What can public opinion data tell us about Putin's grip on power in Russia?

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Summary

- Support for Russian President Vladimir Putin is a qualitatively different concept than support for an elected executive in a democracy. It is essential to understand these differences to interpret public opinion data in Russia.
- There is little evidence of widespread preference falsification in Russian public opinion data regarding support for the government and its policies as of yet, but preference falsification could increase with greater repression in Russia.
- Putin's popularity has decreased substantially over the spring and summer 2026, but remains high in both absolute terms and relative to his popularity prior to the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.
- There is great variation across age and ethnic groups in terms of support for Putin, while support for the full-scale invasion of Ukraine varies substantially by age, gender and ethnic identity.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has long enjoyed popularity ratings that elected officials in democracies would envy. According to the Levada Center, an independent and highly-respected polling organization in Russia, Putin's popularity has rarely dropped below 60 percent since he was first elected president in 2000, and has often been above 80 percent since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[1] Scholars propose that Putin's popularity lies at the core of his method of governance: being popular means that he can rely to a lesser extent on costly and risky methods of maintaining control, like widespread repression.[2]

However, Putin's approval ratings have dropped precipitously along key metrics of Russian public opinion over the course of 2026. Given the relationship between public opinion and regime stability in Russia, Putin's declining popularity raises questions about the degree to which the government can continue to rely on Putin's popularity as a tool of authoritarian control.

In this context, understanding how to interpret public opinion data is very important. In democracies, these data provide insight into potential electoral outcomes: if many more people support or trust Candidate A than they do Candidate B, Candidate A is likely to win in a face-to-face contest. In personalist autocracies like Russia, there is no clear Candidate B, making it difficult to benchmark Putin's popularity against anything other than itself. As such, interpreting the implications of changes in Putin's popularity is complicated: does a sudden shift in popularity indicate lower political stability within Russia, or is it just a largely symbolic sign of displeasure?

The left cell of Figure 1 illustrates this point, showing trends in two of the most prominent measures of Putin's popularity: support for his official activities (*deiatel'nost'*) as president of Russia, data on which the Levada Center gathers; and trust (*doverie*) in him, data on which Russian Public Opinion Research Center (Russian acronym: VtsIOM) collects. Per the VtsIOM measure of trust, Putin's popularity dropped from around 80% in December 2025 to around 71% in April 2026; stabilizing in the low 70s through the summer.[3] Per the Levada measure of support, Putin's popularity dropped more continuously from 85% in December 2025 to 74% in July 2026.[4] In both cases, the spring and summer 2026 estimates represent the lowest Putin approval ratings since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine – when approval of

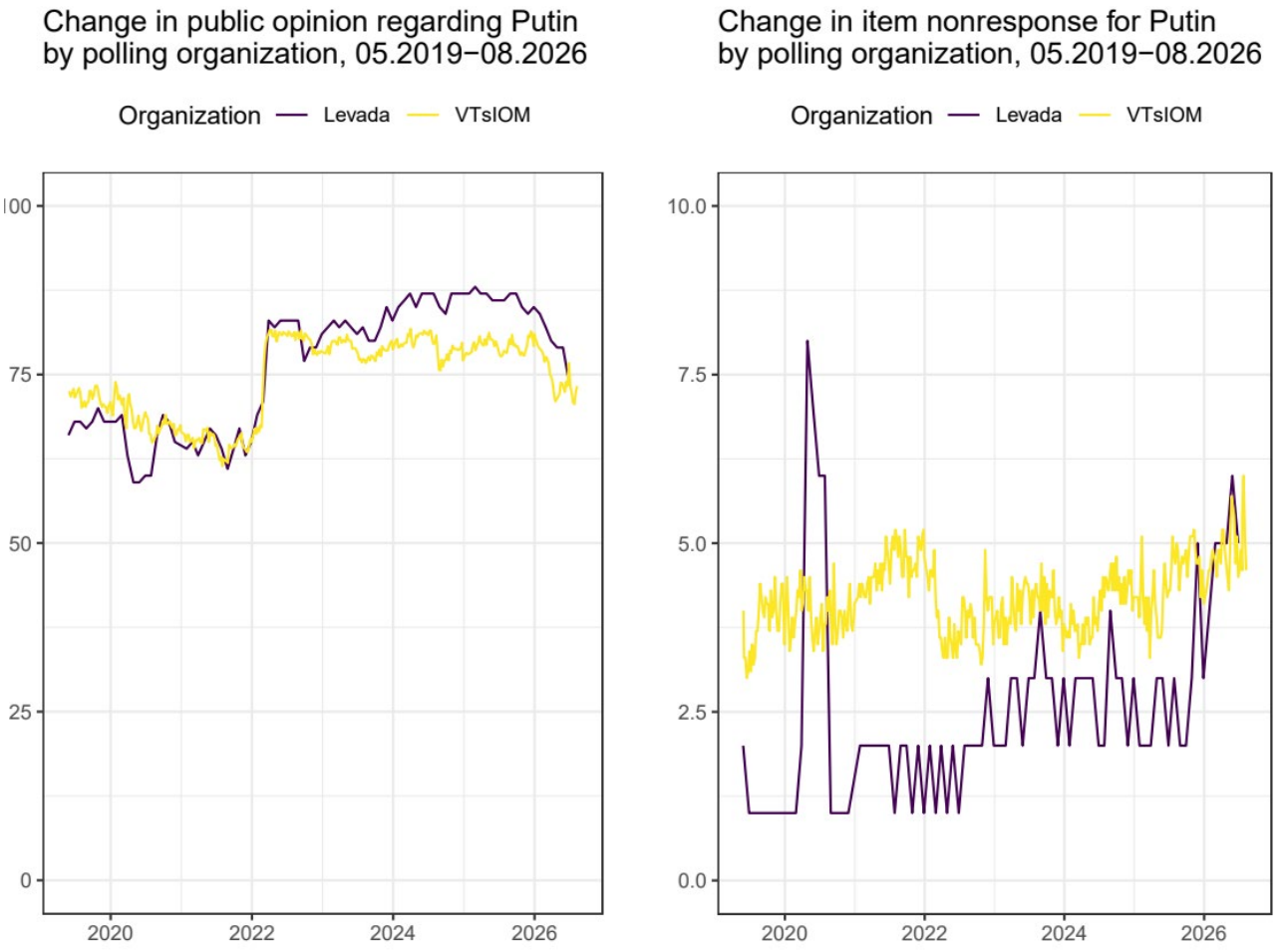
Putin skyrocketed across most available metrics. As such, these estimates represent a relatively and substantively large drop, which could suggest regime instability. However, these statistics could just as well suggest high levels of regime stability: 70% approval is objectively high approval, not to mention higher than Putin's ratings prior to the invasion in 2021-2022.

