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**The ideological kaleidoscope of Russian elite in the time of late
Putinism**

Disertační práce

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this dissertation, *The ideological kaleidoscope of Russian elite in the time of late Putinism*, has been composed solely by myself, and I confirm that I have only used the resources listed in the bibliography.

Chapter 5 include parts from the article “Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin: A study of a rank-and-file actor in an authoritarian regime” that has been written together with Professor Jan Holzer and that will be published in *Europe-Asia Studies*. My author’s contribution constitutes 80%.

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Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Elites, institutions and ideologies in non-democratic regimes	9
3. Contemporary Russian regime and ideology	20
4. Research approach	32
5. Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin	48
6. Chairman of the State Duma Vyacheslav Volodin	61
7. Secretary of the Security Council Nikolai Patrushev.....	75
8. General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation Gennady Zyuganov	86
9. Conclusion.....	101
10. Bibliography	109

1. Introduction

It is tempting to imagine non-democratic regimes as monolithic. The picture of an Orwellian machine managed by faceless bureaucrats, guarded by brutal security officers and oiled by a constant stream of propaganda with the charismatic autocrat at its top is very much established in the popular imagination. However, the reality tends to be more complicated, messy and contradictory. Non-democratic regimes might try to apply various tactics to monopolise the political space but are only rarely fully successful. One of the reasons for that is the very logic of the struggle for power. Even if opposition structures are completely suppressed, the information space absolutely controlled and society brainwashed by propaganda and coerced into subservience, there is still one place where the political struggle occurs. In line with the logic of the saying, the darkest place is under the candlestick, and this place is at the very centre of power among the regime elite.

Most of the non-democratic regimes are in history books associated with the name of their leader. There is Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Soviet Union, Franco's Spain, Pol Pot's Cambodia or Putin's Russia. Such a perspective, however, overlooks that the autocratic ruler never actually rules alone. This would not be humanly possible, especially in such complex structures as modern states and societies. Therefore, the autocrat might make all the decisions but can only hope that their subordinates will execute them. This situation somewhat constrains the autocrat's choices since they must consider whether the grip on power is sufficiently strong to deal with potential opposition within the regime. As alluded to, the real problem for an autocrat is not bullying and monitoring opposition but instead the closest allies and collaborators who are able to potentially gather enough power and resources to overthrow their ruler (Bove & Rivera 2015). The other dilemma the autocratic leader faces is their ability to manage the whole country since they cannot make decisions about everything alone. This forces the autocrat to establish at least some kind of institutional framework, including bureaucracy, police or judiciary, that would deal with the problems of day-to-day life. The issue with these institutions is that they cannot ever be independent enough to establish themselves as an alternative centre of power that could challenge the ruler. However, too much interference makes them ineffective, complicates their scope to serve their purpose and limits their ability to stabilise the regime (Geddes 2003). Therefore, the political elite and institutions represent relevant topics of study since their positions can provide interesting insights into the way a given regime operates.

Moreover, the situation of non-democratic regimes in the 21st century is further complicated by the fact that they incorporate some of the practices of the democratic system. Competitive authoritarianism organises elections, forms legislative assemblies or allows the existence of organised political opposition. This energy and time-consuming exercise has its advantages since it allows for increased legitimacy, incorporates potential political opponents into the system and forces ruling elites to present at least some performance that would allow the autocrat to evaluate their efficiency (Levitsky & Way 2010). However, this strategy also has significant trade-offs since the regime is usually weakest around the time of elections, and it cannot ever be certain when “systemic opposition” will turn into a real political threat. Moreover, the existence of these practices can provide ground for an increase of political self-awareness of the population, increasing its demands for accountability of the ruling elite and reinforcing the self-confidence of legislative institutions (Ross 2015). Therefore, managing electoral autocracies requires that the regime constantly balances and reevaluates the situation.

With all that said, it is no wonder that the role of elites in non-democratic regimes has attracted notable attention from scholars. Much of the scholars’ attention has been dedicated to the role of these elites in maintaining regime stability and survival. From that perspective, political actors in non-democratic regimes were simplified to merely cynical opportunists aiming to maximise their power and access to rent-seeking opportunities. Similarly, the non-democratic regimes were presented as corrupt mafia states existing only to extract resources from their citizens. Their rhetoric was dismissed as shameless propaganda ready to claim anything to support the existence of the status quo (for example, Krastev 2011 or Guriev & Treisman 2020). The research aims to challenge this argument and suggests that ideology in non-democratic regimes matters. When the research uses the word “ideology”, it does not refer to an elaborated set of abstract ideas with ontological ambitions typical for totalitarian regimes of the 20th century. With few exceptions, such as North Korea or Iran, these non-democratic regimes do not exist nowadays. The underlining assumption of the research is that non-democratic regimes have their ideological underpinnings, which are general, blurred and often defined negatively. This negativity is related to their opposition to the hegemonic ideology of liberalism that was, for a short time, globally dominant after its triumph in 1989. In the author’s mind, the term “illiberalism” captures well the ideology of contemporary non-democratic regimes, which are not certain what they are but are very much able to see what they are against (Waller 2023a). This ideological vagueness creates an umbrella under which political elites can pursue multiple ideological projects, which results in shaping policy choices made by the regime. The research

aims to demonstrate that – similar to non-democratic regimes – elite actors are not simply rent-seekers but have their own ideas about what is right and wrong for them and for the society in which they are living. While these ideas might seem strange, twisted or illegitimate from a moral standpoint, it is important to understand them to be able to analyse and explain the functioning of contemporary non-democratic regimes.

To contribute to the theoretical debate about the role of elites and their ideological positions in non-democratic regimes, the research focuses on the case of Vladimir Putin's Russia. Putin's authoritarian regime is an interesting case study due to its internal contradictions corroborating the theoretical postulates presented above. Vladimir Putin has de facto ruled for the last two decades and, during this time, he was able to construct a regime which revolves around his personality. One of the keys to his political success has been the ability to manage struggles among elite actors and to serve as the key arbiter of splits between individual interests and ideological groups. However, it seems that over time, Putin became less able to fulfil this role since he seems to be less inclined to engage in day-to-day politics and surrounds himself mostly with like-minded individuals – often with a security service background – which narrows his worldview and limits his understanding of developments in the country (Sakwa 2020a). The situation when “Tsar is far away” has several implications for elite members; it becomes harder for them to understand what the regime wants. This can be illustrated by the crucial decision to begin the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which was – as far as it is known – taken in a very small circle of Putin's closest collaborators. The rest of the regime elite was not informed about the decision and, subsequently, had to adjust to it as best as it could. As infamous speeches by the Director of the Foreign Intelligence Service, Sergey Naryshkin, during the Security Council meeting immediately after the invasion shows, it is not always an easy task (Walker 2022). Putin's isolation makes it difficult for the regime elite to reach him and present their views and suggestions and, therefore, policy decisions are made by an ever-narrower group of people with a similar mindset. To break through this wall, one must take theatrical steps to get the attention of the ruler. Since understanding the thoughts and wishes of the ruler is not easy, it creates the space for misunderstandings, as seemed to happen to Wagner group head Yevgeny Prigozhin, who spoke too loudly and pushed too hard and, in the end, paid the ultimate price. However, Prigozhin's case also shows that Putin became unable to manage his own regime since the escalation of the situation could have been prevented by his timely involvement in disputes between Wagner mercenaries and the Ministry of Defence (Pertsev

2023a). The fact that it did not happen shows that Putin was unable to make hard decisions and to discipline the arguing elite, which is always a dangerous situation for the autocrat.

Dysfunctions in the power vertical also bring positives for elite members. Since the autocrat cannot be everywhere and make all decisions, elite members have a multitude of opportunities to pursue various political strategies to improve their position in the power hierarchy, enrich themselves or simply apply the policy that they perceive as the best in a given circumstance. The role of institutions is crucial in this regard since they form the political playing field. Russia is a typical electoral autocracy with two legislative assemblies (State Duma and Federation Council), the government and twenty-one ministries. Such a robust political-bureaucratic institutional framework does not exist solely as window dressing for increasing the legitimacy of the regime but has the key role in maintaining the basic function of the state. Members of the elite can use these channels to resolve ideological tensions and clashes of interest. Moreover, all these institutions have their own agendas, goals and mindsets that impact the decision-making process (Treisman 2018). Any analysis of the elite without acknowledging the institutional context would be incomplete since it is necessary to consider both orders of “dual state” – normative as well as administrative – as Russian politicians must be able to operate in both areas (Sakwa 2010).

Ideologically, Putin’s Russia remains flexible, which provides further space for elites to pursue their own ideological project. There is an overarching umbrella which some tried to define as Putinism (for example, Taylor 2018), but this ideology remains vague, blurred and flexible to adapt to circumstances. One of the few of its more elaborated elements is the opposition to the power of the West’s framework of liberal values allegedly promoted by the United States. The bluntness, tenacity and aggressivity of this view – encapsulated by Putin’s claim that liberalism has become “obsolete” (Barber, Foy & Barker 2019) – turned Russia into one of the beacons of illiberalism (Laruelle 2020). However, a closer look shows that Putinism has a problem with forming a coherent alternative vision. Instead, it provides space for multiple streams of thought that are contesting for dominance in the public space. Even the so-called “conservative turn”, starting after 2012, despite all the fuss, succeeded only partially in influencing state policies. Therefore, Russian politics remains the space of paradigmatic pluralisms (Chebankova 2017) and elite members of various mindsets form broader ideological coalitions (Tsygankov 2014 or Sakwa 2021). It should be noted that the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 might change that and may provide space for the introduction of a more elaborated, coherent and

unifying ideology for the regime (as debated by Zorin et al. 2022). However, at the time of writing the research, nothing suggested that this was the case. On the contrary, the findings suggested that ideological fragmentation persists in the time of war and only manifests differently.

The research aims to contribute to theoretical debates about elites in non-democratic regimes and demonstrate the relevance of their ideological worldviews for their political choices. This perspective is important since existing scholarly work overfocuses on the question of interests, limits the nature of elite members to pragmatic rent-seekers and dismisses regime proclamations as cynical propaganda. Taking contemporary Russia as a useful case study, the research touches on the topic of institutions in non-democratic regimes and demonstrates that they play an important role even in the case of personalised autocracies. It reinforces this perspective by pointing out that institutions remain relevant when the autocrat does not oversee the situation or topic directly, and members of the elite are left to settle their disagreements among themselves. The research addresses the existing knowledge gap in Russian studies by providing an in-depth study of the thinking of selected high-level politicians in contemporary Russia. Such a contribution is relevant since most of the works on this subject focuses on Vladimir Putin personally (for example, Drozdova & Robinson 2019) or analyses the elite from the macro perspective (for example, Sakwa 2021). The regretful context of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine also allowed the research to analyse this event as the exogenous shock influencing the dynamics of debates in the political elite. Since the dataset enables us to make conclusions only about the limited period in this context, the research serves primarily as a baseline for further scholarly work.

The guiding question of the research was how members of the Russian political elite perceive politics. Inspired by the established concept of the dimension of politics – polity, politics and policy (Fiala & Schubert 2000: 47) – the research followed three sub-topics:

1. The way in which elites understand the nature of the Russian regime, what this regime should be called, and its core values and qualities.
2. How analysed political actors describe the mechanisms organising day-to-day political life, in particular institutions.
3. The key programmatic objective analysed political actors aimed to achieve.

The research utilised the method of political discourse analysis and constructed views of analysed political actors from recurring words, themes and topics present in their public speeches available online (van Dijk 1997). While none of the analysed actors is a sophisticated political thinker with an elaborated and overarching ideology, it was possible to gather a sufficient dataset that would enable the drawing of conclusions about their thinking. Obviously, as is always the case with the analysis of political speeches, one has to be cautious about the level of their authenticity and honesty. Especially in the context of non-democratic regimes, political actors should be incentivised to keep their real opinions hidden and adjust their public performances to the regime's propagandistic line. The research questions this view by demonstrating that, even in contemporary Russia, the struggle for control over the discourse is very much present, and the public domain remains the place for political contestation between different ideological groups. Therefore, at the methodological level, the research argues that political discourse analysis is a valid method for understanding the dynamics in non-democratic regimes.

The conclusions of the research were formulated on two analytical levels. On the lower level of abstraction is the description of the ideological positions of individual actors. The analysis was focused primarily on their differences and demonstrated the existence of multiple ideological groups among the members of the Russian political elite. These findings also enabled identification of potential points of contestation among different ideological groups within the Russian elite. On the higher level of abstraction, the research focused on themes that appeared in the speeches of multiple actors, which was seen as evidence of agreement over the unwritten rules of the regime. The identified commonalities allowed the author to draw conclusions about certain aspects of contemporary Russian politics and about the politics in contemporary non-democracies in general.

The research reaches these conclusions through an in-depth analysis of the opinions of four political actors. Their selection was guided by the assumption about the importance of institutions in non-democratic regimes. Therefore, all selected actors hold high posts in key institutions of the Russian state. This approach ensures that selected actors are relevant political actors and that their opinions are possible to study with the political discourse analysis method since they often contribute to the public debate. The secondary consideration related to the selection of analysed actors was the variety of their personal backgrounds, career paths and opinions, which allowed for capture of the worldviews of different segments of the Russian

elite. The research does not claim that selected actors are the ideal representatives of ideological camps in Russian politics, and it is cautious when generalising its findings. However, it turned out to be the case that the ideological positions of the analysed actors are distinct enough to make their comparison interesting. The research focused on the following political actors:

- Mikhail Mishustin, Prime Minister, and career bureaucrat
- Vyacheslav Volodin, Chairman of the State Duma, and politician closely associated with Vladimir Putin's regime
- Nikolai Patrushev, Secretary of the Security Council of Russia, and the most influential member of the silovki faction primarily comprised of representatives of security services
- Gennady Zyuganov, General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, and politician representing systemic opposition against Vladimir Putin's regime

The dataset comprised public speeches of the analysed political actors from the years 2020, 2021 and the first half of 2022 – the period that some authors (Galeotti 2019a or Lucas 2023) label as “late Putinism”, as referenced in the title of the text. Speeches were gathered from various online sources specified in each individual chapter. The selection of the period under the research was not guided only by the ambition to provide insights into the latest political developments. Instead, the analysed years were also relevant to the context of Russian politics. Constitutional amendments were adopted in 2020, and the parliamentary elections took place in 2021. As anticipated, these events motivated some of the analysed actors to comment more openly and specifically about their perceptions of politics. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was completely unforeseen; it forced the author to adjust his research approach and gather more data than previously anticipated. However, the situation created yet another context in which it was possible to observe the development of the opinions of the analysed politicians.

The research presents its arguments in the following order. The second chapter, “Elites, institutions and ideologies in non-democratic regimes”, focuses on the existing knowledge about elites in non-democratic regimes. It demonstrates that the elite matters and that, despite difficulties, scholars try to find ways to analyse their behaviour and opinions. The chapter presents several approaches to these issues and takes from them the inspiration for further

analysis. The important identified knowledge gap is a lack of attention on the ideological struggles among elite members. The third chapter, “Contemporary Russian regime and ideology”, focuses on the Russian regime and maps the ideological context in which political elites operate. It summarises several ideological projects aiming to shape Russian politics over the past decades and presents the ideology of Putinism which, due to its vagueness, allows the existence of different ideological camps. The chapter presents several attempts to define these ideological camps and concludes that such endeavours are currently limited to only the macro level and lack sufficient grounding in in-depth case studies. Next, the fourth chapter describes the “Research approach”. It explains the rationale of political discourse analysis and shows how it informed the various steps of the research. The chapter provides detailed explanation of the selection of actors, research period and the approach towards construction of the dataset and its analysis. This chapter also identifies potential challenges and limitations in the research. The following four chapters present findings about each analysed actor and are similarly structured. Each chapter presents the institutional setting in which the given actor operates, then focuses on his personal biography with emphasis on points relevant to forming his worldview and describes his understanding of Russian politics based on findings from the research. Finally, the “Conclusion” summarises the views of the analysed actors and, by comparing them, reaches a more general findings about the Russian regime and ideological camps within the elite. Separately, the chapter also presents differing interpretations of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Based on these findings, this concluding chapter suggests further possibilities in the research of the Russian regime in particular and non-democratic regimes in general.

2. Elites, institutions and ideologies in non-democratic regimes

The underlining assumption of the research presented in this work is that elites in non-democratic regimes matter. Moreover, it argues that these elites matter not only because of their different interests and individual ambitions to dominate the political scene but because of the different ideological positioning that influences their goals and behaviour. In other words, the research starts with the assumption that, even in non-democratic regimes, it is possible to detect ideological plurality among ruling elites and argues that this plurality matters and should be researched. While this stance might seem unusual to the reader, the work attempts to justify it in this chapter and by exploring relevant literature to show that the research builds on existing knowledge and develops it in new directions.

This chapter will do so in three sections focusing on different aspects of the literature on elites in non-democratic regimes. In the first section, it demonstrates that the thinking about non-democratic regimes always dealt – at least implicitly – with the issue of political elites as it tried to answer the question of who is actually ruling. Since even the most despotic and tyrannic leader could not manage to rule the country on their own, the attention shifted to the composition of the apparatus supporting them and fulfilling their orders. As will be shown, this consideration became even more important in the context of the third wave of democratisation (Huntington 1992), which resulted in the emergence of hybrid regimes that were neither democratic nor fully authoritarian. The situation of the elite became one of the important indicators of the classification of the given political regime. Secondly, this chapter will focus on how researchers try to understand the behaviour of elites in non-democratic regimes. These regimes are highly non-transparent, which makes it difficult to observe and analyse changes in the dynamics of power. Therefore, researchers have tried to come up with theoretical models that might help to understand the behaviour of the elite in non-democratic regimes. While this chapter will introduce several possible approaches, it concludes that the focus on institutions and the way they shape the actions of elite members is the most useful framework for the analysis. The third and final section will add a new element to the considerations when pointing out the fact that current literature mostly ignores or openly dismisses the role of ideology in current non-democratic regimes, respectively, in inter-elite conflict. In line with other experts, the research argues that this approach is flawed and overlooks important levels of struggle ongoing within these regimes. Finally, it is explained how the research can contribute empirical

findings to theoretical literature, by trying to revisit the debate about the role of ideology in contemporary non-democratic regimes.

Hidden plurality of non-democratic regimes

The very thinking about the plurality of non-democratic regimes is complicated by the fact that they are defined negatively as the opposition of democratic rule. The problem is that one of the key features of democracy unifying the various definitions of this phenomenon is plurality, meaning free political competition and the possibility to express various views and opinions (Schmitter & Karl 1991). Therefore, it is intuitive that regimes that are not democratic should not have this quality, and it makes it logical in the case of non-democratic regimes to focus on their closeness, uniformity, and ambition to suppress dissenting views. The once-popular term “totalitarian regimes” represents a clear example of this thinking (Arendt 1951 or Friedrich & Brzezinski 1956). Such a view is simplistic, overlooks differences between different non-democratic regimes, and is prone to moralising, potentially impacting the conclusion of the research (Gleason 1995).

The problem is that the situation is more nuanced and that non-democratic regimes differ significantly. While, generally, it is possible to say that democracies are look-a-like since they are trying to strive for the same values and ideas, non-democratic regimes are heterogeneous since they are shaped by local context, historical circumstance or underlining ideology (Kubát & Balík 2004). It is without question that their guiding principle is still maintaining and legitimising the rule of the privileged few over others. However, this general indicator does not help much in explaining the situation in specific non-democratic regimes. The logical step that can help with this task is to ask how the rule of the elite over society is organised and executed. Based on this consideration, classical works by Juan J. Linz map the internal dynamics of non-democratic regimes and suggest their typology. For the purposes of this research, Linz’s category of authoritarian regimes is the most relevant since it focuses on states that – unlike sultanistic regimes – rely on formalised institutional structures and – unlike totalitarian regimes – were not able (or willing) to monopolise political and social space (Linz 2000). The role of elites in authoritarian regimes is important since their background, power ambitions and struggles influence the logic and nature of the environment in which they are operating. To be more specific, for instance, authoritarian regimes ruled by the military will perform very differently from those governed by the elite with bureaucratic origins (Cheihub et al. 2010).

Therefore, it is important to pay attention to who are members of the elites in non-democratic regimes – such as contemporary Russia – and what are their goals and aspirations.

