emerge. Men are overall less supportive of political authorities, and less likely to vote for United Russia. Older participants are less likely to support incumbents, and so are more educated participants. Individuals who reside in larger settlements are finally less likely to approve of government performance than those respondents who reside in smaller cities or villages.

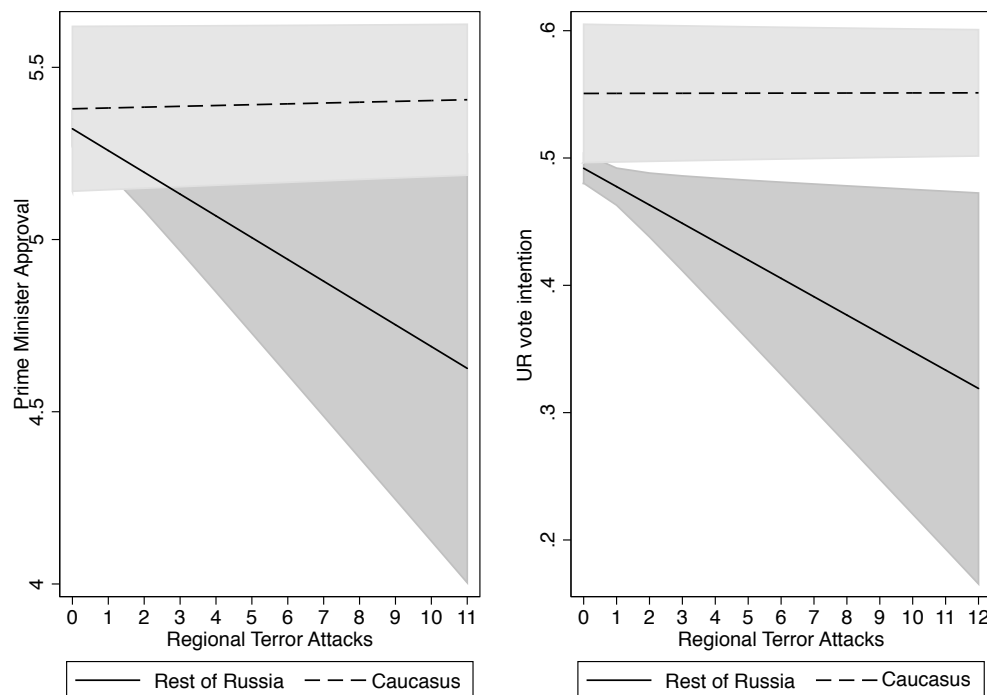
Figure 1 aims to facilitate the interpretation of the interaction terms in Models 1 and 3. It highlights the heterogeneous effects of attacks on support for the country's PM (left-hand panel), and voters' intention to support United Russia in the upcoming elections (right-hand panel). The interaction terms suggest that the attitudes of individuals who reside in the North Caucasus, change very little, if at all in response to local attacks. And, while the negative slope for attitudes in the rest of Russia suggests that local attacks in the rest of the country have a negative effect on approval, the differences between the two groups are not statistically significant when the number of attacks is below the regional mean of 11 events. Differences in vote intention between the two groups, however, i.e. between respondents who reside in the Caucasus and those who do not, are statistically significant; with respondents in the North Caucasus being more likely to vote for United Russia. Again, we can see that while respondents in the rest of Russia are less likely to vote for the party of power as the number of attacks increases, vote intentions in the North Caucasus do not shift as a result of the attacks.

