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Searching for a Russian National Idea: Putin Team Efforts and Public Assessments

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The crafting of a new national idea has been the most elusive of the four processes comprising Russia's quadruple revolution in the wake of the failing state of the 1990s. However, the seven policy position papers of Vladimir Putin's 2012 presidential campaign illuminate a Putin-contoured national idea of four primary components. Relying on the October 2014 ROMIR national survey results, augmented with results from other surveys, this article explores Russian public judgments that are connected with a new national idea. Russians are found to strongly support a key component of Putin's national idea, the strong state, and their views accord with the hegemonic leadership position assumed by Putin. Russians view Putin's strong state as a democracy, though their understanding of democracy and its key components varies from that of Westerners. Russians' overall mixed assessments of key policy efforts by the governing team generally fit with Putin's articulated preferences, but there are policy soft spots. Putin and his team confront a Russian public that is more supportive of their hegemonic political-institutional position and vision of a national idea than laudatory of the results of that team's policy efforts.

"Of course, we should always be thinking about the future. Here in Russia we have this old tradition, a favorite pastime, of searching for a national

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idea. This is something akin to looking for the meaning of life. It is, generally speaking, a useful and interesting pursuit, and also one that is never-ending." – Vladimir Putin[1]

Vladimir Putin and his team have governed Russia for more than sixteen years, addressing the challenges of Russia's "quadruple revolution" and reversing the dilemmas of the "failing state."[2] As the first term of the second Putin presidency moves toward its conclusion, it is appropriate to take stock of Russia's current political condition, as a well-entrenched governing elite continues to promote a policy program that has dominated the Russian polity, economy, and society for a generation.[3] During the period 2000-2016, an array of profound dilemmas confronted both the elite and society, and we can debate whether the regime policy responses have been reasoned or haphazard, and whether they sum to a more coherent programmatic whole. But by many statistical measures, identifiable advances occurred, with the governing Putin team predictably championing claimed successes, while critics offer more measured – and even negative –judgments. As the third Putin period presidency winds down, the Russian public is well-positioned to offer its own judgments. Results of the October 2014 ROMIR survey, combined with those of other surveys, yield important insights into Russian citizens' assessments; such assessments, linked with Putin team policy claims, are a core focus of this article.

While attentive to public assessments of Russian political realities and Putin team policies, this article focuses on Russia's continuing search for a post-Soviet "national idea." Russians have long ruminated over the meaning of the Russian culture and Russian civilization, with such ruminations stretching back centuries. Yet in the wake of the complete collapse of Soviet ideology, with the near-complete discrediting of almost all Soviet institutions, the sorting-out of a new national idea for a re-emerging and increasingly self-confident 21st century Russia is an important concern. It is a significant issue that merits analytical attention.

[1]President of Russia. 2007. "Annual Address to the Federal Assembly," At http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24203, accessed May 9, 2016.

[2]By "quadruple revolution" I mean Russia's simultaneous experience of profound political, economic, and societal change, together with the search for a new post-Soviet national identity. By "failing state" I mean a state which is unable to uphold the commitments and provide the services set out in that country's constitution, other legal documents, and government decisions. See John P. Willerton, Mikhail Beznosov, and Martin Carrier. 2005. "Addressing the Challenge of Russia's 'Failing State': The Legacy of Gorbachev and the Promise of Putin," *Demokratizatsiya* 13:2: 219-38.

[3]This study is grounded in the October 2014 ROMIR all-Russia survey of 1,007 respondents. This survey and resultant database are part of the NEPORUS Project, "New Politics Groups and the Russian State," funded by the Research Council of Norway. I thank Jacob Cramer for statistical research support, and Mikhail Beznosov and Patrick McGovern for helpful suggestions.

A Russian "national idea" is a nuanced and multifaceted phenomenon, and it necessarily entails complexities. Given the hegemonic institutional position of President Vladimir Putin, who is the dominant figure in Russian society, this article will focus on Putin's ideas and expressed preferences in identifying an emergent national idea. Four important elements are at the core of Putin's construction of a 21st century Russian national idea: (1) the strong, functioning state; (2) the state-guided market economy; (3) the welfare state with attendant safety net; and (4) the state-safeguarded foreign and security policy position that provides Russia a Eurasian – and even global – leadership position. These four components are inter-related and self-reinforcing; when taken together, they are more powerful than when considered in isolation. While Vladimir Putin has, over the years, addressed the issue of a Russian national idea, and while individual officials have discussed related specific policies, citizens' assessments of those policies and that overall national idea are critically important. Twenty-five years after the Soviet collapse, we can now think seriously about a post-Soviet Russian national idea, with both (a) the reversal of the failing state and (b) advances in political, economic, and societal conditions permitting attention to this elusive notion. As we consider public assessments of the Putin-led political system and the Putin policy program, we evaluate how the operation of that system and the consequences of that program can be tied to a new national idea.[4]

Overview with Expectations

Evaluation of the Russian public's assessment of the Russian polity, the Putin team's policy program and an emergent new national idea must be considered against the background of the difficult realities of the late Soviet and immediate post-Soviet periods – periods that confronted Putin and his emerging team when they assumed power in 2000. The "quadruple revolution" (i.e., political, economic, and societal change, with the search for a new national identity) overwhelmed Russia in the late 1980s and 1990s, and the Russian Federation would only evince progress in the four areas of that revolution by the second half of the first Putin presidency. Russians had been struggling with the various challenges of life in a "failing state" for well over a decade; the widespread references in Russian political discourse to Russia's new (third) "time of troubles" were but one

[4]The notion of a national idea did not originate with the Putin regime. Speculation around a national idea extends back at least to the 19th century philosopher, Petr Chadaayev. The Yeltsin regime gave only passing attention to a post-Soviet Russian national idea, with Yeltsin aide Georgy Satarov charged with creating a group of scholars to find a post-Soviet Russian national idea. But little came of this effort. On the Yeltsin regime and a national idea, see Marlene Laruelle, ed. 2009. *Russian Nationalism and the National Reassertion of Russia* (London: Routledge), ch. 16 and Daniel Treisman. 2012. *The Return: Russia's Journey from Gorbachev to Medvedev* (New York: The Free Press), ch. 2.

suggestive indicator of just how difficult the Russian domestic reality had become.[5] By the second Putin presidency, various Russian opinion surveys revealed that negative assessments by the public of that pre-Putin period were widespread and deep-seated.[6]

There is a considerable literature illuminating the consequences of the Putin policy program, and there are profound debates as to how to understand what that program has brought to Russia as of the latter 2010s.[7] Elsewhere I have offered my own summary judgment – a judgment that, in the main, accords with the mixed but more positive perspectives of mainstream Russians.[8] Certainly, in considering macro-level statistics offered by both international governmental organizations (e.g., International Monetary Fund and the World Bank) and the Russian government, major socioeconomic strides were realized for most citizens, with the significant growth of the national economy permitting nearly all boats to rise.[9] Public opinion survey results offered by the Levada Center, VTsIOM, and FOM have consistently revealed strong domestic public awareness of Russia's economic gains, not to mention domestic public appreciation for Russia's bolstered regional and international standing.[10] In this regard, for average citizens, these advances accrued to the Putin regime, resulting in consistently strong public support for Putin himself, and even modest – but consistently identifiable – support for other political actors in the governing team. Russian domestic public opinion assessments of the governing team, its policies and their consequences have evolved in the wake of the 2014 Ukrainian crisis, the consequent Western economic sanctions and Russian counter-sanctions, and the drop in global energy prices. It will take time to sort out the long-term implications of these developments and their

[5]The "Time of Troubles" refers to a chaotic period in Russian history (1598-1613) when there was elite turmoil, domestic strife, foreign invasion, and a lack of strong leadership. The use of the term arose again in the early 20th century as the Russian Empire moved toward collapse and Russia was overwhelmed with civil war. The term was popularly used in Russia in the early 2000s in referring to the confused and chaotic post-Soviet 1990s, when a weak Russia was said to once again be experiencing all of these domestic problems with related foreign meddling.