The debate about the role of elites in non-democratic regimes was stimulated by the developments in the 1990s related to the third wave of democratisation (Huntington 1992). The collapse of the communist bloc and authoritarian regimes in South America and Africa made classical authoritarian regimes as described for instance by Linz quite rare and forced researchers to think differently about non-democratic regimes. Given the changing environment, the logical reaction was to abandon fixed categories and try to think about regime type on a scale. This approach led to the development of the theory of hybrid regimes and their various sub-categories, such as defective democracies or competitive authoritarianisms (Diamond 2002, Bogaards 2008 or Wigell 2008). This period was also marked by scaling of regime types presented by Freedom House and Polity Project (Marshall & Elzinga-Marshall 2017). The aim of the research is not to analyse these trends in thinking about non-democratic regimes in detail. The important point is that the behaviour of elites in these regimes becomes even more important for researchers since one of the important indicators of the mentioned studies was the level of institutional constraints put on them and their compliance with legalised rules of power competition and responsiveness to the demands of citizens. These approaches trying to place various regimes on a scale between democracy and non-democracy provide yet another argument for analysing elites in authoritarian regimes. Yet, it also reminds us that political constellations are not static and can evolve. The current climate – marked by democratic backsliding and the rise of populist strongmen – can motivate us to interpret this conclusion with pessimism as a sign of a dark future (Haggard & Kaufman 2021). However, this research tries to be more optimistic and points out that even seemingly stable non-democratic regimes – such as Russia under Vladimir Putin – are not immune to change. In particular, the period under research scrutiny between 2020 and 2022 shows how dramatically these regimes can evolve. Obviously, change can also be for the worse as these regimes become more closed, merciless and aggressive. Importantly, such changes put extra pressure on the elite, which faces unexpected dilemmas and is forced to re-evaluate its views and make difficult decisions. Since elites matter, such a process can ultimately lead to the change of the whole political regime. These are exactly the dynamics in which this research is interested.

How to study elites in non-democratic regimes?

Studying not only elites but political development generally in non-democratic regimes is difficult. They are closed, secretive and paranoid, which complicates access to data and forces research to rely on mediated information which is often difficult to verify. At the same time, the lack of established procedures and weak institutions makes competition for power unregulated, chaotic and constantly evolving. Since this “bulldog fight under a rug” is usually hard to grasp, even for regime insiders, it is even harder for researchers. Nevertheless, since elites in non-democratic regimes comprise an important topic, researchers have come up with various theoretical approaches to analyse them. This section will introduce the most relevant of them and explain how the research can benefit from them.

The account of ongoing developments in non-democratic regimes is usually incomplete and biased in most respects. As such, it is more appropriate for journalists than academics to try to make sense of it. While looking for general rules and patterns, historical highlights and access to archival materials and personal testimonies can be the best guidance. One example of how this approach can greatly help to provide a more nuanced account of the situation in non-democratic regimes is Sheila Fitzpatrick’s work on the close collaborators of Joseph Stalin. Their parallel biographies show clashes and intrigues ongoing under the façade of the regime. These developments undermine some of established assumptions about the nature of the totalitarian regime in the Soviet Union, in particular about the political elite. Fitzpatrick concludes that even Stalin himself needed to take into account the moods and opinions of his collaborators and was – to a certain extent – dependent on his “team” (Fitzpatrick 2015). To name another example, the book by Vladislav Zubok dedicated to the collapse of the Soviet Union demonstrates how the behaviour and goals of regional elites played a crucial role in this process. His key observation is related to the key role of politicians embracing Russian nationalism in these developments (Zubok 2021). Obviously, these – and many other (for example, Kiernan 2008, Peterson 2015 or Graham 2016) – works belong to the field of history, which makes them different from presented research leaning towards political science. However, the shared characteristic is the ambition to provide nuanced perspectives on the opinions of elite members and reliance on source material produced by analysed actors. Historians have the possibility of using diaries, personal correspondence or memoirs of actors under scrutiny. This research does not have access to such personal materials, but applies a similar logic to its dataset when it takes public speeches of analysed political actors as a serious

source for understanding their thinking. While this source has its problems and limitations which prevents taking them at face value – as highlighted in the methodology chapter – it still can represent a useful way for political scientists to gain an understanding of ongoing developments and clashes among elites in non-democratic states. It is for historians with access to more material and the benefit of a time gap to provide a more nuanced and complex picture.

Regretfully, political scientists do not enjoy this hindsight and, instead, mapping individual trajectories tries to provide a more general and theoretical view on elite actors in non-democratic regimes. One of the contexts in which their behaviour was often studied was the time of crises of the regime and the change in the distribution of power. The classic example is the theory of transitology, which tries to explain the logic beyond the collapse of non-democratic regimes during the third wave of democratisation. The theory is primarily focused on the behaviour of elites and concludes that regime change is only possible when part of the ruling elite concludes that the status quo is no longer sustainable and joins forces with the opposition. In this paradigm, elites, as well as opposition actors, are divided according to their relation to the collapsing regime and willingness to compromise. This restricts the utility of the conceptualisation only to moments of regime change (O'Donnell, Schmitter & Whitehead 2013). The concept of colour revolution presents very different perspectives on regime change and highlights the importance of mass protests and modern technologies. Nevertheless, it does not neglect the role of regime structures completely and points out that the split in security forces is an important pre-condition for the success of the revolution (McFaul 2005). Since the research analyses the turbulent era of Russian history during which – especially after the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine – the very existence of the current political regime might be at stake, presented theoretical frameworks suggest some insights on which it can develop. Mainly, the split between elite actors in relation to the war effort resembles the level of commitment to regime survival presented in the distinction drawn by transitology. While given by the period of analysis, the research only suggests the level of loyalty of different regime actors to the current course and the way in which they express it. Even these findings can serve as a relevant starting point for other researchers aiming to describe the downfall of Vladimir Putin's political regime.

However, the research is not interested solely in the borderline situation of regime crisis but has the ambition to describe it in its ordinary times. Therefore, it also takes inspiration from other theoretical approaches explaining the behaviour of elites in non-democratic regimes. The first

one to be introduced takes advantage of game theory and assumes that political actors try to multiply their profit – access to power – and limit the risk of its loss (Gehlbach, Sonin & Svulik 2016). The significant obstacle in this effort is that non-democratic regimes lack transparent and established mechanisms for decision-making and solving disputes. This leads to a high level of instability and a never-ending series of clashes among the members of the power elite – called the selectorate (de Mesquita 2003). While its members have significant influence over the situation in the regime and access to resources, they must constantly try to remain part of the winning coalition holding power. Similarly, this coalition cannot be fixed since it must react to changes in the situation, be able to address them and potentially include new figures rising to power. This development also means that none has secured a place in the winning coalition, and all elite members have to be vigilant not to lose it (Acemoglu & Robinson 2006). This theoretical approach underlines that the reality of non-democratic regimes tends to be chaotic and constantly evolving given the changing circumstances resulting from outcomes of internal fights, crises, and external shocks. The limit of such theoretical approach is this it remains too broad, and it is not able to reflect specificities of context or elite actors involved in such a struggle. Nevertheless, the notion of winning a coalition is relevant for the research since it highlights that not all members of the elite are equally important and that the struggle for a position within the hierarchy is never-ending. Therefore, it motivates us to ask which tactics various political actors use to increase their influence.

The issue remains how to identify actors that are worthy of research and are important enough to play a relevant role in fluctuating and non-transparent non-democratic regimes. The theory about the role of institutions in them can be very helpful in answering this question. Scholars researching institutions in non-democratic regimes point out that despite the fierce and largely unregulated struggle for power, there is still a need for some basic framework for facilitating the political process or – on a more basic level – allowing the state to function. They argue that even political actors in non-democratic contexts prefer to establish institutions such as ministries, laws or elections to stabilise their power (Geddes 2003 or Schedler 2009). Moreover, in the contemporary era, non-democratic regimes try to mimic democracies and their procedures to increase their legitimacy. Examples of these electoral autocracies are possible to find all over the globe in such different places like Benin, Serbia or Bolivia (Schedler 2006 or Levitsky & Way 2020). However, the argument of institutionalists goes even further and claims that these institutions are not solely charades that should fool the local population and the international community. Institutions should play an important role in the recruitment of cadres

into the elite, maintaining the state function and saturating the demands of the population (Kavasoglu 2021). On top of these practical tasks, institutions also influence elites themselves since establishing the arena for political competition reinforces routine and raises the cost of overstepping the rules. This is obviously a two-way process since elites have influence over the shape and functioning of institutions (Pepinsky 2014), but neither side should be neglected. The takeaway from the research is that institutions in the non-democratic context matter and, therefore, it is useful to focus analytical efforts on political players holding official positions in the state apparatus. Also, the institutionalist perspective motivates to include in the analysis the way in which the relationship between individual institutions is presented and – with regard to the interplay between the office and the officeholder – to describe how the political actor under scrutiny describes their own institutions and their role within the regime.

Ideologies and elites in non-democratic regimes

Despite their differences, the assumption connecting most of the presented theories presented in the previous section is their understanding of elite members as highly pragmatic actors. The thinking of these politicians is presented as rather simple, revolving around the ability to ensure a comfortable place in winning coalition, rent-seeking and, ultimately, surviving within a largely unregulated power competition. There is certainly a reason for such a perspective since non-democratic regimes tend to be corrupt and organised about clientelist networks, and succeeding in such an environment requires a high level of pragmatism or even cynicism. The problem with this view is that it oversimplifies the motivations, personal characteristics or ideological backgrounds of political actors in non-democratic settings. The institutionalist perspective is similarly simplifying since it understands the behaviour of political actors as a consequence of the context in which they are operating. This logic is similarly limiting since it does not leave much space for the agency of political actors and, in a more radical interpretation, can somewhat blur boundaries between democratic and non-democratic contexts.

The omitting of ideology or, even more broadly, considerations about value frameworks from the analysis of non-democratic regimes is somewhat understandable considering current developments. The collapse of the communist bloc in 1989 meant the end of non-democratic regimes that – despite increasing ideological emptiness and relying on formal rituals without real meaning – still based their legitimacy on elaborate ideology encapsulating all areas of human life. Previously the ideological clash between the values of capitalist and communist

society was a very much relevant perspective for the analysis. However, this situation changed in the 1990s when the liberal-democratic model, combined with a market-based economy, seemed to be the dominant – and some would likely even argue the best possible – model of ruling society (Fukuyama 1992). Even though, from a moral standpoint, this consideration can be acceptable, it creates the danger of oversimplifying the thinking about motivations of rulers and elites in non-democratic regimes. It is then easy to simply label them as evil or at least purely self-interested individuals without any further ambition than to enrich themselves. This perception is implied in the latest trends in the thinking about non-democratic regimes encapsulated by the term “new authoritarianism” (Krastev 2011). According to this perspective, “informational autocrats” utilise propaganda and manipulation to create legitimacy of non-democratic regimes (Guriev & Treisman 2019). This assumption has several important contributions since it allows us to describe how these regimes deal with the changing realities of the information space in the 21st century. However, at the same time, it may create a pretext for interpreting every statement that comes from elites in non-democratic regimes as a lie and part of a more or less elaborate deception that aims to cover the ideological hollowness of the regime and allow politicians to continue to enjoy the material benefits of being in power (Guriev & Treisman 2020).

However, the historical accounts briefly mentioned in the previous section show that such oversimplification can be misleading since personal beliefs, experiences or even psychological profiles of members of elites in non-democratic regimes played an important role in their decision-making and policy agenda. These politicians might not always be – or even likely, are only rarely – brilliant ideologues intellectually capable of constructing or expressing a complex thesis about the meaning of their rule. The lack of this ability – which is, in all honesty, also often missing for politicians in democratic countries – does not equal a lack of a value framework guiding a given political actor. This framework might be unclear, vague and flexible, but it is still important not to omit it completely since it is one of the elements guiding the decisions of a given politician and contributes to shaping the nature of the regime. Consideration of this value framework is nothing new since it was already articulated by Juan J. Linz, who considers it an important characteristic of authoritarian regimes (Linz 2000). To describe the Russian context in a similar manner, Brian Taylor argues that to understand the local regime it is important to consider the “code” forming the behaviour of the local elite (Taylor 2018). In addition, Marianne Kneuer suggests that, nowadays (as in the past), non-democratic regimes need a mission that would allow them to defend their legitimacy. This

mission does not have to be universal but must make sense within a given societal and cultural context, the historical experience of the given society and the nature of the regime's elite. Since elites are playing an important role in shaping and reinforcing this collective endeavour, this opinion has to be analysed as well to understand how individual contributions shape the overall picture of the regime's goals. Kneuer reminds us that the sense of mission can be pragmatically adjusted but remains influential and guides the behaviour of the regime; it can lead it to choices which seem illogical from the outside and can result in economic and other expenses (Kneuer 2017). This perspective might prove to be quite helpful when considering the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which is also scrutinised in this research. This decision is possible to explain via multiple lenses, but it seems that the aim to gather historical Russian lands and to develop the tradition of the Tsarist empire played a considerable role in Vladimir Putin's thinking (Waller 2023b). This case very much demonstrates that the ideological foundations of non-democratic regimes should not be underestimated and must be considered an important factor in their analysis. Similarly, on the level of elite actors, events like the invasion of Ukraine allow us to assess to what extent they are willing to join such endeavours and which strategies they are using to express their commitment to the mission that the regime envisioned for itself.

Another argument for the consideration of the relevance of ideology in contemporary non-democratic regimes is the emergence of illiberalism. This concept tries to capture underling themes and values of political forces and regimes that present themselves as an alternative to the Western-style liberal democracy. Currently, such political forces are on the rise in multiple democratic countries (Laruelle 2022). Moreover, some non-democratic regimes (including Russia) embrace the ideological framework of illiberalism to increase their legitimacy and present an alternative to the democratic model of governance (Waller 2023a). Obviously, this ideology is thin and reactive, but it might be the case that it is part of the ideological interregnum providing space for the more coherent and elaborate anti-thesis of democracy as we currently know it to emerge. It is more than likely that the climate of a non-democratic regime will be the one providing ground for the formulation of such an anti-thesis. This is yet another reason for undertaking serious intellectual debates in non-democratic regimes since it might allow us to better understand the ideological and values framework that might appear to challenge established liberal democracies.

Implications for research

The existing literature on non-democratic regimes informs the research in several ways and contributes to specifying its questions. Generally, it supports the assumption that elites in non-democratic contexts matter since their composition and behaviour have proven to be relevant, even for the definition of the regime type across different typologies. This finding motivated scholars to further investigate how elites shape the nature of the regime and its decision-making processes. The research aims to develop this established stream of scholarly thinking.

As works of historians suggest, a great level of nuance is important in similar research since the opinions of elite actors are shaped by multiple factors, including personal experiences, the mood of a given era or constraints imposed by the realities of merciless political struggle in non-democratic contexts. The research adheres to this nuanced perspective and presents a graphic, detailed and complex portrayal of the thinking of each analysed actor. Such an approach also means that the speeches of analysed politicians will be treated seriously, and the research will not speculate about their possible side motives or try to highlight inconsistencies or factual inaccuracies. The goal is not to pass moral judgments but to try to describe the opinions of analysed actors in their complexity.

While generalising theories of elite behaviour are not suitable for such research, they can still provide useful guidance in relation to several points. It is indisputable that political survival and maintaining presence in the winning coalition is an important goal for every political actor that will be analysed. The research, therefore, focuses on various techniques presented in speeches used to improve the actor's position in the political system – in particular, framing the relationship with its main figure, President Vladimir Putin. This will allow us to draw general conclusions about the mechanism of power in Russian politics. The research is partly based on institutional perspectives of politics and subscribes to the argument that institutions matter even in non-democratic settings. Guided by this perspective, it selects for analysis politicians holding official positions, which are – in theory – dependent on the popular vote (with the obvious exception of Nikolay Patrushev, who is a member of the security apparatus). Also, the research will perceive analysed actors not only as individuals but also as officeholders and try to investigate the way in which their speeches are influenced by the institutional context in which they are operating.

The important part of providing a nuanced picture of the thinking of a given elite actor is the ability to describe their personal opinions and ideological profile. The research will draw here on existing findings and try to complement them with its own focus on the nature of politics and the Russian regime. Developing Marianne Kneur's hypothesis about the importance of mission for the behaviour of non-democratic regimes, the research will take a closer look at the approach of individual actors towards the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which is indisputably the main undertaking of the Russian regime at the time of writing. However, the research finds it equally important to identify the personal mission and political objectives of individual elite actors under scrutiny. Through these case studies of topics often mentioned in their public speeches, it will be possible to draw more general conclusions about their approach to politics and consideration of the current and ideal nature of the Russian state.

3. Contemporary Russian regime and ideology

The values, opinions and ideas forming non-democratic regimes must be analysed in a specific context since they are shaped, to a large extent, by the unique experience of a given society, era or ruling elites. Concepts like mentality (Linz 2000), code (Taylor 2018) or mission (Kneuer 2017), presented in the previous chapter, can serve as a useful framework but must be accompanied by empirical data. Informed by such considerations, this chapter will scrutinise ideas influencing the current Russian regime, their evolution over time and different opinions resonating among various segments of the political and intellectual elite. This will enable the research to provide a broader perspective on the analysis of the opinions and perceptions of political actors (to be presented in later chapters) and illustrate the context in which their views are formed. As will be demonstrated, there is no overarching conceptual framework that could be easily applied to categorise their thinking. However, this is not an obstacle for this research since this finding further supports its underlining motivation to provide nuanced insight into the opinions of the Russian elite.

One important clarification related to terminology should be made. This chapter will employ the term “ideological” to refer to the ideas, opinions and concepts used to describe the nature of the Russian regime. This term is not meant to refer to “ideology” (as defined, for instance, by Linz 2000), since the chapter argues that Vladimir Putin’s Russia lacks a unified, comprehensive and overarching set of principles that would guide its decision-making and political strategies. Instead, “ideological” should be understood in relation to an eclectic set of ideas that are circulating within the political elite. As will be discussed further, despite a general consensus on certain values and priorities, current Russian politics lacks a pronounced and clear ideology and can be described instead as disorderly, contradictory and flexible paradigmatic pluralism (Chebankova 2017). After consideration, the author decided to choose the term “ideological” as the most appropriate to describe tendencies in these dynamics.

While trying to describe the ideological milieu forming the thinking of the current Russian political elite, there is a relevant and difficult question about where to start. The existing literature would provide different answers to that question. Some authors would argue that it is important to take into account the influence of Russian political culture and would recommend consideration of how this culture was formulated over centuries of development (Inozemtsev 2017). Others might claim that such a chapter should consider the positions of elite members in

the Soviet era and their proven or alleged connections with intelligence services, the KGB in particular (Belton 2020). Yet other authors would find it useful to start in the 1990s and describe how the legacy of that era impacts the thinking and legitimisation processes of the current regime (Malinova 2021). All these approaches can be backed by convincing arguments and bring some potentially useful insights. Nonetheless, the author decided to limit this chapter only to ideological debates and projects that emerged during the past two decades, in the time when Russia was ruled by Vladimir Putin. Aside from practical reasons (such as limitations of the space dedicated to this chapter), the author is convinced that this period is distinctive enough to be treated as a separate entity. For most of the analysed political actors, the period of Putin's rule also means the culmination of their political careers. The understanding of this period is crucial for any ability to contextualise their worldviews. Their previous life experiences will be described in detail in the chapter dedicated to each political actor. Nevertheless, the emphasis of the research is on how these actors interpret and describe the political regime in the years 2020-2022. Since this period is the main topic of interest of the research, it seems sufficient to provide, at this point, context from the two previous two decades.

The chapter describes this ideological context in three sections. The first section outlines the chronological perspectives and introduces different ideological models to capture the nature of the Russian regime. It shows how, over two decades, Vladimir Putin's regime evolved its mindset from its strictly non-ideological beginnings to the current era which emphasises various motives opposing Western liberalism. Secondly, the chapter explores stable signifiers of the Russian regime and explores the concept of Putinism. It demonstrates that, despite changing emphasis, it is still possible to identify general, vague and yet persistent themes informing Putin's rule. In the third section, it will be argued that it would be too simplistic to understand the Russian elite simply as followers of Putin's visions and ideological projects. On the contrary, it will be demonstrated that there exists a paradigmatic plurality among the elite and that a different approach to its definition will be considered. However, the chapter concludes that the current emphasis is placed on the macro-level of analysis and that more attention to individual actors and their opinions, goals and motivations is missing. This is precisely the knowledge gap that the research is trying to fill.