**Table 1. Voter Responses to Regional Terror Attacks Taking Place in the Last Year:
Merged Surveys**

	(1) PM Approval	(2) President Approval	(3) Vote UR
12-m attacks	-0.063* (0.035)	-0.039 (0.032)	-0.014* (0.008)
Caucasus Rep	0.003 (0.149)	-0.005 (0.135)	0.042 (0.034)
Caucasus X Attacks	0.0656* (0.035)	0.0421 (0.032)	0.015* (0.008)
<i>Controls</i>			
Male	-0.447*** (0.015)	-0.426*** (0.015)	-0.153*** (0.004)
Age	-0.007*** (0.000)	-0.004*** (0.000)	-0.004*** (0.000)
Secondary Edu	-0.092*** (0.017)	-0.107*** (0.018)	-0.010** (0.005)
Higher Edu	-0.289*** (0.022)	-0.258*** (0.023)	-0.056*** (0.006)
Small cities	-0.124*** (0.032)	-0.123*** (0.033)	-0.020** (0.009)
<50.000 pop	-0.091*** (0.024)	-0.134*** (0.025)	-0.045*** (0.007)
<100.000 pop	-0.251*** (0.032)	-0.266*** (0.033)	-0.076*** (0.009)
<250.000 pop	-0.298*** (0.029)	-0.295*** (0.030)	-0.095*** (0.008)
<500.000 pop	-0.230*** (0.027)	-0.238*** (0.028)	-0.096*** (0.008)
<1M pop	-0.270*** (0.029)	-0.260*** (0.030)	-0.100*** (0.008)
>1M pop	-0.308*** (0.043)	-0.282*** (0.044)	-0.086*** (0.012)
Constant	6.110*** (0.042)	5.691*** (0.040)	0.797*** (0.011)
Observations	54,342	54,341	54,339
Regions	74	74	74
Log Likelihood	-106330.2	-108241	-38139.51
AIC/ BIC	212696.4/ 212856.7	216516.1/ 216667.4	76309.02/ 76442.57

Standard errors in parentheses, *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Figure 1: Differences in the Political Consequences of Terrorism in the North Caucasus and the rest of Russia



Notes: The graph illustrates how support for the country's PM (left hand panel) and intention to vote for the United Russia party (right hand panel) differ for individuals who reside in the North Caucasus (dashed line) and those who reside in the rest of the country (continuous line), at different levels of regional terror attacks. Differences are presented with 90% Confidence Intervals. To produce the results, we keep all other covariates at their means. The graphs are based on the hierarchical linear models presented in Table 1, Model 1 (left panel) and Model 3 (right panel).

B2: European Social Survey Results: A natural experiment from Russia

To further address endogeneity concerns resulting from the fact that the timing and location of terror attacks is not random, I now use the fact that the terror attack in Moscow's Domodedovo International Airport, on January 23rd, 2011 occurred during the fieldwork period for the 5th wave of the European Social Survey. The findings from this natural experiment corroborate findings presented in the main part of the paper, in that they highlight that overall, domestic terrorism dampens approval across the country.

The binary treatment is coded as 1 if respondents were interviewed after the attack and up to the end of February 2011, and 0 if respondents were interviewed prior to the attack. 767 respondents were interviewed before, and 812 were interviewed after the attack. This part of

the analysis, therefore, takes advantage of the plausibly exogenous assignment of the day on which interviews were conducted. In other words, because the timing of the attack is plausibly exogenous to attitudes toward government, I attribute the differences in responses regarding attitudes toward government to the impact of the terrorist attack. The analysis relies on three key assumptions.

First, I assume that the underlying baseline of trust in government would have remained constant over the period prior and after the attack, were it not for the event. Given the narrow time frame (December 2010-February 2011), this assumption appears plausible (for a similar approach see: Frye and Borisova 2016; Legewie 2013). Second, I assume that respondents in the ‘treatment’ group, i.e. those who were interviewed after the attacks actually received the treatment, i.e. that they found out about the attacks. Given the salience of the event, and the coverage it received both nationally and internationally, this second assumption appears plausible. Also, between January 29th and 30th, the Public Opinion Foundation in Russia conducted a nationally representative survey of 1500 respondents, interviewing respondents in 43 federal subjects. 99% of all respondents answered that they either knew about the attacks (90%), or had heard about them (9%). Third, I assume that the treatment and control groups are not biased in covariates that predict approval. As I show below, the two-groups were statistically indistinguishable.