Another complicating factor in interpreting these data is that it is difficult to assess the extent to which Russians who oppose the Russian government feel comfortable revealing this fact, especially as open opposition to the government becomes increasingly risky. Some regime opponents may choose to either not respond to questions about the government or other sensitive topics in public opinion surveys, or not participate in these surveys at all. Yet other regime opponents may falsely claim that they support the government, a phenomenon which political scientists refer to as preference falsification.[5] If regime opponents in Russia systematically decline to respond to surveys or survey questions – or if they falsely voice support for the government – then public opinion data will overestimate support for the regime.

Trends in the right cell of Figure 1 indicates that concerns about the willingness of Russians to openly reveal their preferences may be warranted: concurrently with the drop in Putin's popularity has come a subtle increase in the percentage of respondents who do not respond – either saying they don't know or prefer not to respond – to the question about support for Putin. Such "item nonresponse" is a commonly used – if complicated – proxy for question sensitivity.[6] Respondents may not respond to a question because they truly do not know or do not have an opinion. However, they may also decline to respond because they feel giving an honest response would be socially or politically undesirable. If the recent trend of increasing nonresponse to questions regarding Putin represents the latter case, Putin's popularity could be decreasing to an even greater extent than the data directly reveal.

In this research note, I first discuss problems with interpreting public opinion data in Russia. Taking these concerns into account, I then discuss valuable uses of these data in assessing Putin's power in

Figure 1: Trends in metrics regarding support for Putin in Russia. Sources: The Levada Center and VTsIOM.



Russia: analyzing trends over time and variation across groups in Russia.

What can popularity ratings *not* tell us about Russia?

Russia is not a democracy, and has become increasingly authoritarian since Putin was first appointed president in 1999. This trend presents multiple problems for the analysis of public opinion data, especially with regard to presidential approval ratings.

First, there is no direct relationship between public opinion and political outcomes. As I mentioned previously, in democracies presidential approval provides important information about the possible outcomes of electoral competition. However, one of Putin's primary methods for maintaining political control over Russia has been to ensure that elections in Russia are not competitive. Crucially, this method involves much more than falsification of electoral returns: the Russian government harasses, bans, jails and allegedly assassinates the opposition politicians and activists who have even a remote chance of competing with Putin for the presidency.[7] As a result, in recent years there have been no real competitors with Putin for the Russian presidency; moreover, government control over the media and administrative resources ensures that even the weak political figures who have run against Putin had little ability to succeed, even theoretically.[8]

The left cell of Figure 2 illustrates the state of Russian democracy using data from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project, an international data gathering project that uses expert-coded data to measure democratic institutions across countries and years.[9] Specifically, it shows Russia's scores (the green line) on the V-Dem Electoral Democracy Index (EDI) from 2000 to 2025 in comparison to the scores for China (purple), Norway (blue) and the USA (yellow). Roughly speaking, the EDI measures the extent to which the conditions to hold meaningful elections exist in a given polity: a score of one represents an ideal democracy, while a score of zero represents a society in which none of the conditions for meaningful elections are met to any extent.

