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Identity, Nationalism, and the Limits of Liberalism in Russian Popular Politics

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Recent Russian election campaigns and post-election contestation have been characterized by a pervasive rhetoric of ethnonationalism, anti-migrant xenophobia, and other forms of chauvinism. This appears to mirror the proliferation of xenophobic frames and vocabulary in everyday Russian discourse, both political and non-political. Alongside this development, the ruling elite have successfully mobilized conservative religious and social sentiment in order to marginalize their political opponents. Evidence from surveys conducted by the authors in Moscow and other large cities, however, suggests that xenophobia operates differently from other valence issues, bridging political camps rather than dividing them. The politicization of xenophobia, then, risks becoming a competition not between chauvinism and cosmopolitanism, but over who can most effectively mobilize nationalist sentiment for electoral gain.

Background

Russia's most important election since the "Bolotnaya" protest wave of 2011-12—the September 2013 Moscow mayoral race, in which nominal opposition leader Alexei Navalny won 27.2 percent to incumbent Sergei Sobyanin's 51.4 percent—was dominated by chauvinist rhetoric. With only one exception (Communist Ivan Melnikov), all of the candidates rallied anti-immigrant sentiment, calling for "guest workers" from Central Asia and internal migrants from the North Caucasus to be either deported or strictly regulated, while Sobyanin's administration rounded up, interned, and expelled thousands of alleged illegal immigrants. More broadly, xenophobic and anti-migrant sentiment has emerged as a prominent part of Russian social and political life, with symptoms ranging from riots in Moscow and other cities to the increasing popularity of provocative websites like sputnikpogrom.com.

Simultaneously, the Kremlin has been seen to use a variety of other issues—including religious identification, homophobic sentiment, and other self-styled "traditionalist" touch points—to rally a conservative constituency to the side of a regime confronted for the first time by a concerted liberalizing movement with a broadly Westernizing "cosmopolitan" agenda. Thus, as a bulwark against the challenge posed by the "creative classes" (though this is a gross oversimplification of the protest movement), symbolized most vividly by the "Punk Prayer" of Pussy Riot and the media-savvy "hipsters" of Moscow's café culture, the Kremlin mobilized support for two laws, one imposing fines for offending religious sentiment and another threatening imprisonment for spreading homosexual "propaganda" among minors. In so doing, it sought to portray itself as a protector of traditional Russian and Orthodox values against a blasphemous and overly permissive West. These laws have been broadly assumed to function as wedge or valence issues, marginalizing the anti-Putin opposition and re-galvanizing the president's core electorate in the wake of a series of elections that called his legitimacy into question.

The question remains, however, of whether ethnonationalism and Russian chauvinism are being manufactured by the Kremlin as a divisive wedge issue, alongside Orthodox religious and homophobic sentiment, or whether the rise of nationalism is a more elemental (and less controlled) phenomenon. The answer to this question has important implications for those seeking to understand Russia's political future. If the former is true, if nationalism is being used instrumentally by the regime (as well as by many of its opponents), that suggests a deliberately pernicious policy course that can, nonetheless, be rejected, should politicians so choose. But if the latter is true, if a nationalist groundswell is forcing Russian politicians to react, the problem may turn out to be much more difficult to resolve. There are no data available that could answer this question definitively, but the evidence presented below seems to suggest that the latter is a more credible depiction of reality.

Research

The data presented in this memo are drawn from a survey conducted in October 2013, one month after the Moscow mayoral elections, in the capital and other Russian cities with at least 1 million inhabitants.[1] Rather than seeking a representative sample, the survey sought out respondents between the ages of 16 and 65, with higher education, middle- and upper-income consumption habits, and access to the Internet, in order to maximize the number of respondents who might be characterized as socially and politically active. While not presenting a picture of public opinion in the country as a whole, the survey was designed to elucidate the factors affecting the attitudes and

[1] Moscow, St. Petersburg, Novosibirsk, Ekaterinburg, Nizhny Novgorod, Samara, Kazan, Omsk, Chelyabinsk, Rostov-on-Don, Volgograd, Perm, Krasnoyarsk, and Voronezh.

behaviors of those Russian citizens most likely to oppose the regime.[2] Thus, as shown in **Table 1**, only 48.2 percent of respondents somewhat or fully approve of Putin's activities as president, and only 39.3 percent reported voting for him in the 2012 election.

