

# Presidential Discourse and Regime Legitimacy in Putin's Russia (2014-2017)

By  
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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this research is to analyze Vladimir Putin's discourse and identify what factors in his discourse attribute to relatively high approval ratings, and thus regime legitimacy, from 2014 to 2017. What explains Putin's approval ratings when the economy is in decline or stagnation? Using discourse analysis, this paper explores Putin's remarks during four Direct Line Events and four Annual Press Conferences from 2014 through 2017. The results indicate Putin's speech is tailored to highlight positive economic developments by utilizing precise economic indicators depicting the President as an expert on the matter. Putin discursively accepts and highlights his own responsibility for events that the Russian public approves of, and deflects blame and responsibility for failures or inadequate attention to issues such as the economy and social programs or concerns. Results also that find Putin's legitimacy hinges on the promise of a strong Russia and better living conditions for Russians. Analysis concludes Putin's discourse, disseminated via the medium of state controlled media, is essential to maintaining regime legitimacy in authoritarian Russia.

*Keywords:* Putin's approval ratings, regime legitimacy, Putin's discourse, discourse analysis, Putin's Russia

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## **Introduction**

Vladimir Putin rose quickly to power in 1999 into 2000. Approval ratings and his popularity soared shortly after he took the stage as the leader of Russia. Whether as Prime Minister or President, Putin's approval ratings hovered well above a 60% approval mark and have come close to 90% of the public approval. By comparison, the approval ratings of democratically elected leaders such as Presidents Obama of the United States, Moon Jae-in of South Korea or Mauricio Macri of Argentina, have been well below Putin's marks, many barely reaching 50% approval even during peak approval periods (Gallup, 2017; Struyk, 2017; Kliment & Lipton, 2017). Many explanations for Putin's approval ratings emphasize the status of the economy: as Russia's economy rebounded from the slump of the 1990s, so did the public approval of the President (see Figure 1). Most, if not all, of the research regarding his approval ratings contains analyses of pre-2012 data and conditions, before his most recent terms as Russian President. More importantly, in 2014 Russia's economy was interrupted with Western sanctions and plummeting oil prices. However, despite the recession, Putin's approval ratings still increased and have stayed consistently high since then. His approval ratings are inconsistent with the economic explanations found in prior analyses and literature, calling for further examination.

Vladimir Putin came to power in Russia during a tumultuous time in its history. Boris Yeltsin had nurtured a high crime rate in Russia and a depressed economy; he had provided no strength or structure on the international or domestic stage. Russians had no leader, but rather a

widely ridiculed President. Yet, he introduced to Russia a then little-known man who would become one of the most powerful leaders in the world: Vladimir Putin. Russians had no preconceived notions of what to expect from Putin, as he carried no major political history. He was mysterious – a former KGB agent, he was sober, intelligent, and took charge exuding strength and masculinity. Because he was relatively unknown and had no image or platform to uphold, he was able to be or appear to be for every Russian what he or she wanted or needed. He held no status quo. Possessing a clean slate, he was soon gifted with a booming Russian economy, resulting in improved living conditions, higher real wages, better social programs, and a unifying Russian people rallying around their new leader and “his successes.”

Russians had every reason to support and approve of their new leader. Putin was aggressive in his rhetoric and action, seeking retaliation for the alleged Chechen terrorist attacks from the very beginning. Day to day life had improved. Putin seemingly removed Yeltsin era oligarchs from power in Russia. He was “cleaning house” and Russians were feeling hopeful for the future of their country. There was not much Putin had to do to legitimize his regime. Although the government brutally suppressed any dissent at home or abroad and clamped down on media freedoms and activities of civil society, Putin’s approval ratings did not reflect pushback on the media suppressions from the Russian population. Life was good, or better, and that is what mattered. The state-controlled media reinforced the official propaganda of those better times, neglecting any setbacks, difficulties, or opposition to the regime. There is no doubt media had an effect on approval ratings, especially those early in his leadership years. However, Putin’s public discourse is what shapes the propaganda the media portrays. Regardless, Putin, from the outset of his leadership, was riding a wave of approval on the back of a strengthening economy. This was the pattern until 2014.



Then, Western sanctions and a quick drop in the value of oil caused the economy to sink into a recession. Russians did not blame or hold accountable their President for the worsening economy, even though they had believed he was the reason for the improving economy in years before. Despite the worsening economic conditions, the constituency still maintained high approval of Vladimir Putin. If, as previous analyses show, Russians' approval of their leaders was related to the status of the economy, why then, did not Putin's approval ratings decline following the 2014 economic crises? What is driving the ratings? These questions are studied in my discourse analysis of specific Putin rhetoric from 2014 through 2017.

There are several reasons why understanding Putin's approval ratings is important. Not only can understanding his approval ratings give an insight into post-Soviet Russian culture, explain Putin's foreign and domestic policy choices, and provide clues to his future decisions in the Russian and international community, but, most importantly, such an analysis can provide a better understanding of regime legitimacy. How has Putin legitimized his authoritarian regime during and in the aftermath of an economic recession? In addition, ideas regarding why he is afforded such a positive response from his compatriots could help identify what type of leadership may be most appropriate in Russia or most likely to succeed Putin. I seek to answer what his ratings are really measuring when they continue to remain high, mostly above 80%, since 2014 even though the economy had not been improving. In order to answer these questions, I have chosen discourse analysis as my method and guiding theory for this project. I analyze Putin's legitimacy through his discourse in annual new conferences and Direct Line with Vladimir Putin events.

This paper begins with a presentation of the research on and literature about Putin's approval ratings showing that prior analyses concluded the economy is responsible for ratings as

well as a short discussion of media in Putin's Russia. Then, discourse analysis as my theory and method is explained, followed by an overview of the analysis. Finally, I will provide the findings, identify contributions to the literature on the subject and conclude with suggestions for further research. My aim is to examine whether Putin has legitimized his authority through discourse by making the ideas of himself and Russia the same, meaning Russians approve of Putin because they approve of Russia and, if they disapprove of Putin, then they are disapproving of Russia. If Russia and Putin are not discursively created as the same, then I intend to identify, through discourse analysis, other potential creations of Putin's legitimacy. I will also briefly discuss how the state-controlled media has disseminated and popularized this narrative.

## **Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

Putin's approval ratings and popularity has been a subject of interest for analysts since he became the leader of Russia. This paper utilizes the poll results from the Levada Analytical Center, a non-governmental research organization in Russia. The Levada team is trained in the United States and Europe, and its research conforms to the World Association for Public Opinion Research (WAPOR) and ESOMAR (formerly the European Society for Opinion and Market Research) guidelines (Levada Center, 2018). These guidelines ensure the polls conducted conform to Western standards of WAPOR and ESOMAR<sup>1</sup>.

As Figure 1 shows, even during low approval periods, according to the Levada Center, Putin's approval ratings never dipped below 60%. Literature regarding this topic varies in

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://wapor.org/publications/esomar-wapor-guide-to-opinion-polls/> for the specific polling and survey guidelines.

approach, looking, for example, at his approval from a cultural view, neo-institutional choice theories, or with hard data regarding the economy or other indices found in the same Levada Center polls. I do not intend to discount the validity, conclusions, or importance of prior research and literature regarding Putin's approval ratings or popularity, as I agree with the conclusions of such. However, this analysis will add to the research in two ways. One way is by analyzing his discourse with the idea that through it he contributes to regime legitimacy. The second way is adding to the literature by examining a more recent time since I believe a change occurred in or after 2014 regarding what influences those polled to approve of him and that the economy is no longer the reason.

Boris Yeltsin chose the young Vladimir Putin as his successor introducing him to Russians first as Prime Minister and shortly thereafter as Acting President. A few months after, he was elected Russian President. He was barely known and had a limited political history yet quickly gained support and popularity (Figure 1). The Russian economy experienced growth each year for the first eight years he was in power; his approval ratings increased as well. As Figure 1 illustrates, even as Prime Minister he retained high poll results. Except for his first two to three years in power, there has not been a large difference in his highest and lowest approval ratings in a given year, until 2014. From 2008, the start of the world financial crisis, through 2013, in to 2014, Putin's approval ratings were in decline. Interestingly, however, is that in 2014, approval ratings spiked. The year 2014 was marked with plummeting oil prices, a drop in the value of the ruble, and the imposition of Western sanctions, but also with the annexation of Crimea and the continuation of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. Not only did approval ratings jump from a low of 65% to a high of 88% in 2014, despite all the economic hardships, Putin's approval ratings have remained similarly high since then. There is no singular explanation for

these trends and the goal of this section is to review and assess the key explanations found in the literature on this subject.

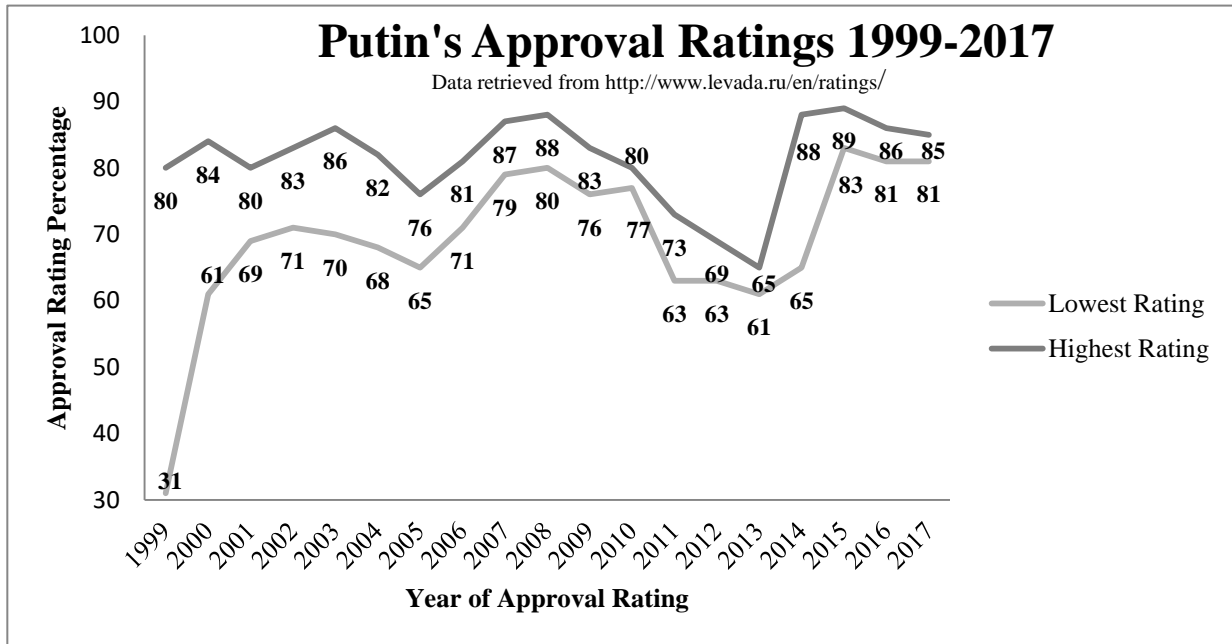
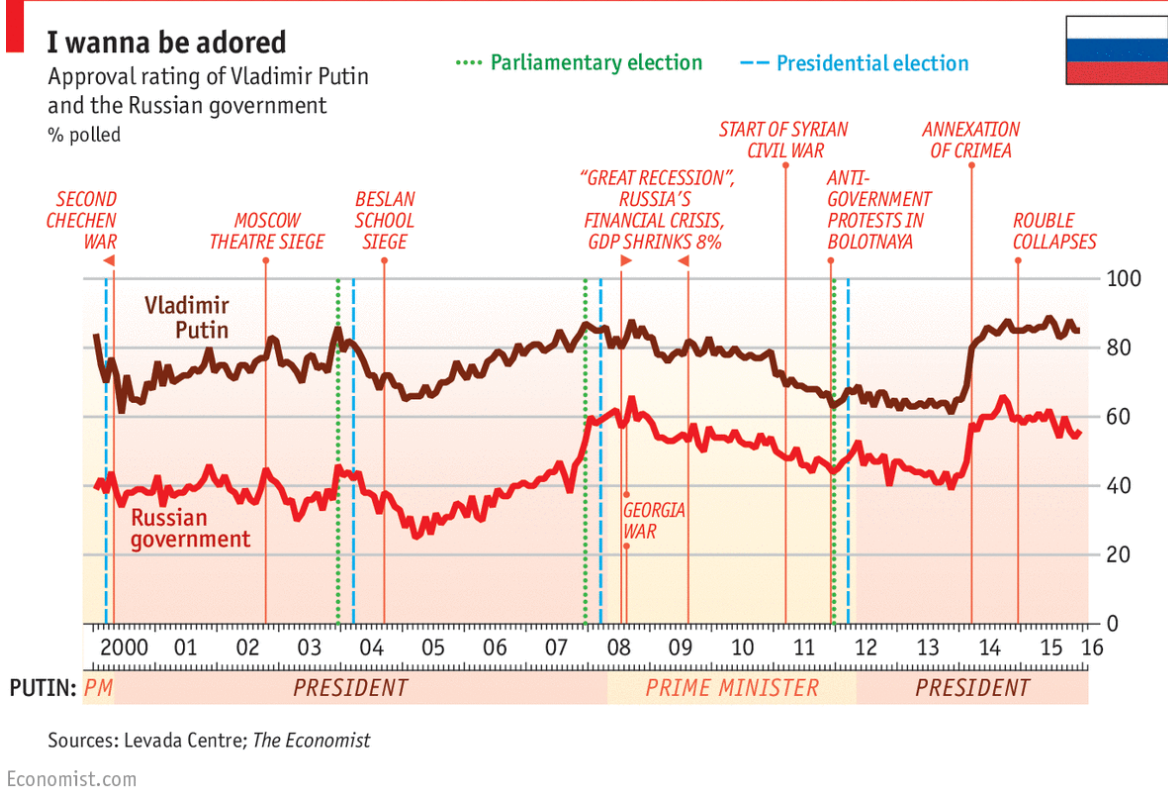


Figure 1. Vladimir Putin's Approval Ratings. This figure illustrates the highest and lowest approval ratings for each year 2009-2017. 2017 data was available only through November.