Although Russia's EDI scores are higher than China – which has not had a popularly-elected executive during the entire period 2000-2025 – as of 2025 Russia's scores are much closer to China than they are to the democratic countries of Norway or the USA. Moreover, Russia's scores have shown a steep decline since Putin first became president in 1999: though Putin was first elected in a competitive election in 2000 (he won 53 percent of the vote vs. 29 percent for his nearest competitor), his most recent election in 2024 was clearly not competitive (Putin won 88 percent of the vote vs. four percent for his nearest competitor).

In this context of non-competitive elections, Putin's popularity is largely irrelevant – at least directly – to electoral outcomes. The right cell of Figure 2 delves into the EDI in Russia to illustrate additional implications – and complications – related to Russia's autocratic political system for interpreting public opinion data. As I previously mentioned, the EDI measures the degree to which the conditions for meaningful elections exist in a given polity. Per political scientist Robert A. Dahl's conceptualization of polyarchy, on which the EDI is based, these conditions include: 1) near universal suffrage, which permits all citizens to voice their opinions in elections; 2) clean elections, which allow public preferences to be fairly translated into electoral outcomes; 3) freedom of association, which permits citizens to openly organize to further their political beliefs; and 4) freedom of expression and access to alternative sources of information, which allows citizens to gather and discuss relevant political information.[10] Although Russia has had near universal adult suffrage for the duration of Putin's reign, the right cell of Figure 2 shows that levels of the other three concepts in Russia from 2000 to 2025 have drastically deteriorated during this period.

As before, values of one represent societies in which these concepts have been perfectly realized and values of zero represent the opposite. The right cell of Figure 2 shows that Russia has low values for each of these three concepts – clean elections (red), freedom of association (black) and freedom of expression (yellow) – and all of these concepts have shown clear downward trends since 2000. Indeed, free and fair elections – which concerns the actual practice of elections as opposed to the preconditions for competitive elections – is arguably the concept in which Russia is closest (but still distant) to the ideal: at present, Russia has even lower values for freedom of association and freedom of expression.

Such low scores for freedom of association provide further evidence that the interpretation of public opinion data is even more complicated than the low levels of electoral competition suggest. Low levels of electoral competition in Russia mean that it is difficult to conceive of an opponent besting Putin in an election; low levels of freedom of association mean that it is difficult to even conceive of plausible alternatives to Putin. If civil society organizations and political parties operate in a severely limited space, it is difficult for them – and their representatives – to become well-known, much less develop the reputation for effective and positive organization that is essential for widespread popular support. As a result, even on a conceptual level Russians' political options outside of Putin are severely limited: when Russians are asked if they support Putin, they are not comparing him to an array of other candidates or organizations