[6]See VTsIOM. 2015. "Russia in the 1990s: Time of Failures or Victories," At www.wciom.com/index.php?id=61&uid=1210, accessed May 10, 2016, and VTsIOM. 2016. "Yeltsin's Time: What We Remember," At www.wciom.com/index.php?id=61&uid=1225, accessed May 10, 2016.

[7]For an especially insightful analysis, see Vladimir Gel'man. 2015. *Authoritarian Russia: Analyzing Post-Soviet Regime Changes* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press).

[8]John P. Willerton. 2016. "Russian Public Assessments of the Putin Policy Program: Achievements and Challenges," *Russian Politics* 1:2: 131-58.

[9]For a comprehensive summary, see Jon Hellevig. 2014. *Putin 2000-2014, Midterm Interim Results: Diversification, Modernization and the Role of the State in Russia's Economy* (Awara Group), At www.awaragroup.com, accessed March 20, 2015.

[10]See VTsIOM. 2015. "Social Well-Being of Russians," At www.wciom.com/index/php?id=61&iud=1173, accessed May 9, 2016.

impact on Russia and its economy.[11] Likewise, time is needed to judge the impact of these developments on Russian public opinion, though findings from Russian survey centers reveal mixed results.[12] However, the overall long-term positive socioeconomic trend line has continued to be clear, as have Russian citizens' overall positive assessments of both that trend line and the governing team responsible for it. It is within this domestic Russian context, and the evolution of political and socioeconomic developments over the past two decades, that I approach a Russian national idea, Putin's thinking, and public assessments.

Toward a New National Idea

The success of Putin team policies is very much tied to that governing team addressing the final – especially elusive – challenge of Russia's quadruple revolution: the search for a national idea. The term "national idea" implies a broader political-economic-societal understanding of what Russia represents, both grounded in commonly held values and constituting a foundation for a policy program.[13] Relatedly, I do not use the term national identity, which is more narrowly focused on ethnicity and culture. The 1991 collapse of the USSR left the Soviet model fully discredited; the "Soviet idea" was dead. Meanwhile, if there was reflection over the pre-Soviet Russian experience, Ancient *Rus'* or Imperial Russia provided little more than socio-cultural traditions that offered fleeting inspiration. Putin has broached the notion of a national idea, and his own thinking on the topic has evolved over time. Indeed, references to a national idea began to crop up as early as Putin's arrival in Moscow in 1999.[14] Yet neither Putin nor any member of the governing team has offered a definitive understanding of a new national idea or laid out an explicit set of elements comprising that idea. Considered in sum, Putin's many public utterances do, however,

[11]The World Bank reported that Russian GDP contracted 3.7% in 2015, and would contract a further 1.9% in 2016, before a projected modest rebound of 1.1% growth in 2017. See World Bank. "Overview: Russian Federation," At www.worldbank.org/en/country/russia/overview, accessed May 10, 2016. Russian Ministry of Economic Development estimates were less negative for 2015, and more positive for 2016 and 2017, at Ministry of Economic Development of the Russian Federation. 2016. "Alexey Ulyukaev: Our economy is expecting a signal. Cancellation of anti-Russian sanctions could be the one," At .http://economy.gov.ru/en/home/press/news/2016240306, accessed 10 May 2016.

[12]A suggestive 13-14 February 2016 VTsIOM survey found that 55% of Russians surveyed thought the Putin team had a well-thought-out plan to lead Russia out of what was described as "Russia's economic crisis"; 32% did not. See VTsIOM. 2016. "Government vs. Crisis: Who Beats Who?," At www.wciom.com/index.php?id=61&uid=1254, accessed 10 May 2016.

[13]Discussion of Putin's leadership legitimacy as core to the advancement of Putin's policy program and the "national idea" is provided in a companion piece in this issue of *Demokratizatsiya*: Bo Petersson, "Putin and the Russian Mythscape: Dilemmas of Charismatic Legitimacy."

[14]"Russia at the turn of the millennium." *Nezavisimaia gazeta*. December 30:99, At http://pages.uoregon.edu/kimball/Putin.htm#lessons%20for%20RUS, accessed 8 May 2016.

provide important insights into a new national idea, even given that Putin's addresses to differing audiences predictably yield different accent points.

My effort to identify Putin's perspective on a post-Soviet Russian national idea draws upon the seven 2012 presidential campaign policy position papers that appeared in high-visibility national publications in January-February of that year.[15] Anticipating a return to the presidency, Putin used these papers to address the diversity of domestic and foreign concerns confronting Russia. While Putin has used many forums to set out his vision and specific concerns, this article focuses on these seven high-profile, interconnected addresses because they lay out a focused and coherent set of positions; they are broadly addressed to the Russian public rather than targeted audiences; they are grounded in the past years of Putin team governance; and they set the programmatic stage for the third presidency of the governing team. From these position papers, a variety of policy concerns is identified, and these policy concerns are considered concurrently with analysis of Russian public opinion. However, for this article, the overarching components of a new national idea should also be identified. Numerous other addresses by Putin, especially in the second Putin presidency, may provide richer detail on specific issues and policy concerns. But the seven position papers, brought together, yield a broader and more expansive perspective of Putin on Russia, its circumstances, its policy needs, and even the relationship of the population to the governing elite. Putin may not explicitly discuss the national idea in these position papers, but his vision of a Russian national idea can be deduced.

From analysis of these seven policy position papers, as well as a review of Russia's post-Soviet evolution across the entirety of the period 1992 to 2017, and taking into consideration additional discussions offered by Putin and others, four core components of a new Russian national idea take center stage:

1. the strong and functioning state;
2. the state-guided market economy;
3. the welfare state program with safety net; and
4. a state-safeguarded foreign and security policy position that provides Russia a Eurasian – and even global – leadership position

[15]Vladimir Putin 2012 presidential campaign policy position papers: (1) "Russia muscles up – the challenges we must rise to face." *Izvestia*. January 16:12; (2) "Russia: The Ethnicity Issue." *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*. January 23:12; (3) "Economic Tasks." *Vedomosti*. January 30:12; (4) "Democracy and the quality of government." *Kommersant*. February 06:12; (5) "Building justice: A social policy for Russia." *Komsomolskaia Pravda*. February 13:12; (6) "Being Strong." *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*. February 20:12; and (7) "Russia and the Changing World." *Moskovskie Novosti*. February 27:12, all at the website of the Prime Minister of the Russian Federation, http://premier.gov/ru, all accessed March 4, 2012.