From the beginning of Vladimir Putin's presidency in the early 2000s, it seemed unlikely that the new Russian President would have the ambition to build up his own ideological project. On the contrary, he clearly tried to distance himself from the Soviet period and his opponents on the political left when declaring his disapproval of a unifying state ideology (Evans 2008). Moreover, Putin's statement seemed to suggest that he was committed to democracy and, in the long run, was committed to bringing governance to a Western-style democracy. However, according to his statements, this process had to occur gradually since Russian society needed to overcome the shock from the collapse of the Soviet Union and the chaotic 1990s. Therefore, he claimed that due to the relative infancy of the political regime and state itself, Russia was not yet ready to become a democracy according to Western standards. Instead, Putin preferred to emphasise that extraordinary steps and measures were needed to ensure the stability of the country and the well-being of its citizens (Laruelle & Radvanyi 2018). Already in 2003, there were the first attempts to conceptualise such a stage of development and Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration Alexandr Voloshin suggested that Russia needed "managed democracy" to be able to overcome its problems at the time (Jurgelevičiūtė 2006).

Notions of the need for a special type of political regime in Russia were further developed by Presidential Advisor Vladislav Surkov, who introduced in 2006 the concept of "sovereign democracy". While the concept of "managed democracy", as propounded by Voloshin, was underdeveloped and quite narrowly focused on performance and governance, Surkov's idea had greater ambition and was based on the argument that every country needs its own path of development which respects local political conditions, history and culture. Henceforth, the ambition to import any other forms of governance – such as Western-style liberal democracy – was perceived as undesirable since it was disrespectful to local conditions (Casula 2013). This concept of "sovereign democracy" must be understood in the historical context since it was introduced at the time of the so-called colour revolutions, which shook the non-democratic regimes of the post-Soviet region (Kortukov 2020). It would be a mistake to perceive this concept solely as a response to ideological pressures from abroad; however, it might also be perceived as a description of the aim of various political steps taken by the ruling elite in a given era. When perceived in this way, it becomes secondary to debate whether Putin himself liked the concept or used it to describe his vision for Russian politics. The important consideration is that it captured the ideological zeitgeist of a given era – a declaratory commitment to democratic

principles and institutions and ambition to maintain the independence of the state from outside influences.

While Vladimir Putin's perception of the concept of "sovereign democracy" is not entirely clear, his accessor in the presidential office, Dmitry Medvedev, clearly publicly opposed it, which led to its exclusion from official documents (Ambrosio 2009: 84). Instead of developing his own vision of a political regime, Medvedev put a more technocratic vision of conservative modernisation at the centre of his agenda (Trenin 2010). Nevertheless, the mass protests after the manipulated elections in 2011 and 2012 undermined the credibility of this approach and forced the regime to look for different methods of legitimation. Scholars labelled this development a "conservative turn" (Engström 2014) and argued that the regime had started to embrace "morality politics" (Sharafutdinova 2014). These politics put traditional values, embracing nationalism, historical legacy and a patriarchal model of society, at the centre of the ideological agenda. Consequently, groups that did not fit into this image – such as the LGBTQ+ community or feminist activists – began to be prosecuted. The case against the Pussy Riot activist group from 2013 for its punk prayer in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour is often presented in the literature as a clear example of the ideological conflict in Russian society (Rutland 2014). However, it is worth remembering that conservative actors, such as the Orthodox Church, were always present in the Russian regime and tried to influence its politics. The "conservative turn" only widened the scope of opportunities for them. At the same time, it is important to note that, despite similar ideological leanings, these actors did not create a united front and were of a very different nature and had different objectives. Therefore, it would be more accurate to describe them as various factions with multiple political agendas (Robinson 2020). Also, the state structures did not necessarily follow the "conservative turn" and the influence of conservative actors varied significantly depending on the specific policy they tried to influence (Busygina & Filippov 2018). Therefore, it would be incorrect to perceive conservatism as the guiding ideology of the regime, and it is necessary to appreciate the gap between the promoters of these politics and the ruling elite.

The different variations of ideological projects in Russia are important to understand within the international context. Their important elements were the increasing anti-Americanism, anti-Westernism and anti-liberalism. The term "sovereign democracy", as well as the 'turn to conservative politics', were significantly clearer in describing what Russia is not and should not aspire to be than vice versa. As tensions with the Western states increased, the Russian

leadership positioned itself not only as a competitor of the West in international politics but also in the ideological sphere. As Vladimir Putin proclaimed in 2019, liberalism has become “obsolete” and Western-style democracy “outlived its purpose” (Barber, Foy & Barker 2019). While the Russian President was one of the most prominent promoters of this position, these ideas gained prominence globally in the 2010s (Sajó, Uitz & Holmes 2022). Therefore, it seems to be correct to perceive the Russian regime through the lenses of the concept of illiberalism, an ideology that suggests the need for significant revision of the current ideological status quo. Nonetheless, this ideology remains thin, and since it is defined negatively, it lacks its own agenda, which makes it dependent on the particular context in which it manifests (Laruelle 2020). As demonstrated in the next section, Putin’s Russia – especially in the contemporary era – is a good example of this since, despite aggressive behaviour in the international scene and great power ambitions, it still lacks a unified and coherent ideology that it could pursue.

The conclusion about the non-existence, or at least vagueness, of the Russian regime’s ideology has always had its opponents. For instance, Alexander Motyl pointed out in 2016 that what he perceived as building the cult of leader was ideological and consistent enough to classify the regime as fascist (Motyl 2016). Especially after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and in the context of a “conservative turn”, other scholars also pointed out that the regime was more invested in the construction of a unifying ideology and should consider whatever the Russian authoritarian regime is not transforming into totalitarianism. The above-mentioned vagueness and lack of consistency of this ideology and its limited ability to mobilise the population were usually acknowledged, but these features were explained as the results of the lacking capabilities of the regime. What matters for the argument about the totalitarian nature of the Russian regime was the supposed ambition of its rulers (Gessen 2017). Obviously, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 added new impetus to this view and led to further discussion about the increasing role of ideology guiding the decision-making of the Russian elite (Zorin et al. 2022 or Snegovaya, Kimmage & McGlynn 2023). In addition, the concept of totalitarianism was in full force suggested again to describe conditions in current-day Russia (Kozyrev 2022).

Given the infancy of this debate, the section does not have the ambition to provide a more comprehensive overview. While acknowledging that 24th February 2022 represents a watershed for Russian internal policy, we might, in retrospect, appreciate that the full-scale invasion of Ukraine also meant the solidification of regime ideology. However, at the time of

writing, it is too early to tell and, therefore, the author prefers to exercise caution about broader conclusions due to the extraordinary situation of the war and the high level of instability.

Putinism as leading ideology?

The previous sections demonstrate that over the past few decades, several ideological projects emerged in Russia. However, it seems that they were each short-lived, and their impact was limited in time and effect. Given this temporality, it makes sense to focus on stable features of the regime and try to extrapolate the regime ideology from them. The personalistic nature of the Russian autocracy suggested that focusing on Vladimir Putin and his opinions might be the right way to describe this issue. Indeed, that is how the concept of Putinism came to be (Kiryukhin & Shcherbak 2022). However, the section will provide a critical overview of the hypothesis underlining this concept, demonstrate its shortcomings, and argue that a focus on Putin himself can be, in fact, detrimental to the proper understanding of the nuance of ideological struggle within the elite.

The term Putinism itself became problematic from its very definition, since different authors use it to describe different things. For one group of authors, it relates to the area of governance, and it should describe the system of power constructed by Putin to protect his position. Henceforth in this research, it refers to fraudulent elections, the use of violence against the opposition or aggressive foreign policy. In other words, Putinism is one of the new forms of non-democratic regimes that developed in reaction to specific conditions of the 21st century (Applebaum 2013). Interestingly, some of these writings even stress the pragmatic nature of Putinism, which excludes ideology from the considerations completely or at least ascribe only secondary importance to it (Gudkov 2014). Obviously, such an approach is not very useful for the topic of this research. The perspective of other authors understands Putinism as an ideological construct. However, they highlight that this construct is vague, not formalised and adaptable to changing conditions (Fish 2017, Sakwa 2020b or Pertsev 2023b). Brian Taylor (2018), the prototypical representative of this thinking, argues that since Putinism is ill-defined by Russian elites themselves, it has to be observed in multiple areas and focuses on ideas, habits and emotions. Based on his observation, he suggests that it is possible to extrapolate the “code” according to which Putin and the Russian elite more broadly operate and which remains consistent over time. He argues that the central themes of the regime are great power statism, emphasis on sovereignty and conservatism (defined especially as opposition to Western-style

liberalism). Based on this conclusion, he claims that the main goal of the regime is to preserve stability which, in combination with increasing anti-Americanism and paranoia, leads to growing aggression on the international stage (Taylor 2018).

The question about the historical foundation of Putinism is approached in different ways. As already mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, some authors argue that it is the result of the historical and cultural conditions of Russian political traditions. In this view, Putinism is only the latest reincarnation of the non-democratic style of governance that is determined by local conditions (Langdon & Tismaneanu 2020). Other authors argue that Putinism should be understood in a more contemporary historical context and point out that it is a reaction to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the chaotic 1990s and the need to establish order and stability during the period of establishing the new state. This perspective suggests that the emergence of Putinism should be seen as the consequence of the dominance of the political sphere by one person whose opinions and attitudes shape the whole environment. Therefore, these works compare Putinism with Thatcherism, Reaganism (Taylor 2018), Gaullism (Laruelle 2017a) or Berlusconi (van Herpen 2013).

The problem remains that Vladimir Putin himself is not particularly helpful when scholars try to define the ideology of his regime. The fact is that he remains remarkably consistent about his views and preferences but, at the same time, he is not an intellectual or ideologue but a politician. This means that his public statements lack sophistication, clearly expressed overarching ideological vision or abstract theorising (Drozdova & Robinson 2019).¹ Scholars are left with a multitude of statements and actions that they can selectively use to support their assumptions. Therefore, analysis of Putin can easily turn into a “Rorschach inkblot test”, talking more about the ambition or prejudices of the given expert than about the worldviews of the Russian President (Galeotti 2019b). Therefore, it was possible to perceive Putin as someone guided by the code of Soviet secret services, nostalgia for the Soviet Union or ultimate machismo defending patriarchal society (as summarised, for example, in Hill & Gaddy 2015). It is not to say that these views are necessarily incorrect since they might shed some light on certain facades of the personality of the Russian President. However, this fragmentation of the research does not allow for judging the importance of individual pieces of evidence for the whole picture and provides a better understanding of the thinking of the whole regime. At least,

¹ The specific tendency of some researchers to look for philosophers and thinkers guiding Putin’s thinking is intentionally omitted from this section since the author is convinced that this thesis does not withstand more thorough analytical scrutiny (as demonstrated, for instance, in Laruelle 2018).

these multiple research strands demonstrate that features of Putinism are contradictory, which does not allow it to develop into a coherent ideology.

The vagueness, fluidity and contradictions of Putinism motivate us to pay closer attention to the way in which this ideological framework resonates among members of the political elite. Brian Taylor (2018) directly addresses this question and argues that “code” is not relevant only for the Russian President personally but reflects the thinking of the whole “Team Putin”. To conclude this section, it is important to highlight the overall thinking behind Putinism as the concept obscures the understanding of the political elite in the Russian regime. On one hand, since the concept is predominantly derived from Putin’s thinking, it puts members of the elite into a passive position and makes them only followers of the leader. However, this contradicts the dynamics of the ideological project described in the previous section since the elite members’ articulation or ambition to introduce them to politics did not necessarily come from the Kremlin but from other elite actors – whether Vladislav Surkov or the Orthodox Church. The following section will try to provide a more nuanced picture and consider the Russian elite as ideologically diverse. On the other hand, the concept of Putinism presents the Russian President as more omnipotent than in actuality. It suggests that any decision or thought process made in Russia is somewhat guided by his wish or command. In an extreme version, such a perspective is not that far from the statement “there is no Russia today if there is no Putin” made by then-Deputy Chief of Presidential Staff Vyacheslav Volodin (““No Putin, No Russia”, says Kremlin Deputy Chief...” 2014). However, the research dedicated to Russian politics shows that politics is far from organised and managed and, in fact, suffers from notable chaos and the pursuit of individual over state interests, especially since Putin is not able to oversee everything (Ananyev 2018). As will be investigated in the next section, the same is true also in the context of the worldviews present among members of the Russian elite.

Ideological plurality among the Russian elite The previous section demonstrated that the Russian regime lacks an ideology that would be consistent, established and shared among political actors. Instead – as Elena Chebankova (2017) usefully summarises – Russian politics is illustrative of paradigmatic pluralism, whereby various opinions can contest for dominance within the limits set by the regime. There is always space for “ideological entrepreneurs”, such as Vladislav Surkov or the Orthodox Church, to try to suggest different ways in which the regime could be legitimised (Laruelle 2017b). Therefore, it is important to study the ideological differences among various elite groups and the values frameworks they try to suggest. This

section summarises some of the key findings and highlights the crucial limitations of existing scholarship, which focuses on the macro level of ideological groups and lacks relevant case studies.

Importantly, the study of differing opinion among members of the Russian elite has a long and established tradition. Despite the fact that the Russian regime was for most of its history non-democratic and repressed – in different forms and scales – dissenting opinions, there were always discussions about the political development and priorities ongoing under the surface. The classic example is the debate among Westernisers and Slavophiles in the 19th century about the relationship of the country with Europe. This polemic was multi-faceted and touched upon the nature of Russian nation, culture and identity but also had notable consequences for practical politics. Even though this might seem like distant history, it is worth noting that some of the classifications of opinions among the Russian elite are clearly inspired by this debate (Zimmerman 2005). Similar attention was dedicated to the study of elite disputes, opinion camps and power dynamics during the Soviet era when they were coined by the term “Kremlinology”. Sometimes, this term had a derogatory undertone since scholars and analysts could rely only on indirect evidence and tried to “read between the lines of official statements” (Engerman 2011). Failures and successes of these approaches remind us how cautious one should be with conclusions and interpretations when focusing on this topic. Finally, the era of the 1990s provided an opportunity to study Russian politics in a manner similar to democratic states and to describe political parties, interest groups or activities (Holzer 2004).

Therefore, it is not surprising that prior research has also tried to describe the thinking of elites in the regime under Vladimir Putin. One of the key observations from the beginning of his rule was his reliance on people with careers in intelligence services or security agencies – the so-called *siloviki*. The professional background of such people would also influenced their worldviews and made them cautious about to democracy, advocates for strengthening the state and confrontational towards Western states. As the number of such individuals within the elite grew, some argued that their dominance in the regime meant that Russia should be categorised as a *militocracy* (Kryshtanovskaya & White 2003). However, already at this point, it was pointed out that *siloviki* did not control the state entirely and had to struggle for power with other groups. Their definition was similarly essentialist since various authors identified oligarchs, state bureaucracy or political liberals (Bremmer & Charap 2006). Nonetheless, exactly the essentialist approach supposing that “once an agent, always an agent”, was criticised

since it was pointed out that different institutions and factions within the siloviki group have different interests and occasionally quite mercilessly clash with each other. Similarly, it was questioned how allegiance to the siloviki is conceptualised, which led to recounts of the number of its representatives in the state institutions (Rivera & Rivera 2014). Despite this criticism, the term “siloviki bloc” remained established in the scholarship and continued to inform thinking about opinion groups within the regime.

Researchers focusing on the ideological division within the Russian elite differ in their approach. Probably due to a lack of transparency in this area, every scholar seems to be tempted to suggest their own categorisation reflecting their understanding of the broader dynamics of Russian politics. This section deliberately omits categorisation based on the position or function of elite members (for example, Minchenko 2019 or Stanovaya 2020a) and emphasises those operating with the notion of ideological division. Andrei Tsygankov divides the elite into three groups based on their attitudes towards relations with the West and their perception of the state. His categorisation includes modernisers trying to emulate Western models, statist prioritising the independence of the country and neo-Euroasianists refusing alignment with Europe and looking for different allies and inspiration in other cultures (Tsygankov 2014). Richard Sakwa offers a similar definition and divides the elite into four groups – liberals, ocharnitelev-siloviki, neo-traditionalists (endorsing different traditions starting from monarchism to Orthodox religion) and neo-Euroasianists. He emphasises that this division is simplified and lists examples of other sub-groups that are included in these general strands of thought (Sakwa 2021). It is noteworthy that these classifications are very much rooted in the Russian context and presupposes that the country’s international politics are closely interlinked with domestic political development. The definition proposed by Marlene Laruelle is closer to conventional thinking about ideologies and defines the regime as conservative in the sense of ambition to maintain stability and balance different interest groups. From that standpoint, she evaluates the relation between the regime and various ideological groups within the elite and society. In her reading, the current illiberal positioning of Putin’s regime is also affected by the consideration of who is the greatest danger to stability at the given moment. Based on previous accounts, Laruelle argues that, in the future, the regime can easily turn its repression to different groups that it perceives as a potential challenge (Laruelle 2017b). In her account of ideological camps in Russian politics, Elena Chebankova argues that, currently, different ideologies – liberalism, nationalism or socialism – are evolving and also have their champions among elite members. She acknowledges that it is important to understand that these ideological camps have

specificity given the contemporary Russian environment but argues that this does not mean that they could not be analysed in the global context (Chebankova 2020).

Another source illustrating the diversity of opinions among elite members is the project “Survey of Russian Elites” by the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. This sociological measurement focused on multiple dimensions of domestic and foreign policy, despite all its possible shortcomings, interestingly illustrates the involvement of and differences between elite members and it is utilised by multiple researchers (for example, Hale, 2019, Lussier 2019 or Sherlock 2020). A different approach was used by Michael Urban, who interviewed politicians active in Russian politics in different periods. One of his interesting findings was that, despite certain unifying themes (such as an emphasis on morality and professionalism), the perception of politics differed among analysed political generations, which demonstrates the ability of Russian politics to evolve (Urban 2010). Obviously, this kind of research method would be preferable for investigating the opinions of elite members. Regrettably, current circumstances do not allow for such an approach.

One limitation of the above-mentioned categorisations and approaches is that they are operating on what Richard Sakwa (2021) identified as the macro level of politics and are not always used to classify specific political actors. There is little research trying to breach this gap and focus on the micro level of opinions of individual political actors. This area is partly saturated in expert pieces published in the media (for example, Pertsev 2019 or Galeotti 2023), but it remains under-investigated. The interesting exception to this rule is Ivan Fomin’s attempt to place members of the Russian elite on the value scale between Radical Statism and Radical Civicism according to the perception of relations between states and citizens expressed in their public speeches. While he concludes that the majority of analysed actors can be perceived as statist, prioritising the strength and sovereignty of the state, he also points out interesting nuances among them (Fomin 2022). Similarly, Martin Kragh and Andreas Umland analyse in detail the political ideas of Nikolai Patrushev and Sergei Naryshkin and, while confirming that these political actors belong among the hawkish siloviki, they still identify different emphases present in their public speeches (Kragh & Umland 2023). Unfortunately, the quantity of such research remains insufficient, which limits our understanding of dynamics within the Russia elite (Noble & Schulmann 2021). This is the research gap that the text aims to address.

Implications for the research

Political elites in contemporary Russia operate in a somewhat fluctuating and vaguely defined ideological environment. The regime lacks an elaborated ideology, and all attempts to define its nature more clearly are very short-lived. Even the seemingly overarching “code of Putinism” remains rather vague and flexible and provides a number of opportunities for evolving individual or collective ideological projects. Obviously, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine might change this equilibrium and redraw existing rules but, at the point of research and writing, it was too early to discuss further developments.

Importantly, elite members do not have to be only passive in the shaping of the ideological landscape. On the contrary, the elusive nature of political regimes incentivises them to act as “ideological entrepreneurs”. In the end, every significant ideological venture of the past two decades in Russia – whether coining the term “sovereign democracy”, introducing a conservative turn or, currently, promoting mobilisation in relation to the war effort had its indicators and benefactors among the elite members.

Interestingly, despite the fact that the elite can (and is) playing an important role in forming an ideological landscape, the research on this topic seems to be relatively limited. Often, scholars remain stuck at the highest level of power and over-focus on the person of Vladimir Putin. More nuanced inquiries about ideological frictions are rather rare and mostly limited to the macro level, describing general differences among various elite factions. The focus on the level of individual political actors is almost lacking at this point.

Therefore, the research focused on analysing the political opinions of representatives of Russian institutions seems to be filling a notable research gap. It is possible to argue that this topic is even more relevant at this point since Russian politics is highly unstable and remains an open question of how the power constellation will evolve over the coming years and even months. Therefore, political actors who are currently seemingly not relevant might rise to unexpected prominence and, in the following years, Putinism will be replaced by another -ism trying to capture the ideas, habits and behaviour of the next Russian leader. It is not possible to rule out that we will be discussing Mishustinism or Volodinism in a few years. Obviously, these are only wild speculations at this point, but it could be argued that scholars should be prepared for these (and many other) possible alternatives.