Table 1: Selected Survey Responses

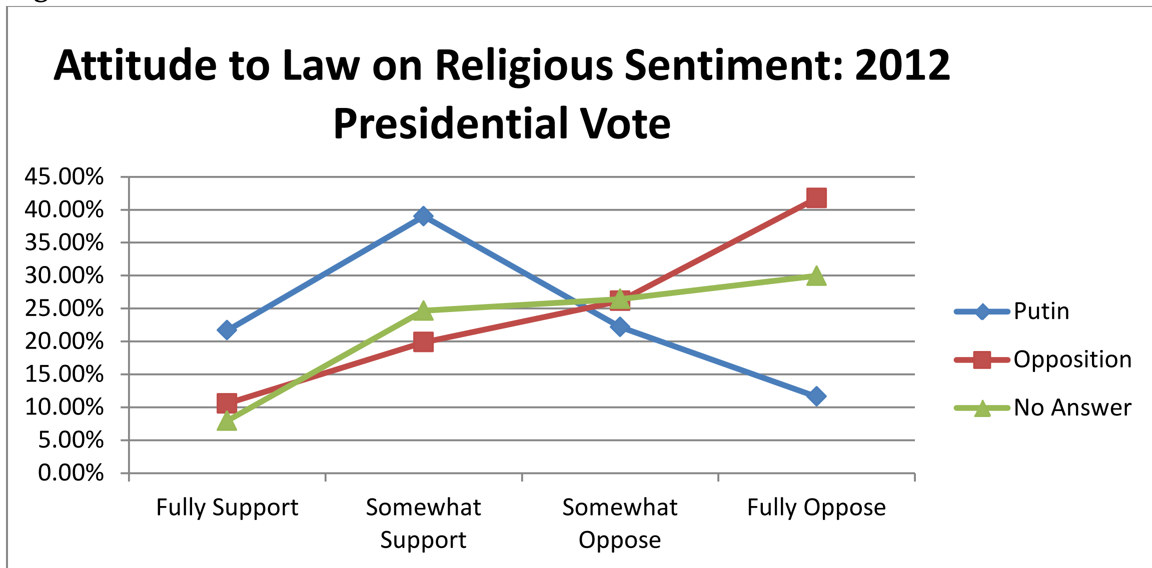
	% of Respondents
National direction	
The country is headed in the right direction	28.5%
The country is headed in the wrong direction	47.8%
Approval of Putin	
Fully disapprove of Putin's activities	14.0%
Somewhat disapprove of Putin's activities	29.0%
Somewhat approve of Putin's activities	40.9%
Fully approve of Putin's activities	7.3%
Media consumption	
Watch federal television channels for news daily	49.3%
Watch federal television channels for news rarely or never	15.7%
Use Internet for news daily	70.9%
Use online social media for news daily	26.4%
Voting behavior	
Voted for Putin in 2012 presidential election	39.3%
Voted for opposition in 2012 presidential election	43.2%
Would vote for Putin in hypothetical presidential election	28.9%
Would vote for opposition in hypothetical presidential election	40.8%

Divergent & Convergent Opinions

The data clearly indicate that at least among our respondents—those Russian citizens most likely to oppose Putin—religion and homosexuality clearly function as wedge issues. Thus, 41.7 percent of those who said they voted for someone other than Putin in 2012 fully opposed the law on defending religious sentiment, compared to 11.6 percent of those who reported voting for Putin (see **Figure 1**).

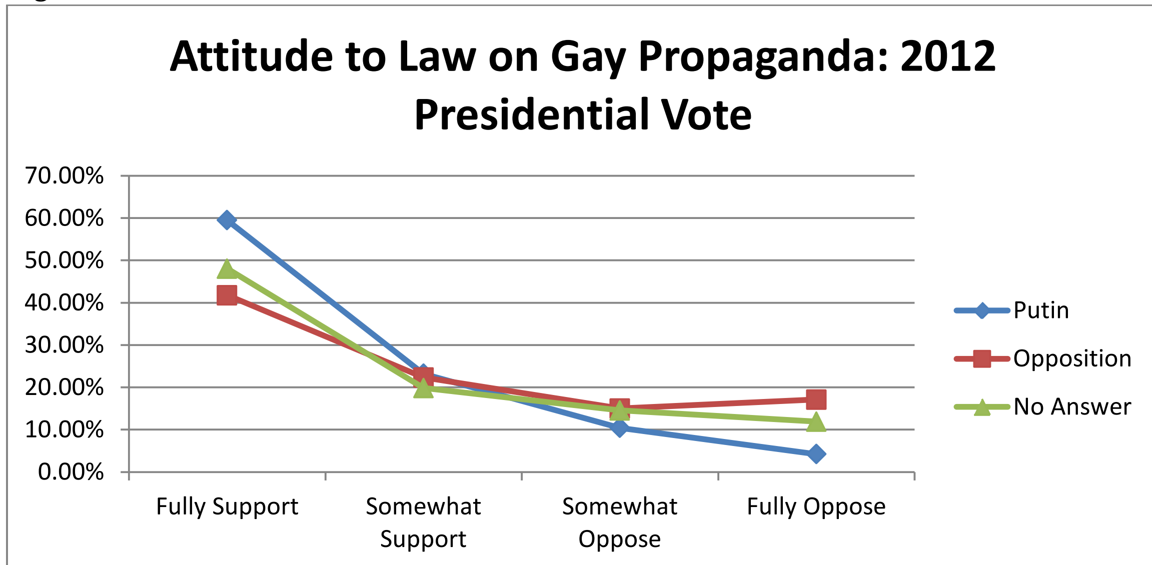
[2] For a fuller description of the data and the project, see http://protestinrussia.org/data/ and http://www.protestinrussia.org. Support for the project was provided by the Smith Richardson Foundation.