### Validity and Reliability of Polling Data

There are compelling concerns with the validity of public opinion polls, particularly those measuring the approval of a president, in authoritarian contexts. Russian citizens may approve of their autocratic leader out of fear of retribution, or non-independent pollsters may falsify approval ratings. A corollary to these critiques is that Russians are not afraid to criticize the Russian government or speak about sensitive issues of high political importance (Levada, 2017). They are more critical of their government than of Putin. Figure 2 shows this difference in the ratings of Putin and the ratings of the government.



**Figure 2. Vladimir Putin's and the Russian Government's Approval Rating.**  
<https://www.economist.com/blogs/graphicdetail/2016/02/daily-chart-4>

In addition, the Levada Center, a nongovernment research organization based in Russia, which conducts independent polls and from which most of the Russian polling data is obtained, is an entity with a strong reputation by Western standards. A variety of Western polling organizations (such as the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press and the New Russia Barometer) have worked with the Levada group and found it highly professional (Treisman, 2008). In addition, the Levada Center, though it consistently reports high approval ratings of Putin, has been placed by the Russian government on Russia's list of foreign agents (Obrazkova, 2016). No political incentive exists for the Levada poll results to be manipulated on behalf of the Russian state. It is, rather, that because its polls reflect honest and true answers, it was added to that list (Obrazkova, 2016). The Levada Center was included in the list of foreign agents to prevent it from engaging in any type of political election polling. According to an article

published by The Economist, the Levada Center polls reflect similar results regarding Putin's approval ratings from state sponsored polls and polls from opposition leader Navalny (Vladimir Unbound, 2016). This information leads to my conclusion the poll results from the Levada Center, which are being referenced for this analysis, are not skewed and are therefore reliable data on which to base my research.

In addition, further validating the poll results, a survey by White and McAllister (2003), found that Putin supporters, at the beginning of his first term and nearing the end of his first term, are nearly an exact cross-section of the entire Russian society. This means that within those who approved of Putin, there was no statistical significance or difference regarding socioeconomic status, religion, gender, age, etcetera (White & McAllister, 2003). This legitimizes the state sponsored and independent Levada polls by discounting any claim those polled are not a representative sample.

Another study, concluded, at least as of March 2015, Putin's approval ratings largely do reflect the attitudes of Russian citizens (Frye, Gehlbach, Marquardt, & Reuter, 2017). Frye et al. (2017) reveals their analysis of direct questions about other political figures and of placebo experiments suggest that the bulk of Putin's support typically found in opinion polls appears to be genuine. The researchers do acknowledge respondents' opinions may be shaped by pro-Kremlin bias in the media and other efforts to boost support for the president, but that their results suggest that Russian citizens are largely willing to reveal their "true" attitudes to pollsters. Frye et al. (2017) concluded that much of the support for Putin is genuine and not the consequence of social desirability bias. Vladimir Putin is one of the most popular leaders in the world. The polls reflect Russian attitudes, and Putin's approval appears real.

## **Linking Putin's Approval Ratings to the State of Russia's Economy**

One of the more popular ideas, at least pre-2012, explains Putin's approval ratings by the state of the Russian economy. For example, Treisman (2008) determined that the popularity of Russian Presidents closely followed perceptions of economic performance, which, in turn, reflected objective economic indicators. Treisman's (2008) work indicates any leader who would have come to power in Russia at the time Putin did would have received the same ratings because of the economic boom. He found Putin's personal style played no role in the approval ratings. Rather he found both Putin's and Yeltsin's approval ratings could be explained with just measures of the public's perceptions of the economy during the preceding six to eight months (Treisman, 2008). He further denounces other theories about Putin's popularity by stating neither Putin's tough words nor his image as a young, energetic, and decisive leader are necessary to explain his ratings, nor is the control of the media. Rather, he concludes his evidence for the high approval ratings shows they are due to the boom of the economy (Treisman, 2008).

In another study, later in Putin's career, Treisman (2014) uses statistical analyses of Levada Center data to see why from December 2010 to December 2011 Putin's approval ratings plummeted. Interestingly, he found the change in attitude occurred quite evenly across age, gender, socioeconomic status, level of education, etc. His data and analysis revealed people started to hold leaders, such as Putin, accountable and dissolved the disconnect between leaders and the economy (Treisman, 2014). This lends credence to his earlier study that the Russian President's popularity is reflective of the economy (Treisman, 2008). Treisman (2014) also wrote the analysis suggests that Putin's public approval remains highly vulnerable to further economic deterioration. If what Treisman claims about Putin's approval rating being vulnerable to the economy is accurate, then Putin's high approval ratings would have continued to fall and would

have seen decreases with the economic crisis of 2014-2015. However, it did not. As Frye et al. (2017) points out, Putin's persistently high ratings are puzzling, as his approval rating seems unaffected by economic sanctions, a precipitous drop in oil prices, the collapse of the ruble, and Russia's economic recession.

Another more in depth look at Putin's approval ratings comes from Mishler and Willerton (2003) who examine presidential popularity with cultural imperative and neo-institutional choice theories, but also conclude that economic conditions are what most heavily account for Putin's high approval ratings. Cultural theories of political support hypothesize that public attitudes toward political leaders in Russia are substantially conditioned, if not directly determined, by fundamental and enduring social and political values that are deeply ingrained in the Russian culture (Mishler & Willerton, 2003). On the other hand, neo-institutional theories of political support conceive of the dynamics of Russian presidential approval as a consequence of citizens' "rational" everyday evaluations of presidential performance in meeting citizens' political and economic needs and demands (Mishler & Willerton, 2003). The researchers found political support for Russian presidents, including Putin's, is heavily influenced by perceptions of the economy and consumer prices. According to Mishler and Willerton (2003), at best the impact of cultural values on support for the two Russian presidents (Yelstin and Putin) is weak and inconsistent. Their evidence suggests that Russians like strong leaders and tough action, but only when those leaders and actions produce successful outcomes in regards to the economy. Therefore, they approve of Putin because they see him as strong, taking tough action, and, most importantly, responsible for producing successful economic outcomes.

Leon Aron (2009) also wrote that Putin's popularity was due to the economic upturn but would be in peril with a global downturn of the economy. When that occurs, according to Aron



(2009), Putin's Russia would follow the path of earlier authoritarian regimes that sought to use foreign conflict to justify internal repression and distract citizens from their daily hardship. Aron (2009) stated Putin and his regime or administration would use the full force of the diversionary theory and effect to maintain his popularity and approval ratings. It is interesting to note Aron (2009) believes that a positive economy, first and foremost, results in Putin's approval, but that due to the nature of the regime, the regime would have to resort to conflict to divert Russians' attention to maintain approval.

### **Foreign Conflict, Russian Power, and Security**

Literature also discusses the effect that Putin's use of foreign conflict, Russian power and security may have on his approval ratings. For example, Petersson (2014) argues Putin has been successful at creating and maintaining his popularity on the basis of two Russian political myths: Russia as an eternal great power and as Russia regularly beset by cyclical recurring periods of weakness and triumph. For example, Putin and his team used the situation in Ukraine and the Sochi Olympics to counteract the stagnation and slow decline of approval ratings by showing Russia does not flinch even when facing sanctions (Petersson, 2014). Putin is able to take advantage of such situations and use fundamental sentiments of national identity to increase and/or maintain his popularity and approval ratings. Using another perspective, Petersson's stance is linking as one the diversionary effect and the assertion of Russia's strength as affecting ratings. However, asserting strength and influence would be more useful to maintain support and regime legitimacy while diversionary responses are more useful to quickly boost support.

Kuzio (2016) argues Putin's use of conflict is in line with the tradition that requires domestic and external enemies to sustain his regime, referring to the diversionary effect and

theory. These ideas encompass the idea of “rally the flag” and it being a reason for Putin’s popularity and approval ratings. Aron (2009) and Kuzio (2016) seem to be correct in their assumptions, as, specifically and recently, the occupation of Crimea has been used to divert public attention from Russia’s own internal social and economic problems (Berzins, 2014). Putin’s approval ratings continued rise after the occupation and annexation of Crimea. They skyrocketed and topped 85% despite the currency crisis (Alexandrova, 2014). Berzins (2014) wrote ratings should fall, and Alexandrova (2014) stated sociologists believe ratings will fall as social issues come back to the forefront, after the initial rise in ratings because of the diversion. However, ratings have not significantly fluctuated or fallen. Frye et al. (2017) also reiterates this by writing that “rally around the flag” effects in public opinion are usually short lived, but more than three years have now passed since the beginning of the Ukraine crisis and the jump in President Putin’s approval ratings and support.

Putin has led a campaign of security for Russia since taking office as a leader of the country. Though marred with controversy, the 1999 apartment building bombings in Russia, killing hundreds of people, were ultimately attributed to Islamic warlords in Chechnya (Mazurova, 2016). This event was Putin’s chance to show Russians how he would protect the country and to exhibit his ability to lead in times of crisis. He responded by ordering air strikes, among other military actions, marking the start of the Second Chechen War. The public responded by voting him in to office as President in 2000. As Figures 1 and 2 show, Putin’s approval ratings rose from a low of 31% in 1999 to a high of 84% in 2000. His hard stance against terror appeared to be successful.

The war on terror, however, is not the only security related conflict; there is also geopolitical conflict, such as the Russo-Georgian War. That Five Day War, or conflict, between

Russia and Georgia in August 2008 had little, if any, effect, on Putin's approval rating. In the months leading up to the war, Putin's approval rating was anywhere from 80% to 86% (Levada Center, 2018). The four months following the conflict saw little change with the ratings anywhere between 83% and 88%. There are major differences in security related to terror and geopolitics. The circumstances surrounding the Russo-Georgian War did not directly affect the everyday lives of normal citizens, unlike the threat of terror and the acts of violence on Russian soil, as in 1999, which could account for the differences in the public's reaction.

In addition, when reviewing Levada Center polling data from 2014, the months leading up to the annexation of Crimea reveal approval ratings in the 60<sup>th</sup> percentile (Levada Center, 2018). In March 2014, the rating reached 80% approval and continued to climb (Levada Center, 2018). The assertion of power in relation to Crimea and Ukraine produced noticeable results and changes in pollsters' opinions. The public responded favorably to the annexation and display of the government's, of Putin's, aggressiveness and commitment to "protecting, listening, and responding to the requests of Russians."

There is not a perfect correlation between Russia's more assertive security posture and ratings. At times, Russians respond positively to confidence, aggressiveness, and forceful security stances, as with the 1999 bombings. Other times, such as the Russo-Georgian War, the public's reaction is not noticeable in poll results. Successful security and conflict decisions and events alone cannot account for Putin's approval ratings. Similarly, failures in security policy have not had a negative effect on them either. For example, the Beslan terror attack and the Drubrovka Theater attacks did not dampen Putin's ratings; he was not held liable in the eye of the public. The months following the September 2004 Beslan attack reflected approval of low 70s to upper 60s percentiles. Regarding the October 2002 Drubrovka attacks, approval ratings

actually rose from upper 70<sup>th</sup> percentiles to lower 80<sup>th</sup> percentiles and then started dropping in the first few months of 2003 (Levada Center, 2018), again showing no distinct correlation between ratings and security failure or successes, thus contradicting any “security-based” explanations for approval ratings.

### **Putin Brings Stability to Russia**

Looking back at Putin’s first election in 2000, some scholars find that Putin’s initial approval was a result of his response to the counterterrorism operation in Chechnya (McFaul, 2000). The public has often rallied behind national leaders at the start of wars (Treisman, 2008). McFaul (2000) also acknowledges, however, that Putin’s response to those attacks would not sustain his popularity indefinitely. His continued public approval was a result of Putin symbolizing the end of tumultuous times. Putin’s lack of record as a public leader, being new to the political scene, allowed voters to project on to him their wishes and desires for the future – they were technically supporting him as a future leader, not for his past achievements, ideological beliefs, or policy positions (McFaul, 2000). They held on to his positivism about the future. Putin, during his first term as Russian President, gave Russians hope, a way out of the erratic Yeltsin era.

### **The Use of Nationalism and Patriotism to Maintain Regime Legitimacy and Support**

Still others discuss Putin’s support in regards to his rhetoric of restoring order under a strong leadership, overcoming Russia’s backwardness by creating a market economy, and creating a sense of nationhood in post-Soviet Russia and creating a strong sense of patriotism (Nicholson, 2001). Richard Sakwa (2008) reflects on Putin’s power as a consequence of his

sensitivity to what he considered traditional Russian values: patriotism, *derzhavnost'* (Russia as a great power), statism, social solidarity, and, above all, a strong state. Rudra Sil and Cheng Chen (2004) take similar ideas, such as national pride, a step further and discuss Putin's popularity and approval in terms of state legitimacy. Sil and Chen (2004) point out Putin's popularity comes from ideas of generating a more coherent national identity to support state recentralization. He has placed a much greater emphasis on patriotism, collective identity and symbols that unmistakably appeal to ethnic Russians (Sil & Chen, 2004). Putin's rhetoric is consistent with the public mood. Just over 48 percent (48.3% - by far the highest percentage of any sentiments or items measured) declared that the most important unifying and mobilizing idea in Russia is the revival of Russia as a mighty global power. Comparatively, only 10.2% named the idea of individual freedom and priority of interests of the individual over interests of the state (Sil & Chen, 2004). This is in contrast to researchers who concluded, during the same time, his popularity and approval ratings are due more to the economy than any other reason. However, Kuzio (2016) points out and acknowledges that the importance of ideology and national identity is downplayed in the analyses of Putin's regime and there is a need for that to be studied in depth to better explain the regime.