4. Research approach

Previous chapters have demonstrated how this research develops on existing scholarship. In the context of the study of non-democratic regimes, it further explores the dynamics of ideological struggles among the elite members. Vladimir Putin's Russia represents a suitable case study for this approach due to its present yet rather vaguely defined ideology and paradigmatic pluralism among elite members (Chebankova 2017). The research also develops on the understudied area of Russian politics and aims to bring further insights into the opinions of elite members. By doing so, the research also reacts to some demands made by the academic community (Noble & Schulman 2021). The aim of this chapter is to specify these general aims in the form of research questions and explain the logic of the research approach.

The chapter demonstrates how the research was informed by approaches of critical discourse analysis, in particular, political discourse analysis. This approach emphasises the role of language as the tool of power interactions, allowing us to not only describe the opinions of analysed actors but also to interpret and deconstruct them. The research considers that the meanings of words and terms are constructed and contextual, and it aims to capture how individual political actors apply this procedure. Therefore, the research will be able to comment not only on the opinions of analysed political actors but also demonstrate how they are using language to achieve their political objectives, shape power interactions and construct the space in which they are operating (van Dijk 1997). Even though the research is primarily interested in each actor individually, the comparison between their rhetoric allows us to draw broader conclusions about the functioning of the Russian political regime. To organise this analysis, the research takes advantage of established conceptualisation of the dimension of the political sphere. The research explores how analysed actors describe the polity of the Russian regime and state, the politics of their interaction with other power brokers and the policy objectives they are seeking to achieve (Fiala & Schubert 2000: 47).

The chapter explains the logic beyond the selection of individual political actors under the analysis and uses the theory about the role of institutions in non-democratic regimes presented previously as a point of reference. Given its complex and nuanced topic and the novelty of the field of study, the author decided to limit the research to four political actors. However, it will be demonstrated that the logic behind the selection of these actors was informed by knowledge about the existing ideological groups in the Russian political elite. This starting point allows us

to perceive analysed political actors not only as individuals but also as typical representatives of certain political camps operating nowadays in Russian politics. The chapter also demonstrates that the period under the research – the years 2020, 2021 and the first six months of the year 2022 – were not selected arbitrarily. The research takes advantage of events that radically reshaped Russian politics – the changes in the Constitution, parliamentary elections and the invasion of Ukraine – to analyse political actors in the context in which they cannot stay disengaged and are forced to express more complex political views.

The chapter is divided into two general parts – theoretical, focused on the research background, and practical, focused on its process. The first part consists of a specification of research questions and their rationale as well as explanation of the way in which critical discourse analysis informed the research. The second part explains the logic beyond the selection of analysed political actors, the time period and the process of gathering and analysis of data. The final section deals with the limitations of the research.

Research questions

The investigation of existing scholarship conducted in the two previous chapters substantiates that the investigation of ideological conflicts and frictions among members of the elite in non-democratic regimes is a vibrant yet still under-researched topic in general – as well as in the case of Vladimir Putin’s Russia. Moreover, existing scholarship lacks a unified approach that would help to specify research questions. One example is Brian Taylor’s approach, which tries to capture “ideas, habits and behaviour”, which are three distinct research areas that should be analysed by different methods (Taylor 2018: 10). Obviously, the research develops on Taylor’s findings in the sphere of ideas guiding the regime and influencing elite members, but its approach is more nuanced since it is interested not in commonalities but differences. On the contrary, Marianne Kneur’s suggestion to focus on “mission” is rather too specific and does not allow to capture the thinking of elite members about the nature of the regime as such (Kneur 2017). To sum up, the existing literature provides ample evidence that the general research questions are relevant but does not help much in specifying them.

Key RQ: How do selected political actors perceive the Russian regime and politics?

After consideration, the author decided to utilise the classical model of dimensions of politics. This approach suggests three different perspectives according to which it is possible to analyse

political life: polity, politics and policy (Fiala & Schubert 2000: 47). Firstly, there is the term “polity” which refers to the nature of political community and its values and principles. This level of analysis could be compared to what, in the context of Russian politics, Brian Taylor calls “code” (Taylor 2018). Secondly, “politics” refers to the dynamics of power interactions among individual actors and institutions. This research is interested in how these relations are described in speeches and what it says about the distribution of power in the regime. In this context, the research refers to scholarship on the role of institutions in non-democratic regimes and aims to capture how their role is defined. Thirdly, “policy” refers to specific measures that are proposed and pursued by individual political actors. The research utilises Marianne Kneur’s thinking about mission and applies it not only at the level of the whole regime but at the level of individual political actors (Kneur 2017).

RQ1 (polity dimension): How do selected political actors perceive the nature of the Russian regime?

Obviously, the nature of the regime can evolve due to the pressure of circumstance. As will be explained further, the research is taking advantage of that fact and focuses on the period of two significant shifts in Russian politics. In the year 2020, constitutional amendments were adopted. In 2021, parliamentary elections were held. In 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. Despite their differences, these events were stimuli that reshaped political life in Russia. They created situations in which analysed political actors had to react and reflect on if and how these changes were impacting their perceptions of the nature of the whole regime. Therefore, Research Question 1 (RQ1) is further developed into three sub-questions, as outlined below:

RQ1a (polity dimension): How do selected political actors perceive the nature of the Russian regime in the context of constitutional changes?

RQ1b (polity dimension): How do selected political actors perceive the nature of the Russian regime in the context of parliamentary elections 2021?

RQ1c (policy dimension): How do selected political actors perceive the nature of the Russian regime in the context of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine?

The level of politics is inspired primarily by consideration of the role of institutions in non-democratic regimes. As described later in the chapter, the research took guidance from this stream of thinking also when selecting political actors for analysis. The question about the role of institutions in contemporary Russian politics also guided the logic of Research Question 2

(RQ2) since the research aims to analyse how they are described in the speeches of analysed actors. The underlining assumption is that institutions still matter, and this is reflected in the way individual actors describe the roles and responsibilities of institutions they are representing as well as their interactions with other institutions.

RQ2: How do selected political actors describe existing institutions in Russian politics and interact with them?

The research emphasises that each of the analysed political actors is an active player with their own goals and objectives. To illustrate that, Research Question 3 (RQ3) is focused on the area of policy and uncovers which priorities actors are pursuing. This mission – as Marianne Kneur (2017) would put it – might have a different nature for each political actor. While some were interested in pursuing specific political topics, others might be interested in promoting certain institutional changes. Nonetheless, despite their differences, these goals can still be understood within the framework of the concept of policy.

RQ3: Which policy do selected political actors consistently pursue?

The organisation of datasets and conducting analysis with the three dimensions of political life in mind allows the research not only to provide in-depth descriptions of the opinions of each political actor, but also to compare their positions. Based on this comparison, it is possible to raise the analysis from the micro level and provide more general comments on the nature of politics in contemporary Russia.

Political Discourse Analysis as theoretical background for the research

The research approach is grounded in the well-established framework of critical discourse analysis. It supposes that language is not neutral and solely descriptive but that its meanings are contingent and constructed. The act of this construction is the act of social action and, therefore, the words have to be analysed with the same seriousness as actions. Moreover, the act of formulation of meaning has important implications for power dynamics since control over the meaning of words also leads to control over decisions and actions (Laclau & Mouffe 1985 or Torfing 2005). Therefore, as noted by the political discourse analysis perspective, the analysis of discourse is a relevant tool for understanding and interpreting politics (Chilton 2004 or Wodak 2012). Even more so in non-democratic regimes where careful interpretation of words and their meanings is required since this connection is far from straightforward. Political

discourse analysis is inspiring for this research due to its middle-ground position in relation to the level of analysis. On one hand, it points out the importance of the individual agency of political actors since they are constantly engaged in the process of re-constructing their identities and roles in politics with the use of words. However, they are not operating in an unconstrained environment and must adjust their rhetoric to the context in which they are operating to be comprehensible to other political actors (Fairclough & Fairclough 2012). Due to its vague ideological framework, Vladimir Putin's Russia is an interesting case study for political discourse analysis in the context of non-democratic regimes. To illustrate this claim, the previous chapter demonstrated that sovereignty is a crucial principle for the regime. However, what this sovereignty means in a particular moment and for a particular political actor is less clear and creates space for struggles over meaning. The research about who gets to decide on the interpretation of sovereignty that should be universally accepted in the polity also provides information about the distribution of power (Glynos & Howarth 2007).

The importance of the term "sovereignty" in the discourse produced by the Russian regime reminds us that the construction of meaning does not occur in a vacuum but in interaction with other terms. The identification of nodal points that have a privileged position in the discourse is another approach to uncovering power dynamics (Laclau 1990). An illustrative example is the way political actors referred to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The term "war" was not an acceptable way to describe the developments; therefore, the Russian discourse was dominated by the term "special military operation". The way in which this vague and unclear term was constructed by analysed political actors allows us to uncover their broader considerations about the impact of the conflict on the nature of the Russian regime and politics (Gorobets 2022).

The political discourse analysis understands any constructed term as being only temporary. While the ruling elite can try to maintain control over the discourse, its dominance is constantly challenged. This challenge is even greater in times of crisis and transformations when the political regime updates in functioning, practices and, therefore, also language (Jorgensen & Phillips 2002: 29). Based on this assumption, the research analysis is focused on the year 2020 (when the constitutional changes were adopted), 2021 (when the parliamentary elections were held) and the first half of 2022, when Russia began its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In relation to the logic of political discourse analysis, it is important to add that these changes created the ground for formulation of the new vocabulary in the Russian political regime. Moreover, the vocabulary was not yet fully controlled and prescribed – as was the case with the already

mentioned “special military operation”. This situation forced the analysed political actors to react and construct their own meaning of ongoing events without knowing exactly what official interpretation would soon dominate the discourse. This makes the period under the research particularly interesting since it provides an opportunity to explore the rhetorical strategies and articulation of positions of the analysed political actors.

The stability of the discursive construction is yet another signifier of the distribution of power. Some of the terms can be open to contestation about their meaning. As will be demonstrated, it was even encouraged by the Kremlin to articulate how the Russian constitution should be amended, and some political actors took an active part in this process and suggested rather a diverse spectrum of suggestions. However, this paradigmatic pluralism has clear limits when it comes to particular topics such as “special military operations” or the position of the President. The level of agreement about the construction of particular topics among analysed political actors also informs about the nature of power dynamics in Russian politics. Similarly, changes in the interpretation of previously undisputable topics – such as the role of the President, for instance – suggested that the regime is changing.

The research fits into the stream of scholarly literature focused on Russian politics and is inspired by the political discourse analysis approach. Most of the research mentioned in the “Contemporary Russian regime and ideology” chapter benefitted from this tradition. Other works used these learnings to analyse Russian foreign policy (Stewart & Zhukov 2009), power dynamics (Baturko & Mikhaylov 2014), energy (Tichý & Kratochvíl 2014) and numerous other topics (for example, Friedman 2017, Aksiumov & Avksentev 2022 or Edenborg 2023). Therefore, it is possible to conclude that the research chooses a well-established and tested approach to answer its research questions.

Selection of analysed political actors

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, the conceptualisation of the Russian elite is far from unified. Different works take different approaches and include a different range of actors in their analysis – often without a clear explanation of why particular individuals are included. Therefore, it is hard to find a unifying framework that would inform the research. However, the important conclusion from existing research of the Russian elite was the existence of various ideological camps, which motivated the author to choose actors with different political trajectories and allegiances for the analysis. As described later, the selection of political actors

under analysis tried to reflect antagonistic ideological views and political biographies. It would be an overstatement to say that the selected actors are prototypes of opinion groups within the Russian elite. Nonetheless, it can be argued that their opinions are not unique but likely shared by other political actors within the Russian elite.

The theory of institutions in non-democratic regimes provides quite an instructive way to approach the selection of political actors for analysis. The research follows its logic and focuses on four individuals holding official positions within the political regime. The author found this way of selection the most transparent. Also, it made it significantly easier to find data for the analysis since people in such public-facing positions are expected to share their views, and they are easily accessible on the websites of the institutions they are representing. For less publicly active members of the political elite, the research approach would not be suitable. Obviously, this approach has its drawbacks since it puts emphasis only on one side of the dual state in Russia (Sakwa 2010) and omits from the picture oligarchs, lobbyists, spin doctors and other actors present primarily behind the scenes. This is an acknowledged limitation of the research. On the contrary, the added value of this approach directly tied to RQ2 is that such an approach allows the capture of how selected political actors refer to their own institutions. In this sense, the findings of the research can also inform the theory of institutions in non-democratic regimes by providing further data from the Russian case.

The actors selected for analysis are the following:

- Mikhail Mishustin, Prime Minister
- Vyacheslav Volodin, Chairman of the State Duma
- Nikolai Patrushev, Secretary of the Security Council of Russia
- Gennady Zyuganov, General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation

The reason for including Mikhail Mishustin in the analysis is that the position of the Prime Minister is the second most important in the executive branch of power (after the President). Also, Mishustin is interesting since – compared to other analysed actors – he is a political newcomer who took his position only in 2020, and his views have not yet been properly analysed. As discussed in the chapter dedicated to his opinions, only the available scholarly work on his opinions conducted by Ivan Fomin (2022) suggests that he differentiates himself from members of the elite by tending towards civicism. His personal background also makes

him a typical representative of the technocratic segment of the Russian elite from the bureaucratic structures. Meanwhile, Vyacheslav Volodin was selected for the analysis due to his position as Chairman of the State Duma, which makes him the most influential person in the legislative branch of power. While Volodin's political career started in the 1990s, it is possible to say that he reached a higher position only during Vladimir Putin's era – firstly in the State Duma, then in the Presidential Administration and later again in the Duma. This political trajectory shows that his career as a politician is closely related to the current Russian political regime. From the institutional point of view, it is relevant that his political manoeuvring helped to strengthen the position of the State Duma which, in turn, increased Volodin's influence.

Selection of the other two analysed political actors was more arbitrary. Nikolai Patrushev's relevance is not only through his position as Secretary of the Security Council of Russia but also by his long-term relation with the President and suspected influence over his thinking and decisions of the Russian regime. It is speculated that, especially in the context of the invasion of Ukraine, his influence increased even further (In Moscow's Shadows 2022a). As the research will demonstrate, Patrushev differs from the other analysed actors in his vocabulary and ambition to introduce an ideological framework to the Russian regime. Also, given his senior position within the security apparatus, Patrushev should be considered as representative of the siloviki group within the elite. Gennady Zyuganov is the most experienced of all the analysed actors since his political career peaked in 1996, when he was a serious challenger for Boris Yeltsin in the presidential elections. This brought him to the attention of the scholars who also focused on his opinions. The motivation to include him in the research was driven by his position as the leader of the strongest party within the systemic opposition. While the Communist Party's position was never easy in Putin's Russia, recent developments have put it into an even more difficult position. Therefore, the research is interested in how this situation was managed by Zyuganov, while trying to maintain his position as a semi-independent political actor. His rhetoric is the most likely to reveal the limits of the possible within the current political regime.

The research aims to provide a detailed analysis of the opinions of selected actors, which limits the number of elite members that could be included in the analysis. The author is convinced that the rationale explained above makes a compelling case for why these actors were included. Nonetheless, this selection is still arbitrary and there would be various good arguments to focus

on different political actors. For the sake of transparency, it should be mentioned that other political actors were also considered. At one point, research attention was dedicated to Sergei Shoigu, Minister of Defence and a capable political operator. However, during the gathering of data, it turned out that Shoigu's speeches did not provide sufficient insights into his thinking and did not provide the opportunity to answer the research questions. Shoigu's speeches were almost exclusively focused on military affairs and remained mostly technical and bureaucratic. Another considered political actor was Vladimir Zhirinovski, the leader of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia. However, his death in April 2022 prevented the potentially interesting analysis of the evolution of his radical opinions during the course of the war.

Selection of analysed period

Since scholarship on the opinions of members of the Russian elite is rather scarce, the research had a certain level of liberty in choosing the period of the analysis. In order to provide the most contemporary insights, its main aim was to create a dataset that would be as current as possible. At the same time, the period under scrutiny needed to be long enough to provide a representative sample of speeches of the given actors presented in different contexts to different audiences. Given the time-consuming research approach, the author decided to select the research period to capture the latest developments in Russian politics. Therefore, it encompasses data gathered from the year 2020 (when the constitutional changes were adopted), 2021 (when the parliamentary elections were held) and the first six months of 2023 (when Russia began its full-scale invasion of Ukraine). While the analysis does not focus solely on these events, their context has proven to be useful since they occurred somewhat unexpectedly and forced members of the Russian elite to find different strategies to adjust to the new realities. As the critical discourse theory suggests, this adjustment had not only been reflected in the change of behaviour but was also reflected in their vocabulary and political speeches. This section briefly describes the nature of the above-mentioned events and their impact on elite behaviour.

The process of constitutional changes took place in the first half of 2020. This process started somewhat unexpectedly since this possibility was firstly hinted by the President during his regular annual press conference on 19th December 2019. When a journalist asked Vladimir Putin about his opinion on possible constitutional changes, he noted that there is no need to “adopt the new [Constitution]” and even claimed that the first chapter of the document is “sacrosanct”. At the same time, he referred to this document as “a live tool that has to keep up

with the evolution of society” and acknowledged that he was aware of ongoing debates on this issue and did not exclude the possibility of amending it (Putin 2019). This rather cautious answer contrasted with Putin’s annual address to the Federal Assembly on 15th January 2020, when he outlined seven major principles for constitutional reform, which “means drastic changes to the political system” (Putin 2020). A significant role in the process was played by an incoherent working group that evaluated the incoming proposals of the amendments submitted by citizens following a campaign encouraging them to do so. In the next stage, the State Duma approved in the first reading amendments suggested by Putin himself in the bill entitled “On improving the regulation of various issues concerning the organisation of public power”. On 2nd March 2020, the package of amendments, including those processed by the working group, was submitted to the State Duma for the second reading. During this procedure, a member of the Russian State Duma, Valentina Tereshkova, proposed a last-minute amendment that would remove presidential term limits from the constitution and allow Putin to run again in the 2024 elections. This and other changes were approved and submitted to the third reading, which took place on 11th March 2020. The President signed the law on 14th March 2020, and the amendments were officially published in Rossiiskaya Gazeta, the official newspaper of the Russian government, where laws are published (Teague 2020).

After the finalisation of procedures in the parliament, the amendments were approved by the popular vote, despite the fact that the Constitution does not require this process. The procedure of the “all-Russian vote, which was selected for this purpose, belongs to a legally grey area since it is not equal to a regular referendum and had to be regulated by ad hoc legislation. The vote was originally scheduled for 22nd April 2020, but was postponed to 1st July due to the global coronavirus pandemic. The turnout was 67.9%; 77.9% voted for the amendments, and 21.2% were against them. Following that, on 3rd July 2020, Putin signed the executive order regarding the adoption of amendments that came into power the next day (Hutcheson & McAllister 2021). Despite the President being the main driving force behind the constitutional changes, the process provided multiple opportunities for other political actors to enter the process. In fact, their active involvement was expected since it should increase the legitimacy of the whole process, which William Parlet (2021) labelled as “theatrical constitutional-making”. As will be demonstrated in the following chapters, some of the analysed political actors used this opportunity to introduce amendments reflecting these ideological views, and also used the Constitution to support this political agenda.

The parliamentary elections were held from 17th to 19th September 2021. The opposition challenged the Kremlin by introducing the concept of “smart voting” to undermine the position of its affiliated parties (Turchenko & Golosov 2023). Nonetheless, this strategy was not entirely successful, due to numerous election frauds that were made easier by the remote electronic vote. The pro-Kremlin party, United Russia, won the elections with 49.8%, followed by the Communist Party with 19.8%. However, the electoral manipulation in Moscow led to protests and a refusal to accept the results by the opposition, including the Communists. While these protests were only short-lived, it reminded that – despite their orchestrated nature – elections still represent pressure points during which the regime remains highly vulnerable (Hutcheson 2022). Also, elections create various different opportunities for elite members to pursue their agendas.