Figure 1.



Similarly, while overall levels of support for the law on homosexual "propaganda" are higher, they are markedly lower among non-Putin voters, with 48 percent expressing full support, versus 59.5 percent of Putin supporters, and 17.1 percent of opposition voters fully opposing the law, versus 4.2 percent of Putin's voters (see **Figure 2**).

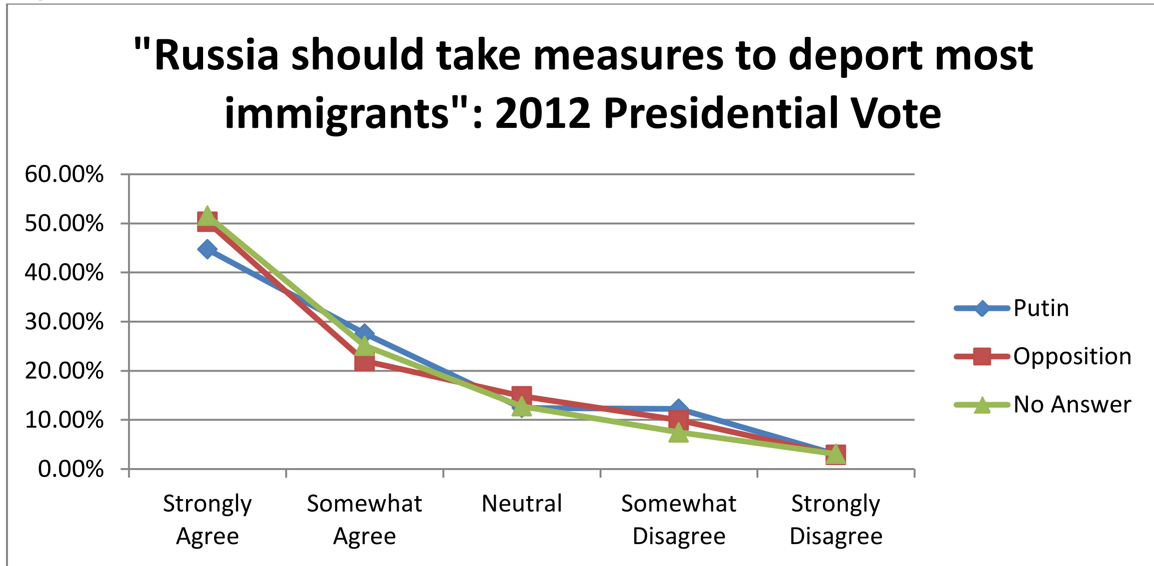
Figure 2.



On the question of whether Russia should "take measures to deport most immigrants," however, there was no such difference of opinion. The gap between pro- and anti-Putin voters was only 7 percentage points among those who strongly agreed with the statement, and it was nonexistent among the relatively few who strongly disagreed with it (see **Figure 3**). (It is worth noting here that opposition supporters were more likely to

want to see immigrants deported than were pro-Putin voters, a point we will return to later.)

Figure 3.



Similarly, the sentiment curves for Putin and anti-Putin voters on the question of identification with the Russian "nation" were almost identical, unlike the curves for levels of identification with Russian Orthodoxy and with the Russian government, where there were marked differences (see **Figures 4, 5** and **6**).

Figure 4.