All of these broad components are discussed across the policy position papers, and the discussions bleed together as Putin touches upon specific problems and policies. Since these four overarching components are interconnected, discussions of interrelated policies, domestic and foreign, reveal a more fixed national idea set out by Putin.

The central component, the emergence of a strong (consolidated) and functioning state, is tied to the three others, and is a hallmark – indeed, the foundation – of the Putin team policy thrust during this period. Both supporters and critics would emphasize the full emergence of the hegemonic presidency and the overpowering executive branch and federal government as central to the Putin legacy. While the powerful executive was firmly grounded in the 1993 Yeltsin Constitution, the broader possibilities of hegemonic power were only realized after Putin came into office. Meanwhile, equally important to the continuing viability of the Putin team and its program is the second component, the functioning market economy strongly guided by the consolidated state. While the Russian market economy got off to a rocky start in the 1990s, its generally consistent growth in the 2000s was critical both to filling government coffers and to satisfying the material expectations of citizens.[16] The near-universal acceptance of the market was further revealed by the fact that an apparently cash-strapped regime would countenance even more privatization of state holdings in 2016; Putin raised the issue of additional privatization of state holdings in his annual "Direct Line" national question-and-answer session.[17] Along with a strong, functioning state and a market economy yielding needed government revenues comes the third core component, a social welfare program that addresses numerous societal needs while providing a safety net for the most vulnerable. The four National Priority Projects (NPPs), set out in the first Putin presidency, focused on high-priority concerns such as education, healthcare, and housing that would be at the heart of such a social welfare program. These policies fit with both the expectations of public reliance on the state and collectivist values long held by the Russian public. Meanwhile, memory of the state's failure, in

[16]The application of Putin team's tax program in 2000 is illustrative of the critical relationship between consolidated state and market economy. It is estimated that before the tax program was applied, in 1999, the government secured only 18% of the taxes due to it, while by 2001, the government secured 80% of such taxes. See 2012. "Awara Group Research on the Effects of Putin's Tax Reforms 2000-2012 on State Revenue and GDP." At http://www.awarablogs.com/effects-of-putins-tax-reforms-on-state-tax-revenue-and-gdp/, accessed December 14, 2015. While economic growth yielded considerable government revenues, an overreliance on oil and natural gas exports pointed to the unbalanced nature of the Putin period economy. See Peter Rutland, "The place of economics in Russian identity debates," in Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud. 2016. *The New Russian Nationalism: Imperialism, Ethnicity and Authoritarianism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), ch. 12.

[17]2016. "Direct Line with Vladimir Putin." At http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51716, accessed May 5, 2016.

the 1990s, to meet such expectations only reinforces the importance of welfare state safety net arrangements for a national idea.

Finally, these three domestic core components are tied with a fourth, an energetically pursued foreign and security policy that safeguards Russia as a Eurasian leader while permitting Russia to (re)assume its position as a protector of Eastern Slavic peoples and defender of Orthodoxy. Andrei Tsygankov has written of the centrality of honor in Russia's foreign and security policy thinking for over two centuries.[18] Such honor has been, and continues to be, tied to Russia maintaining the capabilities necessary to promote its interests, protect the interests of the Eastern Slavic peoples found in what has been termed by some the "Russian World," and defend Orthodoxy.[19] Once again, the experience of the (pre-Putin) late 1980s and 1990s is important, as profound Russian weakness left the state incapable of addressing the most basic threats to its Eurasian interests.[20] A consistent theme of Putin and all officials has been that Russia should possess the domestic conditions, resources and will to assert its foreign and security interests as desired. Discussed in Putin's policy position papers, and more explicitly set out and analytically interrelated here, these four components are at the heart of Putin's vision of a national idea; they are a powerful foundation for the policy program articulated and implemented in the second Putin presidency.

2014 – Decisive Year

The year 2014 represents an important and appropriate moment to consider the Russian public's assessments of the 21st century Russian polity and economy, the Putin team's policy record, and the components of a new Russian national idea. Fifteen years of governance is more than a sufficient time period to take the pulse of the citizenry's visceral reactions to a well-ensconced governing team. Certainly, there has been a predictably wide array of influential events and policy developments across the entirety of the Putin period, spanning from such impactful lows as the August 2000 Kursk submarine disaster and the September 2004 Beslan school attack to the profound 2014 highs of the February Sochi games and March "return" of Crimea to Russia.[21] Well into the second Putin presidency, Russians

[18]Andrei P. Tsygankov. 2012. *Russia and the West from Alexander to Putin: Honor in International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

[19]For a detailed illumination of Russian public views of a so-called "Russian World," which 63% of respondents of a VTsIOM survey said exists, see VTsIOM. 2014. "Russian World and What It Means." At www.wciomcom/index.php?id=61&uid=1034, accessed May 9, 2016; further discussion in this paper's conclusion.

[20]Especially illustrative was the March 24, 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia and consequent decision by Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov, who was mid-air on his way to a Washington, D.C. summit, to cancel his visit and fly back to Moscow.

[21]There are profound differences in the way Russians and many outside Russia understand

are positioned to assess his team's core policies and the overall regime program, especially as Russians anticipate continued governance by Putin and this team for the foreseeable future. While public opinion centers such as Levada, VTsIOM, and FOM have produced reliable survey results that reveal relatively stable – and, in the long term, overall supportive – Russian public assessments of Putin's leadership, it is important to illuminate in more detail the specific policy concerns and results that are so essential to any new 21st century national idea. The October 2014 ROMIR survey offers not only a rich snapshot of Russians' thinking about both the governing team and its efforts, but also directs attention to public assessments of specific policy concerns and of the polity more generally.[22]

Equally important, the successful Sochi Olympics and "return" of Crimea represented defining events that are directly tied to a new Russian national idea.[23] Occurring in the span of a little more than two months, these two events captured the attention of Russians and were strongly associated with deep-seated nationalist sentiment. Evaluating Russian public opinion in the wake of two historically profound events that were near-universally welcomed by Russians is mandatory in illuminating the public's engagement with Putin's national idea. These developments only make more propitious the availability of 2014 public opinion data, whether from ROMIR or other survey centers.

Public Opinion Surveys and ROMIR, with a Caveat

Putin and his governing team have given considerable attention to their policy program and claimed successes, and the desired public support has been central to regime efforts to secure legitimacy. Russian public opinion surveys by established firms such as Levada, VTsIOM, and FOM have illuminated public assessments, and we can identify considerable over-time stability in many attitudes.[24] The October 2014 ROMIR survey offers important insights into Russian public assessments, and these

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the Russian move into Crimea. The term "return" in quotation marks is used to communicate the Russian political elite and mainstream public view, as qualified by strong foreign reservations.

