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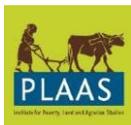
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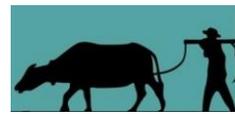
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# Understanding the silent majority in authoritarian populism: What can we learn from popular support for Putin in rural Russia?

Natalia Mamonova

## Abstract

*In this paper, I distinguish and challenge three main assumptions/shortcomings regarding the silent majority - the majority of the 'ordinary', 'simple', 'little' people, who are usually the main supporters of authoritarian populism. The silent majority is commonly portrayed as (1) 'irrational', 'politically short-sighted' people, who vote against self-interests; (2) it is analysed as a homogeneous group, without attempting to distinguish different motives and interests among its members; (3) the existing analysis often overlooks the political economy and structures of domination that gave rise to authoritarian populism. I address these shortcomings while analysing the political behaviour of rural Russians, who are the major supporters of Vladimir Putin. In so doing, I reveal that the agrarian property regime and power relations in the countryside largely define the political posture of different rural groups. Less secure socio-economic strata respond more strongly to economic incentives, while better-off villagers are more likely to support the ideological appeals of the regime. Furthermore, Putin's traditionalist authoritarian leadership style appeals to the archetypal base of the rural society – namely, its peasant roots – and, therefore, finds stronger support among the farming population. Finally, this study reveals that collective interests prevail over individual interests in the voting behaviour of rural dwellers, who support the existing regime despite the economic hardship it imposes upon them.*

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## 1 Introduction

Authoritarian populism has been spreading across the world. Its main features are a coercive, disciplinary state, a rhetoric of national interests, populist unity between ‘the people’ and an authoritarian leader, nostalgia for ‘past glories’ and confrontations with ‘Others’ at home and/or abroad. The rise of authoritarian populism is primarily linked to the recent political events, such as Donald Trump’s election, Brexit, and the entry of right-wing political parties into many European parliaments. Meanwhile, in Russia, a similar type of governance has existed for quite some time. There are ongoing debates on whether Vladimir Putin’s rule can be characterised as authoritarian populism (Oliker 2017, Muravyeva 2017, Yudin and Matveyev 2017). However, regardless of their position, all scholars agree that Putinism and populism have much in common and that Putin’s governance and popularity are ‘admired by populist leaders as well as right-wing extremists’ (Oliker 2017, p.19). In this study, I do not take sides in the debates on authoritarian populism in Russia, but rather look for explanations for the popular support of its main features: authoritarian leadership, a strong state, nostalgia for ‘past glories’, and ‘us’ versus ‘them’ discourses.

The supporters of authoritarian populism are often referred as the ‘silent majority’<sup>1</sup> – the majority of the ‘ordinary’, ‘simple’, ‘little’ people, whose interests are often overlooked in favour of the ‘vocal minority’ of the economic and political establishment (Lassiter 2011). The rise of authoritarian populism indicates the crisis of liberal democracy, when the silent majority is willing to give up some democratic freedoms and supports an authoritarian leader who claims to ‘take back control’ in favour of the ordinary people and return ‘the national glory’ that was presumably lost due to the activities of the ‘Others’. The supporters of authoritarian populism are commonly portrayed as ‘naive people’ or ‘blind crowds’, who vote against self-interests as they are not sophisticated enough to resist the propaganda they encounter (Rancière 2013, Inglehart and Norris 2016).

In this study, I look beyond the common assumptions about popular support for authoritarian populism. In particular, I distinguish and challenge the three following shortcomings in the contemporary debates on the silent majority: (1) the popular support for authoritarian populism is commonly portrayed as irrational and against self-interests; (2) the silent majority is discussed as a homogeneous group, and there is no attempt to distinguish different motives and interests within that group; (3) debates on authoritarian populism often overlook the political economy and structures of domination that triggered/provided the ground for the emergence of this political movement.

I investigate social, economic and political factors that influence rural Russians’ support for the authoritarian regime of Vladimir Putin. Rural dwellers are the key political actors in Putin’s Russia: their electoral support and relatively high turnout at presidential, parliamentary and regional elections<sup>2</sup> have contributed to the regime’s durability for nearly 18 years (Zubov 2017, Mamonova 2016a, Vasilyeva 2015). However, their political views and preferences are largely overlooked in Russian studies literature<sup>3</sup>, which portrays them as politically silent, conservative, reluctant to engage in open contestations, and having no influence on the ongoing political processes (see Granberg and Satre 2017 on the ‘othering’ of rural Russians).

This study brings the ordinary rural Russians in the spotlight and sees them not as passive victims of propaganda, but as citizens who have their own reasons to support Putin’s authoritarian governance. Here, I follow Taylor’s (1998) argument that ‘any regime reflects the needs of the society under which it had originated’ (Taylor 1998 p.223). By understanding the reasons behind the popular support for Putin’s governance, we can better understand the Russian regime and its durability. In addition, this study contributes to the emerging literature on authoritarian populism and the rural world. In their framing paper, Scoones et al (2017) called for research to ‘understand, but not judge, the social base,

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<sup>1</sup> The term is borrowed from Richard Nixon’s populist approach during the Vietnam War.

<sup>2</sup> The turnout is significantly higher for presidential elections than for regional and parliamentary elections.

<sup>3</sup> With some exceptions such as Mamonova 2016a,b, Mamonova and Visser 2014.

and its class, gender, ethnic and cultural-religious dimensions, which gives rise to regressive and exclusionary, sometimes violent, political movements' (Scoones et al. 2017, p.3).

The present analysis is based on my primary qualitative data, obtained during fieldwork in several villages in the Moscow region during August and November 2017, and public opinion survey data, conducted by Levada-Center during November-December 2017. The primary qualitative data was collected for the purposes of this study and focused on motives, incentives and underlying processes of rural support for authoritarian populism. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with various rural dwellers: commercial and subsistence farmers, rural workers, farm directors, civil servants, pensioners and other social groups. This data is complemented with additional data from my previous fieldwork in the Moscow, Vladimir and Stavropol regions during 2013-2015. Elements of critical discourse analysis are used to analyse the primary qualitative data.

The public opinion survey data was obtained from a database of Levada-Center – a Russian independent non-governmental polling and sociological research organisation. Levada-Center provided me with a detailed data on public attitudes towards authoritarian leadership in Russia, the populist unity between the president and the ordinary people, the neoimperialist foreign policy, nostalgia for the Soviet past and other features of authoritarian populism. The data (sample size: 1600) contains socio-economic characteristics (*gender, age, occupation, education, income*), and geographical characteristics (urban, rural settlements), which allowed me to distinguish several rural socio-economic groups and analyse their political opinions.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section (section 2) presents the existing theoretical assumptions about popular support to authoritarian populism and discusses their limitations. Section 3 briefly introduces the political situation in Russia and provides the current arguments for and against referring to Putinism as authoritarian populism. Section 4 discusses the relations between the structures of political authority and agrarian property regimes in Russia. Section 5 distinguishes different socio-economic groups in the Russian rural society and explores their political positions regarding various elements of authoritarian populism. Section 6 examines the notion of the 'self' in villagers' self-interests. Finally, section 7 provides a discussion on the rural roots of authoritarian populism and identifies several directions for further investigation.