Table 1: **Group Comparisons**

	Group Mean and 95% CI	
	Pre-Attack	Post-Attack
Education (1-11)	6.29, [6.10, 6.48]	6.24, [6.06, 6.42]
Income Satisfaction (1-4)	2.67, [2.62, 2.73]	2.69, [2.64, 2.75]
Age (15-94)	47.59, [46.23, 48.95]	47.59, [46.33, 48.85]
Gender (1-2)	1.62, [1.58, 1.65]	1.56, [1.53, 1.6]
Minority Group Member (1-2)	1.84, [1.82, 1.87]	1.85, [1.82, 1.87]
United Russia Voter (0-1)	.72, [.68, .76]	.69, [.64, .73]
Unemployed	.02, [.009, .027]	.02, [.012, .032]

To measure attitudes toward government, I rely on a variable that asks respondents to rate their level of trust in the country’s parliament, the police, and the United Nations. I include

the UN item as a placebo test, as there is no reason that the terror attacks in Russia would affect trust to international institutions. The models presented below also include region fixed effects and standard demographic controls. Analysis presented below suggests that while the attack dampened political support for Members of Parliament and law enforcement institutions, such as the national police, it did not influence attitudes towards international institutions, such as the United Nations for example. As already highlighted in the main part of this paper, terrorism dampens overall, i.e. country-wide approval for political authorities, and this effect can be attributed to citizens negatively updating evaluations of incumbent competence, as opposed to just a ‘halo’ effect, which would imply that people in the aftermath of attacks become less trusting of political institutions in general. If this were the case, then we would also expect trust for the United Nations to decline for example.

Table 2: Treatment Effects: Political Trust

	(1) Trust Parliament	(2) Trust Police	(3) Trust United Nations
Treatment Group	-0.266* (0.149)	-0.425*** (0.146)	-0.176 (0.183)
Non - Russians	-0.283 (0.228)	-0.313 (0.223)	-0.451* (0.268)
Age	0.010** (0.004)	0.014*** (0.004)	0.003 (0.005)
Education	-0.0545* (0.029)	-0.113*** (0.029)	0.0428 (0.035)
Income Satisfaction	-0.372*** (0.089)	-0.186** (0.089)	-0.011 (0.119)
<i>Regions: Central</i>			
North/North West	0.574 (0.363)	0.339 (0.356)	0.309 (0.435)
Volga Vyatka	0.587 (0.364)	0.735** (0.344)	0.142 (0.453)
Central/ Black Earth	-0.370 (0.306)	0.059 (0.305)	0.234 (0.364)
Volga	1.012*** (0.291)	1.077*** (0.275)	0.825** (0.346)
North Caucasus	0.343 (0.271)	0.408 (0.269)	0.109 (0.323)
Ural	1.187*** (0.283)	1.389*** (0.275)	1.265*** (0.333)
West Siberia	0.659** (0.282)	0.748*** (0.269)	0.208 (0.341)
East Siberia	0.754** (0.305)	0.847*** (0.314)	0.607 (0.407)
Far East	-0.366 (0.384)	-0.159 (0.417)	-0.201 (0.582)
Constant	4.682*** (0.611)	4.499*** (0.611)	4.593*** (0.729)
Observations	1,458	1,485	1,115
R-squared	0.052	0.060	0.032

Robust standard errors in parentheses, *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Section C: Robustness

C1: Additional evidence in support of the nexus between terror attacks and government responses

My argument predicts a positive relationship between terror attacks and government transfers toward the Caucasus on the one hand, and a negative association between terror attacks and political freedoms on the other. The need to appease belligerent regions could motivate Moscow's decision to target unstable regions with federal transfers and donations. The need to silence criticism in the aftermath of attacks could also motivate Moscow's decision to clamp down on domestic opposition.