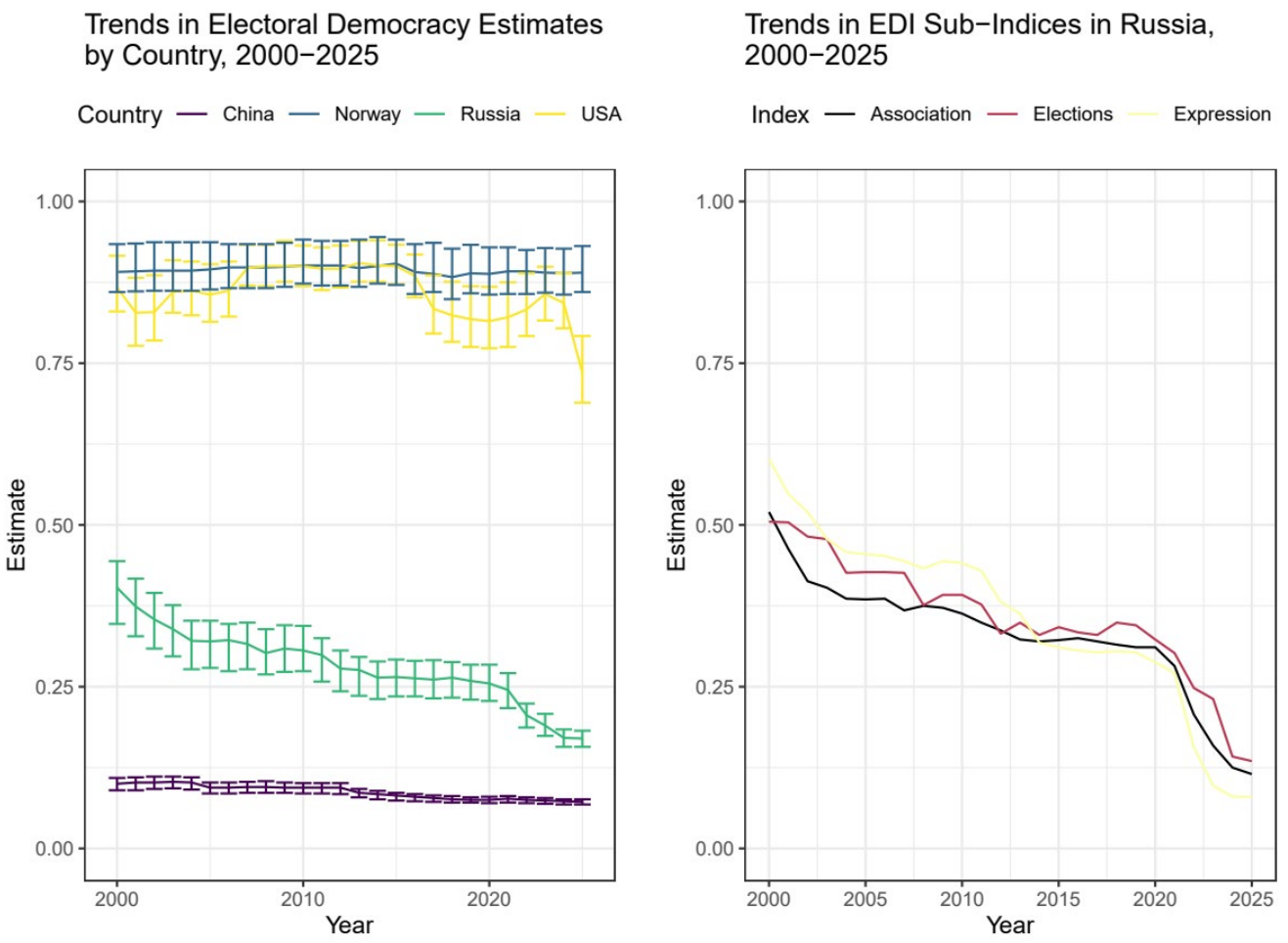


Figure 2: Trends in electoral democracy across countries and within Russia, 2000-2025. Source: V-Dem Project. Vertical lines in left cell represent statistical uncertainty about estimates (68% credible intervals); removed from right cell for ease of visualization.

of proven quality, but rather to his subordinates or very unclear alternatives.

Similarly, freedom of expression and access to alternative sources of information in democracies means that citizens are presented with critical information about their country's leadership and exposed to individuals who have alternative viewpoints. Russia's low scores on this index correspond to the Russian government's stranglehold on mass media, which mean that Russians have to actively search for regime-critical information; increasing censorship and restrictions on the internet is making this task even more difficult. When most Russians are asked about their opinion of Putin, they have a severely restricted framework with which to assess him.

For all of these reasons, many social scientists and activists are stridently critical of public opinion data regarding Putin. Notwithstanding concerns about data falsification in different forms – a point to which I return in the following section – these individuals argue that Putin's high popularity is based on a fundamentally different environment that that in which popularity is estimated in Western democracies. As a result, it does not reflect "true" support in the sense of citizens making decisions based on their informed perceptions of the relative advantages and disadvantages of different politicians, but rather the absence of alternatives and even the opportunity to develop and learn about alternatives. Scholars such as Greg Yudin therefore argue that taking Putin's (extremely high) popularity at face value serves to reinforce the pro-Putin narrative that his victory is inevitable, making opposition even more difficult.[11]

There is evidence to support some of these concerns: colleagues and I have found that perceptions of Putin's popularity substantially affect support for him.[12] In research we conducted between 2020 and 2021, we took advantage of the fact that Putin's popularity was both high in an absolute sense (around 65% approval) and low relative to its previous heights (from 2014 to 2017 Putin's popularity ratings generally exceeded 80%).

Over multiple survey modes and waves we randomly assigned respondents in Russia to one of three experimental conditions, then asked them to report their level of support for Putin. Figure 3 illustrates the different frames over these conditions: 1) a control condition, in which we did not frame Putin's popularity; 2) a negative treatment condition, in which we informed respondents that Putin's popularity had been decreasing and was relatively low; and 3) a positive treatment condition, in which we informed respondents that Putin's popularity was high in absolute terms and stable in that regard.

The results from the negative treatment condition were striking: respondents were between six and 12 percentage points less likely to report support for Putin relative to the control condition. On the other hand, respondents in the positive treatment condition were roughly equally likely to report support for him as they were in the control condition. In other words, when Russian citizens receive information that indicates that Putin's popularity is lower and less stable than they might believe, they are less likely to support him themselves. The null result for the positive frame is perhaps due to the fact that Russians already believe that Putin is popular, so information attesting to this fact is not novel and thus does not change their opinion.