### **Putin as a Shapeshifter**

Other possible explanations for Vladimir Putin's high approval ratings and popularity are discussed in the framework of Stephen Benedict Dyson's (2001) Operational Code of Putin. Dyson (2001) explains Putin is not a man of chance and only promises what he can keep. In this reference, one of the reasons Putin remains highly approved by the Russian population is because he is a man of his word, and he can be trusted. Further analysis of this Operational Code

identified by Dyson could give more insights on how he excels at seeming to reach and gain approval from all aspects of Russian society, no matter the age, gender, socioeconomic status, education, and so forth. Dyson (2001) also emphasizes Putin is a man with a split or dual belief about the nature of political life, with concomitant prescriptions for how to deal with others depending on how they themselves have dealt with him. This idea fits well with the work of John O'Loughlin, Toal, and Kolossov (2005). O'Loughlin et al. (2005) contends that President Putin has successfully adopted a Protean (shapeshifting) strategy to appeal to different elements of the Russian geopolitical spectrum. In their discussion, they reveal how Putin appeals to all at the same time, for example, to statist and Eurasianists, supporters of Westernization and those who still see and feel the glory of Soviet times. He does not subscribe to one school of thought. Similarly, Hanson (2011) writes that Putin has mixed and matched ideologically contradictory pre-revolutionary, Communist, and Yeltsin-era symbols of Russian statehood to placate citizens from a variety of ideological backgrounds.

Daniel Tresiman (2013), writing nearly 10 years after O'Loughlin et al. (2005), discussed three segments of society Putin must appeal to and control in order to remain in power, which translates in his high popular approval. Interestingly, these three classes, similar to what is identified by O'Loughlin et al. (2005), include elites, the disenchanting "creative class" found mostly in big cities, and the more traditional residents of Russia's heartland (Tresiman, 2013). Tresiman (2013), however, offers specific ways on how Putin achieves this control. He writes that for Putin to remain in power, he must control the three classes. Putin reorients the elites to maintain control of them – removes from power or replaces anyone who even alludes to dissent. He provides amenities such as parks and social gathering places and recreation for the creative class. He then appeals to the nostalgia of the traditional residents and promises services and

improvements, for which he provides timelines for completion or accomplishment, which then circles back to reformatting the elite. If the “elites” do not deliver on those promises for him, he replaces them by placing the blame for failure on them (Treisman, 2013).

### **Putin as a Cultural Icon**

Others believe and write Putin’s popularity is a type of personality cult, a “Putin phenomenon.” Specifically, Valerie Sperling (2016) stresses the role of personality and masculinity in Putin’s popularity ratings. The regime appeals to cultural understandings of the “right” leader to bolster the President’s power, utilizing machismo, masculinity and even masculine patriotism. Sperling (2016) references the media’s portrayal of Putin, his “machismo,” macho-like shirtless images, his strength, his softer side, all denoting what Russian men, supposedly, want to be and what women want, or believe, Russian men should be. In the earlier Putin years, White and McAllister (2003) also looked at the Putin phenomenon and the importance of managing of the presidential image to maintain or create popularity and citizen approval.

### **The Media and Putin’s Approval Ratings and Popularity**

There is little doubt media plays a crucial role in Vladimir Putin’s approval ratings and popularity. Soon after becoming President of Russia, Putin began finding ways, many of them creative, to put control of the media back in the state’s hands. The Russian state now relies on national television channels as an invaluable political resource. As Putin said, “Contrary to a common perception, mass media is an instrument, rather than an institution,” (Enikolopov, Petrova, & Zhuravskaya, 2011). Putin appears to believe the press should support his efforts to

bring “order” back to Russia by strengthening central institutions (Becker, 2004). Therefore, the media is responsible for disseminating Putin’s messages, or the Russian government’s messages, to more than the 90% of the Russian population who report their main source of political news is television.

Media effectively shapes public opinion by boosting, playing down, or ignoring any figure or event as directed by the state (Lipman, 2009). As in the Soviet-era, the media is strongly curtailed under the Putin regime and is reduced to being a political tool. However, there are differences between the state-controlled media of the Soviet era and Putin’s Russia. For example, under Putin’s Russia, there is still some autonomy, though self-censored, in entertainment broadcasting as the state is most interested in controlling the news (Gehlbach, 2010). In addition, the capacity of the state to limit media autonomy is enhanced by three intertwined factors, instead of exhibiting total control: the state retaining ownership of a majority of the media, the degree to which the state is involved and intertwined with Russian business, and Russia’s weak legal system (Becker, 2004). Without state ownership, without deep relations with businessmen involved in media and to whom to appoint to key positions, and without a weak legal system, the state would not effectively control the messages of the media. State-controlled media has helped Putin gain legitimacy by then, according to Lipman (2009) directing reports and content to Russians who constitute the reliable electoral base of his regime – the provincial, the elderly, and the less educated. It is not only notable the medium through which the messages are transmitted but also to whom. It has been reported the Kremlin convened meetings each Friday with the top television directors who were given the following week’s talking points as well as recommended approaches. The agenda is entirely political, aimed at supporting Putin and his political party (Lipman, 2005).



Controlling media content is not the only means by which media influences the public's opinion. Access to media is also important. Researchers Enikolopov et al. (2011) found that access to independent television channels also has a significant effect on voter outcomes and votes. They found that access to independent television station programming results in fewer constituents supporting the position of the state and effectively turns undecided voters to alternative candidates or political parties over the ruling or incumbent entity. Results of their research suggest the media possess a substantial power of political persuasion in countries characterized by weak democratic institutions like Russia, making access to independent media important (Enikolopov et al., 2011). State-controlled national television networks in Russia reach over 90 percent of the more than 140 million Russians. Independent networks have a miniscule reach in comparison, relegated to using old educational channel transmitters to reach an audience. Similarly, though the internet is available to more than 50 percent of the Russian population, not more than 10 percent reports using it (Lipman, 2005; Ognyanova, 2014). Consumption of print media has dropped in recent years, more than offsetting the slow growth of internet use (Gehlbach, 2010). For example, printed press, including Izvestia, which is the last mainstream daily newspaper, has a low reach and is centered only in urban areas, read by not more than two percent of Russians (Lipman, 2005).

On the surface, Putin's media strategy has been remarkably successful at gaining, building and bolstering his legitimacy. Although assertion of control damaged his reputation internationally and permanently alienated liberals who initially backed him, the long-term damage among domestic audiences appears to be limited (Gehlbach, 2010). On the other hand, Russians seem to have a realistic view of what they can learn from the news. (Gehlbach, 2010).

The media has helped to disseminate Putin's messages while the Kremlin has controlled the message. There are, however, other authoritarian regimes with highly controlled media where the rulers do not enjoy high popularity or approval, such as in North Korea. Understanding the role of the media helps to identify and understand how information is spread, but not why or what makes the information resonate with the target of communications.

### **Gaps and Further Research**

What remains to be answered is identifying what explains Vladimir Putin's high approval ratings post 2014. The ratings are particularly puzzling because they are inconsistent with many of the previous explanations: economic, foreign conflict/Russian power/security, nationalism and patriotism, his ability to appeal to everyone, and being a cultural icon. There is a lack of published research post-2012 addressing his high approval ratings. Researchers concluded from the onset of Putin's presidency through his first term and after, his high approval ratings were due to the economy, or at least the perception of the economy. That cannot be the case now as a currency crisis, Western sanctions, and low oil prices stress the Russian economy. Researchers agree "rally the flag" effects are normally short-lived and that economic conditions will come to light after the effect wears off, disregarding the idea the annexation of Crimea or the situation in Ukraine will maintain his approval ratings. If Putin is highly approved because he is to everyone what he or she want him to be, a chameleon or wearing a Protean mask, then why does that work? How does he do it? Perhaps the answers can be found in his discourse and identifying what reality he discursively constructs. Data sets from well-respected polls, such as those from the Levada Center, can be analyzed to find correlations between, for example, support for Putin, the Duma and government, ideas about the direction of the economy, among other ideas, but

those numbers do not answer why behind approval ratings. A different approach and type of study and analysis is required, of which I believe discourse analysis is most appropriate. I contribute to research by utilizing a different perspective, method, and historical period to analyze Vladimir Putin's approval ratings.

### **Theory and Perspective: The Lens of Social Constructionism**

Academic and non-academic literature contains several definitions of and approaches to *discourse*. For the purposes of this paper, I will use the basic definition as provided by Jorgensen and Phillips (2002) that discourse is a particular way of talking about and understanding the world, or an aspect of the world. My approach that draws on the work of Jorgensen and Phillips (2002) is premised on the idea that our ways of talking do not neutrally reflect our world, identities, and social relations but, rather, play an active role in creating and changing them. The idea is that discourse creates a reality that affects thoughts and actions. It creates the framework for and lens through which a group of people understands the world, which directly affects beliefs and “truths.”

Through the lens of social constructionism, of which discourse analysis is a part, my analysis of Putin's discourse is loosely based on four premises, taken from Burr (1995). These premises are a critical approach to taken-for-granted knowledge, historical and cultural specificity, a link between knowledge and social processes, and a link between knowledge and social action (Burr, 1995). What this means is that I analyze how Putin's discourse addresses and uses “everyday” knowledge, historical and cultural contexts, the interaction of knowledge and society, and the interaction of knowledge and action. Further, I adhere to the view in critical

discourse analysis and discursive psychology (a type of discourse analysis that uses psychological themes in speech) that language users are discursive products and producers in the reproduction and transformation of discourses (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002). These assumptions translate into my analysis in the following way. Via the media of language (communications), widely circulated by the state-controlled media, Putin produces and reproduces meanings and knowledge, which shape the understandings of Russian citizens based on the framework he creates. The Russian citizens, then, are the re-producers of the meanings put forth by the President through his approval of him. Putin, then, becomes a product of those approval ratings. All of these elements of discourse are agents of social and cultural change. In addition, if, for example, I find in Putin's discourse Russia is equated with Putin, then I will attempt to show how that coupling has been established discursively and determine what consequences that has on Putin's approval ratings.

## **Methodology**

### **Data**

To analyze Putin's discourse, I identified four annual news conference speeches (2014, 2015, 2016 and 2017) as well as the texts of his conversations with the public and journalists during the 2014, 2015, 2016, and 2017 "Direct Line with Vladimir Putin" (an annual television program and question and answer session with Putin) events. The dates of events were chosen because my research question is specifically targeting the period of economic decline via currency crisis, plummeting oil prices, and Western imposed sanctions.

I chose the sample of eight texts (speeches and conversations) because of the difference in the time of year of each event and the high visibility of each event for the public. Putin's annual news conference was held in December of the respective year, and his "Direct Line" event has been held in April for year 2014-2016 and June in year 2017. "Direct Line" in years 2014 through 2016 was broadcast live on state-controlled Channel One, Rossiya-1 and Rossiya-24 TV channels, and Mayak, Vesti FM and Radio Rossii radio stations. (Kremlin, 2014a; Kremlin, 2015a; Kremlin, 2016a). In 2017, it was broadcasted on all of those in addition to the television channel Russia Today (Kremlin, 2017a). Putin's 2014, 2015, 2016, and 2017 annual news conference was broadcasted live by Rossiya 1, Rossiya 24 and Channel One, as well as Mayak, Vesti FM and Radio Rossii radio stations. I chose transcripts in English taken directly from the Kremlin's website to ensure continuity in message and meaning for all Direct Line events and annual press conferences.

### **Purpose**

My purpose is to identify the discursive constructions of Vladimir Putin's legitimacy through his framing of the state of affairs in Russia. His legitimacy stands as a surrogate of approval and his discursive construction stands as a surrogate for *what* in my research question: What explains Vladimir Putin's high approval ratings since 2014?

### **Validity**

In addressing the validity of my research and choice of method, I emphasize timeliness and novelty. This study seeks to provide new insights about Putin's high approval ratings and fills the gap of not only a time period that has not been studied, but also by identifying why,

besides the state of the economy, Russians approve of Putin and the impact of discourse on that approval rating.

### **Discourse Analysis Approach: Discursive Psychology**

I use a portion of Fairclough's model, as outlined by Jorgensen and Phillips (2002). This includes analysis of the texts (Putin's speeches) and genres articulated in the production and consumption of the text and considerations regarding whether the discursive practice reproduces or restructures the existing order of discourse and about what consequences this has for the broader social practice (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002). Though I will perform some linguistic analysis, it does not include an in-depth analysis of linguistics, nor are linguistics the primary basis for my conclusions. Rather, any linguistic analysis will be supplemental. As Jorgensen and Phillips (2002) point out, there is no fixed method for the discursive analysis and my research design should be tailored to match the special characteristics of my project.

For this research, I take the stance that ways of understanding and categorizing the world are not universal, but historically and socially specific and consequently contingent and that attitude formation is constituted through social activities (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002). However, the social and historical context as well as the linguistics utilized is important in Putin's discourse. In addition, analysis of the rhetorical organization of his speech, how it is oriented toward action, is more directly related to my research than solely linguistics. It is also from discursive psychology I agree discourses create a world that looks real or true for the speaker and that discourse constructs our lived reality (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002). I believe Putin's discourse creates a real legitimacy through his speech.

## **Steps of Analysis**

Following Wodak, Fairclough, Sanguinetti, Czarniaska, and Taylor (2004), as described in Hamilton and Hillier (2006) and Jorgensen and Phillips (2002), I adopted a multi-stage framework for my discourse analysis. Each stage includes specific steps. I digressed from their three-stage model and adopted only Stage A and Stage C.

Stage A includes selecting and contextualizing the chosen documents for analysis. I selected Putin's annual news conferences and his "Direct Line" events years 2014 to 2017. These texts were most appropriate for this analysis as they are from the period I analyzed, are examples of direct communication with the public, and are highly visible discourse.

Stage C includes the different strategies I utilized in the analysis. These included analysis of the speeches looking for actions, genres, metaphors, irony, the plot, conversational style, valuing, legitimation, authority, modality, humor, choice of vocabulary, contradictions, inconsistencies, offered alternatives, and different perspectives (Hamilton & Hillier, 2006). Actions are effects the speeches can have. Is Putin directly stating or saying to do a particular action or think a particular way? Valuing is identifying if he approaches a topic positively or negatively or maybe distances or embraces an idea or topic. Modality would be identifying if his speech was dialogic, declarative, or persuasive.

The initial read through of each speech noted any recurring themes. I then identified the prominence of each theme and any overlapping themes. The identification of themes aided in discovering in what areas Putin's discourse required analysis pertinent to this project. Examples, which may overlap with other discourse, include economy, Putin's place in Russia – how he views Russia in relation to himself and vice versa, and themes about Russia's place (world power, against the West, with or against Europe, etc.). How is the economy situated? How is

Putin situated? How is Russia situated in his discourse? Next, using the different strategies as described in Stage C, I answer those questions others about his discourse.