[22]For a scholarly assessment of Russian public opinion results revealing Putin's popularity, see Timothy Frye, Scott Gehlbach, Kyle L. Marquardt and Ora Reuter. 2017. "Is Putin's popularity real?" *Post-Soviet Affairs* 33:1: 1-15.

[23]If the meaning for Russian public opinion of the "return" of Crimea is self-evident, overcoming the legacy of the disappointing 1980 Summer Games was also meaningful. While some Western and other countries (most notably the U.S., Canada, and Japan, along with the People's Republic of China and Albania) boycotted the 1980 Moscow games, all major sporting countries participated in the 2014 Sochi Winter Games.

[24]See the over-time summary public assessments at Levada, at http://www.levada.ru/eng/indexes=0 and http://www.levada.ru/indikatory/polozhenie-del-v-strane/; and VTsIOM. 2016. "Government vs. Crisis: Who Beats Who?" At http://www.wciom.com/index.php?id=61&uid=1254, accessed May 8, 2016.

assessments fit squarely with other Russian survey results.[25] While much of the ROMIR survey addresses public assessments of social movements, media, and mobilization efforts, the focus of this article is on the Putin federal executive and its policy concerns; the level of public receptivity to that executive's programmatic efforts; and – most importantly here – the relevance of public assessments of all of these to a 21st century Russian national idea. The ROMIR survey includes a number of questions that directly address components of such a national idea, and these results can be nested among relevant findings from other surveys. Meanwhile, a series of questions tapping Russian public assessments of a Russian civilizational idea, a concept Russians often use interchangeably with a Russian national idea, helps us tap more socio-cultural aspects of this elusive national idea.[26]

In setting out this analysis of Putin team policies, Russian public judgments, and a new Russian national idea, a caveat is in order. In illuminating Russian political ideas, perspectives, and experience of the Putin period, there is a profound difference between Western evaluation and the judgments of Russian political elites – and the mainstream Russian population – about Russian political system building and governance. Reflecting on the political system and democratization, there are, by most internationally recognized standards, enormous problems in Russia as the post-Soviet polity is consolidated and Russian foreign-security interests are pursued.[27] This article, and the broader project from which it is drawn, assesses the Putin team's system-building efforts and governance with attention to its core policies and the Russian public's perception of the consequences of those efforts and policies. By core policies I mean Putin team initiatives that address the consolidation of state institutions, the operating of the

[25]The ROMIR survey, consisting of 70 questions, spans four major substantive concerns: the executive and society; social protest and framing; societal developments; and mobilization and social media. The survey was crafted in summer 2014, and ROMIR conducted the survey in October 2014. For information regarding ROMIR, see http://romir.ru. The NEPORUS eight team members who constructed the survey are Geir Flikke (principal investigator), Elena Belokurova, M. Steven Fish, Pål Kolstø, Jardar Østbø, Carolina Vendil Pallin, Anna Tarasenko, and John P. (Pat) Willerton. For details regarding the survey instrument, contact Geir Flikke (University of Oslo).

[26]While Russians interchangeably use the terms "Russian national idea" and "Russian civilizational idea," the latter term connotes a stronger socio-cultural differentiation of Russia and its experience from that of the West. Select ROMIR questions tap elements such as a specific Russian cultural-historical identity or "way of life," and these elements can be viewed as potential parts of a "Russian national idea." A more detailed analysis of these elements is found in John P. Willerton, Mikhail Beznosov, and Patrick McGovern. 2018. *Vladimir Putin and Russia's Search for a National Idea* (Unpublished manuscript).

[27]I set out my own overview analysis of the causes and consequences of the conflicting Russian and Western assessments of the Putin regime, its actions, and its legacy in John P. Willerton. 2016. "Mosca è nostra nemica perché non la capiamo" [Moscow is our enemy because we don't understand it]. *Limes: Revista Italiana di Geopolitica* 2/16 (March): 115-22, and John P. Willerton. 2016. "Washington chiama Mosca" [Washington calls Moscow]. *Limes: Revista Italiana di Geopolitica* 11/16 (November): 143-53.

economy, the universally desired improvement in living standards, the hoped-for provision of state-guaranteed services, and the safeguarding of Russia's Eurasian – and even global – security interests. In assessing the contemporary Russian polity, my focus is not on the potential democratic quality of the system, on system rules and functioning, but rather on the political system's ability, as judged by Russians, to provide the goods and services set out by the Russian Constitution and laws and articulated by the governing elite. As will become evident, attention is also given in this analysis to Russian citizens' ideas about a Russian democracy and what it constitutes. But this discussion of the quality of a putative Russian democracy entails Russian public judgments, not my own.

In identifying and assessing core policy concerns, focus is given to the second Putin presidency (2012-18). While granting that individual Putin policies have arisen over time and that the overall program continues to evolve, how do Russians judge the performance of this governing team in the second Putin presidency? Indeed, while anticipating that Putin, in the wake of the Sochi Olympics and joining of Crimea to Russia, will himself enjoy considerable domestic public support, how does such support relate to the broader team and its efforts? Moreover, as Putin has broadly contoured a 21st century Russian national idea with identifiable components, do public judgments about politicians, policies, and consequences accord with that national idea? Public preferences merit our attention: there is considerable evidence that Putin and the governing team are highly concerned about public opinion, expending much effort to shore up domestic support.[28]

What ROMIR and Other Survey Results Reveal (and Do Not Reveal)

What do survey results – especially those drawn during the second Putin presidency – reveal about public judgments of Putin and his team, their program and policy efforts, and a Putin-crafted national idea? An overview of many survey results, with those from the October 2014 ROMIR survey nested in their midst, indicates considerable stability and consistency in public assessments. What follows is a summary description of overall results, after which attention is given to specific survey findings tied with the four over-arching components of the new national idea.

[28]Vladimir Putin has proven especially attentive to such efforts, directly reaching out to various interests in high-profile ways. His February 2013 participation in the First Congress of Russian Parents, addressing problems of juvenile justice, was an important and suggestive effort, reflective of the family policy priorities important to his second presidency; see a summary article and video at "Vladimir Putin vystupil na pervom s"ezde roditelei Rossii, prokhodiashchem v Moskve." *Pervyi kanal*, February 09:13, At www.1tv.ru/news/social/225987, accessed May 19, 2015.

ROMIR survey findings, augmented by findings from the Levada Center, VTsIOM, and FOM, reveal that most Russians appreciate having a strong state, they are supportive of a market economy and what it has brought them over the past two and a half decades, they support a social welfare policy program that provides a safety net to the needy, and they are buoyed by an assertive foreign-security policy that advances Russia's position as a Eurasian – and even global – leader. In essence, most Russians share the vision of a new Putin-crafted national idea; their preferences fit with that idea's fundamental components. However, if most Russians favorably view President Putin himself, they are more critical of other officials and actors who comprise the governing Putin team. And, equally important, Russians are not enamored with all the results of that governing team's policy efforts to date. Indeed, their assessments of the Putin team's efforts in some important policy areas are muted and even moderately negative. While there is no doubt that the Putin team enjoys tremendous institutional power, and Putin himself wields tremendous authority, occasionally mediocre public assessments of that team's and leader's programmatic efforts constitute an important challenge. Indeed, if most Russians exhibit comfort with the hallmark components of a Putin-crafted new national idea, the policy imperatives stemming from that national idea may well constitute problematic benchmarks by which Putin and his team will be judged.

