**Understanding Putin’s Approval Ratings During Russia’s Current Economic Crisis**

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*Abstract:*

Past studies researching public opinion in democracies and hybrid regimes have found a link between the state of the economy and leader approval ratings: a decline in the economy leads to a subsequent decline in a leader’s approval ratings. And yet, during Russia’s current economic crisis, Vladimir Putin’s approval ratings have stayed consistently high. Through the use of a single-case study, this project seeks to understand why this economic crisis has not triggered a significant decline in Putin’s approval ratings. Three main variables are taken into account: the economic conditions within the country, the presence of a leader’s cult of personality, and the degree to which the leader blames external threats. Each variable is qualitatively measured and analyzed through the use of newspaper articles and government documents. By conducting this analysis, this research works to determine which variable has the most impact on public approval ratings. Close analysis has demonstrated the importance of a leader’s cult of personality, which shelters leader approval ratings from the negative blow of the economic crisis. This research seeks to clarify our understanding of the relationship between the different variables affecting Putin’s popularity in Russia, increasing our comprehension of critical factors influencing public opinion in times of economic crises.

**Introduction**

The stores in Moscow, once filled with European products, scramble to find replacements as people struggle against rising prices on consumer goods and a lack of Western imports. In the current economic crisis, which has descended upon Russia in the aftermath of the war in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea, the Russian economy is experiencing a significant economic downturn.[[1]](#footnote-1) Yet despite these problems, Vladimir Putin, the president of Russia, has enjoyed some of the highest public approval ratings since the time he came to power in the early 2000’s. Just in the summer of 2015, his approval ratings peaked at 89%, while the Russian ruble continued to lose value against the dollar, oil prices decreased significantly, and the sanctions imposed on Russia by the international community shrank its economy.[[2]](#footnote-2) This is where the puzzle emerges.

Literature pertaining to public opinion in countries of various regime types and their economies has demonstrated that there is a positive relationship between leader approval ratings and a country’s economic situation. This means that citizens would be more inclined to rate their leader highly if the country’s economy is doing well and the people have confidence in the future growth of said economy.[[3]](#footnote-3) But the current economic crisis in Russia is a deviant case, since it stands in juxtaposition with pre-established economic theories and expectations of scholars. Despite the downturn of the Russian economy, Putin still enjoys high rates of approval and trust from his people, with his ratings not dropping below 80%. There has not been any obvious explanation for this behavior and there is a lack of consensus among scholars over the factors that contribute to Putin’s popularity. Keeping this puzzle in mind, I pose the following research question: What explains the consistency of Putin’s approval ratings during the current economic crisis?

In order to provide an answer to my research question, I take a small-n neo-positivist approach. I begin with a literature review, which identifies three schools of thought that all focus on factors that help the leader improve their reputations amongst their people. Scholars in the first school of thought explain that the economic situation in the country and the people’s confidence in the economy have the biggest influence on the public’s opinion of the leader.[[4]](#footnote-4) The second group of scholars postulates that the leader’s ability to manipulate the idea of the “political myth” is the most significant factor when determining leader approval ratings,[[5]](#footnote-5) while the last groups of scholars highlights external threats and the leader’s ability to cast blame on external forces as having the biggest impact on the leader’s approval ratings.[[6]](#footnote-6) Following the literature discussion, I dive into my methodology where I lay out my research process. My dependent variable measures leader approval ratings. My independent variables are the economic conditions within the country, the degree to which a cult of personality exists, and the level of blame of outside forces by the government, which are influenced by the information in the scholarly literature. After this, in the analysis portion of the paper, I discuss my findings, where I focus on the “high” presence of the cult of personality and its relationship with the “moderate” economic conditions and “medium” presence of blame of outside forces. I discuss these findings in relation to previous economic turbulence in Russia and highlight possible implications for the international community.

Although this study examines a single case, the conclusions are relevant to states other than Russia. Approval ratings are modern mechanisms that leaders around the world depend on to justify the legitimacy of their rule.[[7]](#footnote-7) By examining this puzzle closely, I hope to clarify our understanding of the different factors influencing Putin’s popularity in Russia, while joining the scholarly conversation surrounding Putin, Russia’s future, and the effect of public opinion on both. I hope to offer more information to Western policy makers as they evaluate the effectiveness of the sanctions currently put on Russia and what Western-Russian relations will look like in the future. Furthermore, Putin is not the only illiberal leader in the world, so exploring the causes for these high ratings will help policy makers better assess the potential of influencing these states to become more supportive of liberal and democratic ideals. I also provide a method of conducting research regarding public opinion that employs both qualitative and quantitative measurements, as both are important to consider when identifying situations in international relations that cannot be encapsulated by numerical data alone.

**Literature Reviewed**

Throughout the literature reviewed I examine publications by scholars who focus on discussing the behavior exhibited by public opinion of various leaders. Scholars employ different explanations when considering which factors impact the approval ratings of state leaders and are grouped into three different schools of thoughts. One of them considers the impact that the economy and people’s perception of future economic growth both have on approval ratings, while another emphasizes the “political myth,” and the last one highlights the leader’s ability to shift blame from themselves to another external entity in times when approval ratings start to decline.