The strategies utilized vary with each text. Some are used in all texts and some are only applicable to portions of the sampling. For example, I identify crisis points. Does he repeat and reiterate certain themes, interpretative repertoires, change his tone answering certain questions? Though not conducting a full linguistic analysis, I look at the tense in which he speaks as well as the pronouns he uses. A change in use of pronoun can indicate a shift from one subject position in the discourse to another (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002). I then identify any calls for action. Does Putin offer alternatives other than his word, leadership, to trusting him, to not supporting him, to not supporting Russia? What boundaries does he create discursively? Does use of vocabulary, authority, modality and valuing allow for a different point of view? How does he incorporate his legitimacy in to all this? In addition, on what social and historical contexts does he draw and insert in the discourse or create discursively?

Each sampling (speech or interview) is analyzed separately. There is no specific coding utilized. Rather, I mapped and wrote the findings of my analysis of each and then discussed and connected those findings, identifying discursive changes and ultimately finding what reality he creates that cements his legitimacy and keeps his approval ratings high. What I believe to find is that Putin legitimizes his power and leadership of Russia as him being responsible for making the country powerful, united, great, offering no other alternative, and framing a positive future around a “we will prevail against them” emotion. I suggest this equates Putin with Russia and Russia with Putin. Therefore, those surveyed approve of Putin because they support Russia.



## Analysis

### 2014 Direct Line with Vladimir Putin<sup>2</sup>

On April 17, 2014, Vladimir Putin held his annual live Direct Line event. This event is in a question and answer format with the idea that Putin is able to directly discuss and address the most concerning issues Russians have with callers. The event lasted approximately four hours and he responded to 81 questions. Nearly every one of the 81 questions was related to Crimea.

One theme, identified in his first answer, set the tone for the entire event: directing blame toward others, whether another nation, global organization or the Government of Russia. When answering the question, “What do you think about the events underway in the Lugansk and Donetsk regions?” Putin answers by first giving a review of those events. In that review he blames the government in Kiev, Ukraine for appointing oligarchs and billionaires as new governors in the regions, people who already draw suspicion, people who then refused dialogue and sent tanks and aircraft act against civilians. He blames others for the situation in Ukraine and points out that dialogue is the answer to solving it, that there is a miscommunication.

The theme of blame is closely connected to another pattern. This is a pattern of pointing out others doing the wrong thing and appears when Putin first references NATO. He discusses his belief the “block mentality is a thing of the past” but how NATO, formed as a counterbalance to the Soviet Union, still exists, is still expanding, and that Article 5 is still in effect, but that Russian is being told NATO is changing in to more of a political organization. Putin is pointing out inconsistencies of others’ messages. Though he does not say it, he alludes the actions of NATO are not political but rather military in nature. His approach to discussing NATO

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<sup>2</sup> All quotes in this section are from the English text of the 2014 Direct Line event retrieved from <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20796>

potentially instills a sense of distrust in NATO and its members, thus bringing people who may be on the fringes of not supporting Putin, or Russia, back to supporting him or the country.

The decision to annex Crimea was seemingly popular among Russians. When Putin discusses the annexation, he references it as a decision “I” and “we” made, only after a referendum, to support Crimeans’ wish of determination. He takes responsibility for this action, which legitimizes his decision, and therefore his rule. This idea of taking responsibility is a very important pattern in his conversations in the 2014 Direct Line event. He takes responsibility for actions and events where there is strong public approval. It is in stark contrast to events or situations that are not so popular among the population. In those times, he separates himself and does not utilize the first person, instead using “they,” for example, to designate someone else or group made a decision or was responsible for an outcome of a decision.

There is also a recurring use by Putin of “understanding,” “overcoming challenges,” referring to others as “partners,” and “cooperation.” This is a theme of moving forward together. However, when this theme appears, it also appears with discourse that delegitimizes others and in conjunction with a frame that Russia, or “we,” took or attempted the correct action. Again, when discussing the annexation of Crimea, Putin responds by mentioning, “What happened in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya...when someone tries to make the world unipolar, then there is an illusion all issues can be settled through power” (Kremlin, 2014a). He references this is not the correct way and hopes to move along the path to strengthen international laws. This is delegitimizing others, insinuating, perhaps, the United States erred, which then legitimizes his actions as appropriate.

One will also find this “we are right, they are wrong” theme when Putin talks about the division of Russia and Ukraine: “There are enough forces in the world that are afraid of our

strength, our ‘hugeness,’ ...so they see, to divide us into parts, this is a well-known fact” (Kremlin, 2014a). Then he references what “they” did in Yugoslavia, cutting it into small pieces and manipulating the formation of new nations, government, etc. Again, he is delegitimizing other nations, the West and Europe, by making a statement about the “wrong” directed toward Russia and Ukraine. The tone of these answers is almost a plea to cooperate and the hope or belief the rest of the world will fall in to line and listen to “us” because listening would nurture international progress. It creates a framework of, the message Putin wants to convey is, “We are the good guys because we want to talk about things, let others make their own decisions, and foster positive relationships” (Kremlin, 2014a).

The theme of a strong Russia in relation to world affairs is also apparent throughout the 2014 Direct Line event. For example, Putin takes a clear stance when asked directly about the expansion of NATO. His answer to what he thinks about NATO as an organization and its expansion is, “We’ll strangle all of them [NATO] ourselves. Why are you so afraid?... We aren’t afraid, neither me nor anyone else. Nobody should be afraid, but we must proceed from reality” (Kremlin, 2014a). He reasserts the idea Russia has nothing to be afraid of, but acknowledges that there is a threat from NATO encroaching on Russia’s borders. He speaks then also of not just annexing Crimea because Crimeans voted for it, but because strategically the annexation ensures NATO cannot take Sevastopol from Russia, reiterating he always undertakes actions for the whole good of Russia.

Putin continues to delegitimize the actions of the West, instilling an idea his or “our” actions are the correct ones, pointing out that the United States would not sign even “some trifling legal paper that would say that these systems are not directed against us” (Kremlin, 2014a). In that quote from the 2014 Direct Line event he is referring to the deployment of United

States missile defense elements. He says he wants to discuss threats together if they are in fact not for threats from Russia and determine together where best to place the systems, but the United States refused. This is an example of discourse with the themes of “them versus us” as well as that of Russia attempting to cooperate and move in the right direction themed. He points out what other nations are doing incorrectly when discussing oil, specifically Saudi Arabia and the United States. He points out the high production costs of developing shale gas and oil in the United States will make the projects for developing shale gas and oil unprofitable if world prices fall, maybe even killing the industry. As before, he is pointing out the downfalls of others.

An additional recurring idea or theme in this Direct Line from 2014 is one of solving problems, using “we will” and “I will.” When discussing voting rights in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) being suspended, Putin responds with language that “we” come up against the failure to understand our position and sometimes the unwillingness to understand, again saying that Russia is not to blame, but that someone else is for the suspension. He maintains “we” will continue working as normal and do not intend to impose isolation on “ourselves.”

Regarding the Russian economy, it is important to note and examine how Putin approaches it. When he discusses or answers any questions about the economy, he always answers with several specific numbers, figures, or percentages. In addition, it is within discourse about the economy Putin distances himself from the subject. For example, when responding to the statement “agriculture turns out to be more important than guns and planes, and in the light of the Western threats of sanctions national food security is the number one issue,” part of Putin’s reply separates himself from the Government: “I hope the Government will react promptly” (Kremlin, 2014a).

Regarding Russian-United States relations, Putin delegitimizes the United States by discussing that the world thought in the United States' actions in Yugoslavia, Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya were appropriate but that the world appears to think it is inappropriate for Russia to defend its interests. This theme and idea of unfairness toward Russia reemerges in future Direct Line and annual news conference events.

The very last question Putin answers in the 2014 Direct Line event is, "What does it mean to be Russian? What do you think about their pluses and minuses, their weaknesses, and strengths?" In Putin's response, he almost or attempts to legitimize what will soon be a weakening economy,

Of course, in everyday life we all think about how to live a wealthier and better life, to be healthier and help our family, but these are still not the main values. Our people open themselves outward. Western values are different and are focused on one's inner self. Personal success is the yardstick of success in life and this is acknowledged by society. The more successful a man is, the better he is. This is not enough for us in this country. Even very rich people say, 'Okay, I've made millions and billions, so what's next?' At any rate, everything is directed outward, and oriented toward society. (Kremlin, 2014a)

Putin makes being poor part of being Russian and that it is acceptable because there are other values that are more important than financial stability or having more money than one already has.

### **2015 Direct Line with Vladimir Putin<sup>3</sup>**

This event lasted nearly four hours and Vladimir Putin answered 74 questions. The overarching theme for this year, 2015, was the economy. The very first question was, “The economic situation is also complicated. Given the external pressure, it also required your direct personal decisions. What are the results of the year?” From the 2014 Direct Line event to the 2015 Direct Line Event, sanctions were placed on Russia, the ruble lost value, and oil prices dropped. Putin immediately begins his answer, as well as the event, by reiterating the success of the Sochi Olympics in 2014, the ruble gaining strength, stock markets on the rise, and that “we” have managed to avoid spiraling inflation. Then, as with answers to Direct Line in 2014 about the economy, he starts answering and explaining his answer regarding the economy with numbers, facts, figures, and percentages. He always returns to the numbers to explain the economy is rebounding. For example, he acknowledges consumer prices showed an 11.4% growth but that the inflation rate has dropped. In a complete change of topic, he concludes his answer on a social note, rather than an economic one, by reminding the audience of a positive indicator in Russia; the birth rate is going up against a drop in the death rate and the average lifespan continues increasing.

Interestingly, legitimizing his regime, Putin discusses the sanctions as beneficial for Russia. He makes a positive out of a negative. He specifically discusses the agricultural industry and that sanctions are providing farmers the ability to flood Russian markets with their own products. Putin discusses how the sanctions have forced an economic policy adjustment and that those positive changes would not have occurred if not for the sanctions. Though the sanctions are bad, they are not the worst situation for Russia. He even turns around the idea of enduring

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<sup>3</sup> All quotes in this section are from the English text of the 2015 Direct Line event retrieved from <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/49261>

sanctions and says it should not be about enduring anything but that “we” must benefit from the sanctions to reach new development frontiers.

Another major change in discourse from 2014 to 2015 in his Direct Line events is that in 2015 he separates himself and uses the phrase “the Government” much more often, deflecting responsibility for any future decisions, changes, policy implementations, actions away from himself as well as many present situations, especially relating to the economy. It is possible this is purposeful in that if conditions worsen, he does not take the blame. In addition, Russians will not blame him, they will blame “the Government” because that is what Putin said is responsible for the failures, should there be any further. Again, this is in stark contrast to his 2014 Direct Line event where “I” and “we” were prominent and Putin was taking credit for the annexation of Crimea as well as taking the stance he has no blame for the events in Ukraine but that he has the answer, which he then explains.

In 2015, especially, there is also a theme of a strong Russia and prevailing Russia. For example, Putin is asked, “What other threats could Russia be faced with this year?” He replies, “You know, there are lots of unpredictable threats out there, but if we manage to maintain a stable political situation in the country and keep our people as united as we are now, we will be immune to any threats” (Kremlin, 2015a). This reassures Russians he is keeping them safe, that Russia is a safe to place to be, as long as “we” are united

Putin downplays the seriousness of the economic problems in Russia by acknowledging the problem but then giving a figure to show another region, for example, is worse. He says, “Unemployment has increased slightly, but not like in the Euro zone. It is over 11 percent there and here it is, so far, just 5.8 percent” (Kremlin, 2015a). This legitimizes his and the Russian government’s failures or shortcomings because they are not as bad as the failures of others. It

sends the message to Russians they could not be better off at this time because everyone is facing the same problem and theirs is actually better than others' situations. This is demonstrated again when Putin discusses the lag in the Russian economy: "Just look at the level of the US national debt, which is now higher than its GDP. This is an alarming sign, a red flag for the entire global economy. And we do not know which turn the events will take there" (Kremlin, 2015a). These statements follow Putin's discourse in the 2014 Direct Line event by delegitimizing others and comparing what Putin portrays as similar situations in other countries.

Regarding Russian foreign relations and policy, Putin legitimizes them, for example, when answering a question asked about how dialogue can be conducted with Mr. Poroshenko if he is telling different things to Russia, Ukraine, and the West. Putin replies, "We do not choose our partners, but we should not be guided by likes or dislikes in our work. We must be guided by the interests of our country and we will proceed from this" (Kremlin, 2015a). This clearly states he has Russia's best interests at heart, no matter with whom (or what) he is dealing. In addition, when asked why [Russia] failed on the Ukrainian track (Russia's Ukraine policy), Putin responds blatantly with, "You know, we were not the ones who failed; it was Ukraine's domestic policy" (Kremlin, 2015a). After discussing some specifics, he ends the answer with, "So, it is not our failure. This is a failure within Ukraine itself" (Kremlin, 2015a). Here again, he legitimizes the wins/losses of his regime by deflecting blame and reiterating Russia has been correct in its actions and decisions.

The recurring element of legitimizing his regime by delegitimizing another in his 2015 Direct Line event occurred when he answered a question about normalizing relations with the West with the United State in particular. Putin responds, in part, by discussing the United States as seeing themselves as the only center of power, not needing allies, and how Boris Yeltsin was



applauded by the West who then “set the dogs on him” after announcing his stance on Yugoslavia. He then reiterates “we” are ready to cooperate and move forward, and not back down despite those actions. He legitimizes his, the Russian regime, by again relaying the message, “We do the right thing, even when we are wronged.” He also, in answering the same question, finishes with, “If it is apparent that we are protecting our interests, people support us. I would like to thank Russians for this support” (Kremlin, 2015a). This statement validates the idea he no longer can rely, or does rely, on the status of the economy, to legitimize his rule. He is saying there is something more important in Russia: protecting interests. Thus, in turn, he has directed his discourse to reflect the idea of protecting Russia or Russians’ interest and put that above all else, even the economy, stating they can get through the economic issues, and, besides, others are in worse condition, as pointed out above regarding the United States’ debt and the Euro region unemployment. The economy is not all that matters. This is the message he is sending and the message received by listeners.