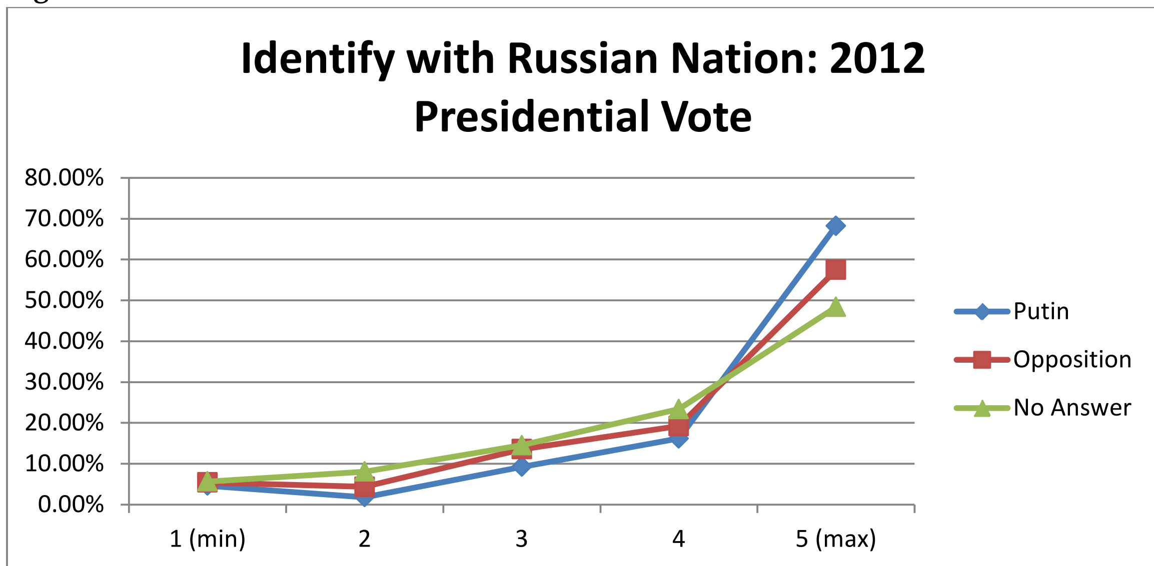


Figure 5.

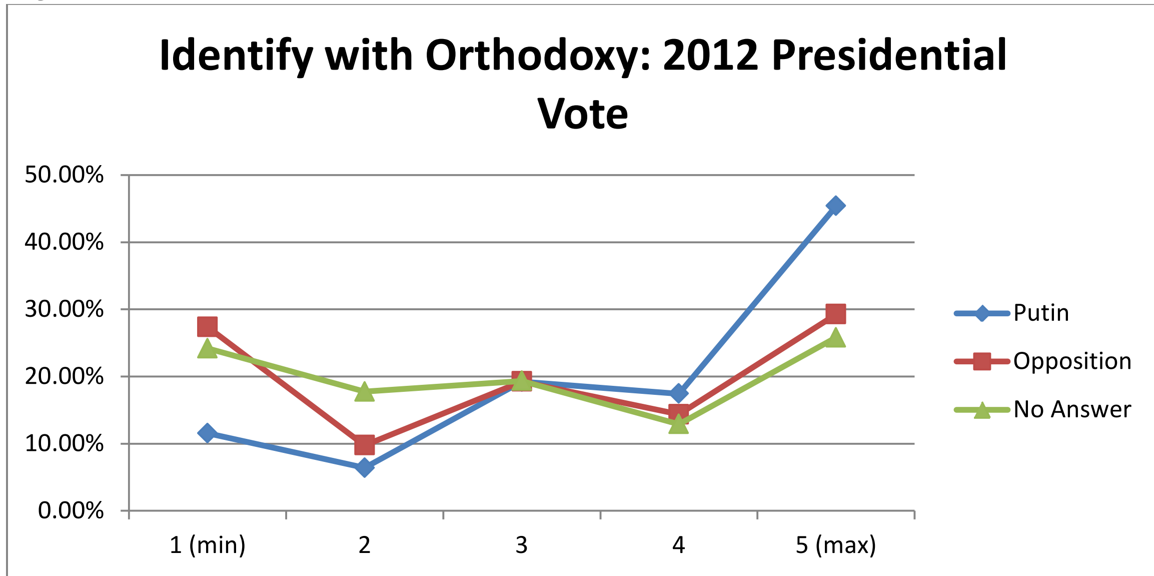
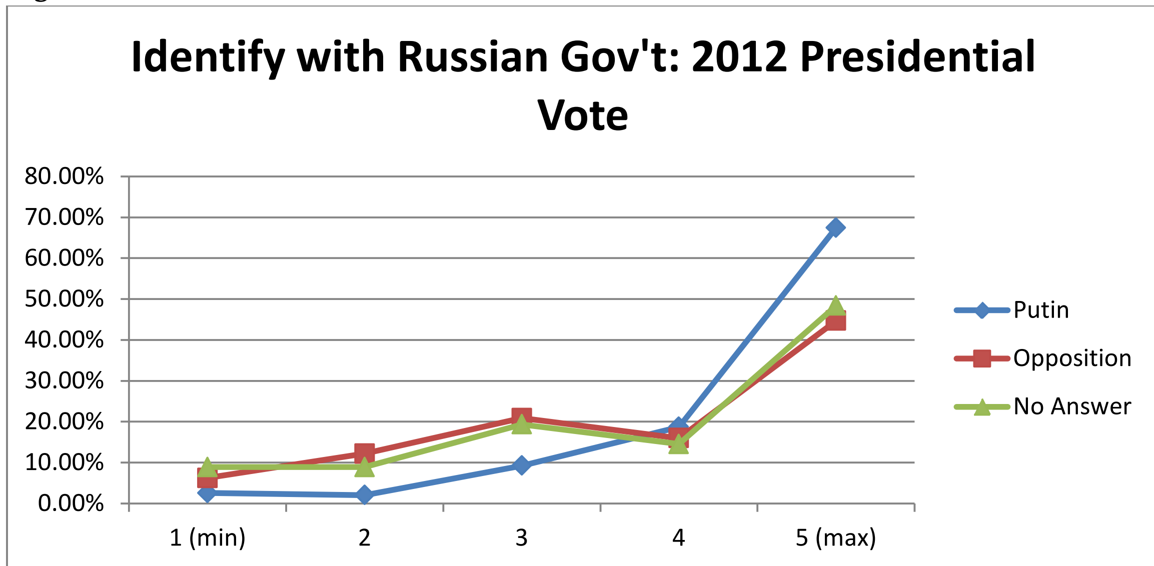


Figure 6.