The economy has emerged as one of the more important factors to consider when analyzing shifts in approval ratings. Scholars that focus on the economy claim that the economic situation within the country and its citizens’ perception of it have a substantial impact on approval ratings, with a struggling economy having the potential to drag a leader’s approval ratings down significantly.[[8]](#footnote-8) A statistical study of public opinion done in Western democracies found that the public’s perception of the government is tied to their perception of the economy at any given time and to the economy’s potential for future growth and development.[[9]](#footnote-9) The economic performance within these different states was measured through quantitative indicators, such as unemployment and GDP.[[10]](#footnote-10) A similar study was conducted in Russia, which is considered an illiberal democracy, analyzing the time period from the 1990’s until 2010. This yielded similar results to the democracy-specific studies, suggesting that the popularity ratings of the Russian president were influenced by the economic situation in the country and the level of optimism for economic growth.[[11]](#footnote-11) The pattern of the economy affecting approval ratings has been shown to be present in different political models, illustrating its prominence.

Some scholars within this school of thought have highlighted that, in addition to objective economic indicators impacting approval ratings, citizens also need to be confident in the leader’s ability to manage economic downturns.[[12]](#footnote-12) Studies on consumer confidence and leader approval ratings have demonstrated the significance of slogans and speeches made by leaders during periods of economic recession, emphasizing the importance of the leader displaying high levels of confidence.[[13]](#footnote-13) If the people see that the leader can guide them through a crisis, demonstrated through improvements seen in objective economic indicators, they will be more likely to believe in the potential for future economic growth, boosting the leader’s overall approval ratings.[[14]](#footnote-14) Surveys conducted within Russia demonstrated that approval ratings decreased during the 2008-09 economic crisis, but the government was able to provide an explanation that emphasized the steps it had taken to reduce the impact of the global economic crisis, which had resulted in huge losses even in Western countries.[[15]](#footnote-15) This highlighted the importance of government statements in conjunction with the economic performance within a country. Objective economic indicators in tandem with the confidence portrayed by the leader regarding the rate of economic recovery combine to influence the effect economic downturns have on leader approval ratings.

An alternative group of scholars has focused more on the leader’s ability to portray themselves as worthy of the public’s trust by using common beliefs to unify their population as a way to influence the public’s perception.[[16]](#footnote-16) Establishing a respectable image and earning the trust of the people helps leaders cement their legitimacy.[[17]](#footnote-17) This image is created by paying attention to the idea referred to in the literature as “political myth,” which is the narrative the general population constructs using common history and by focusing on their homeland’s overall greatness and past achievements.[[18]](#footnote-18) As pointed out by Vincent Della Sala, these political myths have been found by examining core texts important to a country’s identity.[[19]](#footnote-19) Leaders of states thus determine an efficient way to write themselves into these stories and shared beliefs. Their government then becomes the redistributor of this myth, influencing mass media sources accordingly.[[20]](#footnote-20) Subsequently, the leaders have the ability to control how they are perceived by the public through strategies such as imposing state control over the media, which then is filled with pro-regime messages and focuses on highlighting the chaos that would result if the leader were to leave their post and consequently threaten the collective identity of the country.[[21]](#footnote-21) To further gain public support, leaders manufacture merchandise with their image emblazoned on it and present themselves as interested in the concerns of those at all levels of society.[[22]](#footnote-22) If the leader can construct this positive image, they will be able to unite these strong feelings of nationalism and identity, which in turn help to secure and prolong the public’s approval.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Leaders in both semi-authoritarian and democratic regimes have been able to use this “political myth” to help them achieve the acceptance and support of the public. “Pseudo elections” in semi-authoritarian regimes allow the leaders to connect with their citizenry, which provide the leader the opportunity to present an appealing image by embodying desirable leadership qualities.[[24]](#footnote-24) In addition to pursuing democratic techniques, leaders also have the ability to instill fear into those who speak out against them. This can be done through a demonstration of support by the armed forces once the leader links their identity to that of the state. Resisting the leader becomes tantamount to denying the core values promoted by the political myth in the country and opens up individuals to threats from the military.[[25]](#footnote-25) In countries like Russia and China, the government’s legitimacy rests on their ability to deliver and maintain stability within their respective systems,[[26]](#footnote-26) which has been something that Putin has been working to incorporate into his public image ever since he rose to power.

This final group of scholars deviates from those who highlight the political myth, as they focus more on the leader turning attention away from themselves during a time of crisis and placing the blame for domestic issues on an external force or entity. Regimes like the Soviet Union, Cuba, North Korea, and Iran all regarded as necessary the technique of mobilizing their society against an enemy and the need to transform potential adversaries within their state into supporters due to the government’s outlook on a certain foreign entity.[[27]](#footnote-27) Furthermore, they were able to harness the public’s fear of the outside world and fear of potential military confrontations as a common uniting factor.[[28]](#footnote-28) This allowed leaders to turn the public’s attention away from domestic problems and portray the leader as defending their ideals from a greater outside threat.[[29]](#footnote-29) Studies have shown that there is increased public support for leaders when they initially engage with the perceived “enemy,”[[30]](#footnote-30) demonstrating how leaders can justify utilizing the blame game while making the decision to involve the country in a military conflict.