The analysis of opinions of selected political actors in the context of debates about constitutional amendments and elections was planned since the very early stages of the research. On the contrary, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 forced the author to reconsider his approach and react to the new situation by extending the period under analysis. The project plans to continue with gathering data until August 2022. The research does not have the ambition to provide a detailed summary of the different arguments put forward by elite members to explain and legitimise the invasion, but it takes advantage of the fact that it put under pressure the formal and informal rules guiding political life and forced the analysed actors to reconsider their positions and identities. While the decision-making process related to the invasion still needs to be carefully studied, it seems that the decision was made in the closest circle of Vladimir Putin’s collaborators, and the majority of elite members seemed to be surprised by the situation and had to adjust to developments (Waller 2023b). The situation was quite turbulent, given the failure of the original invasion plans, which forced the regime as a whole and members of the elite to improvise. Just how turbulent and open-ended the situation became was illustrated, for instance, by the mutiny of the Wagner mercenary group in June 2023. This event is not covered in the research but demonstrates a more fluid and chaotic context, which provided new opportunities for elite members to pursue their political objectives (Stanovaya 2023). Therefore, analysis of their speech related to the war represents a useful source for understanding their political strategies. As has already been stressed, the ambition of the research is rather modest and bound to the original research questions. Nonetheless, as demonstrated in the following chapter, the research still provides a useful starting point for

other scholars interested in the analysis of internal political dynamics during the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Dataset and approach to analysis

Political discourse analysis is a broad method for the interpretation of public speeches by politicians. It does not provide a step-by-step guide for the analysis but suggests a general framework for understanding data (Howarth 2005). It emphasises the need to treat the content of speeches seriously and critically at the same time, which allows for uncovering meanings beyond words through sub-text and allusions. The approach of discourse analysis also suggests not perceiving statements in a vacuum but trying to understand them in interaction with other statements by a given political actor or other members of the elite. These principles were considered while conducting a close reading of the speeches included in the dataset.

The gathering of a sufficiently large dataset for analysis turned out to be fairly straightforward, since all political actors were publicly active. They gave interviews to the media, made public speeches on various occasions, and some of them even used social media. Also, finding these speeches was not difficult since their transcripts – usually provided in full length and detail – were gathered on the websites of institutions represented by the analysed political actors. The number of public speeches and attempts to gather and present them in one place suggest that presenting one's opinion in the public domain remains significant even in the conditions of the non-democratic Russian regime. While most of the transcripts were in the Russian language, in some instances, there were also translations available in English. Obviously, it is necessary to acknowledge that gathering datasets from speeches from official websites has its problems since it very much replicates the way a given political actor wants to be perceived. Therefore, it is possible to assume that this source will not record speeches or statements that might be controversial. There is also a danger that transcripts of speeches will be curated over time to better suit changing realities. With all these caveats in mind, the author is still convinced that, based on this source, it was possible to gather a sufficiently large dataset capturing analysed political actors in various contexts and speaking to different audiences. The special case was Nikolai Patrushev, who did not speak publicly as often as other analysed actors. However, the significantly lower number of texts was compensated by their length and direct focus on topics related to matters of research interest. This allowed them to contribute to conclusions about the political opinions presented publicly. Focusing on the longer periods including political

turbulences presented in the previous section enabled critical evaluation of terms, themes, and arguments present in speeches. This approach allowed the analysis to answer research questions about the opinions of the selected political actors.

In fact, the large quantity of data presented a challenge since it was not easy to decide which texts were relevant enough to be included in the dataset. This relates to the fact that the analysed actors used different phrases, terms, and wording to talk about politics. While existing research provided a general idea about the topics trending among the Russian political elite, it was not sufficiently detailed to prepare a suitable research framework prior to analysis of the data. This limited the use of artificial intelligence tools or machine-assisted keywords searches. Therefore, the relevant texts for analysis were selected based on a close reading of all available texts and selecting those suitable for further analysis in relation to the research questions. The criteria for including the text in the analysis were the following:

- 1) The article refers to the nature of the Russian political regime.
- 2) The article refers to constitutional changes or Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.
- 3) The article describes political institutions or interactions between them.
- 4) The article describes the political priorities of an analysed political actor.

The selected approach was obviously time-consuming and putting together a dataset for further analysis required significant effort. Nonetheless, at the end of this procedure, it was possible to present the dataset sufficient for answering the research questions. The table below shows the number of analysed texts per each analysed political actor.

Table 1. – Number of speeches by political actors included in dataset

Political actor	Number of texts
Mikhail Mishustin	166
Vyacheslav Volodin	147
Nikolai Patrushev	22
Gennady Zyuganov	72

Despite its time-consuming nature, this close reading approach also helped to reconcile the difference between the nature of the research questions and the speeches of political actors. The highly theoretical, if not even philosophical, topics of the nature of the political regime and its guiding principles and values are not necessarily the most prominent in political speeches. Neither are the analysed actors political philosophers, political theoreticians or ideologues. As

a result, their speeches were not intellectually elaborate exercises of essayist nature. Instead, the analysis had to grapple with vague clichés, unclear comparisons or slogans scattered in speeches which focused on issues of mundane state management. Only during analysis did it become apparent which terms and references recurred despite being said in different contexts or which were further elaborated. Only then was it possible to start composing individual pieces of information into a mosaic, enabling the analysis to answer the research questions. This data-driven approach benefitted tremendously from the selected research method, which allowed for identification of nuances and the uncovering of seemingly irrelevant remarks that fit into the broader picture of thinking of a given political actor. In some cases, the selected period also helped since – as anticipated – it created the context in which political actors had an incentive to articulate their political views more fully. Obviously, this approach has its limitations since it really depends on the interpretation of opinions from ample yet still fragmentary pieces of evidence. The comparison among individual analysed actors helped to make the analysis more grounded, since it uncovered interesting similarities and differences in the ways they spoke about the regime and its individual institutions (which was particularly relevant for RQ1 and RQ2). Looking into each person's political background and personal history was then helpful for providing context for the preferred policy investigated in the context of RQ3.

Research limitations and challenges

The research faces various limitations and challenges. While some of them – like lack of existing scholarship on the analysed actors – have already been discussed, this section will deal separately with the three most significant challenges that might complicate the search for answers to the posed research questions.

The first challenge is related to the unreliability of sources. As was already discussed, gathering texts for the dataset was not very challenging since the analysed political actors and their institutions presented this material online. While materials were not always available in the form of the full transcript, they still provided a satisfactory number of data points to use to draw conclusions relevant to the research. However, political discourse analysis presupposes that public speeches are not neutral but have their distinct role in shaping the image of a given actor and helping that person to pursue their goal. Therefore, filtering, adjusting and censoring of public speeches should be expected practice – even more so in the context of non-democratic regimes that face turbulent times, such as the Russian one. Thus, it is reasonable to ask to what

extent texts gathered in the dataset present reality and to what extent they were manufactured to serve a particular purpose. The answer is that this consideration is already present in the thinking of critical discourse analysis since this method does not take texts at face value but tries to understand them in their context, including the very technical aspects of their curation and revision. This consideration was present during the whole analytical process in order to critically scrutinise texts. The author was surprised about the amount of material and its detailed nature which, in the case of some sources, was almost stenographic in nature. Obviously, the reliability of sources slightly differed for each actor since various sources were used to acquire data. However, in any of the analysed cases, the author does not consider that the material was curated to the extent that would make analysis impossible. To overcome possible challenges related to the loss of data, the author created his own database of relevant parts of the texts, which allowed him to store material independently from the original online sources.

The second possible criticism of the research might relate to the relevance of the sources. As already demonstrated, the role of ideology in the Russian political context (and contemporary authoritarian regimes in general) was, to a large extent, dismissed in recent academic literature. Instead, political actors were understood as pure rent-seekers who are willing to use any tool that would give them more legitimacy. In this view, studying their rhetoric in any other way than as a form of deception and propaganda seemed to be fruitless. Already, previous chapters have shown the limits of this approach and provided sufficient explanation as to why public speech should be studied. To add a different perspective grounded in the critical discourse analysis approach, it is possible to emphasise that the research does not aim to explain the behaviour of individual political actors since actions can be motivated by multiple reasons in which opinions and ideological belief comprise only one component. What interests this research is to use the analysis to capture the ideological matrix of Russian politics in the given period and use this mapping to better understand the environment in which political actors made their choices. Similarly, as words must be studied in the context of other words, the opinions of political actors are studied in comparison with other political actors. Selected periods of significant political shifts open up questions as to why individual political actors speak differently about them, which allows us to formulate further questions about their behaviour. Obviously, this approach should be made with notable caution and the research tries to support this wider conclusion with other existing sources that might result from different methods or even spheres of expertise, such as investigative journalism. As always, sticking to the research

questions proved to be a helpful defence against the temptation to start with unfounded speculations.

The third challenge for the research was the lack of data that would not enable analysis to answer the set research questions. As already mentioned, this problem did not occur even though, in most cases, that analysis had to be based on fragmented statements scattered through multiple speeches. Since none of the analysed political actors base their speeches on an elaborated ideological framework, this situation was expected. Nonetheless, it was the case that the frequency of comments on individual topics differed. Specifically, it occurred in relation to the invasion of Ukraine, which was commented on by some analysed actors more than by others. In this instance, the comparative perspective was particularly useful since the silence itself was a powerful signal about the opinions of a given actor.

Despite overcoming the mentioned challenges, the research has its obvious limits, which are, however, related to the selected method. The use of interviews would provide an in-depth probe into the thinking of the selected actors. In addition, historical distance would have allowed entrance into currently unavailable archives and, therefore, further insights into private conversations. Using a larger dataset investigated with the assistance of artificial intelligence would enable the capture of opinions of a wider range of political actors and analysis of various topics. Unfortunately, the sad reality of research on politics in contemporary Russia is that the available options are limited, and field research is nearly impossible (Lankina 2023). However, rather than lamenting lost possibilities, the author is convinced that scholars should find ways to grapple with the current situation and take the fullest advantage of the methods it allows (see, for example, by Kalinin 2023). The author hopes that his research is one of the scholarly works showing that, even in today's circumstances, it is still possible to provide meaningful insights into Russian politics.

5. Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin

At the beginning of 2020, Russian politics experienced an unexpected reshuffle in the position of the Prime Minister. Dmitry Medvedev, the long-term holder of this office and close ally of President Vladimir Putin, was replaced by a political novice – former Head of the Federal Tax Service, Mikhail Vladimirovich Mishustin. The selection of an unknown bureaucrat for one of the highest positions in the institutional hierarchy surprised observers and scholars focused on Russian politics. This unexpected move led to various speculations about the reasons behind Mishustin's appointment and its potential impact on power dynamics within the regime. Interestingly, commentaries often disagreed and contradicted each other. In the view of the author, this inability to agree illustrates not only uncertainty but also the lack of attention that was dedicated to the role of the Prime Minister. This institution was overshadowed by the President and his administration, who were seen as comprising the main decision-making body in the executive branch of power (for example, Burkhardt 2021a). While previously – when Medvedev held the post – this perspective was understandable to a certain extent, the appointment of Mishustin means that it is necessary to rethink the role of the Prime Minister in the Russian regime.

In order to do that, it is important to understand how Mishustin thinks about the role of the Prime Minister and politics in general. The limitation is that, so far, very little is known about his opinions. This fact is far from surprising since – similar to other Russian career bureaucrats – Mishustin avoided the public sphere and kept his opinions to himself prior to his appointment as Prime Minister. For this reason, the study of his opinions is even more relevant since he should be perceived not only as an individual but representative of a wider group of civil servants that are managing the day-to-day operations of the state. The group is usually silent but, at the same time, crucial for regime function and survival.

Research revealed that Mishustin's political views were not overly sophisticated. He did not promote any elaborated ideological vision but perceived himself mostly as an administrator. His aim was to establish a well-functioning state that would be responsible for the socio-economic needs of Russian citizens. The main tool to achieve that should be digitalisation, which Mishustin perceived as an almost universal cure to various problems of the Russian state. As an early adopter of modern technologies, his approach to digitalisation was not naïve, and his speeches were clearly informed by global trends as well as Russian debates about modernisation. However, Mishustin never dared to consider – or at least express – that the

problems of the regime, which he acknowledges might also have political reasons, need to be tackled. This vision of gradual modernisation via digitalisation was obviously put under significant pressure due to the invasion of Ukraine. Mishustin did not belong among those cheering the war and, instead, mostly ignored this subject in his speeches. There are some hints that his main aim was to keep the economy running without significant interference from the state, which brought him into conflict with the siloviki in the elite. The fact that he was able to keep his post despite that suggests that Mishustin turned into a capable political operator whose next steps are worth watching. The texts of Mikhail Mishustin's public speeches were gathered from the transcripts on the official website of the Russian government. The analysis was based on, in total, 166 speeches that the Prime Minister made between 2020 and 2022. Mishustin seemed to be quickly adapting to his new role and, from an ordinary bureaucrat, evolved into a public-facing political figure presenting his opinions at various venues where he met with ordinary citizens. Similarly, he also started to represent Russian abroad – especially in the countries of Central Asia – where he tried to advocate for its politics. This role became even more important after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which started during his visit to Astana in Kazakhstan. Despite the fact that Mishustin did not present any coherent and overarching ideological vision, the analysed speeches uncovered his perception of the role of the Prime Minister and his understanding and practices of political life.

The role of Prime Minister in the Russian political regime

The President has always overshadowed the position of the Prime Minister in the Russian Federation. This was not only a matter of the last two decades when Russian politics revolved around Vladimir Putin but was embedded in the institutional setting in the 1990s. Researchers in comparative politics pointed out pre-Putin that strong presidential powers established in the constitution marginalise other political actors and might represent a threat to the division of powers and democratic development in the long run (Fish 2000). This also applied to the Prime Minister and the government as a whole, since the President had a major impact on the appointment of its members (Semenova 2015). Moreover, the government's position was further undermined by the need to secure the support of the State Duma (Morgan-Jones & Schleiter 2004). Since juggling the need to please the President and maintain the support of legislators was not easy, it is no wonder that between 1990 and 2004, each cabinet lasted only 1.35 years on average (Shevchenko 2004).

However, holding such an unstable job could be beneficial for one's political career since it meant establishment in the highest levels of power. In fact, Vladimir Putin is a clear example of this since he served for a short time in the position of Prime Minister before running for the presidency between August 1999 and May 2020, which was perceived as a signal of his rise to power (BBC 1999). Moreover, he returned to this position in 2008 when his loyal ally Dmitry Medvedev became President. Unsurprisingly, the situation of "tandemocracy" sparked a new wave of interest in the position of the Prime Minister and speculation about the redistribution of power among institutions in the Russian political system (for example, Black 2015). However, these debates were ended by Putin's return to the presidential post in 2012 when it became clearer that the regime was on the path to personalised autocracy (Shevtsova 2015). In this context, the position of Prime Minister started to be perceived as less relevant, which reflected in less attention dedicated to it among researchers. For instance, the latest Routledge Handbook of Russian Politics and Society does not even dedicate a separate chapter to the government or the Prime Minister (see Gill 2023).

A different perspective underlining the importance of the government in Russian politics was offered by Maxim Ananyev, who distinguished between two modes of decision-making in the executive branch of the regime. According to Ananyev's findings, when the President is personally interested in a particular agenda, he can achieve its adoption rather quickly since all actors in the regime are keen on supporting it. However, even in this case, the implementation of Putin's ideas is not automatic since it would require his constant oversight of the agenda in question. This is obviously not possible, as was proven in a number of instances when the Russian President himself expressed frustration over the inability of the regime to achieve set objectives. According to Ananyev, more often, a second mode of decision-making takes place. When Putin's preferences are unclear and his orders are vague, it is up to the state apparatus to deliver a solution that would fit the situation as well as the preferences of the President. This situation opens a space for clashes among various interest groups and leads to the formation of ad hoc alliances pursuing particular objectives (Ananyev 2018). This obviously creates an interesting opportunity for people in official positions, such as the Prime Minister.

The lack of clarity about the role of the Prime Minister clearly manifested in 2020 when Putin's loyal ally Medvedev was replaced by the publicly unknown Head of Russia's Federal Tax Service, Mikhail Mishustin. It is important to underline how notable this change was since it was the first time since 2008 that this position was held by someone other than Medvedev or

Putin. Uncertainty about what it meant for the future of the position of Prime Minister was apparent from commentaries. For instance, Tatiana Stanovaya argued that Mishustin's government would be technocratic and likely to focus on social policy. She suggested that the Prime Minister's role would be to maintain the status quo and, at best, in the very long run, could constitute the conditions for the emancipation of a new generation of skilful technocrats (Stanovaya 2020b). Vladimir Gel'man, meanwhile, pointed to programmatic continuity between Medvedev's and Mishustin's cabinets and expressed significant doubts that the latter would be able to tackle the structural problems of Russian society, also due to political constraints (Gel'man 2020). On the contrary, Fabian Burkhardt, while looking back at the first year of Mishustin's government, claimed that the Prime Minister was becoming rather ambitious in his reforms and might improve the poor quality of governance in Russia (Burkhardt 2021b). These contradictory expectations demonstrate the need for closer examination of Mikhail Mishustin's objectives and opinions. Indeed, they might bring more clarity not only to his political objectives but also to the perception of the role of the Prime Minister and the ways in which he tried to define this institution during interactions with other elite actors.

Political career and personal views of Mikhail Mishustin

The lack of clarity about Mikhail Mishustin's political priorities is not surprising considering the fact that he was not – unlike other actors described in this research – a high-profile political figure before his appointment as Prime Minister. Therefore, his opinions were, to a large extent, unknown. He graduated from the Moscow State University of Technology with a degree in Computer-Aided Design. In the 1990s, he was a member of the non-profit International Computer Club, which tried to integrate Russian and Western computer systems. Furthermore, during his tenure as Head of the Federal Taxation Service, he placed great emphasis on the digitalisation of its processes (Yakoreva et al. 2020). During this time, he did not enter significantly into public debate. Instead, the publicly available speeches from this period were official records of his meetings with the President, published on the websites of the presidential office. These were oriented solely on the agenda of public finances and did not include any references to wider political matters. Based on these matter-of-fact conversations, one could hardly foresee that Putin would select Mishustin as Prime Minister (see Kremlin 2017 or Kremlin 2018). One of the few notable observations about Mishustin's career before becoming

Prime Minister is his genuine interest in the topic of digitalisation. This interest – as demonstrated in this chapter – had implications for his perception of politics.

To the author's knowledge, the only research exploring Mikhail Mishustin's opinions at the time of writing was conducted by Ivan Fomin, who tried to place him in an ideological matrix while analysing the public speeches of various actors in the Russian state bureaucracy. He concludes that Mishustin expresses views of moderate civicism, which is an ideological position placing the needs and interests of citizens at its centre and which is reluctant to limit their rights. This position makes the Prime Minister's views close to those of people like his First Deputy, Andrey Belousov, or Moscow Mayor Sergey Sobyenin and also distinguishes him from the Russian political mainstream, which is inclined to prioritise the needs of the state (Fomin 2022).

This finding was interesting, especially in the context of Russia's war in Ukraine, which pushed such opinions – that were already in the minority – even further from the political mainstream. At the start of the war (February 2022), Mikhail Mishustin was in Astana at the meeting of heads of governments of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). He publicly commented on the conflict only briefly and used this platform to remind other member states of the attempts by Western governments to break up the EEU (Mishustin 2022a). Over the next few months, his rhetoric about the war was rather reserved; he preferred not to talk about it directly but instead focused on its consequences that had to be dealt with by the government. On 7th April, in a speech presenting his work to the State Duma, he defined the task of the government as “limiting the impact of sanctions, achieving goals of national development, developing economy, securing imports” (Mishustin 2022b). The lengthy discussion that followed primarily focused on economic, administrative and organisational obstacles in achieving these goals and did not mention the war or foreign and security policy in general. For the most part, Mishustin's speeches remained free of propagandist slogans about the ideological struggle with the West and treated sanctions as a technical obstacle not dissimilar to the coronavirus pandemic. He did not even mention the Russian war efforts during such relevant occasions as the celebration of Victory Day (Mishustin 2022c) or the visit of the Kalashnikov Concern, which produces military equipment (Mishustin 2022d). The only occasion when Mishustin commented on the ongoing conflict was during a discussion about sanctions, which he described as part of the economic war waged by the West against Russia (Mishustin 2022e).