Thus, we see a clear divergence of opinion along well-defined political lines on issues of religion, the rights of sexual minorities, and self-identification with the government. We see no such divergence, however, regarding attitudes toward migrants and national identity. This, then, provides an initial suggestion that nationalism and xenophobia are not acting as wedge issues in the same way as the other issues used by the Kremlin in its ideational confrontation with the opposition. Nonetheless, the fact that nationalism and xenophobia are not as divisive as the functional wedge issues does not mean that they aren't powerful mobilizational (or de-mobilizational) tools for the regime. To help gauge that, an additional approach to the data is required, which takes account of the ways in which the Kremlin's messages are transmitted and received.

Media Consumption & Message Reception

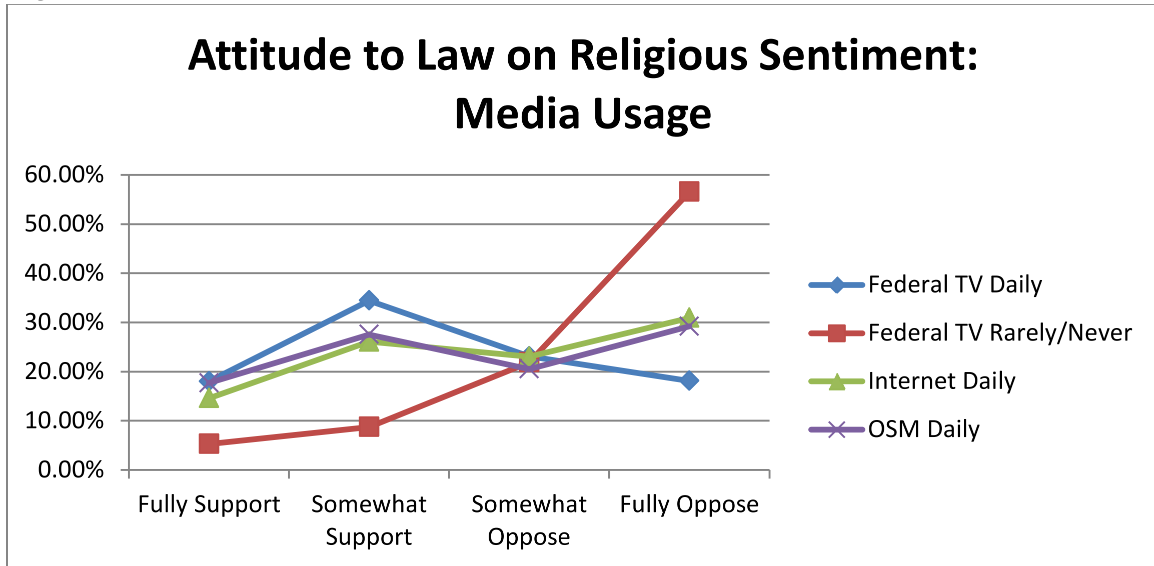
The Kremlin's mobilizational issue campaigns were not, of course, waged solely in the halls of the Russian parliament. The laws on religious sentiment and homosexual "propaganda" became "pegs" on which to hang news coverage and a wide range of public debates, which were played out across television, the Internet, and other media outlets. For the Kremlin's messages to have an impact, then, they had to be transmitted, received, processed, and assimilated. Given what we know from other research about the role of the Internet in the 2011-12 protest wave, in which online news sources and social networking sites were key aggregators and distributors of protest-related information and provided platforms for coordination, we might assume to find a significant difference between the attitude patterns of those who consume significant amounts of television news versus those who consume significant amounts of news on the Internet.[3]

The data, however, suggest a somewhat different picture, in which the key divide is not between television watchers and Internet users, but between those who do and do not watch television. (A similar conclusion was reached in related research by Robertson on volunteer election monitors.) While the entirety of our sample is online (and so differs somewhat from the Russian population as a whole), there is significant variation in news media consumption patterns. Thus, in keeping with our methodology, 70.9 percent of our respondents reported using the Internet for news on a daily basis, although only 26.4 percent said they used online social media to gather news on a daily basis (see **Table 1**). Moreover, 49.3 percent reported watching the three main (state-controlled) television channels for news on a daily basis, while 15.7 percent reported watching those channels for news rarely or never. Thus, a significant portion of the Internet news audience consumes television news in large quantities, as well. (It should be noted that not all of the categories are not mutually exclusive: some respondents turn both to the Internet and to federal television on a daily basis, for example; by contrast watching federal television daily and watching it rarely or never are mutually exclusive.)