Another example of the theme reasserting Russia’s strength is in Putin’s response to, “Mr. Putin, do we have allies now, including those in the struggle against reviving Nazism?” Putin discusses the Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) alliance, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as well as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). However, he adds, “I move forward knowing that we’re not getting to fight anyone, but will nevertheless strengthen our combat ability so that no one would even consider attacking Russia” (Kremlin, 2015a). In a continuance of the topic, when asked about enemies, Putin responds, “We don’t consider any one of [the international community] our enemy and wouldn’t recommend that anyone consider Russia an enemy” (Kremlin, 2015a).

The idea that looking ahead is more important than the present seems also to be a recurring pattern or idea in his discourse. This is important too, because, regarding legitimacy, it provides support because of what may come, rather than dissent or support for what is happening. Putin provides hope. One of the last questions of Direct Line in 2015 was, “A lot is being said now about the Russia of the past or present, but less about the Russia of the future. How do you envision the Russia of your dreams?” Putin’s response included, “All I can say is that I see Russia as a prosperous nation and its citizens as happy people who have confidence in their future” (Kremlin, 2015a).

#### **2016 Direct Line with Vladimir Putin<sup>4</sup>**

Vladimir Putin’s discourse in the Direct Line event in 2016 was similar to that of the one in 2015. There was still a strong distinction and separation Putin made between himself and the Government. He also continued to utilize numbers and figures when responding to questions about the economy. This continues to validate his authority on the subject because, by providing numbers, he indirectly presents himself as an expert on matters related to the economy.

An interesting observation regarding answers to Direct Line questions, especially in 2016, is that many times he responds with saying that an issue has just been discussed, validating the importance the caller feels the question or topic holds. This also suggests some form of action or resolution may be pending or, at least, is being sought or debated.

When discussing foreign policy or politics and relations, Putin also continues to emphasize Russia takes the only correct action, and that action is seeking compromise. He also continues to reassert Russia’s strength: “This is about a country that cannot be manipulated,

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<sup>4</sup> All quotes in this section are from the English text of the 2016 Direct Line event retrieved from [en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51716](http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51716)

cannot be forced to act and dance as somebody may want it to, to dance to somebody's tune” (Kremlin, 2016a).

In contrast to 2014 and 2015 Direct Line events, in Direct Line 2016, there are at least four references to the past, to Soviet Russia. One is Putin pointing out the errors of the leadership focusing too much on the military and weaponry, which resulted in coupons being disseminated for basic food items. Another answer from Putin references a Soviet-era song when he tells a young girl she should not rely on fairy tales for guidance because she asked for what he would wish. He then answers a question about vote counting after State Duma elections always counted in favor of United Russia by referencing a quote from Stalin, “It is not whom people vote for that matters, but who does the counting” (Kremlin, 2016a). He adds this is not the case, meaning that is not what happens in the State Duma elections. He continues with this answer about the Duma elections and points out the failures of the mid-1990s, “when everyone was busy making promises but no one actually did anything and the economy, social sector, and budgeting were simply heading for ruin” (Kremlin, 2016a). The fourth time Putin mentions Soviet times is about a song from it, “The Red Army is the strongest from the taiga to the British seas” (Kremlin, 2016a). Putin is asserting Russia's Armed Forces strength: “Our Armed Forces will really be invincible and the best in the world, as we would like them to be: compact, inexpensive and modern.....It is the strongest of all as it is but it should fortify itself in this position” (Kremlin, 2016a). Is Putin validating his authority by making these off-handed remarks about Soviet times by reminding people this Russia, his Russia, is better? Is this in response to a portion of the population that felt like times were better before the dissolution of the Soviet Union?

As in 2014-2015 Direct Line event answers, he points out the downfalls of, in this case, Europe's most developed countries. He reminds listeners and viewers that even in those

countries, not every person is satisfied with pensions, healthcare, and education. This idea, or theme, of Russia could be in worse condition, has the ability to pacify those feeling unrest or unsatisfied with life in Russia. In another instance, Putin legitimizes his rule when he points out, “We should by all means avoid the mistakes of the European Union” (Kremlin, 2016a). When discussing inflation, he again, deflects the hardships Russians are facing caused by inflation and points out how much worse it is in Ukraine.

In the 2015 Direct Line event, Putin turned the idea of sanctions and Russia’s counter sanctions (restrictions on buying food exports from sanctioning countries) as being beneficial, rather than detrimental, to the Russian economy. The idea, Putin stated, was to encourage Russian agriculture growth and to flood the markets with Russian products. In 2016, a Russian farmer expresses concern sanctions will be lifted resulting in Russia to also lifting its counter sanctions. When replying to the statement Putin suggests why he believes the sanctions will stay in place but also, as in other responses, points out the fault and blame belong to someone else, in this case Kiev. Though Putin has created a framework within his discourse Western imposed sanctions were actually good for the Russian economy, he wants to make sure everyone knows or believes he is not to blame for the challenges the economy still faces.

Putin again reasserts Russia’s place in the world economy by mentioning Russia is second only to the United States in arms sales, and the gap between Russia and those behind Russia is not even competitive.

When discussing foreign policy and relations, Putin’s choice of wording in the 2016 event is in first person plural format of “we,” “us,” “our,” and so forth. This strengthens the idea of unity, being a united Russia against “them.” When discussing the economy, Putin’s majority choice and use is third person, using “the Government.” He continues to use “I” or first person,

but rather to make a distinction for his idea or opinion, not in a possessive form. This is interesting because the economy is not doing well for the majority of the population. He distances himself from those failures by word choice and by speaking numbers that do not have meaning for most people. There are distinct patterns in his rhetoric.

A child asks Putin if a woman can become President of Russia because her daddy says only Putin can deal with America. Putin responds,

We should not focus on how to deal with America. We have to think about how to deal with our domestic affairs and problems, our roads, our healthcare, education, how to develop our economy, restore it and reach the required growth pace. (Kremlin, 2016a)

By saying this, he assures the population they are most important to him. He will take care of them.

### **2017 Direct Line with Vladimir Putin<sup>5</sup>**

According to the host, Tatyana Remezova, the top five of the most sensitive issues for Russians (at the time of the 2017 Direct Line event) includes growing prices, declining living standards, housing and utilities, healthcare, and personal requests such as those asking Putin to address situations of specific single persons (i.e. access to certain services). Remezova also points out most of the messages received are about the future, not the present (Kremlin, 2017a). This is noteworthy as it correlates to prior presidential discourse in Direct Line events focusing on the future with a promise of better conditions. In all the Direct Line events analyzed, 2014-2017, Putin has acknowledged conditions as poor but always improving, not as bad as they have been in prior years in Russia, or, not as bad as in other developed nations.

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<sup>5</sup> All quotes in this section are from the English text of the 2017 Direct Line event retrieved from [en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/54790](http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/54790)

The reality Putin has thus discursively created, legitimizing his regime's authority, is one that focuses on the future (with no set date on when to expect better conditions), not the present. In an endless cycle, the past or present is not as important as the future, even after time passes and that present is now the future.

Also, as in previous Direct Line events, Putin, when discussing the economy, makes heavy use of numbers in his discussion. He also continues a pattern of referencing the past. For example, when talking about real incomes, Putin points out in the mid-1990s, almost a third of the Russian population lived below the poverty line and that currently (at the time of the 2017 Direct Line event), this number is 13.5 percent. He continues his answer about a question on the economy by then citing number for gross domestic product (GPD). He even specifically says, "These are the latest statistics" (Kremlin, 2017a). What this accomplishes is a creation of no other possibility, a "numbers do not lie" situation. It is assumed people accept these statistics as facts. He asserts his knowledge of the numbers by telling the audience he brought the figures with him so he could share them.

A recurring element in Direct Line discussions that continues in 2017 is a comparison with other nations. Within the first few moments of the 2017 event, he talks about decreases in infant and maternal mortality, and asserts that, "Probably no other country's social sector has achieved such results" (Kremlin, 2017a).

The use of the words "the Government" in Putin's answers in the 2017 discussion is still noticeable, but not as much as in 2015 and 2016. However, as before, the choice to relieve himself of responsibility and use "the Government" occurred when discussing failures or not meeting expectations of, for example, adjusting some wages for inflation.

Regarding foreign relations, though Putin is careful and never designates another nation an enemy and reiterates his desire to cooperate on a global scale with nations, he does utilize language giving the impression the world, or some countries, are against Russia. For example, when he answered a question about sanctions, he said,

[W]e have usually lived under sanctions whenever Russia started to become independent and feel strong. Whenever our partners in the world saw Russia as a serious rival, they imposed various restrictions under various excuses; this has been the case throughout our history. (Kremlin, 2017a)

He continued and explained if not for Crimea, the United States would have still come up with some other way to restrain Russia: “The policy of containing Russia has always been presented like this” (Kremlin, 2017a).

As the discussion progresses, he turns to another element, or theme, found in previous Direct Line discourse: comparing Russia’s situations with those of other nations. He points out, “[S]anctions have proven to be a double-edged sword and harm everyone, including those who impose them” (Kremlin, 2017a). Putin backed up his statement with estimates from the United Nations the sanctions on Russia lowered Russian GDP by one percent and caused a loss of \$50-52 billion while the countries that imposed the sanctions lost \$100 billion. Putin also then focused on the advantages of the sanctions as he explicated before in Direct Line events.

For this first time in Direct Line discourse, Putin defines, at two different times, his use of the word “us.” The first time occurred when responding to statements about issues or problems sent in before the event that were corrected immediately before Direct Line occurred. Putin responded, “And this will help us – me, the Government and the Presidential Executive Office” (Kremlin, 2017a). This is an important designation because of the pattern of Putin

utilizing third person more often when discussing citizens' concerns, especially the economy.

This separation between himself and the government is related to deflecting blame and not taking responsibility. For example, when talking about Russian regions' economic situations, Putin deflected any responsibility and said he would find out where money allocated to that region went and often deferred responsibility to regional governors. He carefully separated himself from the economic situation about which Russians asked.

Putin then utilizes comparisons to legitimize the Russian situation include when he discusses the birth rate, "The birth rate in Russia is growing faster than across Europe" (Kremlin, 2017a). He compares Russian and Ukrainian monthly wages as well as household prices for gas, pointing out Ukrainian incomes dropped drastically and gas prices skyrocketed as they have moved closer to Europe. This was in response to a question about Mr. Poroshenko's message to Russia that included a line from a Mikhail Lermontov, which was perceived by many as bidding farewell to Russia.

Additionally, he blamed the 1990s and early 2000s for the collapse of the flight networks in Russia but assured the audience, "[F]or several years we have been working to restore it and put it on an entirely different footing" (Kremlin, 2017a). In the same discussion, he blamed "the Government" for not finding the money to bring back a certain type of aircraft and added, "I will reprimand them for this" (Kremlin, 2017a). He also discussed the "difficulties the plant faced in the 1990s and the early 2000s" with "rough and fraudulent schemes" to privatize it when he answered a question about plans for the Baltic Shipyard. This reminder of past conditions serves to encourage citizens to accept current conditions, as they are better than before.



The element of strength and supremacy is seen in 2017, as in years 2014-2016. He even touts the strength of ships, “I want to point out that nuclear icebreakers of this class are not built anywhere else in the world” (Kremlin, 2017a).

Following the pattern of 2014-2016, Putin is careful to not label anyone (person or nation) as an enemy and prefers the use of partners in his language. For example, when responding to an American’s question on how to help other Americans see Russia is not the enemy, Putin responds with, “We do not consider America our enemy” (Kremlin, 2017a). However, he alludes to the notion of aggressors and enemies. An example is he discusses the importance of asserting dominance in the Arctic against United States nuclear capabilities.

I do not want to stoke any fears here, but experts are aware that US nuclear submarines remain on duty in northern Norway, the time it takes a missile to reach Moscow is 15 minutes, and we need to have a clear idea of what is happening there. We must protect this shore accordingly, and ensure proper border guarding. ...we just need to make sure that the missile warning system and the missile launch control system are in place.

(Kremlin, 2017a)

A possible purpose is to retain support for a stronger military and foster the “them versus us” mentality. This preserves unity and support for Putin’s regime and Russia.

Very closely related, however, is the idea of cooperation and working toward common goals. Putin discusses the idea of cooperation in conjunction with talking about threats. Shortly after stating America is not an enemy, he reflects on the idea, again, of cooperation. Putin says, “Cursing and trading barbs and insults with the US administration would be the worst road to take because we would reach no agreement at all in this case, but it makes no sense to seek agreements without the US, which is one of the biggest emitter countries” (Kremlin, 2017a). He

says this concerning the Trump administration and its stance on the Paris Agreement. In addition, Putin adds, “We must work together to fight poverty in the world” (Kremlin, 2017a). Putin provides hope for further cooperation citing cooperation with the previous US administration on the Iranian nuclear issue. He alludes Russia is awaiting United States’ cooperation and says, “But we are ready for constructive dialogue” (Kremlin, 2017a).

Putin continues comparing situations in Russia with situations in other nations, even referencing healthcare. He says,

We are very well aware that there are problems with medicine everywhere, and patients everywhere are critical about what is happening in this area. This is the case practically all around the world...previous US president...passed a law that drew a lot of criticism...similar things are taking place in Europe. (Kremlin, 2017a)

He uses this tactic to discuss education when he answers a question about textbooks in Russia:

Our single educational space is stronger than elsewhere, than in many other countries. For example, in the United States, almost every state and every university has its own curriculum, and the same goes for Europe. We are probably one of the few countries where we try to preserve this single space. (Kremlin, 2017a)

This type of comparison can appease those who may be moving away from supporting Putin because of issues in the sphere of education and healthcare. He constructs an idea that what his audience is experiencing in Russia is common, nor is it necessarily worse somewhere else. Therefore, he has not failed his constituents in any way.