These examples make clear that the Prime Minister chose to distance himself from the invasion and instead focused on domestic issues. In particular, he emphasised that his job is to ensure that economic sanctions do not affect the well-being of ordinary Russians (Mishustin 2022f). The ambition to maintain the existing economic situation obviously created tensions between Mishustin and other bureaucrats on one hand and elite members (such as those from the military and security apparatus) who advocated that all national resources must be devoted to war (In Moscow's Shadows 2022b). Even though it is necessary to wait to learn more about these internal struggles in more detail since, at the time of writing this chapter, the picture could be constructed only from investigative reporting and leaks of internal documents, which can both be biased and partial. One of the tactics Mishustin adopted during his clashes with the siloviki seemed to be to present himself publicly as someone who knows how to keep Russia's economy working and to express this need in the language of national security. For instance, he remarked during a meeting with representatives from the United Russia Party in March 2022 that it was crucial to maintain "maximal economic freedom" since the country's enemies will try to undermine it. This statement – which Mishustin did not forget to mention should be in accordance with the wishes of President Putin – can be read as a message to rival political forces which might aim to introduce a stronger intervention by the state in the economy (Mishustin 2022g). Later in the year, the Prime Minister adjusted his rhetoric and embraced the ambition to achieve "economic sovereignty" (Mishustin 2022h) and "technical independence" (Mishustin 2022i). However, these proclamations were also associated with calls for openness and to maintain strong economic ties with non-Western states. At least in 2022, this restrained and technocratic rhetoric seemed to yield certain fruit for Mishustin since he was appointed to lead the Special Coordinating Council for Security Enhancement (Evsyukova 2022). Therefore, in retrospect, it will be interesting to follow the career paths of bureaucrats similar to the Prime Minister during the war period because these actors, despite not loudly hailing the invasion of Ukraine (unlike basically all other actors described in this work), have seemed to be able to increase the area of their responsibility.

Mikhail Mishustin: nature of the regime

Mikhail Mishustin became Prime Minister during a turbulent political debate about the proposed constitutional amendments. The legislative changes were of supreme importance, ultimately influencing the government's formal position and, therefore, him personally. Nevertheless, he was completely silent about this issue and did not comment on it in any way.

Mishustin's only comments reflecting this topic were made after the Constitution was amended. His reflection was rather practical since he mentioned that his government had a new task to fulfil due to provisions granting social security for citizens (Mishustin 2020a). His abstention from the debate about the constitutional amendments might, in part, have been due to the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, which dominated the first months of Mishustin's agenda as Prime Minister. However, it is even more likely that he simply did not have anything to say in this context since his comments on the nature of the political system were rather scarce in general. For example, he highlighted the importance of the city of Novgorod for the Russian democratic tradition during an official visit (Mishustin 2020b) and commemorated the day of the State Duma while praising the idea of parliamentarism (Mishustin 2020c). These comments, though, were highly contextual and ceremonial in nature, and Mishustin did not associate them with a broader vision for contemporary Russian politics. His speeches were usually focused on more practical and mundane matters related to day-to-day administrative management. This technocratic approach to governance was encapsulated in his conviction that to be a good politician, one should study mathematics or natural science, which he shared with participants of the educational programme "Leaders of Russia" (Mishustin 2022j).

However, the fact that Mishustin did not mention the Russian regime while using the vocabulary of a political scientist does not mean that he did not have his own understanding of the relation between the state and citizens. Consistent with Ivan Fomin's (2022) categorisation of Mishustin's views as moderate civicism, he frequently mentioned government obligations towards citizens. In his mind, the role of the state is to secure the well-being of the population (Mishustin 2020d). This demonstrates his perception of a close link between government legitimacy and performance in the economic sphere. Mishustin's rhetoric was also influenced by the vocabulary of the New Public Management concept, which still plays an important role in the Russian understanding of modern state administration (Gel'man et al. 2020). The most obvious example was his repeated mention of the "service-oriented state" as the ideal model of governance. According to this thinking, the state's main task should be the satisfaction of all the basic needs of the citizens to allow them to live in decent socio-economic conditions (Mishustin 2020e). As will be elaborated further, the digitalisation of government services played a crucial role in introducing this model. This perspective also manifested in Mishustin's rhetoric when he described the nature of the state as a "platform" offering various services to the population (Mishustin 2020h). This terminology clearly echoes concepts introduced by Alexei Kudrin's team at the Moscow-based Centre for Strategic Research in 2018 (Petrov et al.

2018). Pursuing this priority is a further argument supporting Fomin's thesis (2022) about Mishustin's affiliation with the group within the political elite, emphasising the need to cultivate relations between the state and Russian society. To put it differently, Mishustin aimed to base the legitimacy of the regime on the fact that it could satisfy the needs of its citizens. Such a vision within the elites of the non-democratic state is far from surprising, since many of these regimes emphasise their efficiency and performance in economic and social areas and use them as an important source of their legitimacy (von Soest & Grauvogel 2017).

Perception of other institutional actors: President and State Duma

Given the Russian institutional setting, the Prime Minister depends on the good graces of the President, who nominates him (Constitution 2022). Therefore, Mikhail Mishustin must find a way to manage his relationship with Vladimir Putin. His interaction with the President clearly illustrates the dual nature of Russian politics since, in his speeches, Mishustin not only stressed institutional subordination but also tried to demonstrate his close personal relationship with Putin.

Mikhail Mishustin's speeches during the analysed period clearly indicated that he perceived his position as subordinate to and dependent on the President. He often stressed that the government agenda was set in line with the President's visions, plans and instructions. Another manifestation of subordination was discernible in his comments suggesting that the government is required to secure the President's trust, together with that of the citizenry (Mishustin 2020f). However, the reality of mutual interaction between Mishustin and Putin seems to be a bit more complex. Mishustin's speeches show that he invoked the President's authority to strengthen his position and reinforce his control over the government. One example is the exchange between the Prime Minister and the Minister of Economic Development, Maxim Reshetnikov, about small business loans. When Reshetnikov pointed out that these loans were not profitable for banks, Mishustin interrupted him and refuted his argument by saying that since introducing these mechanisms is the President's wish, there is no point in discussing them (Mishustin 2020g). Similarly, when advocating for maintaining "maximal economic freedom", even during war conditions, Mishustin did not forget to stress that this is an important issue for the President as well (Mishustin 2022h). This rhetoric can be interpreted in several ways. It might be seen as proof that Mishustin was doing his best to please the President, by implementing any idea he might have. While this is likely to be accurate, there is another important element since this

rhetoric allows Mishustin to present himself as someone who knows the President's priorities. Being perceived as having access to the most powerful individual in the regime might help reinforce his position and give him the leverage to pursue his own political priorities. This strategy is also applied by other political actors described in this research.

Mikhail Mishustin tried to cultivate this image of the man with access to the head of state not only by the conscientious emphasis that he fulfils Putin's wishes but also through remarks of a more personal nature. In several speeches, he tried to create the image of an existing personal and friendly relationship with Vladimir Putin. One example of this effort was his answer to being asked to choose examples of people he finds to be inspirational, which was asked during the meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club. Aside from two rather interesting choices, which will be discussed later, Mishustin mentioned Vladimir Putin in the first instance and highlighted his ability to take responsibility for the country's development (Mishustin 2020h). On another occasion, he claimed that Putin was his "mentor", who he could contact day or night and who he felt was "always there and definitely supports you" (Mishustin 2020i). In addition, during one of his visits to the regions, Mishustin gave a notebook to the regional governor as a present and stressed that he should use it to write down the most important assignments of the President (Mishustin 2020j). All these statements can be read not only as demonstrations of personal loyalty to the President but also as signifiers of a personal bond between Mishustin and Putin.

While Mikhail Mishustin tried to depict his relations with the President as close and personal, his interactions with State Duma representatives were more formal and went through official channels. The Prime Minister acknowledged the importance of close cooperation between government and legislators, especially since the changes in the Constitution changed the relationship between these two institutions (Mishustin 2020k). Mishustin was in regular contact with representatives of factions represented in the State Duma, during which he discussed the suggested legislative changes. He also faced the legislators during his speeches in the lower chamber when he replied in detail to various questions. As described in more detail in the chapter dedicated to Vyacheslav Volodin, these sessions were not purely formalistic, but government ministers could come under significant pressure due to uncompromising questions from members of the State Duma.

A useful case study of interactions between the Prime Minister and the State Duma can be seen in the debates about the federal budget in 2020, showing how closely the executive and legislative branches of power cooperated. Firstly, Mikhail Mishustin discussed the draft with

representatives of the factions represented in the legislative body. Then, he presented the document during the session of the State Duma and, in detail, explained its various sections in response to questions from legislators (Mishustin 2020l). After that, the Prime Minister closely observed the adoption of the budget and updated members of the government about the changes approved by parliamentarians. This research does not focus on the content of the legislative process, but it aims to demonstrate that there was significant deliberation over the federal budget. Moreover, one can assume that an even larger part of it was not publicly recorded. Therefore, this process should not be perceived only as performative but, in fact, represents important insights into the power struggles ongoing among different actors within the Russian political elite.

Digitalisation: key political objective and universal cure

As stated previously, Mikhail Mishustin's speeches show that he tried to define the agenda under the competency of the Prime Minister. In 2020, the most notable agenda item was digitalisation, which appeared in multiple speeches on different occasions and was described in great detail. While it is necessary to understand Mishustin's rhetoric in the broader context of the debate about digitalisation and governance in Russia, the topics remain important for an understanding of attempted agenda-setting by the Prime Minister. Notably, Mishustin kept mentioning it even in 2022, when he was overburdened by mitigating the impacts of the war on the Russian economy. His interest in the area of digitalisation seemed to be genuine, which is not that surprising, given his personal history. Mishustin can actually be described as a techno-optimist who believes that innovations could improve the well-being of Russian society and contribute to greater efficiency of governance. Therefore, digitalisation was perceived as an important process for increasing the state's legitimacy. However, similar to other members of the Russian elite advocating for digitalisation (Gel'man 2020), Mishustin did not see that digitalisation should change the nature of the political regime but rather support its stability.

Mikhail Mishustin's understanding of the topic of digitalisation is hardly unique in the Russian context since debates about this kind of reform and its impacts on state institutions have been ongoing since the late 2000s. The main themes of all modernisation attempts include increasing the efficiency of state institutions and improving the capability of the government to satisfy the needs of the population. However, while these reforms were framed in the same rhetoric as similar attempts in Western states, Russian reformers did not consider it important to enhance

the freedom of the people and instead aimed to use e-governance to increase the legitimacy of the authoritarian regime (Maerz 2016). Therefore, these reformist ambitions remained strictly technocratic in nature and were not perceived as accelerators but as barriers to political change. Mishustin's rhetoric clearly echoed these tendencies since he used phrases similar to those used by proponents of digitalisation before him (see the above-mentioned phrase "government as a platform") and defined increased efficiency of state institutions as a goal (Mishustin 2020m). After all, the establishment Government Coordination Centre, tasked with observing the fulfilment of ongoing reforms using digital monitoring tools (Kremlin 2021), was not an original idea of the Prime Minister but was developed based on existing proposals (Gritsenko & Zhrebtsov 2021). Even though Mikhail Mishustin's speeches about digitalisation reflect a broader perception present among the Russian elite, it is important to highlight them since they seem to illustrate his genuine opinions. This can be assumed from his career path, but also occasional remarks related to this topic. To provide an example, when asked about the people who inspired him, Mishustin also mentioned Steve Jobs and elaborated on this response by describing the contents of one of Jobs' lectures (Mishustin 2020h).

Mikhail Mishustin's genuine interest in digitalisation also manifested in his understanding of broader changes in the world economy. For instance, he described data gathered in the online environment as the "oil, gold, platinum of the 21st century" (Mishustin 2020n). In his view, such data should improve the fulfilment of national strategies and the ability of the state to achieve its goals. The digitalisation of state services was also a vital part of establishing the "service-oriented state", described as a new framework for interactions with citizens. Mishustin perceived the online availability of various state services to citizens as a key component of this arrangement. He was also aware that these ambitious changes required a change in attitudes within the state administration and called for creating special departments with bright, educated and ambitious bureaucrats – a "digital Spetsnaz" – leading the digitalisation effort (Mishustin 2020o). Similar competencies were expected from members of the government who should be digital savvy to keep up with the new developments (Mishustin 2020i). Mishustin's techno-optimism led him to believe – or at least claim – that digitalisation can be a universal cure to a wide variety of problems, from social issues (Mishustin 2022k) to the defence of cultural traditions (Mishustin 2022l). However, framing inherently political problems as technical deficiencies that can be overcome by modernisation allows him to avoid any considerations about the nature of the regime in which he operates, and the Prime Minister appeared to be committed to a purely technocratic conception of digitalisation. None of the analysed speeches

elaborated on the possible consequences of these reforms for the political regime or its relations with citizens.

In this sense, Mikhail Mishustin ironically followed in the footsteps of the last person who he mentioned as a source of personal inspiration – Sergei Korolev, the leading authority in the Soviet space programme (Mishustin 2020h). While Korolev was able to put together a rather impressive technical and administrative project, this did not change the system's dysfunction as a whole. Similarly, though Mishustin might try to introduce interesting, well-advised and needed administrative changes, his lack of political vision and understanding of political realities in a personalised authoritarian regime prevent their fulfilment.

Mikhail Mishutin: perception of politics

Mikhail Mishustin's vision of political life during the analysed 2020-2022 period reflected his background as a career civil servant. He was not practically imaginative or able to present a coherent ideological vision. In his view, the key virtue of the polity was the ability to assure the well-being of citizens and, therefore, the primary role of the state should be to answer to their socio-economic needs. Mishustin seemed to be aware of the contemporary shortcomings and malfunctions of the Russian state and hoped that digitalisation could be a cure that would help to overcome them. In this view, he followed the ideas of other elite members, considering various ways to modernise the Russian state.

Due to the lack of political vision, Mishustin did not suggest any radical changes in the institutional setting and followed established procedures – formal as well as informal. His interaction with Vladimir Putin illustrates the dynamic of relations within a personalised autocracy. Mishustin not only acknowledged the President as institutionally superior but went further and tried to emphasise that he had good relations with Putin personally. He claimed that he regularly consulted with the President, which gave him special insight into his opinions. Mishustin then used this argument to support his personal authority and political objectives. Interactions with the State Duma followed institutional procedures, manifested in lengthy meetings with representatives of political factions and responding to questions from deputies during parliamentary hearings.

The invasion of Ukraine put Mishustin in a difficult position. Not only did it challenge his ambition to modernise the state, but it also forced him to find ways to adjust the state

administration and economy to the war effort. Mishustin did not repeat propagandistic slogans and, when talking about the conflict, he used rather vague phrases about the need to overcome problems and complications. Since he was committed to limiting state interventions to the economy, he apparently came into conflict with certain elements of the elite. The fact that Mishustin was able, within this context, not only to keep his position but also presumably increase his influence when appointed Head of the Special Coordinating Council for Security Enhancement makes him a political actor who should be watched closely. Especially since his opinions can also be perceived as a reflection of the thinking of a mostly silent group of bureaucracy on which the day-to-day state functions largely depend.

6. Chairman of the State Duma Vyacheslav Volodin

The strong position of the President envisioned in the Constitution – combined with the personalist nature of the Russian authoritarian regime – incentivises researchers to focus primarily on the executive branch of power. However, such a perspective is too narrow since it overlooks that there are also other institutions important for sustaining the regime. The lower chamber of the Russian Parliament – the State Duma – is a perfect case to illustrate this point since it does not serve as a mere “rubber stamp” but provides a framework in which various conflicting interests can be reconciled (Noble & Schulmann 2018). The fact that elite actors from bureaucracy, oligarchic circles, local administration or corporations are interested in law-making procedures ongoing in the State Duma makes its key figure – the Chairman of the State Duma – an important interlocutor in the power dynamics of Russian politics. Therefore, the views and opinions of the person holding this post are worth further analysis.

This is especially the case since the position of the Chairman of the State Duma is currently held by Vyacheslav Viktorovich Volodin. He has been present in the highest corridors of Russian power for more than two decades and is known for his great ambition; according to some accounts, he proclaimed his goal to become President at the beginning of his political career in the 1990s (INOSMI 2012). Volodin’s political path is closely associated with Vladimir Putin’s regime since he rose to prominence during this period. One of the reasons for that is his pragmatic ability to adjust his ideological positions to the latest trends and demands. Therefore, Volodin’s opinions can also serve as a litmus test of current moods within the regime.

The ability to politically capitalise on existing conditions put Volodin into an interesting position since being the Chairman of the State Duma has turned him into an outspoken promoter of parliamentarism. He emphasises that Russia is a democracy, praises its multi-party system and tries to increase the influence and prestige of the legislature. These efforts were particularly visible in clashes with the government as Volodin successfully tried to gain stronger influence over the executive by supporting constitutional amendments. However, he seems to be well aware of power dynamics in the regime and he uses various means to demonstrate his loyalty to Vladimir Putin. In his view, Putin is not only the main agenda-setter but also the embodiment of the current Russian regime. Therefore, it is not surprising that Volodin was one of the first members of the elite who publicly endorsed the invasion of Ukraine and explored various possibilities for how the State Duma could support it. Due to his ambitions, pragmatism and

ability to sense prevailing sentiments, Volodin will remain one of the members of the elite to watch. At the same time, it will be interesting to observe his influence on the future of the State Duma, whose prestige and influence increased noticeably during his tenure as Chairman. It might easily be the case that Volodin's successors will not be willing to give up the State Duma's new powers and will choose instead to continue to strengthen the position of the legislative body in the Russian political regime.

Analysis of Vyacheslav Volodin's public speeches was made easier by the fact that he has been publicly active during the selected period and often spoke about his opinions on various issues. This chapter is based on the analysis of Volodin's 147 public speeches commenting on the nature of the Russian political regime published between 2020 and 2022; these were gathered primarily from the section of the State Duma website dedicated to the statements of the Duma Chairman. Volodin usually restrained himself to comments on more general matters of Russian politics – with the notable exception of the war in Ukraine – or to elaborate on ideological and value foundations of the state. However, since the Duma was at the centre of his attention, he described its position in political life in detail and was able to place it into the broader institutional framework of the Russian regime. In particular, these texts make him very interesting for analysis in the context of the research questions raised in this work.

It is notable that Vyacheslav Volodin does not only speak often but is innovative in the platforms he uses for communication. The most valuable source for understanding his ideas were the lengthy addresses he held at the end and beginning of each working season of the Duma. During these speeches, he conveyed to lawmakers his ideas about the work of the legislative body, evaluated its success and failures in the given period and set goals for the future. Another interesting type of speeches was the recurring communication format under the title "Three short questions for Vyacheslav Volodin". In these short comments, he highlighted the key approved legislative acts and praised the work of specific parliament members. The last notable platform was Volodin's personal Telegram channel, established during the analysed period.² He claimed that this platform is used for direct communication with citizens and, despite being overloaded by various questions from the public, he tries to answer most of them (Volodin 2022a). This platform was not only an interesting addition to the analysis, but also

² Excerpts from the channels (with links to specific posts) were also posted on the website of the State Duma in the form of articles

illustrates that Volodin is very capable political player who is also able to use modern technologies to his advantage while cultivating his public image.

Role of the State Duma in the Russian political regime

The history of the State Duma dates back to the beginning of the 20th century when this institution was established as the Lower House of the legislative assembly in Tsarist Russia. During the Soviet era, legislative power was represented by Soviets present at various levels of the state. After the establishment of the Russian Federation, the State Duma was reintroduced as the lower chamber of the Federal Assembly.³ The first elections for this new legislative body took place in December 1993. Representatives of the State Duma (450 in total) are elected every four years in the mixed electoral system. The last parliamentary elections took place in September 2021. Individual legislators are organised into factions representing the political parties running for office. In the current – so-called 8th – State Duma, there are five factions represented. These are: United Russia, Communist Party of the Russian Federation, A Just Russia — For Truth, Liberal Democratic Party of Russia and New People (State Duma 2022a). The role of the Chairman of the State Duma is particularly important for the day-to-day operations of the legislative body since Article 101 of the Russian Constitution grants that person with a wide range of powers to manage the work of the institution (Constitution 2022). In this role, one of Volodin's notable responsibilities is to represent the State Duma during interactions with other political institutions such as the President or the government, which is one of the topics analysed further later in this chapter (State Duma 2022b). The Chairman also plays an important informal role in interactions among the different factions and organises regular meetings with their leaders.

In theory, the State Duma plays an important role as a legislative body representing the voice of Russia's citizens. However, in practice, its relevance has been questioned while pointing out the manipulation of the elections, restrictions limiting the party system and overall orchestration of political life in the country. In this context, it is not surprising that the State Duma was mockingly nicknamed as a "rubber stamp", legal "conveyer belt", or legislative "Xerox" (printing device). One of the legislators even described its work as a political "farce" (Noble & Schulmann 2021). All these nicknames suggest that the legislative body does not have any

³ The upper chamber of the Federal Assembly is a Federal Council consisted of the representatives of federal subjects - republics, krais, oblasts, cities of federal importance, an autonomous oblast, and autonomous okrugs

autonomy and serves solely as window dressing to cover up the non-democratic nature of the Russian regime. This perception was even reinforced by the chairmen themselves, who – despite being, in theory, the fourth most important representatives of the Russian state – did not play a significant role in politics. Boris Gryzlov, Chairman between 2003 and 2011, even became notorious for his statement that the State Duma “is not a venue in which it is necessary to hold political battles, to assert political slogans and ideologies [but] is a venue in which people should be occupied with constructive, effective law-making activities” (Noble 2018). The shortened version of this claim – ‘parliament is not a place for discussions’ – became widely popular to illustrate the negligible influence of the State Duma in Russian politics.