Throughout Putin’s presidency there has been overall nostalgia for the “glory” of the Soviet Union, which the government has been able to fuel through the media, which feeds into the previously mentioned political myth, but also creates a basis for the establishment of anti-western sentiments, which echo the negative views the Soviet Union had of the West during the Cold War.[[31]](#footnote-31) The sentiment provides an alternative view of the “blame game,” as it also allows the government to utilize the blame they put on an outside force as a way to intervene against that force and stop its negative impacts.[[32]](#footnote-32) This blame enables the leader to present themselves in a more positive light than the outside world, increasing their popularity with their people and building up their trust.

The schools of thought examined above demonstrate different approaches through which scholars have viewed the potential for leaders to influence their approval ratings. According to the economic theory surrounding leader approval ratings, it can be seen that the lack of negative movement in Putin’s ratings highlights the current economic crisis as a deviant case. To understand this discrepancy, variables from the other schools of thought are examined in conjuncture with the economic factor, as they focus on specific actions leaders could undertake to influence their approval ratings. Thus, these plausible explanations are the main focus of the analytical portion of my project, as I focus to determine the extent to which the variables identified in these schools of thought are present in Russia’s current economic crisis. With my research, I hope to elevate the importance of qualitative variables when looking at approval ratings and explore their relevance when investigating the lack of negative movement in the approval ratings reported for President Putin.

**Methodology**

To evaluate the possible effects that different factors have on Putin’s popularity during the current economic crisis and determine which one ends up being the most important, this project employs a single case study methodology. Since the behavior of approval ratings during this crisis do not follow pre-established theories regarding economics and its relationship with approval ratings,[[33]](#footnote-33) this crisis stands out as a deviant case.[[34]](#footnote-34) The single case in this research is the current economic crisis in Russia, where I focus primarily on data from March 2014 to December of 2015. My approach gives me the opportunity to look at primary sources that are qualitative,[[35]](#footnote-35) without being constrained to only numerical values as I would be in a large-n quantitative approach. This study offers an in-depth picture of the relationship between the different factors affecting public opinion, which are important to understand during Russia’s current economic crisis, as Western policy makers evaluate factors underpinning Putin’s power. As of this paper, not many scholarly articles have been written about this crisis, so understanding the interplay of various variables in this specific case is beneficial for building on the conversation surrounding Putin’s approval ratings in Russia and the factors fueling his support.

To evaluate Putin’s popularity, my dependent variable measures his public approval of the leader, as this is a metric that has the ability to vary across different types of countries. I am conceptualizing public opinion as the way in which the population views the leader, usually assessed through approval ratings and opinion polls concerning the confidence the general public has in the leader’s ability to make the right choices for the country.[[36]](#footnote-36) In this methodology, public opinion is measured through a combination of quantitative and qualitative indicators. As previous studies have demonstrated, approval ratings are measured through questionnaires, which then subsequently turn the answers into percentage points of approval and disapproval.[[37]](#footnote-37) This serves as the primary indicator for this variable, as this is how Putin’s popularity is reported to the public in Russia and the international community. The Levada Center is one of the primary organizations conducting such studies. Using their data, I examine the behavior of these ratings in 2013 before the economic crisis and through its progression, cutting off my observations at December 2015. This allows me to note any percent fluctuations of the ratings. I also include an indicator that approaches public opinion in a qualitative way, in order to provide background on those who disapprove of Putin. This indicator measures the degree to which key opposition leaders complain about Putin or specific government officials.[[38]](#footnote-38) I measured this by reading transcripts of interviews with the opposition leaders,[[39]](#footnote-39) and through a video of one of their rallies.[[40]](#footnote-40) By adding qualitative sources to my measure of approval ratings, I am able to gain an in-depth understanding about the voices behind the numbers.

In order to assess the variables, which play into people’s approval or disapproval of Putin, I construct three different independent variables that are influenced by the literature reviewed. My first independent variable is drawn from the economic school of thought on public opinion and is focused on assessing the economic conditions within Russia. Economic conditions refer to the objective state of the economy, in addition to domestic and international confidence about the economy communicated to Russia’s public. It is measured on a good-moderate-bad scale. One of the indicators is a quantitative one, which looks solely at the numerical economic conditions within the country, including GDP growth, inflation rate, and currency exchange rates.[[41]](#footnote-41) Another indicator I use to assess this is the government’s level of confidence in the economy’s ability to recover from the crisis,[[42]](#footnote-42) as this has been pointed to by the literature to be an important assessment of economic conditions that determine the public’s confidence in the economy and the leader.[[43]](#footnote-43) It is assessed by focusing on various statements from government officials, such as the economic advisor to Putin and the Prime Minister.[[44]](#footnote-44) The last indicator is the level of confidence foreign investors display towards Russia, as investors closely watch the economic situation in a given country to figure out the viability of their investments.[[45]](#footnote-45) Their input is found through examining their annual reports on specific countries and a report put together by an advising firm regarding level of confidence in Russian markets.[[46]](#footnote-46) When assessing economic conditions, I focus on the quantitative and qualitative indicators identified above.