## **2 Three assumptions/shortcomings in understanding the popular support for authoritarian populism**

Authoritarian populism is not a new phenomenon. This term was developed by Hall (1980, 1985) to explain the policy of Margaret Thatcher that provided a right-wing solution to the economic and political crisis in Britain. It characterises 'a movement towards a dominative and "authoritarian" form of democratic class politics – paradoxically, apparently rooted in the "transformism"<sup>4</sup> of populist discontents' (Hall 1985, p.118). Among the main features of authoritarian populism, Hall distinguished: a strong and interventionist state, a shift towards a 'law-and-order' society, populist unity between people and the power bloc, an embrace of nationalist over sectional interests, and an anti-elite movement. The concept of authoritarian populism was criticised by Jessop et al. (1984) for its ambiguity and problematic coupling of the notions of 'authority' and 'people': 'sometimes its authoritarian, disciplinary, coercive pole is emphasised, sometimes its populist, popular, and consensual pole' (Jessop et al. 1984, p. 35).

However, the very same contradiction between 'authoritarian' and 'populism' makes this concept suitable to explain the current crisis of liberal democracy, when authoritarian leaders find support among the ordinary people – the silent majority – whose interests used to be overlooked in favour of the 'vocal minority' of the economic and political establishment. The authoritarian populist leaders promise to 'bring back control' in favour of 'the people', returning the nation to 'greatness' or 'health'

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<sup>4</sup> Transformism is Gramsci's term for the process when, in order to create or sustain a historic bloc, the dominant class has to make concessions to the subordinate social forces, giving them a material interest in its maintenance.

after real or imagined degeneration attributed to malevolent, racialised and/or unfairly advantaged ‘Others’ at home and/or abroad (Scoones et al. 2017). This political movement favours strong individual leadership over diplomatic negotiations, nationalist interests over cosmopolitanism, protectionism over cooperation across borders, xenophobia over multiculturalism, traditional over progressive values (Inglehart and Norris 2016).

In many countries, authoritarian populism has a strong rural bias (Borras 2018; Scoones et al. 2017; Inglehart and Norris 2016). The rural silent majority is the most dramatically affected by the development of neoliberal capitalism in the countryside. The commoditisation of land and nature, massive resource extraction, multinational corporations’ control over the agrifood system, the dispossession of rural communities from productive resources have caused poverty among many smallholders and farmers, exacerbated socio-economic inequality, and created the ‘relative surplus population’ that spreads across rural, peri-urban and urban areas (Hall, Scoones, and Tsikata 2015; Edelman, Oya, and Borras 2013; Li 2010). Many right-wing populist parties use the ongoing crisis in the countryside to gain popular support among the rural population<sup>5</sup>. In their study of populist parties’ strategies across Europe, Inglehart and Norris (2016) revealed that ‘support for rural interests’ is one of the main goals in the parties’ programmes.

While the supply-side of authoritarian populism (i.e. the strategic appeals of its leaders and the programmes of populist parties) have received considerable public and academic attention (Chacko and Jayasuriya 2017; Inglehart and Norris 2016; Vieten and Poynting 2016), little is known about the demand side of this phenomenon. Below I distinguish the main assumptions/shortcomings in contemporary literature about the popular support for authoritarian populism.

First, *the supporters of authoritarian populism are portrayed as ‘simple’, ‘irrational’ people, who vote against self-interests and are not sophisticated enough to resist the propaganda they encounter*. The ‘apparent irrational support of the working class’ for the authoritarian populism of Margaret Thatcher was mentioned by Jessop et al. (1984, p.35). Recently, Peters (2017, p.1) called the election of Donald Trump ‘against all logic and humanism’. Vladimir Putin’s popularity among ordinary Russians is often attributed to ‘the state propaganda and societal fears and Soviet complexes’ (Amelyushkin 2014). Certainly, the role of propaganda transforms societal attitudes in every country it is applied, but if the ‘propagandistic message does not have an archetypal base [in a society], it is inefficient and most likely will be rejected by the society’ (Valiev 2017).

The difficulty of explaining the popular support for authoritarian populism makes many experts and scholars refer this support as ‘irrational’ or ‘illogical’. At the recent British Psychological Society Lecture, professor Reicher addressed this issue from a political psychology perspective. He argued that the people’s vote for authoritarian populist leaders does not seem ‘irrational’ and ‘against self-interests’ if we understand the nature of the ‘self’ in the self-interests. The self-concept comprises three fundamental components: the individual self, the relational self, and the collective self. The individual self-identity is generated through the feeling of belonging to, and identification with, a particular group or nation; therefore, the interests of the collective (national) self are equally important to individual self-interests. According to rational choice theory, utility pursued in voting decisions corresponds to self-interest. At certain moments of time (usually during crises) people put collective interests above personal interests, and vote as a nation not as individuals. Then, the collective elements of national identity become important parts of an individual’s definition of the self and how he/she views the world and his/her own place in it. Reicher (2017) argued that authoritarian populist leaders are the ‘entrepreneurs of identity’ – they generate popular support by appealing to the people’s ‘endangered’ collective identity, and claim to share and defend this identity. Therefore, in order to explain the popular support for authoritarian populism, we need to understand the nature of the self in the silent majority’s self-interests.

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<sup>5</sup> For example, French far-right presidential contender Marine Le Pen gained the support of many French farmers with her ‘eating French’ campaign, in which she called for more food to be produced and consumed in the country.

Second, *the supporters of authoritarian populism are analysed as a homogeneous group, and there is no attempt to distinguish different motives and interests within it*. When talking about the supporters of authoritarian populism, experts and scholars often use aggregated concepts – such as ‘the ordinary people’, the ‘silent majority’, ‘masses’, ‘crowds’ – that emphasise the homogeneity of its members. This generalisation stems from the fact that authoritarian populism is an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups – ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’ (Mudde 2017).

By adopting the populist discourse about the homogeneous people with common interests, scholars tend to overlook different interests within the silent majority. Thus, in their analysis of 268 populist political parties in 31 European countries, Inglehart and Norris (2016) aimed to reveal whether the societal support for populist movements can be explained by the economic insecurity perspective or by the cultural backlash thesis. The economic insecurity perspective emphasises the consequences of profound changes transforming the workplace and society in post-industrial economies. According to this view, less secure social strata – so-called left-behinds – are heavily affected by economic insecurity and social deprivation and, therefore, are more vulnerable to anti-establishment, nativist, and xenophobic feelings, blaming ‘Others’ for stripping prosperity, job opportunities, and public services from ‘Us’. Meanwhile, the cultural backlash thesis explains popular support for authoritarian populism as a reaction to the progressive cultural change. According to this position, the societal transformation to post-materialist values (primarily, cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism) have triggered a retro backlash, especially among older generations, who ‘feel strangers from predominant values in their own country, left behind by progressive tides of cultural change which they do not share’ (Inglehart and Norris 2016, p.5).

The analysis of Inglehart and Norris (2016) revealed that demographic and social controls suggest that populist support in Europe is generally stronger among the older generation, men, the less educated, the religious, and ethnic majorities. The authors concluded that the cultural backlash thesis is the most suitable to explain the popular support for authoritarian populism. Meanwhile, the results of their empirical analysis in regard to economic parameters were ‘mixed and inconsistent’. Populists do indeed receive great support from less well-off and those who have experienced unemployment. However, in terms of occupational class, populist voting was strongest among the ‘petty bourgeoisie’, not unskilled manual workers. Moreover, populist parties received less support among those whose main source of income came from social welfare benefits (Inglehart and Norris 2016). This contradictions cannot be reconciled if the authors try to apply one theory to explain the motives of the entire group of populist supporters. We need to study the silent majority as a composition of different socio-economic strata with different interests.