The Strong State as a Perceived Democracy?

Russians like a strong state, a strong executive, and a strong leader. ROMIR survey results reveal this, as do results from other surveys. When we examine public assessments of the Putin team's performance across various issue concerns, we find evidence that the strong (consolidated) state and strong executive are perceived as delivering policy outcomes with at least some degree of success. With the problematic 1990s as a backdrop, the Putin-era state is perceived as functioning, with this perception tied to strong support for Putin himself. A November 2014 VTsIOM survey indicated that 55 percent of respondents viewed the Russian president as the source of power and the holder of sovereignty in the country, a finding that held true across all age groups (citizens, "the people," came a distant second with 23 percent). Meanwhile, in this same survey, respondents overwhelming viewed Russia as having a federated state (72 percent) rather than a unitary one (4 percent), but they clearly viewed the top federal executive as holding sovereignty.[29] Relatedly, the October 2014 ROMIR survey yields high thermometer readings for President Putin, whose favorability rating (7.546 on a 10-point scale) towers over those

[29]See VTsIOM. 2014. "Power in Russia." At www.wciom.com/index.php?id=61&uid=1037, accessed 9 May 2016.

of all other Putin team and regime actors, as well as that of high-profile critic Aleksei Navalny. (The summary results for others, in descending order: United Russia Party (5.566), Cabinet of Ministers (5.508), People's Chamber (5.475), State Duma (5.385), All-Russian People's Front (5.173), and Navalny (3.374).) Describing Vladimir Putin as a "hegemonic president" reflects public regard both for the institution and for the current occupant.[30] Other Putin regime actors are not so favorably viewed. The public assessments of all Putin regime actors – executive (Cabinet of Ministers), elected (State Duma), consultative (People's Chamber), and party (United Russia) – are middling at best. Meanwhile, the public hardly draws distinctions among these actors regarding favorability, as there is no statistically significant difference in the assessments across these regime actors. However, the public does not draw strongly negative assessments of these Putin regime actors; high-profile Putin critic Aleksei Navalny is the only one to receive a negative assessment.[31]

The ROMIR survey does not directly measure respondents' assessments of how preferable the post-Soviet Russian system is, but it does include related questions regarding that system as a perceived democracy, along with assessments of political actors. Questions on other surveys augment the ROMIR findings, with a strong fit among responses, and across different points in time in the late Medvedev and second Putin presidencies. While a consolidated state, as set out in the Russian national idea, does not presume the creation of a democracy, we will see that many Russian public characterizations of a democracy include descriptors highly correlated with a functioning state. All post-Soviet Russian presidents, whatever their intentions, have advocated for a democratic institutional design. Moreover, Putin and other officials rely on democratic themes and phrasing as they champion a described, ever better-functioning, political system.

[30]An intriguing element underlying Putin's high standing with Russians involves Putin's "leadership myth": an element not analyzed here, but evaluated in Bo Petersson. 2014. "Still Embodying the Myth?" *Problems of Post-Communism* 61:1 (January-February): 30-40.

[31]While there may be complexities surrounding the accuracy of domestic Russian survey results regarding opposition figures such as Aleksei Navalny, the results of the ROMIR survey for Navalny correspond to results generated from surveys conducted by a range of other polling firms (e.g., Levada and VTsIOM).

Table 1. Public reaction to selected political topics.

A. Do you consider Russia a democratic country? [1 = yes; 0 = no]
Mean = .674 [i.e., 67.44% say democratic, 32.56% say not democratic] (95% CI = .642-.707)
B. Do you think Vladimir Putin believes in democracy? [1 = yes; 0 = no]
Mean = .791 [i.e., 79.05% say yes, 20.95% say no] (95% CI = .761-.820)
C. Do you think protests against the Putin regime strengthen or weaken the position of Russia in the world? [1 = strengthen; 0 = weaken]
Mean = .387 [i.e., 38.7% say strengthen, 61.3% say weaken] (95% CI = .351-.423)

Both Putin regime supporters and critics often question whether Russia functions as a democratic country, and the ROMIR survey poses this question, as well as whether President Putin believes in democracy. In a related vein, the survey also touches upon the significance of the 2011-12 protests against the Putin regime, asking respondents whether these events strengthened or weakened Russia's global position. Table 1 provides the results. More than two-thirds of respondents consider Russia a democratic country, while nearly 80 percent think Putin believes in democracy. These findings, considered with those of other surveys, are not surprising, as Russians have held consistently favorable views both of their country's political system as a democracy, and of Putin as a leader who has advanced a perceived democratic Russia. However, there are nuances here, and they are further complicated by the findings in panel C of Table 1, where more than 60 percent of respondents indicate that they consider anti-Putin regime protests to have weakened Russia's global position.

The concept of democracy, whether understood universally and theoretically, or more specifically as understood by Russians, is complicated and subject to contrasting judgments. Regarding Russian respondents' assessments, many may have fairly positive associations with the idea of democracy, especially as democracy is emphasized by the regime itself and is associated with strong governance, substantive (i.e., "quality of life" or material) rights, and political advances. But others may associate democracy with the West, and this could draw divergent views, as some may be pro-Western and therefore judge the Putin-led Russian polity more negatively, while others may tie democracy to the perceived failure

of Western-style reforms during the troubled 1990s. In a September 2014 FOM survey, 43 percent of respondents associated democracy with democratic rights and freedoms, with this characterization by far the most commonly offered when respondents were asked to specify attributes of a democracy.[32]

But what constitutes a democracy? Among respondents in a March 2014 VTsIOM survey, the five most common characteristics (those scoring double-digit responses, in descending order) were: freedom of speech, press, and religion; economic prosperity; order and stability; severe laws and rule of law; and selection of top state officials by election.[33] In this survey, respondents were asked to juxtapose democracy and order, and in doing so, 71 percent indicated they would prefer "breaking democratic principles for the country to achieve order." And what did they mean by order, the core concept for which they exhibited a preference? The responses earning double-digit responses (in descending order): political and economic stability; strict observance of the law; stopping embezzlement; opportunities for all to exercise their rights; stopping struggles for power and the collapse of the country; social protection for low income citizens; and severe discipline. Hence, the consolidated and functioning state with desired policy deliverables was at the heart of order and, in reflecting on order and democracy, the concept of order itself was seen as a core part of a preferred democracy. Relatedly, this survey also revealed that 45 percent of respondents thought Russia had either just the right amount of democracy or too much democracy, as opposed to 22 percent who judged that Russia had too little democracy. Meanwhile, in another 2014 FOM survey, 60 percent of respondents thought they were living in a free country, as opposed to 32 percent who did not.[34] Reviewing these various survey responses, Russians' thinking about order, stability, a properly functioning state, and democracy all bleed together. As of the middle of Putin's second presidency, a majority of Russians viewed the strong, functioning state as a democratic one.