My second independent variable is the level to which a cult of personality around Putin is present within Russia. I chose the term “cult of personality” because it combined many of the ideas presented in the political myth school of thought regarding the importance of the leader’s ability to create a compelling and heroic image of himself for the people.[[47]](#footnote-47) This is measured on a high-medium-low scale, as the leader’s ability to construct this cult of personality can vary depending on the country and the level of indicators present. One of my indicators is the level to which the Russian government controls the media,[[48]](#footnote-48) as this has been highlighted in the literature as a tool used by leaders to effectively promote themselves to their people, and which is accessed by looking at Russian freedom of the press scores.[[49]](#footnote-49) Another indicator measures the level and buildup of Putin’s greatness and charisma,[[50]](#footnote-50) which is a way through which leaders have the ability to build up the cult of personality and employ the political myth to their advantage.[[51]](#footnote-51) For this indicator, I examine one of Russia’s major newspapers to determine if, in the randomly chosen working week of November 30-December 4, 2015, the articles which mention Putin present him in a more positive or negative light.[[52]](#footnote-52) In addition, I examine the movie “President,” which came out April 26, 2015, and focused primarily on Putin.[[53]](#footnote-53) The third indicator I use is the degree to which nationalism is used to unite the people,[[54]](#footnote-54) since it functions as a unifying force utilized by leaders. [[55]](#footnote-55) This is observed by examining speeches from Putin, such as his speech following the annexation of Crimea, and the amount that nationalistic statements were used in the movie made about him.[[56]](#footnote-56) These indicators are used to assign values to the degree to which the leader has developed a cult of personality around themselves.

My third independent variable is the degree to which there is blame on external forces for the current crisis. It is drawn from the third school of thought, which focuses on leaders placing blame on outside forces for the creation of the nation’s internal problems, allowing for blame to be drawn away from the leader.[[57]](#footnote-57) Evaluating the extent of this variable allows me to assess the degree to which the “blame game” is relevant during an economic crisis. This variable is measured on a “high-medium-low” scale. The main indictor is the blaming of an external force by Putin for problems present within the country, which is found through examining interviews with Putin, where he outlines his attitude towards the international community.[[58]](#footnote-58) The other indicator is the degree to which news channels place blame on outside entities,[[59]](#footnote-59) and this is measured through examining the evening news reported by *Channel One Russia* during the working week of November 3-7, 2014.[[60]](#footnote-60) Given the indicators I propose to use, a country that presents a “high” usage of the blame technique will be the one that casts the international community in an overwhelmingly negative light, emphasizing their role in the creation of problems within the country.

To reach a conclusion regarding my research puzzle, I propose a hypothesis, which offers an explanation for the relationship between my dependent and independent variables. It reads: in the context of Russia, a combination of moderate economic conditions, a high presence of a cult of personality of the leader, and a medium presence of blame on outside forces are sufficient to result in high leader approval ratings during an economic crisis. In order to weight the strength of the given hypothesis, I will first go through and evaluate the different independent variables presented above along with my dependent variable in the given case. Afterwards I discuss my findings in context with the literature reviewed and also discuss the results of the analysis in regards to the economic crisis in Russia in 2008, which I use as an informal unit of analysis, to demonstrate the prevalence of the economic school of thought during that economic downturn.[[61]](#footnote-61) Then, I discuss the implications of my findings for existing theories and for the future of public opinion in Russia.

**Analysis**

In order to address the puzzle of Vladimir Putin’s high popularity, which has remained consistently high throughout the current economic crisis in Russia, I consider three independent variables. They are: economic conditions, presence of cult of personality, and use of blame on outside forces. The implications of the degree to which each variable manifests itself and how they have shaped Putin’s approval ratings is then discussed in further detail.

Before beginning it is important to note that in 2014, prior to the annexation of Crimea and the consequent spike in approval ratings, Putin’s popularity was around 69%,[[62]](#footnote-62) which was a relatively low level for him. This seemed to be caused by lower expectations for economic growth and by the increased blame placed on Putin for the economic problems present within Russia combined with doubt about Putin’s leadership.[[63]](#footnote-63) Yet after the annexation of Crimea, these ratings stabilized at over 80% approval, despite the persistence of the economic crisis. This went against the predictions of scholars in the economic school of thought. My analysis suggests that the cult of personality has had the greatest impact on Putin’s approval ratings in the current economic crisis. Economic conditions and the presence of blame on external elements did not have the capacity bolster his approval ratings to the same extent. Instead, I argue that the presence of the blame game and the narrative presented around the state of Russia’s economy amplified the cult of personality present around Putin, further promoting his image in a positive light and working to further strengthen his cult of personality.

In order to demonstrate the heights that Putin’s popularity has reached, my dependent variable used data acquired by the Levada Center. Between March 2014 and December 2015, despite the economic downturn, Putin’s popularity averaged an 85%.[[64]](#footnote-64) These ratings are high for any world leader, especially for such a prolonged period of time. The people who disapprove of Putin have frequently blamed him for the country’s problems, including corruption, police brutality, and the sanctions placed on Russia, yet their voices have been minimized through stringent control of the media and the judicial difficulties faced when organizing opposition meetings.[[65]](#footnote-65) Despite the presence of opposition leaders, like Aleksey Navalny and Ilya Yashin, the high numbers of people who approve of Putin’s actions have rendered them insignificant, as shown by the consistently high ratings Putin receives.