This brings us to the third shortcoming in the contemporary debates on authoritarian populism: *the existing analysis often overlooks the political economy and structures of domination that triggered/provided the ground for the emergence of authoritarian populism*. This limitation was already pointed out by Jessop et al. (1984) in their critique of Hall (1980), who focused primarily on ideological and discursive aspects of authoritarian populism.

The classic studies have demonstrated the existence of interrelations between the structures of political authority and agrarian property regimes (Marx and Engels 1967 [1848], Moore 1966, Skocpol 1979, Rueschemeyer et al. 1992). Moore (1966) argued that the preservation of the peasantry leads to an emergence of authoritarian regimes, as the landed class needs a repressive state to help with surplus extraction. Meanwhile, the bourgeoisie is the main agent of democracy, as economic development driven by capitalist interests in competition with each other brings about political freedom and democratisation of the society (Moore 1966). Marxists, on contrary, believed that bourgeois democracy proclaims the rule of the people, but, in fact, only protects the interest of capitalist class (Lenin, Marx).

Rueschemeyer et al. (1992) argued that democratic development in the countryside depends on: the balance of power among different rural classes and class coalitions; benefits and losses that classes

could expect from extensions of political inclusion; and their ability to organise themselves and engage in collective action to defend own interests. According to these authors, ‘independent family farmers in small-holding countries were a pro-democratic force, whereas their posture in countries or areas dominated by large landholdings as more authoritarian. Peasants living on large estates remained by and large unmobilised and thus did not play a role in democratisation. Rural wage workers on plantations did attempt to organize, and where they were not repressed, they joined other working-class organizations in pushing for political inclusion’ (Rueschemeyer et al. 1992 p.247). Therefore, the typical rules in agrarian societies that feature the peasant mode of production have been autocracy and oligarchy (Rueschemeyer et al. 1992). Even today, Kurtz and Barnes (2002) revealed that a larger rural population with peasant-like features correlates with lower levels of democracy.

Thus, in order to explain the emergence of an authoritarian regime that enjoys popular support, we need to understand the agrarian property regime and power relations in the countryside.

### **3 Is there authoritarian populism in Russia?**

A number of analytical discussions on contemporary populist movements include Russia as an example of authoritarian populism (Stroop 2017, Reicher 2017). Some experts even believe that Putin was the first who discovered a breach in the modern liberal democracy and created an authoritarian regime that enjoys popular support by ‘making empty populist promises and using the political short-sightedness and irresponsibility of the ordinary people’ (Yudin and Matveyev 2017).

Putin, indeed, followed the same path as some Western populists – he came to power through elections and then proceeded to centralise. He built a political regime that has a number of authoritarian populist features: strongman authoritarian leadership, coercive disciplinary state power, traditionalist and nationalist (sometimes xenophobic) appeals in domestic and foreign policies, demonstrative attacks on ‘disloyal’ elites, and popular support among ordinary Russians. However, Putin did not come to power in 2000 on a populist platform and his first two presidential terms were based on a programme of economic modernisation and neoliberal development. The beginning of his rule coincided with rising oil prices, which boosted Russia’s economic growth. The global financial crisis that hit the country in 2008 triggered growing dissatisfaction among many Russians who experienced a decline in earnings. People became more critical to systematic corruption and started doubting the government’s ability to manage the economy. The crisis also ‘undercut whatever vestiges of support remained for the neoliberal, globalisation, and pro-Western model of economic development’ (Chaisty and Whitefield 2015, p.167).

In response to the growing social discontent, Putin’s third presidential term (from 2012 onwards) involved more direct engagement with nationalist issues, and took ‘a conservative direction, with greater prominence given to themes of order and the need to protect the state’ (Chaisty and Whitefield 2015, p.169). Putin has used the Tsarist and Soviet legacies in order to develop patriotism and a unified sense of Russian identity and to create positive historical parallels to justify the state’s policy toward internal opposition and external enemies (Mamonova 2016a, p.326). The idea of a strong – nearly sovereign – leader, who has the power to intervene in any political process and decision making, is often portrayed by the state-controlled mass media as the only efficient way to rule the country. Furthermore, the Orthodox Church gained an important role in constructing a unifying ideology and loyalty to the country’s authoritarian leadership.

In one of my studies, I argued that Putin’s governance (re-)established naive monarchist principles in the state-society relations: the president plays the role of an intercessor and benefactor for the ordinary people, while all problems are blamed on ‘disloyal’ and ‘evil’ elites, who deliberately misrepresent and misinform the president. Indeed, Putin regularly demonstrates his benevolence and closeness to ordinary Russians (i.e. his shirtless pictures on fishing trips, staged meetings with provincial residents, the annual TV question-and-answer session ‘Hotline with the President’, etc.). From time to time, Putin demonstratively punishes ‘disloyal’ elites to maintain his image of the ‘just and impartial ruler’. However, the business elites are the backbone of Putin’s regime and his demonstrative punishments

are aimed at maintaining the elites' loyalty and satisfying anti-elite sentiments of ordinary Russians (Mamonova 2016a).

The ambiguous relations between Putin and elites are one of the reasons against calling the Russian regime 'populism' (Oiker 2017, Yudin and Matveyev 2017). Oiker (2017, p.16) argued that 'anti-elite and anti-corruption campaigns, and popular feeling, are fundamentally different in Russia, where corruption is simply more accepted as part and parcel of the system, than in Europe'. Another reason against Russian populism is the depoliticisation of ordinary Russians. According to Yudin and Matveyev (2017), while populist leaders in other countries are aimed at mobilising and politicising their supporters, Putinism is based on the demobilisation and depoliticisation of the Russian population. The regime endorses peoples' 'non-interference in the affairs of those who are above'. However, Muravyeva (2017) argued that 'parapolitics' and 'depoliticisation' are the features of populism 'a-la-Rus'. This form of populism would be one where corruption of authorities is much more tolerated and where in addition to the population's depoliticisation, any political affair is also depoliticised and presented solely as an economic, technical issue (e.g. the protectionist food policy is presented as an economic measure and anti-LGBT policy as demographic revival).

The present paper does not take sides in the debates on Russian populism but rather aims to examine why rural dwellers support the following features of the regime: authoritarian leadership, a strong state, populist unity between the people and the president, nostalgia for past glories and confrontation with 'Others'. There is a strong rural bias in the popular support for the authoritarian rule of Putin. Table 1 displays selected results from public opinion surveys, categorised by type of settlement. It demonstrates that rural dwellers are the major supporters of Putin's regime: 70% of Russian villagers have a strong positive attitude towards the president, which is 6% above the national average. Likewise, rural Russians are those who most believe that their country needs strong authoritarian governance, but also those who support Putin's neoimperialist foreign policy the least (an issue which will be discussed later). They also score high for appreciating the populist image of Putin as a 'real muzhik' (real man – man of the people) and believe that the president represents the interests of ordinary Russians.