To test these assumptions, Models presented in Table C2 regress two separate indicators that capture (i) transfers from the federal centre to Russia's regions between 2003 and 2011 (ii) levels of regional democracy, on a set of political, economic, and terror-related indicators. The first dependent variable captures the total federal transfers (per capita) to regions in 1000 roubles (2000 prices), and comes from the International Centre for the Study of Institutions and Development (ISCID) at the HSE.³⁹⁶ Evaluations of regional political competition, or levels of democracy come from the Petrov and Titkov index.³⁹⁷ The political competition index ranges from 1 to 45, and more democratic regions are assigned a value of over 40. This is an aggregate index, whose sub-components capture expert evaluations of regional openness, electoral fairness, political pluralism, independent media, and openness of civil society. The analysis also controls for United Russia's margin of victory in the most recent legislative election, and regional economic performance. I control for regional economic performance by including an index of regional growth based on year-to-year changes in gross regional product, and further control for economic development, by including an indicator of regional GRP per capita, again in 2000 prices. Finally, the analysis controls for the number of terror attacks taking place in a region. In Models 1 and 2, I follow Marquez et al. in lagging my independent variables, because the amount of transfers a region receives is decided in the previous year. The analysis presented below, which relies on fixed effects, within-region regressions, includes dummies for time and clusters standard errors by regions. Models 3 and 4 are first differenced models, in which the dependent and independent variables are first-differenced. The analysis in Models 3 and 4 also controls for the lagged value of the dependent variables.

³⁹⁶ (Marques, Nazrullaeva, and Yakovlev 2016)

³⁹⁷ (Petrov and Titkov 2013)

Evidence from Models 1 and 3 suggests a positive relationship between regional terror attacks and government transfers. More specifically, while the coefficient of attacks fails to reach statistical levels of significance in Model 1, in Model 3 it is significant and in the direction anticipated. The coefficient of attacks suggests that an increase in the year-to-year number of attacks in a region is associated with an increase in federal transfers toward this region, everything else equal.³⁹⁸ This effect is substantively important if we consider that in Dagestan alone, 50 attacks took place in 2008 and 103 in 2009. The attacks taking place in 2009 would translate into an increase of transfers to the Republic by 1700 roubles in 2010. This is just a thousand roubles below the mean number of federal transfers to the regions, which was around 29000 roubles for the period between 2003 and 2010. Model 3 further suggests that Moscow is targeting friendly, i.e. core regions with transfers. When United Russia's margin of victory increases by one unit alone, transfers towards a region are expected to increase by 1510 roubles. This finding, which agrees with evidence collected by Marquez et al.³⁹⁹ It suggests that the government in Moscow is targeting core regions, and supporters with benefits. Moving on, the terror attacks coefficient in Model 2 suggests a negative correlation between regional attacks and regional levels of democracy, with a single attack resulting in a downgrade of regional democracy assessments by .016. This effect is small, yet could result in annual downgrades of democracy by 1.6 percentage points in some of the Republics in the North Caucasus. The terror attacks coefficient fails to reach statistical levels of significance in Model 4, which employs the first differenced estimator instead.

³⁹⁸ Due to data limitations, the analysis does not include Chechnya and Ingushetia, two of the most unstable regions in the country. This omission could be biasing the results downwards, making it even more challenging to find an effect.

³⁹⁹ (Marques, Nazrullaeva, and Yakovlev 2016)

Terror attacks, fiscal transfers and democratic retrenchment

	First Differenced Estimator			
	(1) Transfers per Capita	(2) Democracy	(3) Δ. Transfers per capita	(4) Δ. Democracy
Growth	-11.73** (5.724)	1.457 (1.395)	0.160 (2.495)	-0.724 (0.458)
Development	-0.043 (0.037)	-0.010 (0.006)	0.002 (0.009)	-6.23e-05 (0.002)
UR victory margin	-2.312 (1.431)	-0.561 (0.992)	1.510** (0.580)	-0.0893 (0.0724)
Terror attacks	-0.014 (0.016)	-0.016** (0.006)	0.017*** (0.006)	0.013 (0.010)
L. Dependent Variable	-	-	-0.222*** (0.067)	-0.251*** (0.0023)
Year Dummies	Yes	Yes	No	No
Constant	5.345*** (1.730)	26.54*** (0.307)	1.095*** (0.192)	6.814*** (0.0485)
Observations	702	693	624	616
R-squared	0.309	0.186	0.090	0.149
Number of regions	78	77	78	77

Robust standard errors in parentheses, *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Section C2: I replicate the main results from the merged surveys presented in section B1 above while controlling for previous-year attacks. The coefficients remain consistent, but statistical significance is lost when we introduce covariates.