Each independent variable has the potential to impact approval ratings. The first independent variable I looked at was the economic conditions within Russia. I first focused on numerical indicators, which showed the negative impact the crisis was having on the Russian economy. The decline in GDP,[[66]](#footnote-66) and the significant depreciation of the Russian ruble against international currencies,[[67]](#footnote-67) limited the economic prospects of the Russian public. Rising inflation within the country, combined with economic sanctions, also contributed to a decrease in wages and a rise in the price of consumer products.[[68]](#footnote-68) This has left the Russian public in a difficult financial situation.

Despite these numerical setbacks, the situation did not seem as bleak when looking at the indicators measuring levels of confidence from the Russian government and foreign investors, which were both present at a “medium.” When addressing Russian industries and businessmen, government officials focused on acknowledging Russia’s economic crisis, while also emphasizing the ability for industries to learn from this setback and improve their production models accordingly.[[69]](#footnote-69) Despite the slumping economy, this crisis has consistently been framed as a learning opportunity, one that has short-term harms, but which will make Russia’s economy stronger in the future.[[70]](#footnote-70) For example, Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev has pushed for Russian industries to forge closer partnership with Eastern neighbors, allowing new trade relations to flourish and aiding the progress of Russian trade.[[71]](#footnote-71) Foreign investors, although wary of the low oil prices and international sanctions placed on Russia, have not completely lost hope in the potential of Russia’s markets. They mentioned the potential of Russian markets to recuperate if strategically invested in.[[72]](#footnote-72) They cited positive developments in Russian infrastructure and approved of the development of new market models, which raised their hopes of the Russian economy being able to recuperate and be a viable investment option, but also warned of the volatility of the economy due to international sanctions and the devaluation of the ruble.[[73]](#footnote-73) Despite the slumping economy, the hopeful narrative presented by the government and the moderate confidence of foreign investors led me to categorize economic conditions as “moderate” during the current economic crisis, as Russia’s economy has not been hurt to the extent that it has completely eradicated domestic and international confidence. The messages sent to the public about the economic seatbacks they have seen thus far, point to the efforts of both Putin and the government to get the country back on track, while acknowledging the presence and severity of the economic setbacks.

Overall, the negative objective indicators of the economy did not outweigh the positive messages presented by the government and investors; even here, we arguably see the presence of the cult of personality, the next variable I consider. The cult of personality constructed around Putin had a clear “high” presence based on the indicators I examined. Putin has been shaping this cult for himself from the beginning of his presidency,[[74]](#footnote-74) unleashing it in full force during this crisis and continuing to expand it. When examining the extent of the promotion of Putin’s greatness in one of Russia’s largest newspapers, I found no negative mentions of Putin present.[[75]](#footnote-75) Instead, his actions were said to be putting the country on the right track and protecting the identity of the Russian people.[[76]](#footnote-76) Each news article focused on either following the actions of Putin internationally or domestically, or praised him for his strong will and precise decision making. A similar sentiment was present in the movie “President,” produced and released during the economic crisis. His ability to unify and rebuild Russia was reiterated all throughout the film, which depicted him as the leader of the people, caring for the common folk and working tirelessly to figure out a strategy to build respect for Russia internationally.[[77]](#footnote-77) The representation of Putin in newspapers and televised media sources led me to label the presence of the promotion of leader greatness indicator as “high,” since Putin was portrayed as a pragmatic leader who is transforming Russia into a great power. With state-controlled media outlets portraying Putin in this way, Russians were given a perspective of their leader as one who continues to fight for the recognition of Russia as a strong power on the international stage.

A second indicator measuring the presence of the cult of personality was the level of nationalism used to unite and promote Putin to the general public, which was present at a “high” level here. Putin’s previous successes were highlighted in a manner which showed that Putin has always made carefully calculated decisions, which have positively affected Russia.[[78]](#footnote-78) Furthermore, when mentioning Crimea, reporters acknowledged that the economic crisis was in part brought about by Putin’s actions, but these actions were painted as necessary, citing the importance of Crimea for the Russian identity and therefore concluding that Putin could not have done anything differently.[[79]](#footnote-79) This raised the level of nationalism, as people were reminded of the historical and social importance of Crimea to the collective Russian identity.

These messages were promoted through media which was either government owned or headed by elite figures with close ties to the Kremlin. The Russian government’s grip over the media has been reported on by Freedom House ratings, which in 2015 labeled Russia’s press status as “Not Free.”[[80]](#footnote-80) Russia’s press score was 83 of 100 points possible, with 100 being the worst.[[81]](#footnote-81) Russia’s press score has been declining ever since Putin came to power, showing the gradual shift to a state having mostly state-controlled media. This decline has led me to label media control by government as “high.” This increasing control over the media helps build up a stronger cult of personality, which can be seen through the lack of negative comments about Putin in sources of popular mass media and the promotion of Putin as a “Great” Russian leader.