Table 1. Rural dimension of popular support for Putin's governance<sup>6</sup>

	Moscow	Large cities (> 500K people)	Medium cities (100-500K people)	Small towns (< 100K people)	Rural settlements	Total
Support/Positive attitude to V. Putin	60%	62%	65%	63%	70%	64%
Belief that Russia needs strong authoritarian governance	18%	41%	37%	43%	45%	40%
Regret about the USSR's collapse	61%	55%	54%	60%	61%	58%
Support for Putin's neoimperialist foreign policy (protection from the West, return of global respect)	18,8%	20%	18,3%	18,2%	14%	17,7%
Appreciation for the charismatic features of V. Putin, the 'real muzhik' (man of the ordinary people)	23,3%	17%	19%	17,9%	18%	18,5%
Belief that V. Putin represents the interests of <i>ordinary</i> Russians	11,6%	18%	18,6%	14,4%	18%	16,1%

<sup>6</sup> All but the first row in the table is based on Levada-Center data, collected during November – December 2017; data for the first row, 'Support/Positive attitude to V. Putin', was taken from the Public Opinion Foundation (2017) report.

Rural dwellers constitute nearly 30% of the total population (Rosstat 2017). Moreover, many residents of small towns and town-like settlements are not very different from rural dwellers ‘in terms of lifestyle, consumption pattern, and socio-political orientations and beliefs’. Together with villagers, they represent more than 50% of the population (Gudkov and Dubin 2002, p.1). This largely conservative social array ‘has a decisive influence on the course of changes in the country’ (Gudkov and Dubin 2002, p.1).

#### **4 Agrarian structure and the lack of pro-democratic rural forces**

In order to understand the popularity of Putin’s governance in rural areas, it is important to, first, understand the socio-economic structure of the contemporary rural society. Here, I follow Rueschemeyer et al. (1992), who argued that different rural classes exhibit different political tendencies in the struggle for democracy. The political posture of class actors depends on: the balance of power among different rural classes; benefits and losses that classes could expect from extensions of political inclusion; and their ability to organise themselves and engage in collective action to defend own interests. According to this position, peasants are least prone to democratic movements, as their dependence on subsistence farming makes them resilient to economic shocks and, therefore, less interested in political inclusion. Rural proletariats are relatively pro-democratic if they are able to mobilise themselves and join other working-class organisations in pushing for democratic governance. The most pro-democratic force is the group of individual family farmers in small-holding countries, as their economic activities require free competition that, in its turn, requires democratic government. Meanwhile, large agrohholdings would require a repressive state to help with surplus extraction. Certainly, the class structure is not so definite in contemporary Russia; however, this approach provides an explanation for the general tendencies of different rural groups towards or against democracy.

In the Soviet period, all farmland and productive resources belonged to collective and state farm enterprises (kolkhozy and sovkhozy), where the majority of rural population were employed. However, rural dwellers were not absolute proletarians: in addition to their wage-work, they conducted subsidiary farming on their household plots of 0.2 ha on average, which they were allowed to own since the late 1930s. This highly productive food production was ‘outside the state planning and procurement system’ (Wegren 2005, p.8) and preserved a number of peasant features (see Humphrey 2002 on ‘Soviet peasant’). The private subsidiary farming was seen by some experts as an indication that – once Soviet-era restrictions on private production would be lifted – rural dwellers would establish commercial family farms.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the new Russian government initiated land reform measures aimed at distributing kolkhozy’s and sovkhozy’s land to rural dwellers by means of land share certificates for private farming. However, due to the absence of financial resources and informational support, fragmented and often non-functioning markets, and the rural dwellers’ unwillingness to leave the collectives, the majority of land recipients did not become farmers (Pallot and Nefedova 2007). The restructured kolkhozy and sovkhozy experienced severe financial difficulties in free market conditions, and, as result, many villagers lost their jobs. The transition period of the 1990s was characterised by economic and political instability, deep rural poverty, and high unemployment. Many rural residents, especially young people, ‘voted with their feet’ and moved to cities. Those who remained in the villages became highly dependent on subsistence farming on their household plots.

Putin’s rise to power in the year 2000 has changed the direction of the agricultural reform: the previous state programmes of private farming development were curtailed, and the main state support was directed towards the reestablishment of large-scale industrial agriculture, albeit in neoliberal guise. Land sales were legalised in 2002, which brought oligarchic capital to the countryside. Russian oligarchs and foreign investors bought (or rented) land shares from the rural population and established modern agricultural enterprises. In his analysis of the land reform, Wegren (2009, p. 143)

wrote: ‘Russia’s land reform did not deliver on early intentions in that large farms continue to use most of Russia’s agricultural land. Individuals have not become “masters of the land”. The former large collective farms were transformed into even larger agricultural enterprises, while the majority of the rural population continue being dependent on semi-subsistent farming at their household plots.

Today large industrial farms control 80% of Russian farmland and contribute to 52% of the gross agricultural output. Meanwhile, rural households grow staple food for personal consumption and occasional sales at local markets. They produce 35% of the total food in Russia by cultivating only 8% of the country’s farmland. Private farming remains underdeveloped with less than 1% of rural dwellers that can officially call themselves family farmers<sup>7</sup> (Rosstat 2017, All-Russian Agricultural Census of 2016).

The underdevelopment of individual family farmers left the Russian countryside without the main actor pushing for democracy (*i.e. liberal democracy* under *capitalist* ideology). Large industrial farms are enjoying state subsidies and patronage, almost as much as their collective predecessors once did. Many former Soviet structures and networks have remained unchanged, which makes the re-emergence of large-scale industrial agriculture to some extent socially accepted. By taking over the collective farmland, new agricultural enterprises have to take over some of the social functions of their predecessors (support to rural areas, productive symbiosis with rural households, employment, albeit at a much smaller scale than it was practiced in the Soviet time). Putin’s policy boosted large-scale agricultural production and thereby, indirectly, increased the living standards of rural residents. However, rural poverty and unemployment remain the key problems of the countryside. The majority of rural dwellers continue practicing peasant-like farming, which is subsistence-oriented, based on family labour and traditional farming methods. Although some principles of market economy have emerged in the countryside, the capitalist development *within* rural communities remains rather insignificant. The state support to large agribusiness and overall corruption significantly limits prospects for small-scale rural entrepreneurship and commercially-oriented individual farming (Mamonova 2016b). Moreover, due to the socialist tradition of industrialised agriculture, post-Soviet rural dwellers regard themselves primarily as workers and not as landowners, and therefore, they do not long for commercial family farming (Petrick et al 2013).

Collective action is very limited in rural Russia. Waylen (2010) argued that the Soviet legacies of state intervention caused the post-Soviet population’s reluctance to undertake organised (formal) initiatives to improve their wellbeing. *Furthermore, the majority of the rural population tend to distrust independent civil organisations and collective initiatives. As a result, there are hardly any civic organisations or social movements that could defend the interests of smallholders and represent them in the political arena* (Mamonova and Visser 2014).

Thus, the largest part of Russian rural society is stuck between socialism and capitalism, and has preserved a number of peasant features in their household farming. In these conditions, the domination of large-scale agriculture, lack of free market competition, and little stimuli for collective action have made villagers seek state patronage instead of political inclusion.