In addition to demonstrating that Putin's popularity is to some extent endogenous – popularity breeds popularity – these results suggest that support for Putin is fundamentally unstable. Indeed, prominent models of public opinion in autocracies hold that the outward stability of autocratic regimes is superficial: uncertainty about the popularity of the regime suppresses open dissent. The lack of open dissent in turn makes the regime seem more popular than it is. However, once citizens become aware of the extent of opposition to the regime, regime support can cascade downward.[13]

The Russian regime has invested a great deal attempting to convince its citizens that Putin is popular, and has been largely successful in this endeavor. Nevertheless even weak information that counters the narrative of Putin's popularity reduces the probability that a Russian citizen reports supporting Putin herself.

It is nevertheless crucial to not over-interpret the implications of these results: Putin's popularity has declined substantially without collapsing several times over his presidential terms, so his popularity clearly does not solely depend on perceptions of his support. However, these results again point to the qualitative difference between public opinion data in democracies and autocracies. In democracies, citizens make comparisons across multiple viable contenders for executive positions, and popularity plays a key role in which of these competitors becomes executive. In autocracies like Russia, popularity is largely decoupled from electoral outcomes, increasing the importance of other types of information.

Figure 3: Example of frames from experimental analysis of Putin's popularity. Reproduced from Buckley, Marquardt, Reuter and Tertytchnaya (2024).

Control: On the whole, how much do you support the activities of the President of Russia?

Positive frame: Sociological surveys unanimously show that, on the whole, two thirds of Russians support the activities of the President of Russia. The President enjoys stable support from the population—a strong majority of Russians support the activities of the President of Russia. On the whole, how much do you support the activities of the President of Russia?

Negative frame: Sociological surveys unanimously show that only two thirds of Russians support the activities of the President of Russia. This is the lowest level of support for the President of Russia in recent years. On the whole, how much do you support the activities of the President of Russia?

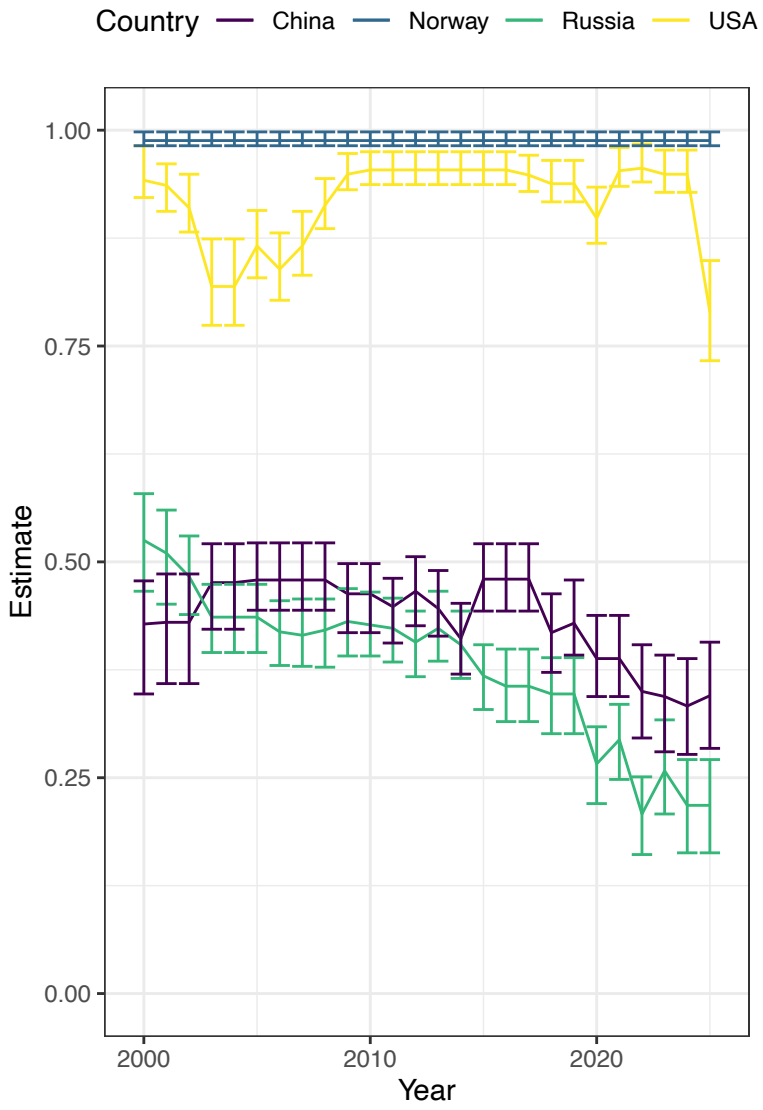
- Completely do not support
- Mainly do not support
- Mainly support
- Completely support

Preference falsification in Russia

Although the preceding discussion complicates the interpretation of Putin's popularity, it assumes that Russians answer truthfully when they say they support Putin, whatever their reasons for doing so. On one level, this assumption is reasonable. Although Putin has evinced a clear willingness to use violence against prominent regime opponents and brutally repress protests, to say nothing about the extreme and unprovoked violence of his foreign policy, until recent years ordinary Russians have generally faced little threat for voicing their opinions in relatively private settings such as a poll interview.