It is also important to analyze how Putin closes the Direct Line event. In 2017, closing statements include another instance where he defines his use of “us” which appeared in his last statement of the event: “It is important for all of us – for the Government, the Presidential

Executive Office and for me – to analyze the incoming questions, proposals, requests or critical remarks” (Kremlin, 2017a). This was specifically part of his closing line on the importance of holding a direct line event. This final statement reiterates Russians are important, their concerns are important, and that Putin is listening.

### **2014 Annual News Conference<sup>6</sup>**

Putin’s 2014 annual news conference was one highlighted by economic concerns and questions, as one would expect. Outside of welcoming the audience, the first statement made by Putin reflects the economic theme: “First the most important thing: the economic performance” (Kremlin, 2014b). He then provides numbers and statistics regarding the economy, many of which are percentages. These percentages show growth and increase or other positive indices in a variety of ways including trade surplus, gross domestic product, or unemployment, for example.

By beginning this news conference with data focused on positive economic indicators, he presents the year 2014 as a year of successes. He utilizes phrases such as, “We have met and exceeded,” “We gave significant attention to,” “The main achievement of the year...,” and “This is 100%” (Kremlin, 2014b). By using examples of positive indicators and phrases that allude to success in his opening statements, he immediately sets the tone of the news conference. However, he also acknowledges citizens’ are concerned with how the state of the economy and currency could affect developments in the social sphere. Then, though, he states, “The current situation was obviously provoked primarily by external factors,” thus deflecting responsibility (Kremlin, 2014b). Masterfully, he turns the declining economic situation in to a positive by

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<sup>6</sup> All quotes in this section are from the English text of the 2014 annual news conference retrieved from [en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47250](http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47250)

acknowledging, “[W]e have failed to achieve many of the things that were planned and that needed to be done to diversify the economy” (Kremlin, 2014b). The economic sanctions forced Russia to recognize, address, and correct those failures.

As observed in the Direct Line events, Putin blames others but takes just enough responsibility for the situation to maintain his legitimacy. This is important because it is a satisfying answer or statement for those who do really believe others are to blame for Russia’s economic woes as well as for those who feel the Russian leaders could have acted in ways to prevent the woes.

In addition, to remain a legitimate figure to discuss concerns and any resolve, he reminds the audience of the successes in 2008, “What do we intend to do about this? We intend to use the measures we applied, and rather successfully, back in 2008” (Kremlin, 2014b). Then, in ending his opening statement, he reassures citizens, “And I will repeat that inevitably the situation [economy] will return to normal” (Kremlin, 2014b). It reminds the audience there will be improvement and the current economic woes are not permanent.

Putin continues to use the idea or theme of reassurance when discussing the economy. For example, to allay fears the economy will not rebound, he uses phrases such as, “This will become a fact of life,” “it is inevitable. I would like to highlight this. This will be a fact of life,” when emphasizing the economy is only in a temporary difficult situation.

In the 2014 news conference, when discussing foreign relations, politics, or policy, Putin speaks with confidence Russia attempts to work together with partners while those same partners distance themselves. An example of this occurs when a reporter asks Putin about his thoughts on living in a divided world and the possibility of returning to dialogue and cooperation with others. This is asked in conjunction with statements about the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the fall the Berlin Wall

and the idea of a potential new Cold War. Putin responds nobody has ever, our partners never stopped building walls and references NATO expansion, which is the problem: “They never stopped building walls, despite all our attempts at working together without any dividing lines in Europe and the world at large” (Kremlin, 2014b). He also identifies authorities in Ukraine as the reason for the conflict, focusing on the idea that they refuse and did refuse to engage in any dialogue to resolve differences.

In a similar fashion, Putin justifies the Russian economic situation by saying, “This is actually the price we have to pay for our natural aspiration to preserve ourselves as a nation, as a civilization, as a state” (Kremlin, 2014b). He supports this statement by making Russia look like the “good guy” and doing the right thing. Putin then references Russia opening itself to partners after the breakup of the Soviet Union and that, “no matter what we do, we always run into challenges, objections and opposition” (Kremlin, 2014b). He gives an example using the Sochi Olympics, “and this is an evident truth, unprecedented and clearly orchestrated attempts were made to discredit our efforts to organize and host the Olympics” (Kremlin, 2014b). He continues by discussing the ways Russia is unfairly treated by others and then bluntly states, referring to the economy, “So, it is not about Crimea but about us protecting our independence, our sovereignty and our right to exist. That is what we should all realize” (Kremlin, 2014b). As earlier, he turns this negative to a positive, “because we can use the current situation to our own advantage” (Kremlin, 2014a). This instills more of the idea Russia will prevail and no one can stop “us.”

Putin also attempts to, whether purposefully or not, delegitimize other governments or nations by pointing out negatives. This follows the pattern of language in Direct Lines 2014-2017. However, he also adds wording or phrases such as, “Unlike Russia, this is not the path

chosen by, say, our European partners” (Kremlin, 2014b). This statement is preceded by a brief discussion of how the government [in Russia] will not stigmatize anyone. He then gives an example of another country’s government banning a person from entering its territory. In addition, he uses a tactic of repeatedly pointing out that when there are potential solutions to issues, other nations purposefully choose to not work together, have open dialogue, or move forward with agreements so that problems, such as in Ukraine, can be resolved. He takes a strong stance with those statements or beliefs, telling them as if they are not only truths but that they are self-evident, especially with regard to his discussions on conflict in Ukraine.

Putin points out an agreement between opposition in Ukraine and the Ukrainian government made in February 2014. He states if those that signed the agreement would have been supportive of Ukraine joining the European family, they would have referred back to the agreement and conditions for joining Europe and reminded Ukraine to follow those conditions, which would not have resulted in a coup. Regarding those involved in the agreement, Putin states, “I’m sure that if that was their position, there would be no civil war in Ukraine with its many casualties” (Kremlin, 2014b). This is direct language, which he appears to prefer when discussing hot topics related to foreign relations or for events which there appears to be public approval.

The deflection of blame and accusatory language is not only found in rhetoric about conflicts in which Russia is not officially involved. This style of communication is found with regard to discussing Russia-United States relations, disagreements and tension. Putin’s response to a question asking him to take the opportunity to let the West know he has no desire to carry on with a new Cold War and to explain to military air exercises includes a statement Russia stopped strategic aviation flights in remote surveillance areas while the US continued those flights with

aircraft carrying nuclear weapons. He adds, “Why? Against whom? Who was threatened? So we didn’t make flights for many years and only a couple of years ago we resumed them. So are we really the ones doing the provoking” (Kremlin, 2014b)? He also adds to this idea the United States is behaving aggressively, not Russia, by pointing out the United States military bases scattered all over the globe and the very few Russia has.

Putin points out ways Russia is treated unfairly by other parts of the world. He declares no one is engaging in dialogue with Russia about NATO expansion and that Russia is told, “That’s none of your business. Every country has the right to choose its way to ensure its own security” (Kremlin, 2014b). He adds “we,” meaning Russia, has the right to do so too, “Why can’t we” (Kremlin, 2014b)? Another example of this is when he talks about the joining the World Trade Organization (WTO): “That organization has rules. And yet, sanctions were imposed on Russia in violation of the WTO rules, the international law and the United Nations Charter – again unilaterally and illegitimately. Are we in the wrong again” (Kremlin, 2014b)? Interestingly, though he appears to state it indirectly, he says, “I will not discuss who’s right and who’s wrong. I already said on many occasions that I believe Russia behaved the right way in the Ukrainian crisis, and the West was wrong, but let us put this aside for now” (Kremlin, 2014b). Similarly, he makes a comment about Russia, “We are always accused of every sin in the book, accused of provoking something” (Kremlin, 2014b). He even adds a bit of a conspiracy element. When addressing economic relations with Iran, Putin references a potential collusion between Saudi Arabia and the United States to lower oil prices and punish Iran or influence Russia’s economy. However, he then adds this may or may not be the case.

A pattern found within Putin’s solutions for foreign or regional conflict or tensions is political dialogue. He makes heavy use of the word “dialogue,” whether using it as the answer to

a problem, as something Russia tried, or something others refused. Utilizing and reiterating dialogue in his rhetoric downplays any aggression abroad in which Russia is involved.

Additionally, this emphasis on dialogue then legitimizes Putin's regime. The idea is created that, if aggression is occurring or does occur, Putin attempts to work through issues before ever reaching the point of violence.

Regarding the economy, one reporter asks Putin if he thinks he is personally responsible for domestic and foreign policy moves, weakened ruble, and economic problems. Putin's response includes, "I have never tried to evade responsibility and I am not going to start now" (Kremlin, 2014b).

Putin ends his news conference discussing the economy, just as it began, with "I'm absolutely confident this will happen," meaning that the economy will adjust to low energy prices, diversity, and that eventually those prices and demand for the energy will grow (Kremlin, 2014b). Interestingly, however, he places this responsibility not on himself, but on others, "We will see how the authorities – the financial and managerial sectors and the Government – perform and evaluate them accordingly" (Kremlin, 2014b). He also reaffirms "we" will overcome this situation stronger. His very last statement is, "We will focus our attention to the social wellbeing of our people in the upcoming period. And I'm confident that we will achieve all targets" (Kremlin, 2014b).

### **2015 Annual News Conference<sup>7</sup>**

Putin's opening statement varies significantly from his opening statement at the 2014 annual news conference. It is very short, not filled with the slight light-heartedness found in

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<sup>7</sup> All quotes in this section are from the English text of the 2015 annual news conference retrieved from [en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50971](http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50971)



2014, and tells the host to, “get right down to your questions so as not to waste time” (Kremlin, 2015b). He also says he does not know what else to add other than what he said at his Address to the Federal Assembly. It appears his attitude is poor with a much blunter demeanor, as if he is less concerned with a sense of politeness when addressing the audience. Additionally, in his opening, he defines “us:” “Nevertheless, there must be issues, which you want us to clarify. When I say ‘us,’ I am referring to my colleagues in the Presidential Executive Office and the Government Cabinet and myself” (Kremlin, 2015b). This is worth noting as he utilizes “we”, “us,” and “I” interchangeably yet rarely denotes this.

He addresses the economy, as in Direct Line events 2014-2017 and the 2014 annual news conference, with numbers and statistics. He acknowledges decreases in disposable income and fixed investments but reassures the audience, “At the same time, as we have already said, statistics show that the Russian economy has generally overcome the crisis, or at least the peak of the crisis, not the crisis itself” (Kremlin, 2015b). He continues to point out positive economic indicators, mainly in the form of percentages.

He delegitimizes any negative consequences of sanctions by calling them “so-called sanctions.” He points out Russia is persevering, “Despite all limitations, we complied with all our commitments to our partners, including international credit institutions” (Kremlin, 2015b). What he says is that Russia paid all its debts on time and in full and even though then could not continue to borrow, still made improvements economically: “Despite the complicated financial and economic situation, we continue our responsible state financial policy” (Kremlin, 2015b). He also ties the economy and social situation together when discussing maternity capital and population growth, “This is a very good figure that speaks of the people’s state of mind, shows that they have the opportunity to plan their families, which makes me very happy” (Kremlin,

2015b). It is not often Putin references his own feelings. This is notable as it emphasizes the importance to him of the people of Russia. He could say he is happy about anything but specifically chooses to reflect on Russian families – which alludes to Russia’s future and strength.

Following the pattern of 2015-2017 Direct Line events, Putin separates himself in his discussions from the Government and its decisions, especially those related to the economy. Putin is asked whether he is satisfied with the Government’s work. He responds, “Overall I think that the Government’s work has been satisfactory. Of course, it can and should be even better” (Kremlin, 2015b). In a prior discussion, he said, “We will not move to adjust the budget, as this would lead to a reduction in the funding of both the social and real sectors; however, the Government is of course working on different development scenarios” (Kremlin, 2015b). He uses “we” when referencing positive things and “they” or “the Government” when discussing future plans or something unsuccessful or uncertain.

However, to legitimize the Government, he adds, “let me reiterate that overall in terms of its strategy the Government is moving in the right direction and is efficient” (Kremlin, 2015b). This is important to note. He does not want to speak directly negatively about the Government since it is his government and he oversees it. By employing a specific kind of language, he allows himself to take direct responsibility, indirect responsibility or no responsibility at all.

Similar to the blaming of others found in Direct Line events and the 2014 annual news conference, Putin blames Turkey for the rapidly deteriorating relations, not just for the Russian plane that was shot down resulting deaths of the occupants, but also because of how Turkey handled the situation - running to NATO and “brown nosing” Americans. Putin states Russia was willing to cooperate but that Turkey did not attempt to. In addition, when speaking of

Russia-Turkey relations, he says, “Even when we tell them, ‘yes, we agree,’ they are trying to outflank or stab us in the back for absolutely no good reason” (Kremlin, 2015b). This follows the pattern of Putin speaking that Russia is treated unfairly. It is an idea of victim self-perception or at least using that stance to explain things that go wrong.

A reporter asks Putin about a question about, after 2000, elites coming to power, their children experiencing preferential treatment and the results of that. Putin responds with, “We will have to admit that these are not the only results. Our best achievements are higher incomes for the people and a stronger economy, which has grown by 100 percent. Our GDP has almost doubled” (Kremlin, 2015b). Only after touting the positive outcomes since he came to power in 2000 does he acknowledge what he calls the, “problems of secondary importance...they can happen anywhere” (Kremlin, 2015b).

Just as with Turkey, Putin specifically states “we” are not to blame for deteriorating relations with Georgia, “The former Georgian leaders and then then President Saakashvili should not have made the adventurist decisions that triggered Georgia’s territorial disintegration. This is their fault, their historical fault. They are fully to blame for this” (Kremlin, 2015b). Putin not only deflects blame for complications with foreign relations and the economy, but also with social issues. For example, when asked about housing costs, Putin says, “There is no doubt that this issue deserves the most careful attention; we need to closely monitor the property management companies” (Kremlin, 2015b). He defends himself and the Government, however, in this instance, as this statement was preceded by a discussion of subsidies citizens are entitled to receive for housing costs.

There are certain instances where Putin purposefully designates what he means when using “us” or “we.” An example occurs when discussing the oil industry exploration and

taxation. He says, “We, meaning the Government, must look closely at developments in this sector so we do not kill the goose that lays the golden eggs. We will analyze the situation very seriously” (Kremlin, 2015b). The oil and gas industries were and still are the foundation of the Russian economy so they are delicate issues with citizens; he must take care when discussing them. He understands this and allays fears he or the Government may make any rash decisions regarding this important aspect of the economy.