## **5 Explaining Putin’s popularity among different socio-economic groups**

In Table 2, I distinguished different socio-economic groups for the purposes of this study, based on the available data. The division of rural dwellers into small-scale food producers, rural labourers, pensioners, and jobless groups is primarily guided by their self-identification and their degree of dependence on subsidiary farming. However, they all conduct small-scale farming at their household plots and are reported in the Agricultural census as ‘rural households’ (see an elaborate description below Table 2). Rural groups are listed in descending order from the most secure to the least secure socio-economic strata.

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<sup>7</sup> Commercial family farmers produce about 10% of gross domestic agricultural output.

Furthermore, it should be noted that the percentages in the table represent the share of people who support Putin *because of* particular reasons, i.e. his authoritarian leadership, foreign policy, etc. (not just a share of people who support his authoritarian leadership or foreign policy). The same principle is used for the explanation of people's regret about the USSR's collapse. Respondents were allowed to give multiple answers choosing among many options, which resulted in relatively low percentage value. However, I am interested less in the values themselves, and more in the differences between them.

Column A 'Support/Positive attitude to Putin' indicates that the most supportive groups are less secure social strata – pensioners, rural labourers, jobless, small-scale food producers. They were heavily affected by economic insecurity and social deprivation during the post-socialist transition period. Their support can be partly explained by the economic insecurity perspective, as discussed later in this paper. Farm managers and rural specialists also score quite high in their support/positive attitude to Putin – these are the members of rural communities who benefited the most from Putin's regime (I should note that land investors, businessmen and authorities – i.e. the rural establishment – are not discussed here). The commercial family farmers and rural entrepreneurs are least positive about Putin and his authoritarian governance. To some extent, this confirms the previous section's argument that commercial family farmers are the main pro-democratic force. The difference between the answers of various groups is often insignificant (usually just a few percentage points), however, it is still possible to observe variations in the groups' response to the elements of authoritarian populism. Below I explain the reasons behind one answer or another using qualitative interview data.

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Table 2. Various rural groups and their support for different features of authoritarian populism in Russia

Categories:	Support/ Positive attitude towards Putin	Authoritarian governance		Populist unity between the ordinary people and the president		Nostalgia for the 'past glories'		Economic reasons		The benevolent president - evil elites		Regret about the collapse of the USSR	Share in rural population ( <i>approx., author's calculations</i> )
Variables (questions)		Believe that Russia needs authoritarian governance (not Putin <i>per se</i> )	Support Putin as he is a strong (authoritarian) leader	Support Putin as he is a 'real muzhik' (man from the people)	Believe that Putin represents the interests of the 'ordinary people'	Regret the USSR collapse because people lost the feeling of belonging to a 'great global power'	Support Putin because of his foreign policy that returned global respect towards Russia	Regret the destruction of the USSR economic system, and the reorganisation of kolkhozy and sovkhozy	Support Putin as he brought economic stability, improved living standards, ensured pensions are paid on time	Believe that Putin is misinformed about the situation in the country	Support Putin as he is a fair and honest man		
<i>No. of columns</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>H</i>	<i>I</i>	<i>J</i>	<i>K</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>M</i>
<b>Rural groups:</b>													
Farm managers/specialists	62,5%	43,9%	16,0%	18,0%	17,0%	32,7%	16,6%	54,9%	6,6%	41,0%	5,9%	52,6%	1-5%
Commercial family farmers/rural entrepreneurs	55,3%	46,1%	8,0%	14,6%	13,3%	31,0%	12,0%	58,1%	3,1%	35,6%	4,2%	47,3%	0.5-6,3%
Rural labour (main income from wages)	71,3%	37,1%	16,3%	17,7%	16,4%	26,7%	14,0%	60,2%	6,4%	42,0%	12,0%	61,0%	35-40%
Small-scale food producers (main income from farm activities)	67,7%	49,5%	17,3%	19,0%	18,0%	27,6%	13,0%	67,6%	6,0%	39,5%	11,8%	61,0%	40-45%
Pensioners	77,6%	51,8%	11,5%	17,3%	18,4%	32,0%	12,8%	56,0%	6,3%	40,0%	13,0%	87,3%	26%
Jobless	67,0%	45,0%	20,2%	18,5%	17,4%	28,4%	11,8%	55,9%	5,5%	38,5%	8,1%	50,5%	10-15%
<b>Gender:</b>													
Male	60,2%	43,9%	15,0%	19,5%	16,0%	31,0%	14,0%	61,2%	5,1%	41,0%	6,6%	59,9%	46%
Female	78,3%	46,1%	15,0%	16,5%	18,4%	30,5%	14,8%	52,8%	6,6%	41,0%	10,5%	62,1%	54%
<b>Average for rural areas</b>	70%	45%	15%	18%	17%	31%	14%	57%	5,9%	41%	8,6%	61%	
<b>Average for Russia</b>	64%	40%	15,6%	18,5%	16,6%	36%	17,7%	54%	5%	41,5%	7,3%	58%	

This table is largely based on the data from a public opinion survey, conducted by Levada-Center in November-December 2017 (columns B – L). The sample size was 1600, of which 30% were rural residents (the same proportion as in the total Russian population). The survey data was categorized by socio-economic parameters (gender, age, occupation, education, income), and geographical location (urban, rural residence), which allowed me to distinguish 6 rural socio-economic groups (that represent the largest groups in the rural society and are important for my study). I faced a major difficulty in distinguishing the group of 'small-scale food producers' as the survey questionnaire did not contain this category for respondents' self-identification. The closest category was a 'house keeper/housewife'. The categories 'Authoritarian governance', 'Populist unity...', 'Nostalgia for the past glories', 'Economic reasons' and 'The benevolent president - evil elites' combine at least two variables. The variables represent either one of the most popular answers, or most related ones. I do not use negative answers in this analysis (although they were available) in order to focus primarily on the *supporters* of Putin's regime and investigate the reasons for their support.

Column A is calculated based on the data from the report of the Public Opinion Foundation (2017). The Public Opinion Foundation provides the data on the degree of people's positive attitude to Putin, which is distributed by age, education, income (*not* occupation) and rural-urban divide. Here too, I distinguished the same rural socio-economic groups and applied a rural coefficient. Therefore, although the percentages in column A might be not fully accurate, they reflect the general trends and can be used for the purpose of this study. Column M is also very suggestive, as no exact data is available. The share of 'commercial family farmers/rural entrepreneurs' is indicated based on the research of Skalnaya and Burykin (2009), who argued that up to 6.3% of rural households are commercially-oriented, but not all of them are registered as commercial farms. The size of the 'farm managers/specialists' group was calculated based on data from the All-Russian Agricultural Census of 2016. The share of 'rural labour' is calculated based on rural employment rates minus the share of the 'farm managers/specialists' group, corrected according to various scholars' estimations of a real rural employment/unemployment rate in rural Russia. The share of the 'jobless' percentage was calculated accordingly. The share of 'pensioners' was estimated based on the data from Rosstat (2017).

### 5.1 Authoritarian governance and democracy with adjectives

In the early 1990s, many Russians were enthusiastic about democracy and supported democratic reforms hoping that the post-socialist transformation would bring a better life to many. However, the economic and political turmoil of the 1990s disillusioned many Russians with liberal democracy, which became associated with instabilities and uncertainties. Pensioner Vitaly (69), who used to be a combine driver at a former kolkhoz, does not believe in democracy for ordinary people, but describes it as a means of wealth accumulation by elites:

Democracy belongs to those who have large wallets. They have democracy. We do not know what democracy is. Maybe, democracy does not exist at all. There is a ruling elite [that follows the principle]: you give to me – I give to you. That is what they call a democracy<sup>8</sup>.