Yet if a solid majority of Russians indicated they considered they were living in a democracy, that majority desired a political environment in which order would be maintained, even if efforts to promote order violated democratic rules. Their assessments of the job the President was doing were high. As we have seen, ROMIR thermometer readings for other governing Putin team actors were not so high, falling into the average-to-modestly-above-average range. But in a VTsIOM survey conducted

[32]FOM. 2014. "Impressions about Democracy." At www.fom.ru/TSennosti/11741, accessed May 9, 2016.

[33]VTsIOM. 2014. "Order or Democracy." At www.wciom.com/index/php?id=61&uid=944, accessed May 10, 2016.

[34]FOM. 2014. "Russia: Image of the Country." At www.fom.ru/Mir/11358, accessed 9 May 2016.

a year later, though the rating of the Putin-second-presidency Medvedev government again fell into the average-to-modestly-above-average range (the 2014 and 2015 Medvedev governments earned 3.49 and 3.67 respectively, on a 5-point scale), these ratings were the two highest accorded any Russian government since the question was first asked in 1998 (when the Chernomyrdin government scored a 2.16).[35]

Given these public judgments about the condition of the Russian polity and assessments of Putin and his team, it is not surprising that the ROMIR survey yields complicated, albeit apparently negative, public reactions to the 2011-12 protests. Reflection on the results in Panel C of Table 1 requires more nuanced thinking. Many of the roughly 39 percent who conclude that the protests actually strengthened Russia's global position may see such protests as a sign of a more normalized and healthy polity, as would befit the perceived democracy so many respondents see as existent in Russia. Few respondents self-reported having participated in the protests (4 percent). In contrast, most of the roughly 61 percent who judged such protests as weakening Russia's global position were positively oriented toward Putin, saw him as believing in democracy, considered the political system a democracy, and hence viewed such protests as constituting an attack on the Putin-led polity. Such Russians could well not only question the goals of those who protested, but also have more negative perspectives toward the liberal reformers and opposition forces (on both left and right) that organized the protests. It merits noting here that in a FOM survey conducted just a little over a month before the October ROMIR survey, when respondents were asked when, in the 20th and 21st centuries, Russians had the most democracy, the second Putin presidency scored the highest percentage of responses.[36] The results:

Earlier Soviet regimes	13%
Gorbachev	3%
Yeltsin	7%
Putin I	12%
Medvedev	1%
Putin II	27%
Difficult to answer	37%[37]

[35]VTsIOM. 2015. "Assessment of the Government Performance: 2012-2015." At www.wciom.com/index/php?id=61&uid=1124, accessed May 10, 2016. It should be noted that the ratings for the Medvedev government rose consistently between 2012 and 2015.

[36]FOM. 2014. "Impressions about Democracy." At www.fom.ru/TSennosti/11741, accessed 9 May 2016.

[37]It is notable that the highest percentage response (37%) was "difficult to answer." This result likely reflects the challenges for many respondents in thinking about the notion of democracy, respondents' varied understandings of the term, and the variance in their judgment as to whether a given regime was a democracy and should be viewed favorably. Indeed, all of these

Ultimately, the publicly perceived beneficial democracy was tied to order and stability, with order and stability also tied to the strong leader. The results of a late 2015 VTsIOM survey, more than halfway through the second Putin presidency, are profound: a whopping 81 percent of respondents indicated that "strong leaders do much [*sic*] more good things for the country than any laws or discussions."[38] Perhaps the widely held deference to the strong leader was partially explained in citizen responses to another question, where 74 percent indicated that "everything is changing so quickly that you cannot figure out which laws you need to abide by." Perhaps having a hegemonic leader is so preferred because it is that leader who provides the desired reliable guidance in the midst of perceived dizzying root and branch change. It is the strong executive, atop the strong state, who reassures a population that appears to buy into the political system, who is championed. For most Russians, a strong and functioning state, the critical component of the Putin national idea, is the bedrock for a broadly perceived functioning democracy.

Economy and Social Welfare Program

If the national idea also entails a functioning market economy, as directed by the strong state, and entails a state-guaranteed welfare program with safety net, then public assessments of how a leader and governing team are performing in regard to the country's socioeconomic life are essential as the public engages with that regime's promoted idea. Elsewhere, I have drawn upon the ROMIR survey to assess, first, the degree to which the Russian public views key issues of the Putin socioeconomic program as essential to Russia's advance.[39] All of these policy concerns were touched upon in the 2012 presidential campaign policy position papers, and all are relevant to the logic of a new national idea. Measuring the public's ranking of importance of nearly a dozen policy concerns, where 10 is highly important and 1 is largely unimportant, all of these concerns rank from a low of 8.36 to a high of 8.89; hence, all of these rankings are positioned on the high end of the scale. These policy concerns run the gamut of economic and social issues, including achieving a higher standard of living (the highest ranking, at 8.89) and ensuring better quality social services (second highest, at 8.80), to a return to traditional multi-children families (the second lowest, at 8.42) and returned social trust to social institutions (the lowest ranking, at 8.36). These findings did not reveal whether this

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regimes, when in power, described themselves as a democracy of some sort.

[38]These November 2015 results were significantly higher than the 52% that was recorded when the question was asked in 1990. See VTsIOM. 2016. "The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same." At www.wciom.com/index.php?id=61&uid=1236, accessed May 9, 2016.

[39]Willerton, "Russian Public Assessments."

public reaction was due to Putin's influence, or whether Putin's policy concerns followed public preferences. But these findings did demonstrate a high correspondence between Putin and public assessments as regards what are important policy matters, and across both the economic and societal domains. The ROMIR survey is also rich, second, in public assessments of the Putin team's efforts to address such socioeconomic policy concerns as are judged to be important. If the strong and functioning state is a key precondition for positive public judgments, the perceived policy payoffs of state efforts are critical. The results in Table 2 are suggestive.

Table 2. Public Assessment of Putin Team's Performance - 11 Policy Concerns

Policy Concern	Assessment	Group
Revitalization of Cultural Life	6.32 (0.067)	A
Return to Traditional Multi-Children Families	6.24 (0.069)	AB
Education	6.04 (0.070)	BC
Higher Standard of Living	6.01 (0.068)	BCD
Reindustrialization Efforts	5.83 (0.074)	CDE
Returned Trust to Social Institutions	5.81 (0.068)	CDEF
Infrastructural Projects	5.78 (0.071)	CDEF
Better Quality of Social Services	5.75 (0.071)	DEF
Healthcare	5.59 (0.073)	EF
Housing	5.18 (0.075)	G
Anti-Corruption	5.04 (0.078)	G

Notes: Standard Errors are in parentheses. The group column shows an intuitive way to quickly assess statistically significant differences across responses. Responses sharing a letter in the Group column are not significantly different at the 5% level.