	(1) PM evaluations	(2) President Evaluations	(3) UR vote
Twelve month Attacks	-0.085** (0.0359)	-0.058* (0.0321)	-0.02** (0.00873)
Caucasus	0.0324 (0.152)	0.0236 (0.136)	0.0474 (0.0371)
Caucasus # 12 month attacks	0.0862** (0.0359)	0.0585* (0.0321)	0.0193** (0.00873)
Attacks 2010	0.00615 (0.00728)	0.00940 (0.00654)	0.00265 (0.00178)
Constant	5.328*** (0.0321)	5.073*** (0.0287)	0.494*** (0.00781)
Observations	54,385	54,384	54,382
Number of groups	74	74	74

Standard errors in parentheses, *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.

Supplementary Information for Chapter 7

Section A: Background Information

Table 1: Summary Statistics

	Observations	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Perceptions of electoral injustice – Duma Elections	3287	3.02	1.25	1	5
Shares the demands of protesters	2104	2.5	.97	1	4
Medvedev Approval	3287	2.02	1.25	1	5
Putin Approval	1500	3.2	.77	1	5
Supports Putin	1600	.6	.4	0	1
Education	3278	1.98	.72	1	3
Gender (Male)	3287	.435	.50	0	1
Age	3287	45.61	17.5	18	92
Ethnicity (Russian)	3277	.90	.30	0	1
Sector Combined (Employment)	3269	1.44	.59	1	3
Settlement Status (Urban)	3287	.750	.43	0	1
Watches news on TV (vs doesn't)	3218	.90	.29	0	1
Watches news often (vs less frequently)	3057	.797	.79	0	1
Church Attendance Frequency	3206	1.20	.99	0	3
Duma Vote Behavior	3278	.9322	.81	0	2
Family Financial Situation	3287	1.959	.66	1	3
Protest Participation	3287	.054	.05	0	1
Regional Media Independence	3287	3.44	.83	1	5
Regional Protest Frequency (0-max)	3281	7.10	15.19	0	88
Regional Protest Frequency (1-max)	2714	8.58	16.31	1	88
Suppression Prior to Interview (Dummy)	2720	..41	.5	0	1

Table 2: Protest and Repression Events Count

Region	Suppression	Total Protest	Dates of Suppression Used
Moscow	1	105	Dec: 04; 05; 06; 07; 10; 21; 26; 31 Jan: 14; 18; 31 Feb: 02; 04; 07; 14; 18; 19; 21; 21; 28 Mar: 05; 05; 08; 08; 10; 18; 18; 19; 25 Apr: 01; 01; 08; 08; 10; 10; 15; 19 May: 01; 06; 06; 07; 07; 08; 08; 09; 14; 16; 26; 27; 28; 31
Krasnodar	1	4	Mar5th
Rostov	1	5	Dec24th; Mar10th
Nizhniy Novgorod	1	12	Dec4th; Feb4th; Mar10th; Mar19th
Samara	1	18	Dec17th; Apr20th
Ulyanovsk	1	4	Feb19; Mar18; Apr21
Sverdlovsk	1	7	Dec10; December13
Novosibirsk	1	10	Feb17th
St. Petersburg	1	38	Dec4th; Dec5th; Dec6th; Dec10th; Dec11th; Dec24th; Dec31st; Jan31st; Feb04th; Feb19th; Feb23rd; Mar5th; Mar6th; Mar10th; Apr07th; May01; May01; May07; May29; May31st
Moscow Oblast	1	4	May29th
Tatarstan	1	13	Dec10th; Mar10th; Mar18th
Kurgan	1	5	Dec10th
Perm	1	6	Dec10th

B: Detailed Coding Criteria for the Protest Event Dataset (sourced from namarsh.ru) for the Lankina Protest-Event Dataset