Similar to patterns and themes, when discussing gas pipelines, Putin again use phrases that blame others, show Russia attempted something positive, and was treated unfairly. For example, he says, “They did not let us, do you understand” (Kremlin, 2015b)? This was in reference to the roadblocks encountered for the construction of South Stream. Shortly after, Putin ends this news conference discussing future plans for Crimea, Sevastopol, and the assistance Russia will continue to provide.

### **2016 Annual News Conference<sup>8</sup>**

Putin’s opening statement is even shorter in the 2016 news conference compared to the already shortened one in 2015 from 2014. The very first question is also about the economy and Putin responds with numbers, percentages, and statistics. He focuses on growth and positive indicators, making many comparisons with the prior year.

Another important observation about Putin’s answers in the news conference is that he tends to relate his answers with the future and where Russia is headed. Regarding the economy, he acknowledges there are issues but reminds the audience the positive trend will remain in place for the near future. He tends to discuss the future, instilling a sense of hope. He continues in this

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<sup>8</sup> All quotes from this section are from the English text of the 2016 annual news conference retrieved from [en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53573](http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53573)

news conference to discuss the economy in mainly terms of “the Government’s actions.” This follows the pattern of the 2015 annual news conference and the 2015-2017 direct line events.

One difference in reading the transcripts of the 2016 press conference, compared to 2014 and 2015, is that the overall tone is much more direct, less enthusiastic, and more to the point. The reader acquires a sense Putin just wants to answer questions and get on with his business, as if he is tired or perturbed by the event. One could go so far as to say he is argumentative in his answers, and he is much more likely to use sarcasm when addressing reporters and their questions, in almost a belittling way. This is apparent from the very first few minutes of the program. He is careful with his choice of words and points out the cunning or inappropriate use of words by reporters in their questions. This would lead one to believe he is also very particular in his choice of words. Is he perhaps frustrated by the questions he is asked, many include references to what he said before and are much more accusatory in nature? Some reporters reference, for example, that Putin said something before that is not true or the reality or that no action occurred after a promise.

With regard to relations with the United States, Putin is asked to respond to a statement from President-elect Trump about nuclear weapons. He downplays the referenced Trump comment as not anything new and something referenced through the campaign. However, he adds,

If you listened carefully to what I said yesterday, I talked about strengthening the nuclear triad and in conclusion said that the Russian Federation was stronger than any potential – and this is key – aggressor. This is a very important point, and not an incidental one.

(Kremlin, 2016b)

He then rhetorically defines what it means to be an aggressor. He reiterates more than one time after this is the same discussion that Russia is stronger, saying, “it is true,” as well as saying that he has no problem repeating it.

In the 2016 news conference, Putin follows the pattern of blaming others for foreign tensions. For example, Putin is asked if he is concerned about a new arms race. Putin responds with, first, blaming the United States for paving the way for an arms race by withdrawing from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. He emphasizes with, “This is obvious” (Kremlin, 2016b). Again, here his language is more matter of fact during this conference. He adds, “We did not concoct this. We have to respond to this challenge” (Kremlin, 2016b). He continues discussing American military and nuclear expansion and, as in previous answers and years, blames the United States, “So if anyone is instigating this arms race, it is not us” (Kremlin, 2016b).

Another prevalent theme found again in the 2016 event is that of not only comparing situations in Russia with other nations, but also with the situation in Russia in the 1990s and 2000s. An example of this is when Putin is asked a question about concerns pensioners have about retirement and income. Putin, again with a much different tone from prior years answers, “Since you are concerned with this matter, you should know that not long ago, in the 1990s and early 2000s, the size of pensions did not depend on the length of service or the amount of wages....We have made major changes” (Kremlin, 2016b).

I draw attention to Putin carefully choosing his words because of a statement he made in response to, “Ukrainians will still view Russians as occupiers.” Putin then says, “It would be good to begin by making sure that the Ukrainian army is not viewed as an occupying force in Donbass, which is Ukrainian territory. This is what matters” (Kremlin, 2016b). This is very noteworthy because he does not acknowledge or discount Russians are in the region, which he

admitted to in a prior year's statement. He does not lie but also directs the statement back at the reporter or audience. Maybe this is sarcasm, but it is an example of a different tone demeanor from earlier years of his news conferences and direct line events.

Putin makes lighter of the tax situation in Russia by pointing out, again an example of his harsher language, "You know, you need to distinguish between taxes and non-tax fees...which are still the world's lowest" (Kremlin, 2016b). In the same sense, comparing Russia with others, he answers a question about the price of oil with, though still references numbers as with other statements about the economy, "The global economy is worse off, but our performance is better. This means that the economy has adapted and will continue to grow" (Kremlin, 2016b). He is able to overlap certain ideas that actually strengthen each other. His rhetoric gives the message Russia is in a better situation than others are, and is still growing. This aggregate combination is a much more powerful message than each idea presented individually.

When responding to a question about whether or not democracy is a good thing and what has gone wrong it (in the context of the outcome of the American election and people saying they were betrayed by their own democracy), Putin says,

Yes, there are problems. This is something we have long been saying, but our American partners always dismissed it. The problem lies above all in the United States' archaic electoral system....Perhaps it was done deliberately so as to let people in particular states keep hold of their privileges. (Kremlin, 2016b)

He delegitimizes American democracy. This type of language belongs in the same category as pointing out the faults of others to legitimize his leadership.

Interestingly, even though Putin touts the improvements in the Russian economy because of the measures Russia was forced to take to flood the market with domestic goods, he also

reasserts his outward willingness to cooperate on the international stage to improve relations. For example, when discussing Germany, he says, “We would be happy to lift these measures if our partners, including in Europe, lift the anti-Russian sanctions, even though our farmers are asking us not to do this” (Kremlin, 2016b). He then continues, however, with his version, though brief, of what happened in Ukraine that led to souring relations with Germany. He accuses American and European friends of supporting the anti-constitutional coup in Ukraine. He then connects this with Crimea, “This resulted in the people living in Crimea wanting to be reunited with Russia, Ukraine losing Crimea, and the sad, tragic, bloody events in Donbass” (Kremlin, 2016b). His language is direct and commanding.

Again, Putin’s different, more negative tone is evident when responding to a reporter asking about media being required to remove content, “Do you believe such rulings set a dangerous precedent, legitimizing the suppression of information that may not be to someone’s liking?” Putin’s immediate response is, “Do you have a problem with Sechin, the courts or the unreliability of your own information” (Kremlin, 2016b)? His response is that the decision to order the removal of content is okay with him as long as decisions are made within the bounds of the law.

There are several other examples of Putin blaming others for problems in Russia. Putin even defers the alcohol problem in Russia saying, “However, oddly enough, it may not be as bad as in some other countries, particularly in Northern Europe” (Kremlin, 2016b). He also then blames the Russia-Georgia travel restrictions on Georgia, not even when asked or prompted, “I would like to note, though it may seem trivial, that we are not the ones to blame. We did not start the fighting in South Ossetia” (Kremlin, 2016b). These are ideas Putin wants to assure Russian



citizens hear, ensure they receive his message he is not responsible for these decisions which may have negatively affected Russians.

He ends the news conference with the different tone heard throughout. When he is asked about seizing funds in the Rosneftgaz's accounts, Putin's first response is, "You just want to seize everything. You represent Vedomosti, a liberal economic newspaper, and you just want to 'seize, grab, and prohibit'" (Kremlin, 2016b). He then defends the funds saying those funds can be and are utilized for things not worked in to the budget and that for which the Government has no money. This is a very different ending from 2014 and 2015.

### **2017 Annual News Conference<sup>9</sup>**

Putin's opening statement is short, with a more positive, lighter tone than in 2015 and 2016. He directly addresses a theme identified in prior news conferences, the future. It seems a little out of context but he says, "I will use your questions to speak once again about what I believe is very important. Very close to what is going to happen in the near future" (Kremlin, 2017b). However, the first question he is asked is regarding his decision to seek re-election and his goal and mission. Putin responds,

You know I have spoken many times about a Russia I would like to see....I will say it again: Russia must be spearheaded into the future. It must become a modern country with a flexible political system, its economy must be based on high technology, and labor efficiency must increase manifold. (Kremlin, 2017b)

Putin focuses on the future, using "must" to emphasize the importance of what he is saying. The statement sets the tone for the rest of the news conference.

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<sup>9</sup> All quotes from this section are from the English text of the 2017 annual news conference retrieved from [en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56378](http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56378)

As in prior annual news conference, as well as Direct Line events, Putin refers to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, this time when referencing a question about merging regions, “The developments of the early 1990s...the new federation entities were created based on old principles, which is why many of them are unsound economically” (Kremlin, 2017b). He continues, however, to ensure the audience there are no plans to change or enlarge regions, “We will not impose our views on the regions,” even though he acknowledges enlarging regions could be good for the Russian economy (Kremlin, 2017b). This is a reflection of the attitude that people come before the economy, that they matter above all else. In addition to reminiscing, when referring to complaints about property taxes, Putin references the hardship felt during the collapse of the Soviet Union, “Shock treatment of the kind we had in the 1990s is unacceptable” (Kremlin, 2017b). Here again, he reminds people to remember how bad those particular circumstances used to be.

As Putin heads in to discussing the economy, again, as in prior years, he overwhelms the audience with numbers, percentages, and statistics. He, however, also boasts about achievements and uses colorful language: “Exports continue to grow, and they have reached a very impressive scale. We are now first in the world in terms of grain exports. This is a brilliant indicator” (Kremlin, 2017b). He speaks to the economic growth as due to overcoming two economic shocks in mid-2014 and 2015 – sanctions and decreasing energy prices.

Putin asserts Russia’s place in the world when answering a question about Arctic development. He responds with statements about Russia’s expansion and place in the world, “I already mentioned this but I would like to repeat – rephrasing the great Lomonosov who said that Russia will expand through Siberia. Now Russia should expand through the Arctic” (Kremlin, 2017b). This says Russia’s growth is occurring in more than one facet. Physical, geographical,

expansion is a powerful idea. It asserts Russia's greatness and emphasizes Russia as a global player and entity.

As in prior years, Putin refers to Russia being accused of something, this time by the United States. Putin discusses the "de facto" withdrawal of the United States from the Treaty on the Elimination of Intermediate-Range and Shorter-Range Missiles,

The United States is trying to reproach and accuse us of something, but what exactly has been accomplished? It has deployed systems, allegedly AMB systems, in Romania...Nothing good will come of this trend if it persists. We have no intention of withdrawing from any document. (Kremlin, 2017b)

This shows the audience that despite the unreliability of others to stay true to their word and treaties, Russia will remain the responsible party and abide by the legal documents to which it agreed. He does not elaborate but makes a noteworthy statement about the talk the United States is going to also withdraw from the START-III Treaty: "If this happens, and if the United States once again unilaterally withdraws from this treaty, then this would spell dire consequences in the context of preserving international stability and security" (Kremlin, 2017b).

Interestingly, and along the same lines, regarding the doping situation, Putin calls it a scandal, "this whole scandal was whipped up in the run-up to Russian domestic political events. No matter what anybody says – I am sure that is the way it is. No matter what they say, I know that this is so" (Kremlin, 2017b). However, he does acquiesce to responsibility for the scandal to start since there were recorded cases of using drugs. He ends though, however, by downplaying the significance, "In other countries, however, there have been similar cases, except there was no such political frenzy. There is no doubt that this whole situation is politically motivated" (Kremlin, 2017b). This, therefore, is also an example of Putin's claims Russia is treated unfairly.

Putin also discounts Russia meddling in the United States presidential elections. He first says the accusations of Russian collusion with Trump were all invented by those in opposition to Trump. He continues comparing the share of Russian corporate advertising with that of American companies, which he says is incomparable so the rumors are gibberish. He takes another jab at American democracy by commenting that RT and Sputnik are seen as threats in America but that there is supposed to be freedom of the media. This is another attempt to delegitimize others.

A different pattern found in this annual press conference is that of Putin referencing an issue that is being discussed, was just discussed, or something similar, even “raised the issue as recently as last week.” He talks about concerns addressing the urgency as though the issues’ resolutions are being considered. He uses language that sends a message the concern or situation, is unacceptable to him. For example, when talking about housing payments, Putin makes a comment regarding imposing restrictions, “It is imperative to introduce regulations on housing payments, and this must be done immediately” (Kremlin, 2017b). The urgency in his statement also sends the message of importance and that he cares about each concern brought to him, the people, and their livelihood.

Regarding the United States, Putin makes some very direct statements about relations and his view on them. For example, an Associated Press member asks Putin about Russia’s potential role in halting North Korea missile programs and about mending US-Russia relations. Putin responds,

You are such interesting people... They [US Congress and Senate] have put us on the same level with North Korea and Iran, and at the same time, they continue to prod the President to talk us into addressing the issues of North Korean and the Iranian nuclear

program.... What is the matter with you? You must agree that this sounds strange, and that it somehow goes beyond common sense. (Kremlin, 2017b)

He then provides the audience an overview of when in 2005 there was an agreement that then the United States decided was not enough and so North Korea drew out of the agreements altogether. Putin says, “In reality, you provoked North Korea to withdraw” (Kremlin, 2017b). He also then blames the United States for continuing military exercises they said they would stop which was then answered with more missile launches from North Korea.

Though the overall tone of the 2017 news conference is not as lighthearted and upbeat as the one in 2014, it is also not as harsh as the ones in 2015 and 2016. There are bouts of humor in this one, not just sarcasm. For instance, a reporter makes a statement after a long discussion, “now that I was given the microphone.” Putin interjects, “To all appearances, nobody else will have the chance to get it” (Kremlin, 2017b). An additional observation that deserves recognition is Putin addresses concerns with plans of action. This is very important – people feel partially accomplished when a plan is described regarding an issue and it provides hope. This is pertinent too in order to see a future with Putin as a leader. He creates a framework for the future where he and the audience to whom is he speaking are of both a part.