However, Russia has become substantially more repressive in recent years, a trend that began with the violent suppression of protests surrounding opposition activist Aleksei Navalny's return to Russia and his subsequent arrest in January 2021; and which intensified with the extreme repression of all forms of dissent against Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.[14] Accordingly, the increasing restrictions on the rights of association and assembly that Figure 2 illustrates have coincided with increasing risks of physical violence at the hands of the Russian state.[15] Figure 4 shows V-Dem data on trends in physical violence in Russia – the degree to which Russian citizens are free from physical violence at the hands of the state – from 2000 to 2025.[16] Under Putin, Russians' physical integrity has drastically decreased, and suffered a particularly steep decline after the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Per the V-Dem data, the physical integrity of Russian citizens now ranks below that of Chinese citizens.

Figure 4. Trends in V-Dem physical violence index in different countries, 2000-2025. Source: V-Dem Project. Vertical lines represent statistical uncertainty about estimates (68% credible intervals).



Given this level of repression, it is perhaps unsurprising that Russians perceive risks associated with voicing their opposition to the regime. In December 2024, 63 percent of respondents in a Levada Center survey agreed or fully agreed with the statement that "in the current situation people can face negative repercussions (stolknut'sia s nepriiatnostiami) from the authorities because of their comments about the policies of the country's leadership."[17]

Such statistics indicate that preference falsification could indeed present a concern in the context of Russian public opinion data. However, actual evidence about preference falsification is mixed. The most comprehensive review of sensitivity bias in Russia after the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine finds that uncertainty or conflicted feelings appears to drive item nonresponse, as opposed to sensitivity per se; a barrage of techniques designed to elicit truthful responses to sensitive questions provide little evidence of preference falsification with regard to support for Putin, but some evidence of limited preference falsification with regard to opposition to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[18] This and other evidence from earlier research runs counter to the idea that preference falsification about regime support is pervasive in Russia.[19]

However, concerns about falsification in public opinion data extend beyond individual respondents. The Russian government's repression of civil society and media censorship also raises concerns about the continued viability of independent polling in Russia. Most recently, the suspicious timing of a change to VTsIOM's methodology – when reported support for Putin was dropping substantially in May – raised questions about government interference in the organization's operations.[20] However, the fact that survey organizations – including VTsIOM – continued reporting a decline in Putin's popularity in the following months indicates that the government is still willing to allow survey organizations to gather and report information that runs counter to their policy goals.

Nevertheless, understanding Russia's increasingly repressive context is imperative to understanding how and what questions survey organizations ask. Perhaps most prominently, since referring to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine as a "war" remains illegal in Russia, most survey organizations use a euphemistic framing when asking about this policy (e.g. Levada frames it as support for "the activities of the Russian armed forces in Ukraine") which likely increases estimated support for the invasion even before factoring in possible preference falsification.[21]

Although there is little evidence of falsification in Russian public opinion data – at either the organization or respondent level – consumers of these data should remain cautious. The government's authoritarian nature already restricts the operations of survey organizations, and could become more restrictive when-and-if the data these organizations produce becomes less favorable to the regime. Some Russian citizens may already be falsifying their preferences when reporting their sensitive opinions, and increasing repression could cause this phenomenon to become much more widespread, both across citizens and for specific questions.

What can popularity ratings tell us about the Putin regime?

Despite the unclear conceptual implications of Russian public opinion data and concerns about falsification, the data have two essential uses.

The first use is to analyze trends over time, as in Figure 1. Although Putin's popularity ratings remain high in an absolute sense, ambiguity about the implications of these values means that change – and rate of change – is of equal or greater relevance for understanding Russian politics. At a minimum, the fact that multiple metrics of regime support show that Putin's popularity is dropping indicates that the period of extremely high levels of popularity that began with the full-scale invasion of Ukraine is coming to an end. Awareness of the signs of preference falsification and the endogenous nature of public opinion in Russia reinforces these conclusions. The fact that the recent drop in Putin's popularity corresponds with increasing item nonresponse is perhaps evidence that Putin's popularity is decreasing even more than the data suggest directly. Finally, the relationship between perceptions of Putin's popularity and his popularity itself means that this slide may be difficult to arrest.