Looking to our survey responses, we find that only 18.1 percent of regular television watchers fully opposed the law on religious sentiment, versus 30.9 percent of Internet users and fully 56.6 percent of those who rarely or never watch television news (see **Figure 7**).

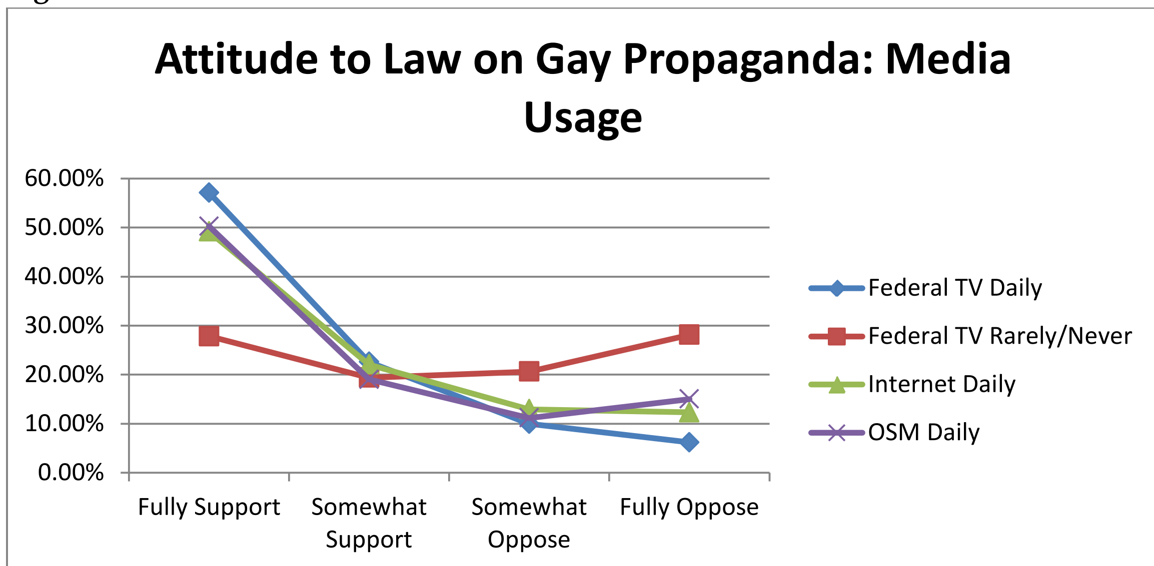
[3] See: Sarah Oates, *Revolution Stalled* (Oxford University Press), 2013; Samuel Greene, "Beyond Bolotnaya: Bridging Old and New in Russia's Election Protest Movement," *Problems of Post-Communism* 60 (2), 2013.

Figure 7.



Similarly, 57.1 percent of television watchers fully support the law on homosexual propaganda, as do 49.2 percent of Internet users. In contrast, only 27.8 percent of non-viewers do (see **Figure 8**).

Figure 8.



The same divergent patterns hold for self-identification with Orthodoxy and the Russian government (see **Figures 9** and **10**).

Figure 9.