Protest Events: Electoral or political protest events focus primarily on anti-government protests. Protests may include other issues, but criticism of regime/ government policy/ politics or demands for the protection of political rights form the crux of the event. These protests are often organized by the political opposition, though they are not exclusive to one particular party or civic movement; they include events like the March of the Millions, a mass civic march organized by the political opposition, and Strategiya-31 civic meetings organized in support of the right to peaceful assembly. Both movements were particularly active during the 2011-2012 protest movement. Anti-government protests organized by nationalist activists (excluding those sponsored by the government) are also coded as political protests; protests challenging electoral fraud, as well as protests against local and regional instances of electoral fraud; protests featuring calls for resignation of elected or appointed officials at all levels of government (regional and local politicians and other public officials); protests against political repression, such as rallies calling for the release of political prisoners; and protests organized by the group Memorial in support of political activists and against police abuse and repression of political activists. Because we create the dataset ourselves we are confident that the protest events considered only include anti-regime political protest events that are directly or indirectly related to electoral outcomes during this period. We are in a position to identify what factors led people to take to the streets for every protest we have coded, what slogans protesters used and where protesters' anger was targeted. This is a distinct advantage of our data collection strategy.

Use of Suppression: This indicator captures attempts by the public authorities, police or pro-government groups to disrupt a protest and carry out repressive activities, including arrests of protesting activists. Active disruption implies that we do not simply record a suppression event when police are present at an event observing the participants. For suppression to occur,

protesters have to be disrupted either through forced dispersal, physical attacks or arrest. The dataset also includes a “pre-emptive suppression” variable, which captures whether protest events are being thwarted by police before they take place. It is often the case for example that one or several activists gather in a square in anticipation of others to join, but the OMON, or police forces interfere before others join-in. One could plausibly assume that these protests were less likely to have been authorized. The correlation between this measure and the variable that captures active use of violence against protesters during the period covered in the data is positive, but small ($r=.23, 0.01$).

C: Full Results and Robustness

C1: Alternative Specifications of the Suppression Hypothesis

This section repeats the analysis presented in Table 7.2 using an alternative specification. It follows a design similar to that employed to test for media exposure effects, and interacts the protest frequency variable with the one that describes whether repression has been used against regional protesters, prior to any respondent’s interview. The results remain consistent. Although the interaction terms fail to reach statistical levels of significance, the effect of the suppression variable remains robust and in the direction anticipated. The use of suppression dampens support for the demands of the protest movement and reduces the likelihood that respondents will report higher levels of electoral falsifications.

Table 1: Suppression Effects– Alternative Specifications (Interaction Terms)

	(1) Unfair Duma	(2) Shares Opposition
Regional Protest Frequency	0.0398 (0.0683)	-0.0525 (0.0851)
Use of prior repression	-0.319* (0.167)	-1.231*** (0.467)
Repression X Protest Freq	-0.0309 (0.0671)	0.0447 (0.0789)
Watches Political News	-0.0433 (0.0960)	-0.0148 (0.170)
Participated in Protest	0.330** (0.156)	0.754** (0.315)
Secondary Education ^A	0.0963 (0.0710)	0.0787 (0.0960)
Higher Education	0.112 (0.0686)	0.0294 (0.131)
Male	0.0628 (0.0656)	0.0621 (0.107)
Age	-0.00128 (0.00215)	-0.00223 (0.00326)
Russian	0.0900 (0.0775)	0.0675 (0.186)
Urban Settlement	0.234** (0.0895)	0.129 (0.240)
Voted UR ^B	-0.949*** (0.105)	-1.628*** (0.126)
Voted Opposition	-0.0762 (0.0733)	-0.463*** (0.143)
Household: Same ^C	0.232*** (0.0754)	0.426*** (0.160)
Household: Deteriorated	0.549*** (0.134)	0.536** (0.244)
Out of Labor Force ^D	0.0290 (0.0780)	-0.145 (0.134)
Unemployed	0.0556 (0.109)	0.120 (0.291)
Region FE	Yes	Yes
Survey FE	-0.449*** (0.155)	-1.363*** (0.406)
Constant cut1	3.093*** (0.381)	-4.727*** (0.753)
Observations	2,123	1,660
R-squared	0.26	0.14