The second use of public opinion data in Russia is to analyze sources of support for Putin and his key policies at specific periods of time. For example, Figures 5a and 5b show results from statistical analyses of the relationship between demographic characteristics and support for a) Putin and b) the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, using pooled data from monthly surveys which the Levada Center fielded between November 2024 and January 2025.[22] In the figures, the points represent the estimated probability that an individual with a given set of characteristics supports either Putin or the full-scale invasion of Ukraine; while the horizontal lines represent the uncertainty about these estimates (95 percent credible intervals). The bottom-most estimate in both figures represents a reference individual – someone who does not possess any of the named characteristics in the figure. In this case, the reference is an ethnic Russian woman who is between 45 and 64 years of

age, who resides in an urban settlement and does not have higher education. As Figure 5a illustrates, the statistical model estimates that – all things being equal – this reference individual supports Putin with a probability of 0.91, and we are 95% confident that the probability she supports Putin is between 0.88 and 0.93. As Figure 5b shows, another model estimates that the probability this individual supports the full-scale invasion of Ukraine is roughly 0.85, and almost certainly between 0.82 and 0.87.

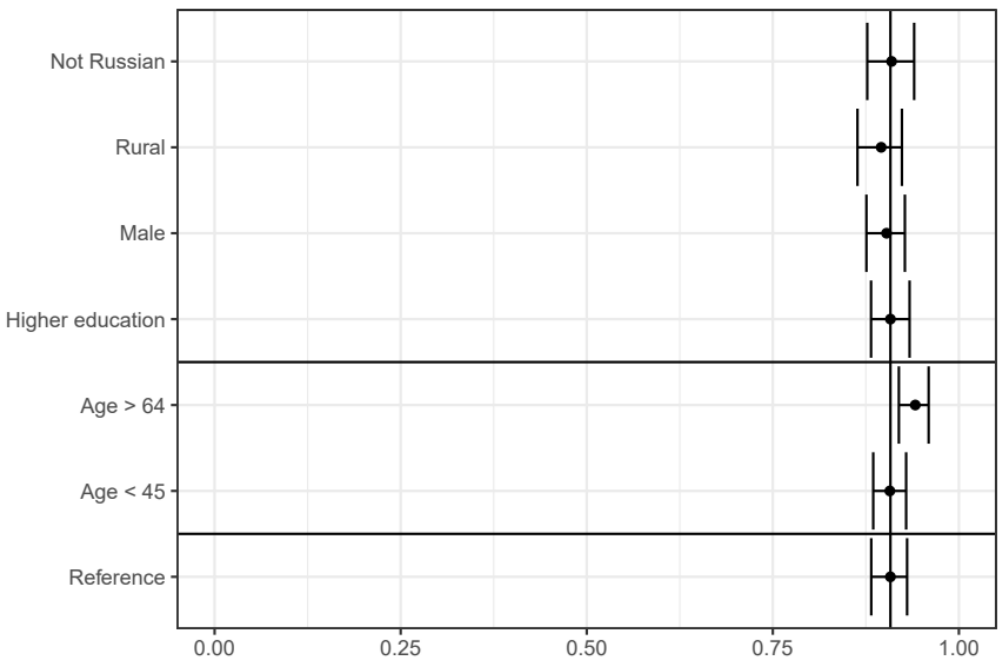
The remaining estimates in both figures represent someone who diverges from the respondent on the named characteristic, but is otherwise identical. For example, "Age > 64" represents someone who has identical characteristics as the reference individual, except that she is older. The fact that the horizontal line representing "Age > 64" respondents does not overlap with the vertical line in both Figures 5a and 5b (which represents the reference level's estimated support for Putin or the full-scale invasion of Ukraine) is therefore evidence that older individuals are more likely to support Putin than middle-aged people.

Indeed, Figure 5a shows that the main demographic source of variation in support for Putin in November 2024 to January 2025 was age: the model estimates a 0.94 (0.92, 0.96) probability that an individual older than 64 supports Putin. The horizontal lines representing other demographic characteristics all overlap with the vertical line, indicating that the differences between representatives of these groups and the reference level may just be due to statistical noise.

However, Figure 5b provides evidence that there was much more demographic variation in support for the full-scale invasion of Ukraine than there was in support for Putin. As with support for Putin, age is a substantial correlate of support for the invasion: individuals under the age of 45 are less likely to support the invasion than the reference individual (the model estimates their probability of support at 0.74, with a range between 0.71 and 0.77), while individuals over the age of 64 much more likely to support it (estimated probability 0.91; between 0.88 and 0.92). Men are more likely to support the invasion than women (0.90; 0.88, 0.92), and individuals who identify as belonging to an ethnic group other than Russians are less likely to support the full-scale invasion (0.81; 0.77, 0.85).

It is also possible to use similar data and methods to analyze other theoretically important sources of variation in support for Putin and full-scale invasion of Ukraine. For example, some ethnic minority populations in Russia have a history of mobilizing in opposition to the federal center; other minority populations have been over-represented in the front lines of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[23]

Figure 5a: Estimated probability an individual with a given set of demographic characteristics reports supporting Putin, November 2024-January 2025. Source: Author's Dataset using Levada Omnibus Survey Data.