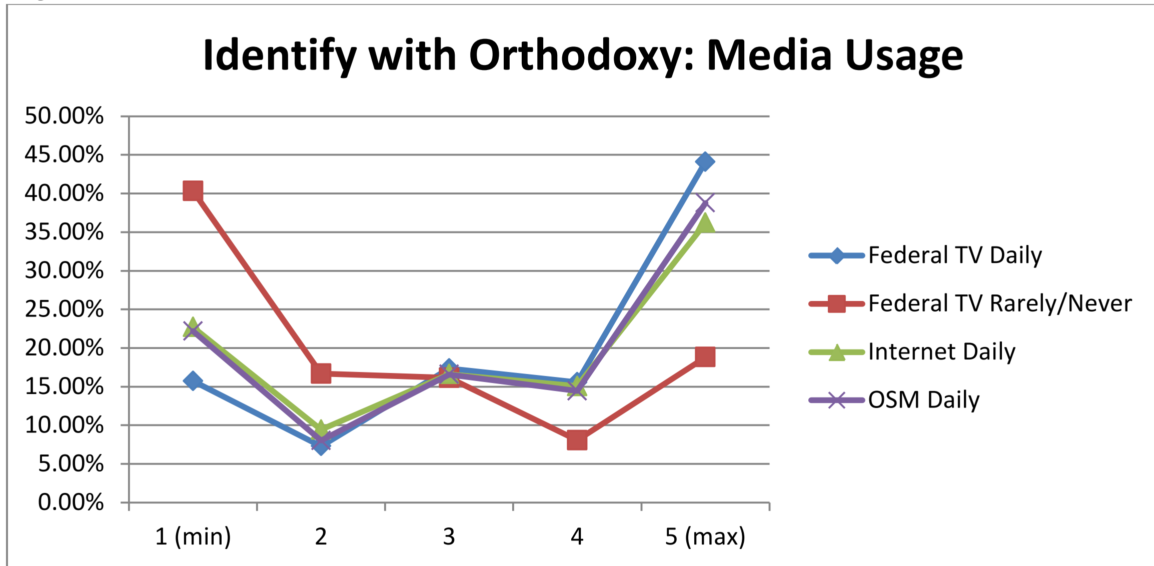
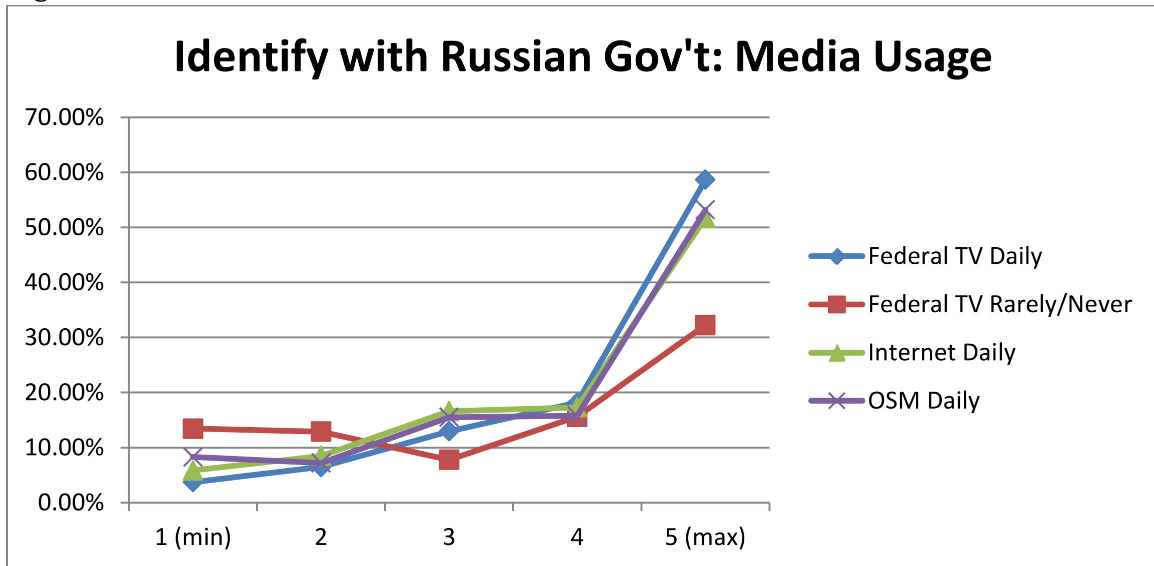


Figure 10.



The media-driven divergence of opinion patterns is much weaker, however, for the questions on xenophobia and national identity, where the curves for television viewers and non-viewers, as well as for Internet users, are all broadly in line (see **Figures 11** and **12**).

Figure 11.