The third independent variable measures the extent to which outside forces were blamed for the current economic crisis. Through looking at news reports and interviews with Putin himself, I found that the blame game has a “medium” presence during this crisis. When examining the presence of blame used by Putin in his speeches and statements to media outlets and government officials, there was a “medium” presence of blame on external forces. He pointed out that sanctions imposed by the West were not caused by Russian “mistakes,” but rather by inherent Western mistrust towards Russia left over from the Cold War and the lack of desire to engage in productive dialogue with Russia.[[82]](#footnote-82) Putin justified his decisions by saying that Russia protected the Crimean people and the subsequent actions he took were intended to protect and support the Russian public.[[83]](#footnote-83) Interestingly, in his placement of blame, Putin was not focused on damning the Western powers, but pointed to their error in underestimating Russia, while voicing hope that relations could be normalized in the future.[[84]](#footnote-84) In order for the blame to have “high” presence, it would have needed to dominate the Putin’s discussions with journalists and he would have emphasized the irreversible damage done by the Western states. Yet, the blame was used as a tool to promote Putin further, not to turn attention away from him.

When examining the degree to which blame was present in the evening news, there was more of a focus on highlighting the efforts of the Russian government and Putin to introduce new laws that would stimulate the efforts of import substitution and create new trade agreements with Eastern countries.[[85]](#footnote-85) The blaming of Western powers for the economic downturns did not dominate evening news reports. Instead, the destroyed parts of Eastern Ukraine and the inefficiencies present in the new Western-backed government in Kiev were shown, highlighting the inadequacies of the new government. This tactic served to cast criticism and blame on the West in a subtler manner. This led me to conclude that the government’s blame game had a “medium” presence in the news.

Keeping in mind my independent variable levels (the “moderate” on the economic conditions, the “high” presence on the cult of personality, and the “medium” use of the blame game), the lack of negative movement in Putin’s approval ratings appears to be caused primarily by the promotion and amplification of Putin’s cult of personality. The blame tactic and the economic narrative presented during this crisis have further promoted Putin, demonstrating the desire of the Russian government to broadcast Putin’s strengths rather than Western faults in this conflict. The blame placed on outside forces feeds into and builds upon the sense of greatness created around Putin. This establishes a link between the presence of the blame on outside forces and the usefulness of blaming others when one is trying to strengthen a cult of personality. Since the media was more focused on Putin himself, rather than actively undermining the Western countries, the blame game ended up being present in a lesser sense than the cult of personality present around Putin.

In looking at these results, it is important to note that Putin’s cult of personality did not become so influential overnight, and to place this in context with previous economic crises in Russia. During the 2008-2009 global financial crisis, Putin’s approval ratings followed the economic pattern laid out in the economic school of thought. Although Putin was not president for the whole event, in his role as Prime Minister he was able to point to his previous economic success to convince the public of the possibility for future economic growth and emphasize the emergence of his image as a great leader, yet this was not enough to keep his ratings from declining as the economy declined.[[86]](#footnote-86) The pattern seen in his ratings during the Georgian conflict, a spike during the 2008 Georgia military involvement followed by a decline soon after, were consistent with the rise in approval leaders see when they first engage with the enemy.[[87]](#footnote-87) Approval ratings began to a decline when, after a few months, economic dissatisfaction with Putin’s economic policies grew following the global financial crisis, as was expected by the scholars identifying the economy as the driving force behind the shifts in approval ratings.[[88]](#footnote-88) During this time, the cult of personality was present, but there was not such a high percentage of state controlled media and a power swap was occurring between him and then president Medvedev.[[89]](#footnote-89) The spike in nationalism after the Crimean annexation allowed him to further highlight his role in restoring Russia’s greatness and rebuilding the Russian empire, which further increased the presence of his cult of personality. Putin has been promoted all throughout his presidencies, yet with every passing year, especially during this economic crisis, the greatness of Putin and his work to turn Russia into the great empire it once was has become the primary message from the Kremlin and from Putin himself.

These findings aid in identifying the reasons behind Putin’s popularity, which no longer seems to be as closely tied to the economic situation in the country as proposed by some scholars,[[90]](#footnote-90) but rather are more reliant on the cult of personality around Putin and his ability to maintain it through turbulent times in Russian history. This supports the group of scholars who highlight the significance of the leader incorporating himself into the political myth present in the country, which he then strengthens.[[91]](#footnote-91) It also identifies the leader’s ability to create a compelling and heroic image of himself that the people will not lose confidence in times of instability, as extremely important.[[92]](#footnote-92) The way in which the blame game has fed into his cult of personality highlights the convergence between scholars who emphasize the charisma and greatness of the leader and those who emphasize the placement of blame. A low presence of a cult of personality would mean that the leader would struggle to legitimize the actions they take to preserve the state, which would consequently decrease their approval ratings.[[93]](#footnote-93) The blame presented by the government on outside forces serves to promote the actions of Putin and distract from the economic turmoil. But alone it would not be sufficient to impact such legitimacy for a long time, as the usage of blame is usually at its highest when first employed, but tends to decrease the longer a state is involved in the blame of external forces.[[94]](#footnote-94) Keeping this in mind, the cult of personality being developed around Putin seems to have the biggest impact on his approval ratings.