Table 2 summarizes public assessments of the Putin team's performance regarding 11 top policy concerns. Most of these concerns are tied to society and the regime's social welfare efforts, while two – infrastructural projects and reindustrialization efforts – are core economic priorities of the second Putin presidency. With assessments offered on a 10-point scale, again with 1 low and 10 high, the midpoint is 5.5. If we view average assessments between 7 and 10 as high, and 1 and 4 as low, then all 11 of the assessments set out in Table 2 must be characterized as average, with some above average, and a couple falling below the 5.5 midpoint. If the Putin team's performance in tackling these 11 concerns is never assessed at a high level, i.e., at or above 7, nor is it ever assessed as low or failing, i.e., at or below 4. Serious observers can offer varying characterizations of these combined results for the 11 concerns, but there is no doubt that public assessments of the Putin team's efforts are mixed, though more favorable than not.

For the two concerns central to the macroeconomic policy program of the second Putin presidency, infrastructural projects and reindustrialization efforts, public assessments of the governing team's efforts are modestly above the mid-point of 5.5. Juxtaposed with the nine other societal concerns, they can be grouped with other concerns where the team's performance is judged to be average, or adequate (i.e., returned trust to social institutions, better quality of social services, and healthcare). It is the Putin team's high-profile second-presidency efforts related to society – revitalization of cultural life, the family, and education – where above average assessments are offered. If these results, all above 6 (on the 10-point scale), are not high, they can be statistically grouped together (see Table 2, far right column entitled group), and, along with "higher standard of living," constitute a solid base of above-average evaluations that reflect widespread public support. In contrast, when considering public assessments of three of the four National Priority Projects (NPP) championed by the Putin regime since the end of the first term of the first Putin presidency, public assessments are less compelling. Education, the one NPP especially championed in the second presidency, earns a respectable 6.04 assessment, but healthcare (5.59) and housing (5.18) yield mediocre and underwhelming assessments. Only the more negatively regarded Putin team efforts at fighting corruption (5.04) are judged lower.[40]

[40]Note congruent findings from a VTsIOM survey, where housing, corruption, and healthcare are all identified as among the most important problems for Russia; 2014. "Summer 2014: Russians about Russian Problems." At www.wciom.com/index.php?id=61&uid=983, accessed May 8, 2016.

Taken together, public assessments of the Putin team's performance in tackling 11 domestic policy concerns sum to a discernible public acknowledgement of advances in particular policy areas, including social welfare areas (emphasized during the second presidency). These assessments fit neatly with results from a mid-2014 VTsIOM survey that reveal that all six long-applied VTsIOM well-being social indices were rising and – at the time – approaching all-time highs.[41] But they do not sum to a strong endorsement of the governing team, with middling assessments for high-profile macroeconomic initiatives and uninspired reactions to selected NNPs. Interestingly, for comparative purposes, when respondents were asked in the ROMIR survey about the Putin team's performance in projecting and defending Russia's interests internationally, the score on the 10-point scale was 7.17, above the scores for all other (domestic) concerns. It is in the foreign and security policy area that the role and actions of President Putin are most readily evident, as all domestic political and socioeconomic concerns necessarily involve the actions of many actors beyond the President. Putin's own high public assessment score (7.55) is in the range of this 7.17, defending Russia's interests, score. In comparable fashion, public assessments of other Putin team actors, in the mid-5-point range on the 10-point scale, are not far removed from the public's middling assessments of that team's performance regarding the 11 domestic policy concerns. If the Russian public supports the economic and social welfare policy concerns associated with the Putin-crafted national idea, that public also has continued reservations as to the Putin team's performance in accomplishing the socioeconomic policy results that should accompany that national idea.

Defending Russian Interests Internationally and a "Civilizational Identity?"

We have seen that the 2014 ROMIR survey, viewed against a backdrop of many other surveys conducted during roughly the same time period, yields a rich array of public judgments regarding the overall performance of President Putin and other governing team members; the team's performance regarding high-profile policy concerns; the condition of the Russian polity and society; and the combined elements of a Putin-crafted 21st century Russian national idea. Assessments are varied; they reveal judgments that – excluding the strong support for Putin himself – are neither enthusiastic nor failing. However, the general Russian public *weltanschauung* identified in this analysis fits with Putin's and his team's posturing, confirming the correctness of Colton and Hale's assertion that the regime

[41]VTsIOM. 2014. "Social Well-Being of Russians: New Heights!" At www.wciom.com/index.php?id=61&uid=982, accessed May 11, 2016.

"has managed to stay reasonably in tune with the attitudes of the population and… successfully cast itself as the only serious state management team in town."[42] Such a "simpatico" between governing team and the populace is certainly important to the long-term viability of the regime because, as Rose and Mishler have observed, mass support for a single leader alone has less enduring value for a regime's stability than does support based on the congruence of broad issue positions (or partisan loyalties).[43] Russians appear to "buy in" to the Putin-crafted national idea, but the Putin team's performance in realizing the various policy ends – integral to realizing that new Russian national idea – is hardly judged by Russians to be stellar.

One aspect of the national idea for which the Russian public shows especially strong support is the conduct of a strong foreign policy that safeguards Russia's interests beyond its borders. Elsewhere I have drawn on the ROMIR survey to determine how important this foreign-security policy aspect of a national idea is; with respondents ranking "project and defend Russia's interests internationally" at a 8.69 (on the 10-point scale), this is judged a very important concern.[44] When respondents are subsequently asked about the Putin team's performance on this foreign-security policy concern, they give it the highest rating of any of the Putin team's policy efforts, a 7.17. Indeed, this positive assessment is statistically higher than respondents' assessments of the Putin team's performance for any of the 11 other policy concerns. One wonders to what extent this high rating for the projection and defense of Russia's interests internationally can be directly related with Putin's own high public approval rating. Foreign policy is arguably the area where the President is most able to unilaterally, and without the undue involvement of other domestic political actors, take action and effect change. Other surveys have revealed strong Russian public support for various foreign initiatives, with Russian actions in Ukraine and involving Crimea especially salient for the second Putin presidency.

While the Putin-crafted national idea may be solidly grounded in political, economic, and societal policy imperatives, the cultural notion of what constitutes a Russian "national idea," as understood as a civilizational idea, must also be acknowledged. Such a Russian national-civilizational idea is closely associated with Russia both projecting and defending its interests abroad. Putin has spoken of both nationalism and patriotism, with his third term posturing putting emphasis on patriotism as understood as love of country. Developments in the area of the former Soviet Union

[42]Timothy J. Colton and Henry E. Hale. 2014. "Putin's Uneasy Return and Hybrid Regime Stability: The 2012 Russian Election Studies Survey." *Problems of Post-Communism* 61:2 (March-April), 3-22, 21.

[43]Richard Rose and William Mishler, 2010. "A Supply-Demand Model of Party-System Institutionalization." *Party Politics* 16:6, 801-22.

[44]Willerton, "Russian Public Assessments."

(FSU), including those in Ukraine, occasioned strong Russian state action, and the public's support for both projecting and defending Russia's interests abroad is especially germane to the region Russia refers to as "the near abroad." Developments in the FSU touch upon matters such as a Russian-speaking community, a Russian cultural-historical identity, and the status of ethnic Russians. A number of these elements could be said to potentially underlie the socio-cultural dimension of a Russian national idea, and the October 2014 ROMIR survey includes questions that ask respondents to assess five of them. The five elements, and respondents' assessments of their importance to a Russian civilizational identity, are set out in Table 3.