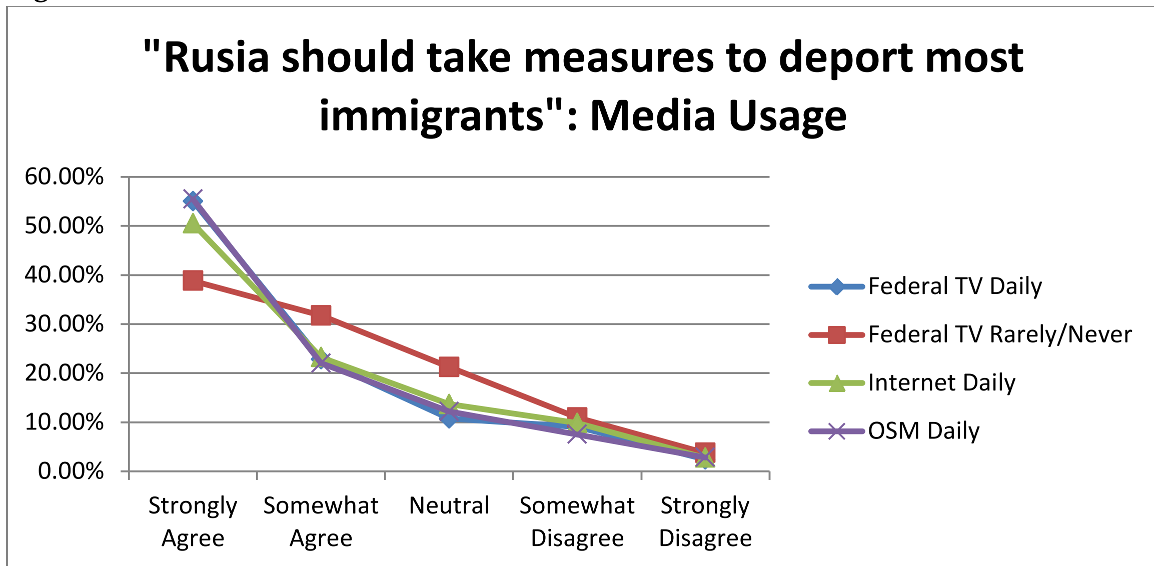
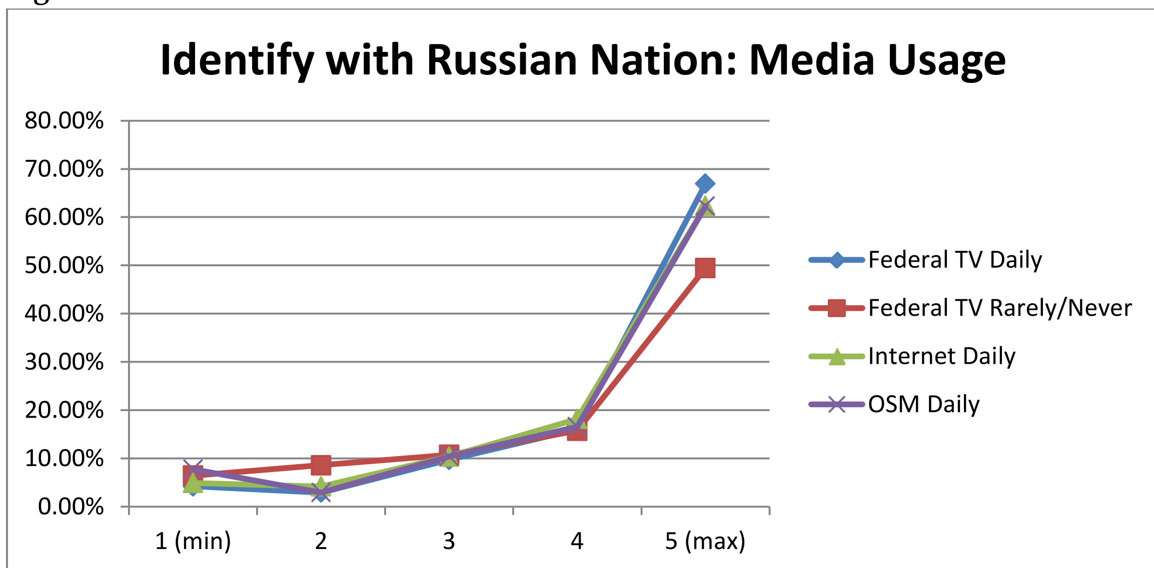


Figure 12.



There does appear to be some difference at the extremities. Thus, 55 percent of daily television news viewers reported strong agreement that Russia should "take measures to deport most immigrants," versus 38.8 percent of non-viewers. But these differences are not nearly as pronounced as they are for the wedge issues above.

Despite the rapid rise of the Internet in Russia—a rise that has demonstrably contributed to the organization and sustainability of protest movements and political opposition—television appears to remain the dominant medium both for news and political messaging. Even within a cohort that systematically captures an unusually high degree of anti-regime sentiment, the difference of opinion patterns between television news

viewers and non-viewers is striking. Moreover, the fact that Internet news consumers' opinion patterns closely track those of television viewers even among those most likely to oppose the regime suggests that the salient factor is not whether or not one uses the freer media space of the Internet, but whether or not one is willing to turn off the television set. The government's effective monopoly over the three "federal" (nationwide) channels provides for a uniformity of message that evidently functions as a limiting factor for news consumers' processing and interpretation of news coming from other sources.

Conclusions

The Kremlin's ability to use the politics of identity and traditional values to rally support and marginalize opponents—a tried-and-true electoral tactic by no means unique to Russia or even to authoritarian leaders at large—is evident, as are the increasingly ideological divisions that are emerging between Putin's supporters and his (still numerically few) opponents. This is most obvious in the case of certain wedge issues, including religion and homosexuality, where the political watersheds are clearly defined.

But while Kremlin-led political messaging, delivered predominantly via television (alongside other media), can be seen to have a powerful impact on how these dividing lines are constructed and actuated, its impact on xenophobic and anti-migrant sentiment is less evident. The question of how to treat Russia's internal and external labor migrants does not appear to divide even socially and politically active Russian citizens along political lines. Moreover, media consumption habits do not correspond with pronounced differences in these Russian citizens' feelings toward migrants and national identity. The latter observation suggests more scope for the government to manipulate homophobic and religious sentiment than nationalist and anti-migrant sentiment.

If anything, the data suggest that Putin's supporters among our respondents are actually somewhat more tolerant of minorities and migrants than his opponents. This may mirror some of the public stances Putin has taken, such as his refusal to endorse visa requirements for Central Asians. But it may also reflect a recognition on the part of the Kremlin of the dangers of ethnonationalist mobilization: if the regime decides to frame its mobilization in the language of chauvinism, it risks the emergence of an opponent who has a stronger command of that particular language, and who is not bound by the demands of pragmatic policymaking.

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