However, such a view of the State Duma is too simplistic. Based on a detailed description of the role of the legislative body in the Russian political regime, Ben Noble and Ekaterina Schulmann conclude that this institution serves as space for battles of diverse interests of state bureaucracy, corporations or powerful individuals. The State Duma does not necessarily have to be the place where laws are created, but it is one of the last points at which it is possible to interfere with their content (Noble & Schulmann 2021). The research tends to support this view since it demonstrates that the analysed actors are obsessed with laws and try to maintain a sense of the legality of their actions. There is no reason to expect that less influential players would think differently. Also, since the content of laws matter, it means that the institution responsible for their adoption matters as well. Henceforth, it should not be surprising that the State Duma witnesses quite widespread practice of amendments to the passed laws, which might shape them to the advantage of a particular interested party (Noble 2018). Another reason why the Duma matters in Russian politics is that it provides space for co-optation of potentially opposing political forces as will be further described in the chapter dedicated to Gennady Zyuganov.

The relevance of the State Duma increased when Vyacheslav Volodin was appointed Chairman in 2016. His role in increasing the relevance of the legislative body is an illustrative example of the complex interplay between institutional and personal power in the Russian political regime. Both sides of this arrangement were not in the best shape when Volodin took on this role. As will be described in the next section in more detail, his appointment to the position of Chairman of the State Duma was rather disappointing for Volodin, who expected a more powerful position. On the other hand, the 6th State Duma had a very bad reputation, especially due to the low quality of legislative proposals, which in many cases even did not pass through the approval process due to technical problems. When Volodin stepped in, he became a driving

force of various initiatives aiming to improve the lower chamber's effectiveness and public image. He tried to limit abstention among legislators, introduced mechanisms to improve the quality of prepared legislation and forbade parliamentarians from using emergency beacon lights on their cars (Kynev 2017). Ultimately, these changes really helped to improve public perception of the State Duma (Levada 2021). Volodin proclaimed the need to win over the trust of citizens as one of his main priorities and tried to demonstrate his success by using numbers from his own pollsters – which were, unsurprisingly, almost three times higher than those coming from the Levada Centre (Volodin 2022b).

Obviously, the real level of trust towards the State Duma was not the key issue. Far more significant was the fact that Volodin could present the lower chamber as a political force to be reckoned with. Since the State Duma is the place where various interests collide, its Chairman has the possibility to become an important interlocutor of the ongoing conflict for influence. He has also the possibility to threaten others by obstructing the adoption of particular legislation. Seemingly, Volodin was well aware of this, which manifested in his self-confident interactions with government representatives. In this respect, his exchange with Minister for Economic Development Maxim Oreshkin during the parliament hearing was notable. During this hearing, Volodin claimed that the minister was not sufficiently prepared for the questions of legislators and ordered him to attend a rescheduled session and deliver a more convicting performance (Starostina & Gatinskiy 2019). Volodin's assertiveness was further encouraged by Constitutional amendments which increased the competencies of the State Duma in the appointment of the government. As will be discussed later, Volodin prepared the ground for this change and tried to maximise the advantages that the situation provided to him. It is important to underline that not only Volodin as a person benefitted from these constitutional changes, but the State Duma as the institution did as well. Its position in the Russian institutional setting changed, and it will be tempting for its next Chairperson (and also the legislators as a group) to maintain these newly-gained powers.

Despite fostering its position, the Chairman still very much knew his place in the context of the personalised authoritarian regime. Vyacheslav Volodin was able to read the mood of the Kremlin and, after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, “mobilised” the State Duma and led it to adopt needed legislative changes as soon as possible (Volodin 2022c). Therefore, the Duma did not provide space for opposition to the war (since only a handful of its members openly protested it) and, instead, become one of important institutional pillars for its support. However,

even in this situation, it was not simply the “rubber stamp” for orders that come from elsewhere. On the contrary, it seems that the State Duma turned into the brainstorming body that tried to come up with a proposal that would suit the mood and situation in the country. As shown in the next section, it could hardly have a more appropriate person guiding it through this process since Vyacheslav Volodin is notorious for his ability to read Vladimir Putin’s wishes.

Political career and personal views of Vyacheslav Volodin

Examining his career, the fact that Vyacheslav Volodin took the role of the State Duma Chairman does not seem that surprising. He studied law at the Interior Ministry’s St. Petersburg Institute and, in 1996, obtained a doctoral degree with a thesis titled “A Russian Constituent Entity: Problems of Power, Law-making and Administration”. At this point, he was already active in local politics in his home Saratov oblast and held a position in the local administration. In 1999, Volodin stepped into national politics when he was elected to the State Duma on the ballot of the political bloc Fatherland-All Russia. He was also successful in attaining a post in the structures of the legislative body and becoming the Deputy Chairman of the Duma. Volodin held this position for the next three election periods until 2010. He proved his political instincts in 2003 when he associated himself with the United Russian Party and became the first Deputy Head of the parliamentary faction (Meduza 2016).

Volodin’s road to the centre of power accelerated in 2010 when he became part of the executive. Firstly, he was appointed Deputy Prime Minister and, in 2012, moved to the position of First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration. In this period, he was a close associate and apprentice of political impresario Vladislav Surkov. Over time, Volodin overtook his teacher and allegedly became a “grey cardinal” of the Kremlin. In this position, he actively pushed back against the Bolotnaya Square protests by organising counter-rallies and, when the demonstration ended, he was one of the key architects of the conservative turn in Russian politics (Zygar 2016). However, it seems that Volodin was not particularly committed to conservative values since this research does not find any particular emphasis on this topic or any other value framework that would guide Russian politics in his speeches. This observation about a lack of ideological zeal is consistent with Ivan Fomin’s classification that identifies Volodin as a moderate statist which makes him the part of the opinion mainstream among the elite (Fomin 2022). This seems to suggest that Volodin’s opinions are flexible and pragmatically adaptable to the latest ideological trends in Russian politics – which makes him

an interesting case to follow to gauge the general mood among the regime elites. However, it should be noted that Volodin remains on good terms with certain elements of the siloviki and the Orthodox Church (Galeotti 2021).

One of Volodin's many responsibilities during his time in the Presidential Administration was organisation of the 2016 Duma elections. Their results were satisfactory from the view of the Kremlin since its party, United Russia, won the majority, and it occurred without significant protests against the regime. The only problem was the record-low turnout which caused doubts about the people's enthusiasm for the running parties. Despite his rather successful management of the electoral contest, the Kremlin power brokers were not satisfied with Volodin's performance. President Vladimir Putin allegedly did not like his attitudes and style of thinking, which was closer to that of a politician than a bureaucrat (Stanovaya 2019). Henceforth, instead of being rewarded, Volodin was appointed to the position of State Duma Chairman, which – even though one of the highest positions in the state structures – was perceived as a demotion. Allegedly, Volodin was disappointed with his new position but, as described in the previous section, he took full advantage of the possibilities it offered.

This ability to leverage his recent position is unsurprising, given the fact that Vyacheslav Volodin perceives politics as a long-term game. One of his close friends said about Volodin that he has a “plan for life” and, during his years in the administration of the Saratov oblast, openly stated that his final goal is to become the Russian President (INOSMI 2012). It is hard to tell whether this statement is true, but it seems safe to assume that Volodin has significant personal ambitions. In order to fulfil them, he is highly capable of understanding the current political climate which, in the context of personalised autocracy includes the ability to stay in the favour of the autocrat. Apparently, this is something which Volodin can do very well – Andrey Pertsev even suggests that, in this discipline, he serves as an inspiration for other Russian officials (Pertsev 2022). Findings presented in the following sections illuminate other examples of Volodin's rhetoric to support this conclusion.

In this regard, Volodin's reaction to the Russian invasion of Ukraine is noteworthy. Despite the invasion taking place at the same time of Volodin's official visit to South America, he quickly made clear on his Telegram channel that he was supporting the war and, by doing so, he became one of the first Russian officials to make such a statement (Volodin 2022d). He also made sure that the State Duma would support that war effort, for instance, by introducing the special committee that would focus on the alleged existence of laboratories producing biological

weapons on Ukrainian territory, which might serve as a pretext for the invasion. Under his supervision, the State Duma also maintained close contact with representatives of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (for example, Volodin 2022e), which allowed their integration into the Russian Federation in autumn 2022.

Vyacheslav Volodin: political regime, role of State Duma and political parties

In his speeches, Vyacheslav Volodin dedicated significant attention to the description of the Russian political regime. In his mind, there was no doubt that Russia is a democracy and, moreover, a democracy that is working well. According to his own words, “democracy – it is no shouting on the square or making noise in the streets, as some think. It is the realisation of the laws of citizens – take part in elections, influence decisions of ruling authorities, freely express own opinions, be the member of any registered political party” (Volodin 2021a). Volodin argued that one of the key features and proof of Russian democracy should be competitive elections confirming the legitimacy of the regime. This competitiveness was the feature which Volodin highlighted most in his evaluation of the State Duma elections in 2021. He pointed to the fact that there were, in theory, 13 candidates for one post in the legislature and compared this number with other countries in which – he claimed – competitiveness in elections is much lower (Volodin 2021b). This rhetoric usually contained undertones suggesting that since Russian democracy is working well, there is no point in taking seriously the criticism from abroad or from domestic opposition associated with attempts to undermine the country's sovereignty.

While considering Volodin's position as Chairman of the State Duma, it is not much of a surprise that he highlighted the importance of elections and democratic procedures in general. Without these institutions – no matter if working in practice – his position in the regime would not have a reason to exist. Therefore, Volodin tried to depict them as important and even natural to Russian political life when pointing out the long history of the country's parliamentary system dating back to the Middle Ages (Volodin 2022f). Another area in which Volodin demonstrated the relevance of the State Duma was in foreign policy, through the International Forum “Development of Parliamentarism” established by the Russian lawmakers' initiative in 2018 (Interkomitet 2018). The existence of this platform allowed the legislative body to become relevant in the foreign politics of the regime. As it happens, Volodin was on an official visit to

Nicaragua at the time of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, where he wasted no time in defending this step in his speech to the Nicaraguan National Assembly (Volodin 2022g).

However, most of Volodin's attention was focused on domestic issues. Unsurprisingly so, since the key task of the State Duma was the adoption of legislation that would react to the needs of the people. In his speeches, Volodin often commented on adopted laws and tried to explain how they would improve the various spheres of life of ordinary people. During the analysed period, the Chairman of the State Duma directly addressed varied topics as wide-ranging as the payment of alimony (Volodin 2021c), driving laws (Volodin 2021d) or supplies of palm oil (Volodin 2021e). Discussed legislation was a regular part of the above-mentioned communication format "Three short questions for Vyacheslav Volodin", which provided him with a way to advertise the work of the State Duma (for example, Volodin 2022h). Law-making was not perceived only as a response to the needs of citizens but as an indicator of performance. Especially in his speeches evaluating the State Duma's sessions, Volodin mentioned the overall number of approved laws and claimed that their high number is an indication of the good work of the legislator. This emphasis on efficiency can be illustrated by the claim that parliament democracy "is not about talking – it's about solving the issues that our citizens are waiting for" (Volodin 2022i). At first sight, this rhetoric resonates with the above-mentioned Boris Gryzlov quote that "parliament is not a place for discussion", suggesting that not much has changed in the role of the State Duma in the Russian political regime. However, it is worth noting that Volodin also emphasises the positive role of the legislative body by presenting it as taking a more active approach to influencing life in the country.

As already mentioned, Volodin evaluated the quality of elections based on the criterium of competitiveness and so it is not a great surprise that he praised the very existence of the multi-party system. He argued that having more political factions in the State Duma is appropriate for Russian conditions while comparing it with the bipartisanship of the United States and the one-party system in China (Volodin 2020a). The interaction between parliamentary parties should be helpful since they allegedly contribute to increasing the quality of approved legislation. Therefore, Volodin at least rhetorically welcomed the participation of parliamentary opposition in the discussion about law proposals and organised numerous discussions to allow the exchange of opinions among representatives of different factions. However, there was a clear limit to the behaviour of opposition parties which has to be constructive (Volodin 2021f). The

fact that the majority of laws was approved by the legislators of all factions was presented as a signal of a good working environment in the State Duma (Volodin 2021g).

This perspective is also manifested in relation to the role of political parties in the Russian regime in general. Even though Volodin praised the existence of different views on the political scene, he emphasised that the primary obligation of the parliament deputy is related to citizens and not political parties. He perceived the advancement of particular political agendas as harmful to the whole regime and at odds with the interest of citizens. As Volodin said to deputies: “we are paid to work, not to care about our own agenda” (Volodin 2022j). This emphasis on the general interest of the people – perceived as a homogenous group, not as a diverse voting group with particular interests – was used to silence any party criticism of the regime in the State Duma. As Volodin emphasised in the context of the war in Ukraine, all lawmakers “have today one party – our country” (Volodin 2022k).

Perceptions of other institutional actors: President and government

The tone of Vyacheslav Volodin’s references to President Vladimir Putin clearly demonstrate that he perceives him as the key political actor in the Russian regime. He described the presidential powers as highly relevant at both the institutional and personal level. The leading position of the President in the political regime was clear, especially since his speeches were used as a framework for the work of the State Duma. In Volodin’s view, the President was responsible for deciding strategic priorities, and it was up to other institutions – including the legislative body – to fulfil them. On several occasions, Volodin referenced this issue directly and used the percentage of approved bills addressing issues in presidential speeches as a demonstration of the State Duma’s effectiveness (Volodin 2020b). Since the President’s wishes and commands had the highest priority, Volodin referenced them when he aimed to make his arguments more resonant (Volodin 2020c).

As already mentioned, Volodin used various signals to flatter Vladimir Putin personally. He did not describe Putin as a regular political actor but turned him into an embodiment of the current Russian political regime. He claimed that the President is not only his personal role model but also a historical figure (Volodin 2021h). Such an exceptional individual leading the country should be an “advantage” for the Russian state on the international scene and, for example, allow the system to cope better with the COVID-19 pandemic (Volodin 2020d). Volodin argued that, since Vladimir Putin was the embodiment of the strength of the Russian

state, it only made sense to adopt constitutional amendments that would allow him to stay in office, which would be needed since the period was difficult for the country (Volodin 2020e). In Volodin's view, the influence of Putin was such that his legacy would outlive his physical demise. That was what he meant when he claimed that "there will be (President) Putin after Putin" (Volodin 2020f). This statement should not be understood only as dodging an uncomfortable question in the interview to the press or one of many Volodin's attempts to flatter the President. It might also reflect Volodin's conviction that the basis for the strong Russia that was put into place during Vladimir Putin's presidency will outlive him and will determine the way the country will be governed in the future.

It was already demonstrated that Vyacheslav Volodin was not afraid to enter into conflict with governmental officials. In fact, during the analysed period, he systematically worked on strengthening the position of the State Duma in relation to the government. This effort is particularly evident from his activities related to constitutional amendments which will be described in detail in the next section. At this point, it suffices to say that Volodin interpreted constitutional changes as the strengthening of the position of the State Duma, which allows it to exercise more oversight of the government. One of the ways to do that was to enlarge the existing format of the annual Government Report to legislators, include more ministers in it and invigorate their debates with lawmakers (Volodin 2020g). Volodin also used this format to get in touch with ordinary citizens since he asked via his Telegram channels for them to send him questions that should be posed to ministers during the debate in the State Duma (Volodin 2022l).

While interactions between Volodin and Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin seemed to be mostly respectful, with emphasis on the quality of collaboration and mutual dialogue, the tone of statements related to other ministers could be very different. For instance, on one occasion, Volodin suggested that there are government representatives who are not able to fulfil the requirements of their position. Mishustin countered that comment by saying that his government must be evaluated as a team, and it does not make sense to try to distinguish between strong and weak government members (Volodin 2022m). On a different occasion, Volodin criticised the Minister of Finance, Anton Siluanov, for a lack of communication with the State Duma during the preparation of the 2021 state budget. The Chairman of the State Duma also eloquently added that while the President is willing to listen to the demands of legislators in this matter, the minister is not (Volodin 2020h). This exchange is quite illustrative

of the power struggles ongoing during the preparation of the state budget, which were already noted by Ben Noble (2018). Also, other statements from Volodin related to this topic show that he tried to position the State Duma in a role that would allow it to influence the distribution of money in the regime. This tendency clearly shows that the State Duma was not only the “rubber stamp” but, in some cases, could become an important lobbying platform through which various forces in the elite could push their agendas.

Volodin’s role in the adoption of constitutional amendments

Vyacheslav Volodin was one of those who advocated for the changes in the constitutions before this topic became part of the Russian mainstream political debate. In April 2019, he proclaimed that the constitution should be adjusted to increase the powers dedicated to the State Duma (Burkhardt 2021c). When Vladimir Putin expressed his wish to amend the constitution, it was the State Duma which played the key role in the collecting and drafting of suggested new amendments. During this process, it achieved what many observers claimed to be the main reason for the whole exercise – finding a way to allow Putin to run for the presidency in 2024 (Trudolyubov 2020). It is notable that this was done in the form of the legislative amendment put forward by an individual member of parliament – Valentina Tereshkova. Given Volodin’s key role in the State Duma structures, one can speculate that he knew about this initiative or might have even helped to construct this scheme. Notably, the Chairman of the State Duma not only advocated for changes to the constitution but, after their approval in the referendum, supervised adjustment of the existing laws to correspond with the new constitutional setting (Volodin 2020i). As far as the author is aware, the role which Volodin played during the adoption of the constitutional amendments has not yet been properly studied. This topic presents an interesting research opportunity since it might elucidate the roles and behaviours of members of the Russian political elite during such crucial moments.

Volodin perceived the approval of constitutional amendments as an event of major importance – the beginning of the “new stage of the development of Russia as a sovereign, democratic, law-based, social state” (Volodin 2022k). Such rhetoric stands out in comparison with other elite members included in this research, who reflected constitutional changes in a positive light, but were significantly less enthusiastic and outspoken about them. This might also be explained by the fact that constitutional amendments had a direct impact on the powers of the State Duma and, therefore, increased Volodin’s relevance within the regime. He spoke about this matter

openly when claiming that, by increasing the oversight of legislators over the appointments of ministers, the President gave up part of his powers to the people – meaning their representatives in the legislative body (Volodin 2020j). This change also manifested in the arrangement of the State Duma since Volodin argued that it is important to adjust its committees to the responsibilities of individual ministers, which would allow legislators to be more organised during the selection of candidates for individual ministries and more closely control the work of the government (Volodin 2021i). Since a stronger State Duma means a stronger Chairman, it is possible to conclude that Volodin was one of the benefactors of these constitutional amendments. When considered in the longer perspective of Volodin's actions after his appointment in 2016, it is possible to see his actions as another step in his efforts to turn the State Duma into a more relevant institution within the Russian political regime.

Vyacheslav Volodin: perceptions of politics

Probably because of his pragmatism, Vyacheslav Volodin turned into a strong proponent of parliamentarism. He proclaimed that Russian polity is democratic due to its competitive elections and inclusion of multiple voices in the legislative assembly. However, as Chairman of the State Duma, he oversaw and ensured that this pluralism does not impede effectiveness or ability to react to the needs of the regime and demands from the President. Ostentatious loyalty to Vladimir Putin was a recurring theme in many of Volodin's speeches, in which he presented the President as the embodiment of the contemporary Russian regime. This was exemplified in the context of the invasion of Ukraine, which Volodin publicly endorsed and made sure that the State Duma would contribute to it, for instance, through legislative steps allowing the integration of Ukrainian territories into Russia.

At the same time, Volodin used various opportunities to increase the prestige and relevance of the State Duma. He presented this institution as effective, able to both address the demands of the people and control the government. Especially in relation to the government, Volodin was particularly assertive and used his position to intimidate its ministers. His ambition to increase the powers of the State Duma was apparent during his activities around the constitutional amendments. Their approval in 2020 was yet another achievement in Volodin's long-term objective to increase his influence. However, this ambition also had important implications for politics in Russia since it increased – as in many of Volodin's previous actions – the influence

and prestige of the State Duma. Ultimately, this change has the potential to outlive Volodin and change the dynamics of political life in Russia in the long term.