This study has a few potential weaknesses. This analysis takes place during a time when Putin’s ratings continue to be high, meaning an alternative explanation could be that just not enough time has passed for the ratings to decrease. But it is important to consider that during previous economic crises in Russia, the ratings decreased more quickly than they are now, meaning that there is something more complicated at work here. In this case Putin owed his high approval ratings to factors other than the economic conditions. Another possible criticism is that the newspaper articles discussed were taken relatively later on in the crisis, which may tweak the level of presence of some indicators. Due to the way these newspaper databases were designed, they only went back to a set point, so I was only able to access the archives up to November 2015. But 107 articles were examined, which is still a significant number, and covered an array of different articles of the newspaper that mentioned Putin, meaning a number of different voices and opinions were considered. Additionally one could claim that the ratings released about Putin are merely being manipulated by the government. But in order for this to be true, we would expect to see a lot more dissent and public uproar in Russia, which Putin would have difficulty concealing from the West.

Although my results are from a single case, the implications from this study transcend Russia. If a leader of another state develops a strong cult of personality, particularly during an economic crisis, and is able to place blame on external forces for this crisis, approval ratings may behave similarly to how they have behaved in Russia. It also points to the dangers which arise when a leader is able to strategically manipulate the people in such a way where they believe in the legitimacy of his power, even when the social and economic situation around them is not doing well. This increases the importance of understanding why Putin’s ratings are behaving the way they are, because such an effect could occur again. In addition, these results highlight the importance of reevaluating the sanction policy against Russia and the way the U.S. has tried to bring Russia to the negotiation table. Seeing how Putin’s popularity and support has grown over the time the sanctions have been in place, it is important to consider the true effectiveness of these sanctions. They may have depressed Russia’s economy, but they have not done to change the mindset of Putin or the people in Russia. Future studies have a few of routes they could take. It would be beneficial to conduct open ended interviews directly in Russia to see how people’s answers to the question “do you approve of Vladimir Putin?” differs when they get to expand on their answers. This would allow for the evaluation of the sincerity of their answers and the depth of support shown for Putin. The current study is limited by its ability to only use online sources meaning interviews with Russian populations are not possible. It would also be interesting to see if these findings would differ depending on where in Russia one goes. When Putin’s approval ratings are reported, all regions are lumped together, but by talking to people from different areas, researchers could see how the justification for supporting Putin varies from city to city, which would help evaluate the potential for his ratings to remain high. This would also lend itself to a study of how media bias and different types of media are able to influence people in different parts of society.

**Conclusion**

Since the annexation of Crimea, Vladimir Putin’s ratings have remained relatively high without any significant decrease, despite the slumping economic performance in Russia over the past two years. Although economic scholars emphasize a close link between the economy and presidential approval ratings, even in semi-authoritarian regimes like Russia, the current economic crisis in Russia has shown that the economy and people’s confidence in the future are not the factors that have the greatest impact on approval ratings. The scholars emphasizing the importance of the leader’s ability to use the country’s political myth to his advantage seem to be more pertinent in this case, especially when the ruler can manipulate messages about the economy and the state’s foreign policy convincingly. Three separate variables were examined to evaluate their presence in Russia and their impact on the dependent variable of approval ratings, which were: the economic conditions within Russia, the presence of the cult of personality, and the use of blame placement on external factors. I came to the conclusion that the lack of negative movement in Putin’s ratings can be attributed to the growing cult of personality around him which was able to be further expanded and built upon with the annexation of Crimea. The economic conditions within Russian and the use of the blame game aid in promoting the positive narrative created around Putin, emphasizing his effort to protect Russia and promote its greatness internationally.

The study demonstrates that the personality and actions of a leader to build up his image have the capability to captivate the public and override their social and domestic concerns. If the West was hoping to punish Putin and deteriorate his grip on power by unleashing sanctions, this has not worked. The annexation of Crimea has created a new wave of nationalism that has swept through Russia and has allowed Putin to further build up approval for his policies. Although the sanctions significantly depressed Russia’s economy, they arguably gave Putin more ammunition to promote his image of a savior of the “great Russian Empire.” This state of affairs could be dangerous, as there is the potential that Putin will continue to use this to justify his expansionist tendencies, in addition to further using the media to manipulate the Russian public into approving of him and his policies. Despite the public approval for the overall Russian government not being high,[[95]](#footnote-95) people exhibit trust and support for Putin specifically, seeing him as the true leader capable of bringing positive international recognition to Russia. In addition, this shows that in certain conditions, if the leader is able to create enough charisma for himself and utilize nationalistic feelings, people will be more likely to follow him and give him their support, even if the situation in the country is not ideal.

Although these results have a limited degree of generalizability to other semi-authoritarian regimes, since only one case was looked at, the methodology employed can be used in other case studies in order to determine the level of presence of the three variables identified as important when considering public opinion. It also offers an in depth look at the different primary sources circulated by the Russian government during the economic crisis, which is important to consider when looking at the conversations established regarding the leader of a certain country. The lack of negative comments about Putin highlights the use of media to further the cult of personality, in addition to external blame being a tactic to justify and legitimize the actions taken by Putin. In the months to come it will be important to keep monitoring the extent to which Putin’s approval ratings continue to remain stable on the international and domestic level, in conjunction with the way in which the narrative around his cult of personality evolves over time. It will also be important to see how long the economic crisis goes on for and if the approval ratings begin their significant negative decline, or if the narrative established by Putin will prevail.