Table 3. Importance of Russian civilizational identity

Topic	Assessment	Group
Russian Citizenship	8.67 (0.061)	A
Belonging to the Russian-Speaking Community	8.51 (0.062)	AB
Russian Cultural-Historical Identity	8.49 (0.062)	AB
Russian Ethnicity	8.43 (0.064)	B
Specific Russian "Way of Life"	7.88 (0.074)	C

Notes: Standard Errors are in parentheses. The group column shows an intuitive way to quickly assess statistically significant differences across responses. Responses sharing a letter in the Group column are not significantly different at the 5% level.

Reviewing Table 3, we find respondents judge all five elements as highly important (on the 10-point scale, all five are well above 7, with four of the five well above 8). "Russian citizenship" (8.67) stands out, though "belonging to the Russian-speaking community" (8.51) and "Russian cultural-historical identity" (8.49) are statistically very close in importance. Again, I have grouped the five by assessed importance level, with only "specific Russian 'way of life'" having an importance level statistically less significant than the others, though with a score of 7.88, this element is still overwhelmingly judged as important. In contrasting these five elements potentially important to the framing of a Russian civilizational identity, it should be observed that the political-administrative

realities of citizenship and "choice" of language and identity are judged by the public as a bit more important than the demographic characteristic of ethnicity or maintenance of a distinct lifestyle ("way of life").

These public assessments fit nicely with findings from other surveys, in particular a November 2014 VTsIOM survey where respondents assessed what is termed the "Russian World."[45] While nearly two-thirds of respondents said such a Russian World (RW) exists, most identified it as constituting the Russian people, brought up according to Russian traditions, speaking the Russian language, and forming a community in Russia. Being Orthodox believers was not understood as mandatory: 67 percent said RW includes not only Orthodox Christians, but other believers, and even atheists. Likewise, 67 percent said RW covers all territory where Russians predominate, including outside (of Russia) territories.[46] If the so-called Russian World overlaps with the Putin-crafted national idea, Putin's public discussion has been more cautious in not explicitly invoking outside territories or unduly emphasizing ethnic-cultural prerequisites.[47] Putin's caution is understandable: promotion of a national idea can stir nationalist sentiments, which is potentially especially problematic in a multi-ethnic Russian Federation where Russians and their culture predominate.[48]

Conclusion: Reflections on a New National Idea

The notion of a Russian "national idea" has long preoccupied Russian intellectuals, cultural figures, and politicians. Ideas surrounding the oft-acknowledged, but elusive, "Russian soul," have often been linked with a "national idea." Yet the imperatives of Marxism-Leninism and Soviet power overwhelmed and buried such ruminations, and it has only been in the wake of the Soviet collapse that serious attention could return to such vague and ill-defined concepts. The realities of the late 20th and early 21st centuries make it clear that a modern Russia cannot return to the systemic and value imperatives of the past, however attractive certain features of those collapsed societies might appear. Much has been made of Putin

[45]VTsIOM. 2014. "Russian World and What It Means." At www.wciom.com/index.php?id=61&uid=1034, accessed May 9, 2016.

[46]E.g., Donbass, Transdniestria, North Kazakhstan, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Serbia, but not Central and Western Ukraine (including Kiev and L'vov) and the Baltics.

[47]Putin has especially stressed love of the motherland, family values, religious values, national interests, and even peace in his second presidency discussions of a Russian national idea. For instance, see his comments to the "Truth and Justice" regional and local media forum, St. Petersburg, 7 April 2016, at President of Russia. 2016. "Truth and Justice regional and local media forum." At http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51685, accessed May 12, 2016.

[48]This potential ethnic-cultural dimension to a Russian national-civilizational idea was arguably the major reason Soviet officials, championing an ideology and system that eschewed nationalism, avoided any such political construction.

team policies said to resurrect certain Soviet realities, but Putin himself commented, just months into his role as acting president, that however much Russians might pine for the "good ole days of Soviet power," there was no going back:

> Anyone who does not miss the Soviet Union, does not have a heart. Anyone who wants the Soviet Union back, does not have a brain. [Radio interview, February 2000]

The relationship between past historical experiences, the ruminations of intellectuals, public preferences, and Putin's own thinking, is complicated and not prone to easy illumination. As already mentioned, we cannot determine whether public preferences have driven Putin's thoughts and actions in crafting a national idea, or vice versa. In all likelihood, Putin and the public have influenced one another. What we can conclude, in identifying the hallmark features of a new post-Soviet Russian national idea, and relating them to public preferences, is that there is a strong positive relationship.

So, decades after the Soviet collapse, what political-institutional, socioeconomic, and security conditions do we find in a Russia governed by the Putin team for more than 15 years? According to that governing team and the Russian populace, much. There is a consolidated and strong state; a state-directed market economy which has successfully raised the standard of living of most citizens; a state-guaranteed welfare system which is increasingly meeting the population's social service needs; and an assertively promoted foreign-security policy which is viewed as better safeguarding Russian interests in Eurasia – and in the broader global system. A review of ROMIR and related public opinion survey results reveals – in the main – correspondingly positive Russian public judgments, albeit with reservations.

Many Russians take the view that their country has its own unique history, traditions, and needs – and survey results suggest that most Russians are comfortable with the political arrangements at the heart of the Putin-crafted national idea. Survey results indicate that most Russians have their own ideas about the political system that should be constructed. A late 2015 Levada Center survey is illustrative. When asked "what kind of democracy Russia needs," 46 percent of respondents said "a completely special kind that is appropriate to Russia's national traditions and unique characteristics." In contrast, only 19 percent said "that in the Soviet Union," and only 16 percent said "that of developed European countries or the U.S."[49] Most Russians, like their hegemonic president, are looking

[49]See Levada Center. 2016. "Democracy in today's Russia." At www.levada.ru/eng/democracy-todays-russia, accessed April 24, 2016; 5% of respondents said "Russia does not need a democracy," while the remaining 15% indicated it was "difficult to say."

inward and to their country's own capabilities and experiences.

When Putin observed in the remark that begins this article that "searching for a national idea... is a useful and interesting pursuit," he further commented that he would not launch into such a discussion that day. Indeed, he did not. However, that discussion is now well underway; Putin himself has launched into it on many occasions, and developments over the decade since that 2007 Federal Assembly Address reveal considerable momentum as the outline of that national idea – and the policies that undergird it – have emerged. Observers will energetically disagree over what the search for a new Russian national idea has yielded to date.[50] But the ROMIR survey results examined here, buttressed by numerous other survey results, suggest that many Russians are – consciously or not – buying into the vision set out by Putin and his team. However one understands the domestic political environment and social conditions within which Russian citizens operate, Russians do express support for Putin, his team, and the Putin team's agenda, and they provide mixed but essentially positive assessments of that team's efforts to date. Only time will tell whether Putin's vision of a Russian national idea will hold firmly, and whether the performance of the Putin team will yield the policy outcomes needed for that new national idea to take root.

[50]See the companion article in this issue of *Demokratizatsiya*, Carolina Vendil Pallin, "Russia's Presidential Domestic Policy Directorate: HQ for Defect-Proofing Russian Politics."