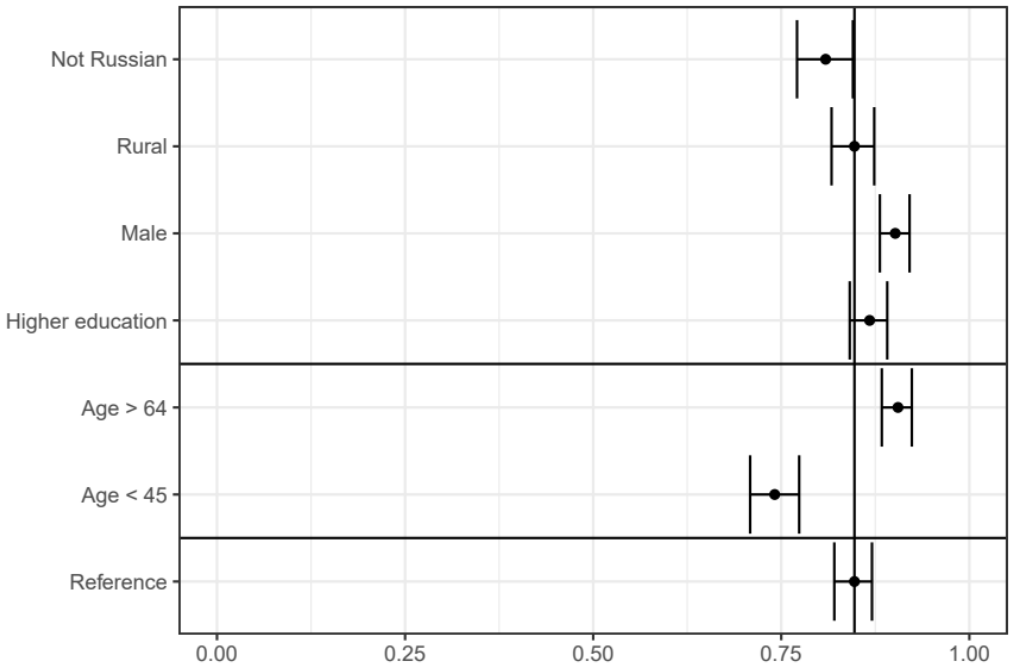


Figure 5b: Estimated probability an individual with a given set of demographic characteristics reports supporting full-scale invasion of Ukraine, November 2024-January 2025. Source: Author's Dataset using Levada Omnibus Survey Data.

Moreover, many of these groups have populations that are territorially concentrated in specific regions of Russia ("republics"), which have themselves served as bases of opposition to the Russian government in the recent past. As a result, support for Putin and his policies among the titular ethnic populations of these regions (the ethnic groups after which the region is named) is a crucial bellwether for assessing the federal stability of Russia.

In an earlier policy memo, I examined November 2022 data from two such titular groups: the Tatars in the Republic of Tatarstan, and the Buryats in the Republic of Buryatia.[24] Table 1 reports results from these analyses. In both cases, a majority of the titular populations of these regions support Putin and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. However, they are much less likely to support these items than ethnic Russians in these territories. Although Putin and his policies remain popular across Russia's regions, populations that have a history of opposition to the government – or contemporary grievances – are less supportive of the government and its policies than their ethnic Russian counterparts.

Conclusion

Users of Russian public opinion data must be cautious. The interpretation of concepts like "approval ratings" is not nearly as straightforward in Russia as it is in democracies given the disjuncture between popularity and political competition, and thus have drastically different implications for regime support and stability. As repression increases in Russia, so too do the odds

Table 1: Ethnic variation in support for Putin and invasion of Ukraine in two Russian republics.

Republic of Buryatia			
	Russians (N=188)	Buryats (N=49)	Difference
Support for Putin	91%	72%	**-19% (-33%, -5%)**
Support for invasion of Ukraine	74%	65%	-9% (-25%, 7%)
Republic of Tatarstan			
	Russians (N=115)	Tatars (N=109)	Difference
Support for Putin	88%	80%	-7% (-17, 3%)
Support for invasion of Ukraine	84%	64%	**-19% (-32%, -7%)**

that respondents will choose not to respond to sensitive questions or, if they respond, will falsify their preferences when they do so.

With proper awareness of these issues and their implications, public opinion data still provide a great deal of valuable insight into Russian politics. Although approval ratings show that a majority of Russians support Putin – whatever that means in an autocracy – the sustained and substantial decrease of the past months indicates that his period of extremely high support after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine may be coming to an end. Substantial demographic variation in both support for Putin and the full-scale invasion – especially with regard to ethnic minority populations and age – demonstrates substantial variation in the degree to which Russian citizens support the government and its policies. Future work and policy would do well to pay attention to these sources of variation.[25]

Endnotes

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