**Appendix A**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | Primary Sources |
| Dependent Variable: Approval Ratings | **Indicator #1: Quantitative Values (%)**   * Putin approval ratings from 2014 through end of 2015   **Indicator #2: Mention of Leader by Opposition (scale: frequent-moderate-infrequent)**   * Interview with Aleksey Navalny, one of the prominent leaders of the opposition * Debate between opposition leader Ilya Yashin and a politician supporting Putin * Speech made by Navalny during public rally |
| Independent Variable: Economic Conditions  (good- moderate-bad) | **Indicator #1: Government level of confidence in economy (scale: high-medium-low)**   * Interview with Russian economic advisor Sergey Glazyev * Speech made by Dmitriy Medvedev to Russian government officials and various businessmen * Publication by the State Duma regarding the conditions and steps taken to improve the economic situation in Russia   **Indicator #2: Foreign Investor level of confidence (scale: high-medium-low)**   * Report from Franklin Templeton Investment Fund which is based in America, where they assessed the conditions in Russia and their potential for future economic involvement * Ernst & Young evaluation of the behavior of various foreign investors with respect to Russia since the start of the economic crisis   **Indicator #3: Quantitative measurements of economy ($, % growth, % unemployment)**   * Numerical data regarding wages, exchange rates, GDP growth, and inflation rate |
| Independent Variable: Cult of Personality  (high-medium-low) | **Indicator #1: Government control of media (scale: high-medium-low)**   * Ratings regarding Russia from Freedom House   **Indicator #2: Buildup of leader greatness or charisma (scale: high-low)**   * Articles from the newspaper *Izvestia* from November 30th – December 4th 2015. A total of 107 articles examined. * Movie “President” about Putin   **Indicator #3: Use of nationalism to unite people (scale: high-medium-low)**   * Address of Putin after the annexation of Crimea (before the slumping economy, but carries weight all throughout the crisis) * The movie “President” about Putin produced in 2015 |
| Independent Variable: Presence of Blame Game  (high-medium-low) | **Indicator #1: Blame of external forces by government officials (scale: high-medium-low)**   * Interview with Putin with journalists about conflict in Syria and Ukraine * Interview with Putin with German channel (for international and domestic viewing)   **Indicator #2: Blame of external forces by the media (scale: high-medium-low)**   * A work week from November 2014 examined through viewing 30 minute news segments of the evening news of *Channel 1* *Russia* |

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54. This indicator is measured on a “high-medium-low” scale [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
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64. "Approval of Putin," *Levada Center* [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
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69. Dmitriy Medvedev, “New Reality: Russian and Global Challenges,” *Russian Gazet*, September 23 2015, <http://rg.ru/2015/09/23/statiya-site.html> (Accessed 3/16/16); “On Measures to Overcome the Economic Crisis in Russia – Publication of the State Duma in 2015,” … ; “Ensuring the Sovereignty of the Financial and Banking System - a Basic Condition of the Russian Economy Recovery Manageability,” *Sergey Glazyev: Official Website*... [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Dmitriy Medvedev, “New Reality…” [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
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    *and Advisory Services LLC*…; “Annual Report Templeton Russia and East European Fund, Inc.,” *Franklin Templeton Investments*… [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Cassiday, 682 [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. *Izvestia*, November 30-December 4 2015…; My first conclusion has been that there were no negative mentions of Putin or critiques of his actions, while there were jabs made at leaders in Ukraine, Turkey, and the U.S. The publication made sure to also publish reactions of experts to what Putin was doing, which concluded that the actions taken by him were legitimate and were beneficial for the country. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. “President. Movie…”; The current sanctions placed on Russia, only served as an effort to stop Russia from becoming a real threat to the hegemonic West, but Putin was experienced enough to guide the country through this temporary crisis. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. “President. Movie by…”; It demonstrated the presence of Putin during important moments for the nation, like his efforts to stop violence in Chechnya, remembering those fallen during WWII, and working with local populations to improve their standards of living. He was presented as one of the common people, making him more accessible to every-day Russians. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. “Full Text of the Address of Vladimir Putin…”; “President. Movie by…” It demonstrated the presence of Putin during important moments for the nation, like his efforts to stop violence in Chechnya, remembering those fallen during WWII, and working with local populations to improve their standards of living. He was presented as one of the common people, making him more accessible to every-day Russians. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. “Russia: Freedom of the Press,” *Freedom House*… [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. “Interview to the German Channel ARD,” *Kremlin: President of Russia*, November 17, 2014, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47029> (Accessed 2/26/16); Pavel Zarubin... [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
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86. Petersson, 34-35 [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Darley, 126 [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Treisman (2011), 384; McAllister and White, 596 [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Cassiday, 682 [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Treisman, 607 [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Della Sala, 7 [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. Bell, 65 [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
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94. Darley, 126 [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. “Approval of Government,” *Levada Center*, 2000-2016, <http://www.levada.ru/eng/indexes-0> (Accessed 3/16/16). [↑](#footnote-ref-95)