The negative associations with democracy are shared by 13% of the population, and 24% think that this form of government is not for Russia. They prefer a strong economy over a good democracy. The majority of the population still believes that democracy is needed, but they refer to a unique Russian form of democracy, which is associated with a strong state that takes care of the people, economic stability, law and order, and free elections (called here democracy ‘a-la-Rus’). The interview data indicated that liberal democracy finds its stronger adherents among commercial family farmers, while the majority of rural dwellers are in favour of ‘a-la-Rus’ democracy with its ideas of a strong state. Therefore, Putin’s consolidation of state power is not seen by the majority of rural Russians as contradictory to democracy. Former kolkhoz milkmaid Maria (67) sees the state power centralisation as a positive outcome of Putin’s presidency, supported by the votes of ordinary people:

Maria: I voted for Putin and continue voting for him. Not only me, but many people in the village raise both of their hands for him [note: totally support him].

I: But the centralisation of state power happened during Putin...

Maria: Yes of course! It is right. I think this is very positive. We at least began to live normally. We lived well under Brezhnev and under Putin<sup>9</sup>.

Villagers’ perceptions of elections did not change significantly since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Similarly to the Soviet elections, when all candidates were members of the *Communist Party*, the contemporary regime of Putin eliminates all real political alternatives, but still needs elections to legitimise its power and to create the image of democratic governance. As a result, the majority of rural dwellers see elections more as a symbolic act of expressing loyalty and their approval of Putin’s performance, instead of a democratic choice between different candidates. There is a significant difference in societal attitudes to presidential elections and those for regional/local authorities. If voting in the presidential elections is an expression of loyalty, the regional and local elections are rather seen as a civic duty with no impact on actual politics. Farmer Nikolai (65) has this to say about local elections in his village:

People go to the polls by inertia. It is like as a duty. Elections, elections! You get a postcard. A beautiful postcard! There is a flag painted; they addressed me personally: “Nikolai Alexandrovich, come to the polls”.[...] But my voice defines nothing. They [local authorities] have their own agenda.<sup>10</sup>

The inability of the ordinary people to influence the decision making at local and regional levels creates a desire for a strong and powerful leader who can rein in corrupted authorities and bring order to the country. Nearly a half of rural dwellers believe that Russia needs authoritarian governance (in the original questionnaire, it was formulated as ‘Do you believe that Russia needs a “strong arm”?’ (column B)). Even individual family farmers and rural entrepreneurs, who are the most critical to the

<sup>8</sup> Interview conducted on 09-11-2017 in the Gravornoe village, Istra district, Moscow region.

<sup>9</sup> Interview conducted on 10-11-2017 in the Sumarokovo village, Ruza district, Moscow region.

<sup>10</sup> Interview conducted on 10-11-2017 in the Sumarokovo village, Ruza district, Moscow region.

existing regime, support this idea. Besides the failure of bottom-up democracy, there might also be a rural/peasant dimension in the popular support for authoritarian governance. This interview with small-scale food producer Sergey (61) highlights an interesting comparison between a traditional peasant family and the country's leadership:

Russia – it used to be mostly a peasant country. How is a peasant family organised? There should be a *khozyain*<sup>11</sup> [a good household leader, master]. Otherwise, the household will fall apart. There should be only one bear in a den. And everyone should listen to him. A strongman should lead the family [...] The state is a family but at a large scale<sup>12</sup>.

Therefore, it may not only be a coincidence that traditionalist (patriarchal) ideas about power and domination found particular support among those rural groups who are engaged in individual farming: commercial family farmers, small-scale food producers, jobless, pensioners (although I should note that pensioners' support for authoritarian governance is mainly attributed to their strong nostalgia for the Soviet past). Meanwhile those who have wage jobs (farm managers, specialists and rural labourers) are less supportive to traditionalist ideas about the country's leadership.

### *5.2 Unity between the ordinary people and the president (against the corrupted elites)*

Elections in the countryside are different from urban areas in that rural voters are primarily guided by the candidates' personal characteristics, not by pre-election political campaigns and programmes (Petrov 2013). Indeed, many respondents in this study stressed the importance of Putin's strong and heroic traditional masculinity and his charismatic leadership, but they are not interested in the political programme of his party. The image of Putin as a representative of the ordinary people is highly popular among rural dwellers, especially among less economically secure rural strata (see columns D and E). In the interview for this study, villager Vladimir (58) stresses which of the president's features he appreciates the most:

How nicely he treats the ordinary people! He knows [everything] inside and out. I like him very much. He can answer any question. And he does not look whether you are poor or a millionaire. He talks to everyone<sup>13</sup>.

In his public appearances, Putin shows that he does not only support the ordinary people, he is also one of them - a real '*muzhik*' (a real man, a man of the people). It is interesting to note that the word '*muzhik*' literally means a peasant man in Tsarist Russia. Although the peasant meaning of '*muzhik*' is less common nowadays, Putin's 'real *muzhik*' image is especially popular among small-scale food producers (column D), who also score very high on traditionalist (patriarchal) understandings of power and domination (column B). This might suggest that the popular image of Putin appeals to the archetypal base of the rural society, namely its peasant roots.

Although Russian rural dwellers are not traditional peasants, the Tsarist peasant belief in a just and impartial ruler and evil officials, who deliberately misinform and misrepresent the ruler, is still quite common in the countryside. Column J shows that more than 40% of rural dwellers believe that Putin is misinformed about the situation in the country. The myth of a benevolent president and evil officials is ardently maintained by the regime (mainly through mass media that portrays Putin as fair and just, in contrast to the corrupted authorities) and by the president himself, who acts as a defender and benefactor of the ordinary people when he visits rural regions (Mamonova 2016a). This myth

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<sup>11</sup> The word '*khozyain*' was first mentioned in the *Domostroy* (Domestic Order) – the 16th-century Russian set of household rules, instructions and advice pertaining to various religious, social, domestic, and family matters in the Russian society. According to the *Domostroy*, the main qualities of a good *khozyain* were discernment, knowledge of the practical side of the matter, and concern for the material and especially moral position of subordinates (Pouncey 1994).

<sup>12</sup> Interview conducted on 11-11-2017 in the Sumarokovo village, Ruza district, Moscow region.

<sup>13</sup> Interview conducted on 09-11-2017 in the Gravornoe village, Istra district, Moscow region.

contributes to the regime's stability – all the wrongdoings are blamed on the political and economic elites, while Putin's authority is not challenged. Many of Putin's supporters share this belief. This interview with pensioner Natalia (81) is representative:

Putin is a good man. He increased our pensions... He makes it better for people, but you cannot be a warrior when you are alone in the field. He cannot cover everything. The local authorities are those who do things wrong<sup>14</sup>.

However, in some cases, it is difficult to distinguish whether people faithfully believe in the myth of a benevolent president and evil officials, or intentionally exploit it in their own interests. In my study on naive monarchism and rural resistance in contemporary Russia (Mamonova 2016a), I analysed different types of rural protests in the name of Putin. I revealed that many villagers strategically use this myth in their grievances: they frame their dissents within the official discourse of deference and express their loyalty to the president to shield themselves from repressions. At the same time, they deliberately exploit the gap between the rights promised by the president and the rights delivered by local authorities, demanding that the latter fulfil their obligations. Whether sincere or strategic, these rural politics largely maintain the status quo and the populist image of Putin as a protector of the ordinary people's interests against the interests of corrupted elites.