Robust standard errors in parentheses, *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

C2: Instrumental Variables Analysis

Table C2.1: I replicate the analysis presented in Table 7.4 of the manuscript without the instrument. The results remain consistent

	DV: Unfair Duma Regional Protests	DV: Shares Demands Regional Protests
Protest Measure	0.0175** (0.00723)	0.0702*** (0.022)
Protested previously	0.659** (0.240)	1.152 (0.742)
Secondary Education ^A	0.152 (0.099)	0.0507 (0.215)
Higher Education	0.131 (0.133)	0.161 (0.338)
Male	0.019 (0.060)	0.142 (0.181)
Age	2.92e-05 (0.003)	0.008 (0.008)
Russian	-0.026 (0.146)	-0.068 (0.356)
Urban	0.017 (0.108)	-0.148 (0.326)
Watches News	0.032 (0.190)	-1.319** (0.605)
Voted UR ^B	-1.025*** (0.183)	-1.709*** (0.307)
Household: Same ^C	0.235*** (0.049)	0.270 (0.317)
Household: Worse	0.800*** (0.130)	0.773 (0.544)
Employed ^D	0.062 (0.067)	-0.147 (0.185)
Media Independence	-0.131* (0.071)	-0.129 (0.114)
Constant	3.282*** (0.363)	2.646** (1.163)
Observations	1,096	666
R-squared	0.25	.13

Robust standard errors clustered by federal regions in parentheses*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1 The baselines are: A: Primary Education B: Did not vote for United Russia; C: Household Evaluations: Improved: D: Employment Status: Not Employed. The smaller number of observations in Model 2 is due to the fact that only respondents who know about the demands of the protest movement are asked whether they agree with them or not.

Table C2: First and Second Stage IV regressions presented in Table 7.4

	Model 1: Unfair Duma		Model 2: Shares Demands	
	1 st stage	Regional Protests	1 st stage	Regional Protests
<i>Instrument</i>	0.922*** (0.055)		0.937*** (0.065)	
<i>Protest</i>		0.047*** (0.015)		0.0424* (0.026)
Independent Media	1.373*** (0.108)	-0.15*** (0.046)	1.641*** (0.144)	-0.082 (0.071)
Protested	0.388 (0.817)	0.632*** (0.193)	-0.257 (1.124)	0.630 (0.383)
Secondary ^A	0.115 (0.297)	0.137 (0.089)	0.312 (0.411)	0.021 (0.154)
Higher Education	0.104 (0.409)	0.112 (0.108)	0.251 (0.556)	0.095 (0.191)
Male	0.059 (0.249)	0.017 (0.066)	0.259 (0.346)	0.081 (0.118)
Age	0.001 (0.008)	-0.000 (0.002)	0.000 (0.011)	0.006 (0.004)
Russian	-0.181 (0.553)	-0.024 (0.136)	-0.671 (0.800)	-0.016 (0.254)
Urban Settlement	1.652*** (0.208)	-0.036 (0.081)	2.274*** (0.289)	-0.108 (0.152)
News Watching	-1.554 (1.084)	0.106 (0.207)	-3.82** (1.607)	-0.77 (0.493)
Voted UR ^B	0.417 (0.254)	-1.03*** (0.074)	0.783** (0.360)	-1.02*** (0.126)
Household: Same ^C	-0.780** (0.306)	0.251*** (0.078)	-0.735* (0.445)	0.164 (0.137)
Deteriorated	-1.98*** (0.368)	0.839*** (0.10)	-2.26*** (0.505)	0.418** (0.187)
Employed ^D	-0.517* (0.294)	0.072 (0.074)	-0.685* (0.415)	-0.071 (0.136)
Constant	2.034 (1.343)	3.193*** (0.335)	3.573* (1.980)	1.541** (0.674)
Observations	1,096	1,096	666	666

Robust standard errors in parentheses, *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1 A: Primary Education
B: Did not vote for United Russia; C: Household Evaluations: Improved; D: Not Employed.

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