Putin ends the 2017 news conference with a closing statement much different from the 2016 one. In this one, he extends his closing statement with reiterating he would like to continue talking but cannot due to other obligations, tells the audience to not be angry with him and then also addresses the journalists directly, “Let me assure you that we have heard you. I want to emphasize again...the importance of the press in today’s Russian life. Let me express hope that we will work constructively in the coming year” (Kremlin, 2017b).

## **Discussion**

### **2014-2017 Direct Line Events and Annual News Conferences in Perspective**

The analysis of four Direct Line event texts and four annual news conference texts reveal notable patterns and changes in patterns in Putin's discourse, which provide insight to how he creates and maintains regime legitimacy, which leads to high approval ratings. (Legitimacy for purposes of this discussion is the belief by citizens that the dictates of the state are right and proper and that a rule, institution, or leader has the right to govern (Whiting, 2017; Hutcheson & Peterson, 2016).) Some of these patterns emerge in different years in Russia. Others are present in all texts in all years analyzed, 2014-2017. These patterns and themes include Putin taking responsibility for positive events or trends, deflecting blame to others (whether the Russian government or another nation), making comparisons between events or situations in Russia with other countries' or other time periods in Russia, focusing on numbers when discussing the economy, providing plans of action, and focusing on the future. So how does Putin maintain regime legitimacy when the economy is not booming via those patterns and themes and how does that translate to high approval ratings?

Putin's discourse creates a reality where Russia is on a pedestal and that Russia attempts to cooperate and believes in compromise, but that the West seeks world dominance and unipolarity, and refuses to compromise and cooperate with Russia. Putin speaks of the West much of the time acting unilaterally and always speaks of Russia as wanting to cooperate, create and maintain political dialogue and work together. He successfully propounds the idea/reality/framework that Russia is the only place the citizens should want to be. The message received is very similar to "There is no place like Russia."

In addition, the way Putin utilizes first and third person creates a scenario whereby the president's role is to appeal to the population on a personal level, but the government is to appeal to them in political or economic ways. Except for times when Putin specifically designates what his use of "we" or "us" mean, for most of the period analyzed, there is a stark distinction between Putin and the government. This distinction is most apparent when examining if Putin or the government takes responsibility for or lays blame to decisions, mainly in regards to economic and infrastructure topics.

Putin's use of historical memory also legitimizes his leadership. Several times, he refers to how things used to be and to how much social and economic conditions have improved since the 1990s and 2000s. This works so well because he purposefully inserts comments and references to the past to emphasize the present is not nearly as awful. The feeling Putin creates is that life is better now even though it may not seem like it at this exact moment. However, the past is not used only to remind of conditions that were more terrible. He also utilizes it remind the population of the success and improvements that occurred in the early 2000s. He implies he was responsible for those improvements in the social and economic realms so he can be trusted to improve conditions again.

However, perhaps the most effective technique for legitimizing Putin's leadership is the most obvious. He takes responsibility for all that is good and redirects blame for any outcome that is or was negative. This blame is aimed at either the Russian government or foreign governments. This produces a vision of Putin as the one responsible for recognizing and then amending failures. This ultimately provides the foundation for support and high approval ratings.

There is not one single reason to attribute to regime legitimacy in Russia. It is a multi-faceted phenomenon. Susan Whiting (2017) writes that political legitimation, social control,

monitoring and control of state personnel, credible commitments to investors, and delegation of controversial policy decisions to the courts are all important functions related to regime legitimacy. However, Putin's discourse appears to be the foundation on which his legitimacy and approval ratings rise. Though this paper has referred to Putin's Russia as authoritarian and autocratic, one could choose to identify it as pseudodemocratic. A pseudodemocratic regime is one where the existence of formally democratic measures, such as open and public elections, masks the reality of authoritarian domination (Diamond, 2002). In this case, an authoritarian government holds what are touted to be fair elections to legitimate rule by allowing the constituents to elect their leader.

Furthermore, it is expected that an authoritarian regime will enjoy a high level of legitimacy when it comes to power but that legitimacy will deteriorate because the population will ultimately want democratic procedures (Nation, 2003). This has not been the case with Putin's Russia. Nation (2003), however, also wrote that expression of dissatisfaction in authoritarian regimes is directed at lower-level authorities while the regime as a whole continues to hold high acceptance. The regime maintains legitimacy typically through rises in living standards, economic growth, the population favoring stability, and due to political repression and the inability to organize an alternative to the regime (Nation, 2003). This explanation appears to be true in Russia. There are lower levels of government approval contrasted with Putin's approval ratings, regional governors are blamed for failures, living standards have improved, and there is political repression. Many Russians believe stability is better guaranteed by more or less severe authoritarian rule than by democracy (Makarkin, 2011). Tolstrup (2015), from the view that Russia supports other nations' authoritarian incumbents, writes that Russia helps other authoritarian regimes win elections and support by assisting with a portrayal of a state's



invincibility, deterring elite defection, undermining opposition activities, and dealing with popular protests and pressures from foreign democracies. These tactics are not just used by Russia for the benefit of other regimes; the Russian regime utilizes them too to maintain legitimacy. However, the basis of these examples is formed in Putin's rhetoric. He reminds people of improved living standards. He blames governors or refers issues back to them. He, or the Russian government, suppresses expression and formation of strong opposition through tactics such as preventing opposition opponents from running in elections, arresting protesters, and maintaining strict control of the media.

Angela Makarkin (2011) identifies similar aspects of regime legitimacy but she designates a social contract is what maintains the legitimacy. The social contract is based on the ability by the state to guarantee a reasonable quality of life for the majority of the population, the prompt payment of pensions and salaries, and the possibility to make realistic plans for the future. She elaborates that Putin re-established the social contract and thus legitimized his regime (Makarkin, 2011). Again, however, to maintain the social contract, discourse has to reflect, at minimum, realistic plans for the future.

With the variety of literature on regime legitimacy, one can find overlapping similarities. What the literature fails to address is where does the legitimacy begin? The answer is in Putin's discourse. Discourse is then transmitted via media outlets, mainly state-controlled television, and approached in ways that relate to the population, garnering its approval, such as great power status and strength, the economy, and the future.

## Conclusion

Using the method and theory of discourse analysis, this paper seeks to assess, “What explains Vladimir Putin’s approval ratings from 2014 through 2017?” This study concludes Putin’s approval ratings are partially a result of his creation of regime legitimacy via his presidential discourse. However simple this may seem, the results are far from straightforward and uncomplicated. Putin’s discourse is not the only factor responsible his ratings, but, rather, plays a foundational role, paving the way for media and then general public and personal conversation to solidify his messages.

If not for state-controlled media, it is highly unlikely Putin’s discourse, his messages, would be as effective and that his approval ratings would be as high as they are reported. As soon as Putin came in to office as president of Russia, he began a campaign to get control of the media under the watchful eye of the state. However, his approach was to control the news coverage of all the major, far-reaching and most-viewed outlets and stations. To do so, he had to replace directors and owners with Kremlin, or Putin, friendly executives. At the beginning of this campaign, stations were mostly allowed freedom to choose the entertainment programming broadcasted. However, as the Kremlin cracked down on any form of public opposition to the government or to Putin, even shows meant for entertainment began self-censorship and feared repercussions for broadcasting views not aligned with the government or negative portrayals of Putin.

The most terrifying incidents were of journalists being murdered apparently for news reported that did not align with the government’s position or calling out corruption and crime within the government, for example, resulting even in further self-censorship. Putin attempts to

defend his country's record of media freedom by pointing out the Kremlin cannot possibly control the more than 3,500 television and radio stations and the more than 40,000 print outlets in Russia (Gehlbach, 2010). However, not only do the independent stations and print outlets self-censor, they have minimal reach and therefore minimal effect when and if views alternative to the government or to Putin are disseminated. Media control continues to increase and all major television and radio networks are owned and controlled by the state. Additionally, an important part of the Putin administration's approach to protest and maintain indirect control of the independent media is reliance on tactics used extensively in Soviet times such as low-level harassment of activists and journalists as well as wide-spread preventative detention (Robertson, 2009). The media is Putin's discourse platform.

Previous literature introduces the economy as the driving factor behind Putin's approval ratings. This paper does not seek to discount those findings or research, but, instead, advances our knowledge by analysis from a new perspective within a different stretch of time. If Putin's approval ratings had skyrocketed and remained high due to the economy, then, accordingly, they should have decreased with the decline of the economy, beginning in 2014. However, that is not what occurred. Instead, Putin's approval ratings increased and remained high during the Russian economic recession.

What this analysis discovers is patterns in Putin's rhetoric, specifically in his Direct Line and annual news conference events, which confirm and reaffirm regime legitimacy. It is from these patterns the conclusion is drawn that the legitimacy of Putin's leadership is responsible for his approval ratings. His leadership is legitimized through a variety of styles in speech. He tactically employs first and third person to denote scenarios of taking responsibility or positioning blame. He frames Russia as singled out by the United States and parts of Europe,

instilling the concept Russia is treated unfairly. He creates the idea Russia attempts to cooperate but other nations refuse political dialogue. He also compares economic and social concerns in Russia with situations in other countries, downplaying the conditions in Russia by saying it is worse other in other places. Similarly, he compares economic and social conditions in earlier years in Russia to how much the current situation is actually still better than those times. In addition, he speaks of plans and of the future. He is always looking ahead.

The manner in which Putin delivers leadership legitimacy through his discourse is not only by what he says but also by how he says it, especially during his Direct Line events. He makes citizens and the audiences feel important and feel their issues matter by, for example, responding to questions with a sense of urgency. He gives plans of actions, next steps, what he will do, or he designates someone else to do to address the question or concern. A sense of urgency and plan of action produce the perception of attention, care, and worry. Putin's attention, care, and worry about problems, whether only perceived or real, legitimizes his leadership.

Using all these tactics Putin creates a reality where things could be worse, as they once were, and, that because of him, Russia is out of those tough times and will get the country through these less than ideal situations as well. The overarching message is Russia will persevere no matter what, no matter how unfairly Russia is treated by the rest of the world, and no matter what happens in the rest of the world. Russia is safe, strong, united, and moving forward.

It is important to note that this is a reality and truth Putin purposefully creates to legitimize his leadership. These perceptions and ideas may not be the truth or a reality for the United States, Europe, Asia, or even the entirety of Russian population. His facts about situations, for example, in Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea, or the expansion of NATO, may not be the same facts understood or believed by the other countries, organizations, or entities.

What matters is that his audience accepts what he says as truth, which explains his ratings. As long as it does, or at least a large majority does, then his approval ratings will remain high.

Putin is unquestionably portrayed positively in state controlled media. There is also no doubt portions of the media, if not all the media, is at some extent controlled by the state. However, it is not the purpose of this paper to examine media sources, but rather approach regime legitimacy and approval ratings through a different lens and avenue. Further research could reveal if the same patterns and themes discovered in Putin's discourse are directly reflected in follow-up media reports.

Furthermore, this analysis also creates more questions than are not possible to answer within its scope and suggests further research. For example, there are distinct and significant differences in Putin's direct line and annual news conference tone of language. Is his tone different because questions are from reporters and not the public or a mixture like in the Direct Lines? Does he not take it as seriously? His tone is much more nonchalant in his annual news conference. His style is much more conversational in Direct Line events. Another question relates specifically to the structure of the Russian government and the president's role. Does the structure of the government lend itself to being seen as separate from the president, therefore creating the perfect opportunity for a leader to carefully balance and dance with assuming and/or denying responsibility for events? Or, perhaps, will the impact of historical memory die as the population who benefited most from the oil boom in Putin's early years die? This means that much of what Putin relies upon to legitimize his authority will no longer be relevant. However, considering, at most, Putin only has six more years as Russian President, this is unlikely.

A deeper, more structured analysis of Putin's discourse should look at the idea of Russia's "special path" as identified by Andreas Umland. Umland (2012) identifies Russian

cultural distinctivism, a historical mission, imperial destiny, its Orthodox nature, a Eurasian essence, and its non-Western character as ideas gaining popularity in Russia and all relating to the idea of a “special path.” The “special path” is that Russia must take a distinct cultural path to modernity, even if that path appears to be undemocratic (Umland, 2012). This concept is important to regime legitimacy because leaders, such as Putin, can carefully use rhetoric to project support of these ideas, connecting emotionally and ideologically with the population and thus securing approval.

The findings of this research complement Hutcheson and Peterson’s (2016) research discussing three pillars on which Putin’s legitimacy rests. Through analysis of survey results of Russians, they identify domestic order, economic prosperity, and demonstration of great power status internationally as three pillars holding up Putin’s legitimacy (Hutcheson & Peterson, 2016). Putin’s discourse analyzed in this study also reflects the importance of the economy and Russia as a great power. This suggests Putin’s message is successfully being relayed and received by Russians via the media; Putin’s discourse is effective and reflects reliance on the pillars identified by Hutcheson and Peterson. Also in line with the conclusions of this study, they write that because there is not a strong legal-rational legitimacy of the Weberian-kind, Putin’s regime is based on the personal popularity of Putin, which is built on the three pillars (Hutcheson & Peterson, 2016).

As this research identified changing themes based on the status of the economy in discourse during some years, Hutcheson and Peterson (2016) conclude that when the economy is in a downturn, Putin has to rely more on the two other pillars, specifically the one of great power status. This tactic of relying on one pillar of legitimacy over another depending on economic performance is successful because the claim to be recognized as a great power, always and

regardless of the circumstances, is closely intertwined with Russian national identity and of its destiny to be great and powerful (Hutcheson & Peterson, 2016). Combining results of this research with that of Hutcheson and Peterson, one could take Putin's regime legitimacy studies further and attempt to identify the specific connector between the similarities. Both find the same ideas in results, this study from Putin's discourse, their study from surveys of Russians. More research could determine if there is a causal relationship.

This paper is not attempting to declare Putin's discourse as necessarily any different from that of other leaders. However, his is much more impactful. It is because there is a disconnect between President Putin and the Russian Government that his ratings do not plummet. Russians have someone, or something, other than Putin to blame for the economic and social conditions declining. Vladimir Putin's approval ratings are a measure of his discursively created legitimacy in the eyes of the Russian people.

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