### 5.3. Economic versus geopolitical reasons

Significantly more Russians support Putin for his foreign policy that 'returned global respect to the country' than for his economic achievements at home (columns G, I). However, if we examine the differences between rural responses and the national average (the two last rows of Table 2), we see that villagers are less excited about Putin's neo-imperialist foreign policy and more positive about his domestic economic achievements. This is not because Putin's domestic policy is more successful in the countryside, on the contrary – poverty in rural areas is twice as high as in urban areas (Bondarenko 2012). However, the point of comparison for many rural residents is the transition period of the 1990s. Lyudmila (54), who works at a large agricultural enterprise, refers to the interruptions in the payment of wages<sup>15</sup> during the 1990s to justify her support for Putin:

As for me, I am for Putin. With him, we started receiving salaries. Before, we worked without salaries. Once, we did not receive salaries for seven months. I remember I did not go to a shop for three months. We planted our household plot with potatoes. That's how we survived. (I: When did the situation begin to change?) With Putin. With him, we started seeing the light<sup>16</sup>.

The economic reasons for popular support have been declining since the economic crisis of 2008; in contrast, Putin's foreign policy enjoys societal support, especially after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Even those who are very sceptical about Putin's regime are positive about his geopolitical achievements. An interview with pensioner Mikhail (69) is representative:

Mikhail: I do not support Putin's domestic policy. I have a pension of 9000 rubbles [*note*: approx. 120 Euros]. Can you survive with this pension?! Luckily, I have a good household with a big glasshouse, I can manage. But what about those who live in urban areas?!

I: What do you think about the foreign policy?

Mikhail: I support it. Although I think Putin should be tougher with these... so to say "foreign friends". We need to implement harder sanctions against them. We should close our borders and work for a domestic market only. So that they would not have access to us. [...]<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> Interview conducted 20-07-2014 in the Rasshevatskaya village, Novoalexandrovsk district, Stavropol Krai.

<sup>15</sup> More than half of the Russian workforce experienced some form of interruption in the payment of wages during 1994-1997.

<sup>16</sup> Interview conducted on 10-11-2017 in the Sumarokovo village, Ruza district, Moscow region.

<sup>17</sup> Interview conducted on 09-11-2017 in the Gravornoe village, Istra district, Moscow region.

Russia's sanctions on food imports from a number of western countries<sup>18</sup> receive quite a high support among rural dwellers (especially among the non-farming population), who welcome the further development of domestic agriculture and food self-sufficiency. There is comparatively little evidence that rural dwellers support Russia's geopolitical conflict with the West because of neo-imperialist sentiments. Column F shows that much less villagers regret about their country's loss of the 'great global power' status after the collapse of the Soviet Union, than the country average. Besides that, the importance of Russia's 'great global power' status declines with a decrease in the respondents' socio-economic security, while the importance of economic reasons increases, respectively (see columns F and H). The interviews for this study revealed that the majority of rural dwellers support Putin not for returning the 'great power' status to their country, but for protecting it from the dangerous 'Others', represented by the western countries. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the harsh transition period are often ascribed to the foreign influence. Villager Sergey (51) blames the United States – Russia's traditional geopolitical adversary – for his country's troubles in the past and today:

All our problems come from Americans. Americans – *they* paid Gorbachev to dissolve the Soviet Union. [...] They ruined us then, and want to ruin us now. They cannot get enough! They need to seize someone, start a war – and our guys resist<sup>19</sup>.

The confrontation with the 'Others' abroad is part of the re-generating Russian national identity, which was in a deep crisis during the transition period (Light 2003). The next section discusses the role of national identity in defining the 'self' in the self-interests of rural voters.

## 6 Against self-interests?

The supporters of authoritarian populism are commonly portrayed as 'naive', 'ignorant' people who vote against self-interests. Certainly, rural Russians are more conservative and less exposed to alternative political views; however, it would be wrong to conclude that rural Russians naively believe in all the myths of Putin's regime. In public discourses, people often blame authorities for economic problems and widespread corruption; however, in more private conversations, some of them also acknowledge the president's responsibility. The following focus group discussion with rural dwellers is indicative. A group of former sovkhos workers have been applying to the court for many years to demand a compensation for their land shares, which they lost during the illegal acquisition and deliberate bankruptcy of their sovkhos. However, they are unable to get a fair resolution:

Woman 1: And who did this? It was during Putin. So, it was his will. The courts are not fools – they fulfilled his order. Putin could not be uninformed about this. I doubt that... Then, there was Medvedev [as the president]. Useless! Now Putin again.

Woman 2: And wherever he speaks, he does not talk about rural areas – nothing. Silence. Like nothing is going on here.

I: For whom will you vote in the next presidential elections?

Woman1: Despite everything – for Putin. He is experienced.

Woman 3: It won't go our way, anyway...

Woman 4: I also voted and continue voting for Putin, although I know that this [corruption and injustice] is the result of his dealings. It is impossible that the *khozyain* does not know what is going on in his country<sup>20</sup>.

This group discussion demonstrates that rural Russians vote for Putin *not because of his domestic policy, but despite it*. What makes the people, who personally suffer from Putin's regime, ignore their individual interests and repeatedly vote for Putin? This can be explained by several factors. First, the

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<sup>18</sup> Russia's food sanctions have been in force since 2014. They were initiated in response to the Western sanctions over Russia's annexation of Crimea and military interventions in Eastern Ukraine.

<sup>19</sup> Interview conducted on 08-11-2017 in the Gravornoe village, Istra district, Moscow region.

<sup>20</sup> Interview conducted 30-05-2013, in the Purschevo village, Balashikha district, Moscow region.

majority of rural dwellers have the so-called ‘underdog’ mentality (see Scott 1990). Rural socio-economic marginalisation has exacerbated the sense of inferiority and pessimistic views of the future among villagers, who found themselves in the bottom ranks of Russian society and have hardly any economic or political power to influence the status quo. The subordinate position of rural dwellers makes them accept the world as it is, with its injustices and inequalities. The phrase ‘It won’t go our way, anyway’ confirms this argument.

Furthermore, the ignorance of individual self-interests in the villagers’ voting behaviour can be attributed to the national identity that requires ‘self-sacrifice’ for the sake of the so-called ‘collective values’ (see Gudkov 2017). Historically, the Russian national identity has developed in an active conflict between the Westernising ideology (characterised by western rationalism, materialism and individualism) and the Slavophile ideology (which stresses Russia’s uniqueness based on autocracy, traditionalism and isolationism). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia went down the Westernising path of development; however the western ideas of private property, market relations, and liberal democracy did not work out for the benefit of all. Putin’s rule is characterised by a shift towards a more traditionalist Slavophil episteme, which took place in the discursive sphere of Russian society (Chebankova 2017). Interestingly, the Slavophil ideology used to consider the Russian peasant commune an uncorrupted representation of an ideal (spiritual) community model, and the autocracy as the most suited form of government to rule over this community. Certainly, the idea of the peasant commune is not directly used in contemporary Russian discourse on the distinctive path of development; however, its traditionalism and nativism might appeal more strongly to the rural communities that still bear some peasant roots.

Besides autocracy and traditionalism, Russia’s collective self-identification also includes the idea of Russia as the ‘great nation’. According to a recent poll of Levada-Center (2017), 64% of respondents are confident that the Russian people are ‘a great nation with a unique/special role in the world’s history’. National greatness is associated within statehood and its glory and, therefore, implies the ignoring of individual rights and interests in the face of national (state) interests (Gudkov 2017). Under this ideology, the Western world is perceived as the dangerous ‘Others’ that block Russia’s path towards becoming a ‘great nation’ with its ‘high-profile place in the world’.

Certainly, Russia’s quest for great-power status in the international arena can be referred as ‘imperial nationalism’ (Arnold 2016). However, for many ordinary Russians, Putin’s foreign policy is more associated with the restoration of justice and the protection of Russia’s sovereignty and national right to a distinctive path of development. Sergey (46) – a manager at a large agricultural enterprise – explained why Russian people put the country’s geopolitical interests above their personal wellbeing:

I: What is more important for you – Russia’s domestic or foreign policies?

Sergey: I think that the pride for the country is the main thing.

I: Does this mean, it comes before the economic concerns?

Sergey: Yes, it does. You know, we Russians – we can complain about life, but when the misfortune happens – we all rise to protect our motherland. This is the mentality. This is, perhaps, the democracy. Each country has its own democracy. This is our feature<sup>21</sup>.

## 8 Discussion

In this study of rural Russians’ political behaviours, I tried to address the main shortcomings in the existing debates on the popular support for authoritarian populism. In particular, I looked beyond the common assumption that the supporters of authoritarian populism are ‘simple’, ‘irrational’ people, who vote against self-interests. I revealed that property regime and power relations largely define the political posture of different groups of supporters. I also showed that understanding the ‘self’ in people’s self-interests is key when explaining their voting behaviour.

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<sup>21</sup> Interview conducted on 12-11-2017 in the Sumarokovo village, Ruza district, Moscow region.

I focused on rural Russians because they are the major supporters of Putin's regime, and because authoritarian populism, in general, has a strong rural basis. Indeed, I discovered a number of peasant/rural features that influence people's choice for strongman leadership, an authoritarian state and other elements of authoritarian populism. Thus, I revealed that Putin's traditionalist authoritarian leadership style appeals to the archetypal base of the rural society – namely, its peasant roots – and, therefore, finds stronger support among the farming population. I also showed that the traditional tsarist peasant myth of a benevolent ruler and evil officials is still used in state-society relations in contemporary Russia. Furthermore, I argued that the main national idea about Russia's distinctive path of development – which is based on autocracy, traditionalism and isolationism – is historically grounded in the Slavophil idealisation of traditional culture and patriarchal values of the Russian peasantry. Does this imply that authoritarian populism is a rural phenomenon (at least in Russia)?

Populism, indeed, has rural roots. This political movement emerged in tsarist Russia in response to the hardships of the peasantry. Populists aimed to mobilise the *narod* (common people, at that time, primarily peasants) against the elites, and to create a socialist society based on the principles of the peasant commune. However, this historical fact does not directly mean that contemporary populism is a peasant movement. The populist notion of the *narod*/the people is now used to refer to the ordinary people, in general, whose interests are often overlooked in favour of the economic and political establishment. Thus, this confrontation between the people and elites is the key to populism, not the rural/peasant origin of the ordinary people. However, the supporters of authoritarian populism do share some common features with the peasant society – namely, conservatism, traditionalism, a subordinate position, and anti-elite and anti-capitalist sentiments. This may explain why authoritarian populism finds stronger support among villagers, who are more conservative and traditional than urban dwellers.

This study also revealed that various socio-economic groups respond differently to different elements of authoritarian populism. Less secure economic strata respond more strongly to economic incentives, while better-off villagers are more likely to support ideological appeals. Although I did not address gender differences in this paper, I included the data on men and women's responses in Table 2. This data demonstrates that Putin is more popular among women than men, and that women are more likely to believe that Russia needs authoritarian governance. Some Russian experts explain Putin's popularity among women by the president's machismo (Sperling 2015). However, Table 2 shows that Putin's 'real man' image is less popular among women than men. In my interviews, I noticed that many rural women have very traditional *patriarchal* views on family: they stress the dominant role of a husband, who protects and takes care of his submissive wife and children. They often use this idea to explain what kind of leadership their country needs, arguing that the state is a family on a larger scale. These gender dynamics are very important for understanding the popular support for authoritarian populism, and require more thorough analysis.

In the title of this paper, I raised the question: what can we learn from the popular support for Putin in rural Russia? The Russian case is quite different from other parts of the world characterised by the rise of authoritarian leadership. Some experts even argue that president Putin cannot be called a populist leader despite his popularity among ordinary Russians (see Yudin and Matveyev 2017). I did not engage in the debates on the Russian political regime, but examined rural support for the key features of authoritarian populism: strongman leadership, an authoritarian state, unity between the leader and the people, nostalgia for past glories and confrontation with the 'Others'. These features are the main pillars of Putin's regime, and public support for them is vivid and socially accepted in Russia – therefore, this is a perfect case to study. Furthermore, contrary to other parts of the world, where populism emerged in opposition to the exiting order, the Russian political system represents what Makarenko (2017) called the 'populism of the power'. The difference is that populists-in-opposition use populist discourses to gain support among the ordinary people and, thereby, get leading positions in the government; in contrast, the populists-in-government (those of the power) use the very same principles to strengthen and maintain their power. In both cases, the populist leaders appeal to the ordinary people's needs, concerns and fears. This paper calls for more attention to the demand-side of this phenomenon, which is usually overlooked in political debates and scholarly literature. It argues

that, in order to understand the phenomenon of authoritarian populism, we need to understand – but not judge – the interests and motives of the ordinary people, and the power relations and socio-economic structure in the society that gave rise to this political movement.

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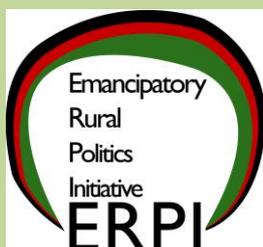
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**Natalia Mamonova** received her Ph.D. in Development Studies from the International Institute of Social Studies of Erasmus University, the Netherlands in 2016. Her research concerns agrarian transformation, peasant politics, rural resistance and mobilisation, state-society relations in contemporary Russia and Ukraine. Two of her single-authored articles ('Resistance or adaptation? Ukrainian peasants' responses to land grabbing', 2015; and 'Naive monarchism and rural resistance in contemporary Russia', 2016) received 'The Best Article' awards from Erasmus University in 2016 and 2017, respectively. Natalia continues her research on rural politics at the Romanian Institute for Advanced Studies 'New Europe College', where she was granted a one-term International Fellowship for 2017-18. From March 2018 onwards, she will be conducting her research project on 'Naïve Monarchism in Contemporary Russia' at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs in Stockholm.



**The Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative (ERPI)** is a new initiative focused on understanding the contemporary moment and building alternatives. New exclusionary politics are generating deepening inequalities, jobless 'growth', climate chaos, and social division. The ERPI is focused on the social and political processes in rural spaces that are generating alternatives to regressive, authoritarian politics. We aim to provoke debate and action among scholars, activists, practitioners and policymakers from across the world that are concerned about the current situation, and hopeful about alternatives.

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