7. Secretary of the Security Council Nikolai Patrushev

Inclusion of Russia's Secretary of the Security Council in research about the ideological positions of elite members can seem like a surprising choice. Institutionally, the Security Council is only one of the Directorates of the Presidential Administration with a narrowly defined agenda. However, the prominence of its Secretary – Nikolai Platonovich Patrushev – illustrates the inner workings of contemporary Russian politics. Patrushev's influence comes from his close relationship with Vladimir Putin since they have a common history dating back to at least the 1990s. Due to this personal connection, Patrushev has been at the very centre of power ever since Putin became President. Patrushev can also benefit from the nature of Putin's regime, which is one in which members of the intelligence services play an important role. As stated previously, the siloviki comprise only one ideological faction of the Russian elite, but this group enjoys the most direct access to the President and, especially during the last few years, has been able to increase its influence on his thinking. After the invasion of Ukraine, Mark Galeotti coined this change of worldviews of the Russian leadership as "Putinism-Patrushevism" (In Moscow's Shadows 2022a). Patrushev has presided over the Security Council for more than a decade and could transform this into his own powerhouse. The wide range of areas in which this institution could interfere provides Patrushev with great potential to project his worldviews into Russian politics.

This fact is important since Patrushev indeed has an ideological vision – or at least a set of overreaching worldviews framing his thinking and guiding decision-making. In his view, Russia has a distinct value framework formed by culture, historical memory, religion and language that needs to be protected. Maintaining state sovereignty is closely related to preserving the national ideological framework. That is why Patrushev perceives his main duty to mitigate the interference from outside, especially from the United States, that is allegedly trying to destroy Russia by indoctrinating it with so-called universal values. This paranoid worldview was the underlying motif for Patrushev's explanation of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which (in his interpretation) was a rescue mission to save the Ukrainian nation from an illegitimate government trying to destroy its traditional values. Moreover, Patrushev argued that the invasion of Ukraine should be only one of many quests for the defence of national sovereignties which Russia should champion in the struggle against the global domination of the United States. Despite its maximalist goals, Patrushev's worldview does not form a coherent ideology, especially due to a lack of a positive agenda; he struggled to explain what Russian

traditional values are and how they are manifested in the institutional framework. Therefore, Patrushev's thinking very much fits into the ideology of illiberalism, which is more able to express who its enemies are than what is its positive agenda (Laruelle 2020).

Even though the Secretary of the Security Council is not exactly a public-facing figure, available sources can provide insight into his opinions. Materials gathered from the website of the Security Council consist of 22 texts published between 2020 and 2022 in which Patrushev comments on the nature of statehood. The most relevant materials for the analysis are the lengthy interviews Patrushev gave to the news website Argumenty i Fakty, published approximately on a quarterly basis, for which he commented on various foreign and security policy issues. It is notable that the journalists did not interview Patrushev on topics relevant to his role as representative of the administrative body, but more as an expert whose opinions are worthy of being presented in the public domain. This detail is an interesting illustration of the relevance of Patrushev as an individual of interest in Russian political debates. Another interesting source for analysis was Patrushev's essay "Does Russia Need "Universal" Values?", published in Rossiyskaya Gazeta in June 2020 (Patrushev 2020a). This text represents an important starting point for an understanding of his worldview.

Role of the Security Council in the Russian institutional setting

The Security Council of the Russian Federation serves as a deliberative body providing space for key Russian decision-makers to discuss matters related to state security. The establishment of the Council was codified in the Constitution in 1993, within which Article 83 defines that the Security Council is formed and headed by the President (Constitution 2022). However, the tradition of this institution is older since it is inspired by the Security Council of the Soviet Union, which served a similar purpose. Meetings of the Security Council are organised on a regular basis and the President chairs these gatherings. Aside from the head of state, the Security Council is comprised of 13 permanent members representative of different institutions, such as the Minister of Defence or the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and 18 regular members appointed by the President, such as the Head of the Customs Service, Mayor of Moscow, and representatives of Federal Districts (SCRF 2022).

Heterogeneous composition of members suggests that the range of topics discussed at the Security Council meetings might be quite wide. There is no possibility to verify this hypothesis from public sources since transcripts from the Council meetings are usually limited to the

President's opening remarks, which are vague and ceremonious and do not reveal much about the further course of debate (see, for example, Kremlin 2022). However, the broad thematic scope can be concluded from the Presidential Decree from 2011, which tasked the Council "to prepare decisions on state security, public safety, environmental safety, personal safety, other types of security provided for by the legislation of the Russian Federation (hereinafter – national security), the organisation of defence, military construction, defence production, military and military-technical cooperation of the Russian Federation with foreign states on other issues related to the protection of the constitutional order, the sovereignty of the Russian Federation, its independence and territorial integrity, as well as for international cooperation in the field of security" (Galeotti 2019c). Such a general mandate provides an opportunity for the Council and its Secretary to intervene in various areas of politics. Since, in Nikolai Patrushev's view, security has to be considered in numerous areas, it is possible to assume that he takes advantage of so generously established a framework.

However, as is common in the Russian institutional setting, the legislative framework is not sufficient to guarantee power. Despite the broad range of topics it covers, the Security Council is defined as deliberative body, and its Secretariate is only one of the Directorates of the Presidential Administration. The volatile position of the Security Council Secretary can be illustrated by the fact that before Nikolai Patrushev took this position in 2008, his predecessors did not stay in office for more than a couple of years. Moreover, most of them – aside from Vladimir Putin (serving as Secretary for a brief period in 1999) and Sergei Ivanov (serving as Secretary between 1999 and 2001) – did not achieve any notable political success after they left office. Since the post itself does not guarantee an important role in Russian politics, it is important to consider the influence of the Security Council in relation to the personality of its Secretary. As will be demonstrated in the following section, Nikolai Patrushev, who has cultivated this institution to serve as his power base for more than a decade and a half, is indeed a powerful personality. An interesting illustration of the special position of the Council is the fact that its offices are located on Ipatevskii Alley in buildings separated from the rest of the working spaces of the Presidential Administration (Bacon 2019; Schulmann & Galeotti 2021).

The established institutional framework of Security Council changed in 2020 when it created the position of Deputy Chairman. Former Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev was appointed to this post, which was perceived as a sign of his declining influence. However, this side-lining did not prevent him from (or maybe, on the contrary, forced him to) take on the role of

commentator on his Telegram channel. Because of this role, Medvedev became the most publicly active representative of the Security Council, who was visible also during the creation of the dataset for this chapter since, in the number of mentions on the website of the institution, he outperformed Patrushev. However, this is hardly reflective of the power dynamics in the Council itself since Medvedev adopted – especially after the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine aggressive rhetoric, which is rather surprising given his personal history. While it is possible to speculate why Dmitry Medvedev decided on this approach, it might be speculated that the zeitgeist of the Security Council influenced his views and talking points (Meduza 2022).

Career and personal views of Nikolai Patrushev

The professional life of Nikolai Patrushev is closely associated with the world of Russia's security services. Patrushev, born in Leningrad in 1951, joined the KGB in 1975 after he graduated in engineering. In the Soviet period, his workplace remained in his home region, where he was in charge of the anti-corruption and anti-smuggling unit. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, he stayed in the security realm and served between 1992 and 1994 as the Minister of Security of the Republic of Karelia. Interestingly, even after more than two decades since his posting in this far-north territory, he seemed to be interested in developments in this region, and the analysis found several speeches dedicated to representatives of Karelia institutions (see, for example, Patrushev 2020b). Patrushev was transferred to Moscow in 1994 and, over the next few years, he held several high positions in state institutions, including as Head of the Directorate of Internal Security of the Federal Counterintelligence Service, Deputy Chief of the Presidential Staff or Deputy Director of the Federal Security Service (FSB). In 1999, he was promoted to the position of Director of the FSB, which he held for nearly a decade until 2008 (Kovačević 2022).

Patrushev's position in the FSB is notable not only since it put him into the centre of the ecosystem of Russian security agencies, where he has remained, but also since it illustrates his important personal connections. The person that he replaced in the position of Director of the FSB was none other than Vladimir Putin. Even though there are several theories about where and when they met, it is certain that they have known each other since at least the 1990s. There are even speculations that Patrushev was actually the one who arranged Putin's transfer from Saint-Petersburg to Moscow. Regardless of the reliability of these claims, they illustrate the existence of a close relationship between these two men. Putin himself openly expressed it

when, in one of his early interviews in the Presidential post, he named Patrushev among a few people whom he trusts (Belton 2022).

This personal connection with the head of the Russian state assured that Patrushev would have an approach to the highest corridors of power. This might be illustrated by speculation that he would replace Putin in the Presidential post after 2008. That did not happen since Dmitry Medvedev became President and Patrushev was appointed Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation. The personnel reshuffle was, at the time, perceived as a demotion for Patrushev to a less relevant position (Kovačević 2022). Even though it is hard to judge whether Patrushev was really bidding for the Presidency, if it was true, it would create an interesting paradox. The paths of Medvedev and Patrushev crossed again in 2020 when both served in the Security Council as mentioned in the previous section. However, this time, the balance of power clearly skewed in favour of the latter.

Since 2008, Patrushev has taken advantage of his post and turned one of the departments of the Presidential Administration into a security policy powerhouse. His personal access to the President and the broad definition of areas in which the Security Council could intervene have allowed him to shape Russian foreign and security policy in the desired direction (Sternthal 2022). Obviously, it is difficult to judge the true extent of Patrushev's influence, but it is suggested that he was the one who approved the assassination of former FSB officer Alexander Litvinenko in 2006 (Addley, Harding and Walker 2016). Another speculation ties Patrushev to Russian influence operations in the Balkan region, where he would have been responsible for organising the unsuccessful coup in Montenegro in 2016 (Amos 2017). He would also have been involved in the inner circle of people who decided – or were at least informed – about the annexation of Crimea in 2014. It is theorised that the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 also increased Patrushev's influence on domestic politics. In this context, Mark Galeotti coined the term “Putinism-Patrushevism” while suggesting that the strong opinion of the Secretary of the Security Council has become an important inspirational source for a rather unimaginative Russian leader (In Moscow's Shadows 2022a). Even though this influence is hard to assess, Patrushev definitely tried to publicly advance some of his ideas about the implication of the new situation for domestic politics and the economy and what Galeotti called the “siloviki manifesto” (Galeotti 2022).

Membership in the FSB influenced Patrushev's perception of the state structures in the 2000s when he was one of the advocates of the idea of the “new mobility” (he was the one who coined

the term). In his view, members of the intelligence services should be the new elite class of society that would not only maintain state security but would play a significant role in the ruling of the state. This romanticised perception of the security services did not survive the clash with the reality and, later on, Patrushev distanced himself from this idea (Soldatov & Borogan 2011). However, as far as we know, the distinctions between people from the intelligence services and the rest of the state servants apparently still remains resonant for him today and dictates the way in which he forms political alliances (In Moscow's Shadows 2022c).

Nikolai Patrushev's worldview was shaped by his life-long career in the security apparatus. His main priority continues to be ensuring Russian security, which is manifested in his other opinions. This has led him to advocate for a strong state which is involved in all spheres of life; Ivan Fomin assessed Patrushev as one of the strongest advocates of statism in his categorisation of opinion camps in the Russian elite (Fomin 2022). Similarly, the paranoid image of the West – mainly the United States – plotting to weaken or even dismantle Russia turned the Secretary of the Security Council into a “hawk's hawk” when it comes to foreign and security policy (Galeotti 2020). While it would be an over-exaggeration to claim that Patrushev has a coherent and thought-through ideology, it seems to be the case that his convictions are consistent and genuine. This is yet another reason to closely study his public speech, in which he has a rather unrestricted possibility to present these worldviews.

The changing political climate in Russia during the last decade meant that Patrushev had an opportunity to project his worldviews into an increasing number of areas of life in the country since his opinions were becoming more mainstream. The so-called “conservative turn” after 2012 led to the securitisation of values, culture and social norms, which must be defended against the distributive influence of domestic actors as well as those from abroad (Østbø 2016; Kragh & Umland 2023). The deterioration of Russian relations with the West led to increasing anti-Americanism among the political elite and provided an opportunity for the Secretary of the Security Council to express his opinions that the United States always intended to destroy Russia and used all available means for this purpose (including the corruption of values). In his mind, the conflict with the United States occurred in the context of the transformation towards a multi-polar world order, which allows Russia the scope to forge ahead with new dynamics in international politics (Galeotti 2022b).

A very notable feature of Patrushev's worldview is his paranoia, fuelling conspiratorial thinking that occasionally appears in his speeches. For instance, in 2015, he stated that the United States

would prefer if Russia did not exist as a state, and it did not deserve to have such natural resources. Patrushev supported his argument with an alleged statement by former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright to the effect that neither the Far East nor Siberia belonged to Russia. The fact that Albright never made this statement did not bother Patrushev (Kragh, Andermo & Makashova 2020). However, the story becomes even stranger when we consider that the quote was first presented by Georgy Rogozin, a former KGB officer known for experimenting with parapsychological activities. Rogozin allegedly claimed to use these techniques to extract the thought about Russian unlawful claims to Siberia from Albright's subconscious with the use of hypnosis (Kashin 2015). While there is no way to find whatever Patrushev knows about the origin of the claim he used to support his foreign policy, it is already quite telling that he uses it. Apparently, in his case, these convictions and beliefs (or even delusions) are an important part of his worldview, which – as is described below – was also the case during the invasion of Ukraine.

Nikolai Patrushev: nature of the state and its institutions

For Nikolai Patrushev, the state is a key entity to which all other interests and processes in society should be subordinated, which manifests in several ways. On one level, Patrushev stressed the important role of institutions in his speeches. He lauded constitutional amendments in 2020 and emphasised that the role of his own institution – the Security Council – is to protect the constitutional order (Patrushev 2021a or Patrushev 2022a). Patrushev also highlighted the importance of legality in another context when he called for new laws that would enable the better protection of the country from various threats (Patrushev 2020c).

However, for Nikolai Patrushev, the institutional framework of the state presented only a means to a particular end, which was the protection of the values of a specific – in this case, Russian – political community. This task was crucial, and from the ability to achieve it was derived the usefulness of existing institutional procedures. For instance, Patrushev reflected positively on the constitutional amendments not because they were adjusting the state structures to new realities but because they better reflected what he understood as the intrinsic values of the Russian nation (Patrushev 2021b). However, at the same time, Patrushev was never imaginative or bold enough to suggest complete reform of state institutions, which would be more reflective of his value-based community, and he operated only in an existing institutional setting. Hence, it seems that his ideas might be radical but he remains, in fact, rather limited to certain areas

such as ensuring security or maintaining sovereignty. This allows him to be a zealous critic of unwanted features of the state and society but makes him incapable of presenting a constructive alternative.

The key guiding principle for Patrushev was the maintenance of sovereignty. This value was referenced constantly throughout the analysed speeches. Patrushev described it as a quality which is natural to the Russian state and claimed that it always stayed on the side of those aiming to free themselves from oppression. He recounted the support of Russian Empire to America's Union States during the Civil War or Soviet assistance during the decolonisation of states in Africa and Asia. According to Patrushev, this historical legacy makes Russia an obvious advocate of the new "democratic and just world order" which will be inclusive of the voices of all nations on Earth (Patrushev 2021c). However, despite this previous support, Russia is (in Patrushev's view) so hated by the United States that the latter aims to subdue other countries through various means of influence. On the contrary, Patrushev despised European countries because they submit themselves to American influence and, through accepting its liberal values, lost their identity and uniqueness (Patrushev 2022b). Interestingly, in some instances, Patrushev seemed to be more willing to compromise when he made surprisingly positive statements about the new administration of President Joe Biden and suggested that both countries can easily cooperate – if respecting each other's interests – since there are no natural points of conflict between them (Patrushev 2021d). Hence, it is possible to assume that Patrushev saw himself as being in a defensive position against what he understood as unlimited danger for the Russian state.

The core of Patrushev's argument is that Russia has an obligation to maintain its sovereignty which he understands fairly broadly – not only in terms of governance but also in the area of culture, historical memory, religion and values. In particular, values were important to him since he claimed that the proliferation of Western values is, in fact, the weapon of American influence wielded under the mask of false universalism. However, a truly sovereign country does not need these universal values – as he proclaimed in a commentary from 2020 – and it is able and willing to defend its own particular identity (Patrushev 2020a). At this point, it is relevant to recall some of his comments related to the invasion of Ukraine and, in particular, Ukrainian statehood, which is almost depicted as an antithesis of what Russia should strive to be. Patrushev did not express hatred for the Ukrainian people; instead, his main target was the Ukrainian government, which he saw as being to blame for betraying the interests of its citizens.

He labelled Kyiv authorities as Nazis serving the interest of foreign powers – namely the United States – aiming to weaken Russia. Patrushev blamed these authorities for the destruction of their own culture (including, for instance, alleged suppression of the Russian language), which undermined the traditional connection between Ukraine and Russia (Patrushev 2022c). By going against this historical legacy, the Ukrainian government lost its legitimacy, and it was the right thing to overthrow it. Moreover, Patrushev was convinced that, in retrospect, even Ukrainian citizens would appreciate the Russian intervention. In addition, his interpretation of the Western protectorate over Ukraine had conspiratorial undertones since he was convinced that American elites were following the depopulation plan of the so-called “Golden Billion”. While Ukrainians might be tricked into supporting this plan, Patrushev argued that they will not have a place among the chosen population and will be exterminated in the process (Patrushev 2022d). Hence, Patrushev’s conspiratorial thinking allowed him to portray the invasion as a rescue mission which is justified by the protection of not only Russian but also Ukrainian sovereignty.

The ability of a state to defend its own sovereignty was, for Nikolai Patrushev, inevitably intertwined with the protection of the unique traditional values of a given community. This process has an important security dimension as when a state allows its population to be corrupted by alien values – as happened to European countries that were weakened after their value systems were infected by imported liberal ideologies. Therefore, Patrushev lauded constitutional amendments in Russia and underlined that the protection of traditional values is among the key task of security institutions. However, here we can witness the clear limitation of his worldview since he was unable to define values traditional for Russia in anything other than a negative way. He was able to distinguish them from Western and liberal ones and vaguely associate them with historical memory and religiosity, but could not (despite attempts to do so) define them more precisely. For example, while speaking about the Sputnik-V vaccine against coronavirus he underlined that Russians will not use it in geopolitical games but, in line with his humanist credo “All Lives Matter”, will try to save as many lives as possible regardless of race, wealth or political opinions (Patrushev 2021d). In another instance, he refused the formulation of ethnical myths and stressed that Russia as a country must be based on a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional society. He suggested that such a potential security threat should be countered by proper education and praised the role of the Russian language as the connecting bridge between various ethnicities living in Russian territory (Patrushev 2020d). Especially after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Patrushev’s obsession with sovereignty almost turned

into a parody when he categorised relevant economic indicators showing the impact of sanctions as the construct of Western thinking and called for national approaches towards the management of the economy (Patrushev 2022b).

These positive manifestations of traditional values were mentioned only sparsely and did not form any coherent vision nor were associated with existing ideological streams or thinkers. Therefore, in Patrushev's case, it is quite appropriate to talk about an intuitive and indistinct mentality rather than a coherent ideology (Linz 2000). Henceforth, while there are already opinions suggesting that especially the Russian siloviki tend towards fascism (compare with Galeotti 2022b), the author would be very cautious in these conclusions because of the inability of actors such as Nikolai Patrushev to formulate a coherent and consistent worldview. However, his negation of liberal values, opposition against external influences and championing of national sovereignty based on unique values are clearly aligned with the principles of illiberalism (Laruelle 2020). Patrushev's prominent position within the Russian regime confirms the view that this country currently represents one of the beacons of this ideological camp.

Nikolai Patrushev and his perceptions of politics

Nikolai Patrushev's way of presenting his opinion in the public space during the analysed period was somewhat old-fashioned since he communicated via interviews and op-ed articles on a well-established news website. Even though his public appearances were scarce, he fully utilised them to outline his worldviews. His opinions were not sufficiently thought through and elaborated enough to create a coherent ideology, but they were complex enough to guide his political actions.

The key point of Patrushev's thinking about the Russian polity was its sovereignty. His understanding of sovereignty was broad and also included the area of values. For Patrushev, the survival of the states was closely related to the ability to maintain its traditional values – culture, historical memory, religion and language. In his opinion, Russian values are currently under attack by the spread of universal values that are, he says, a tool used by the United States to increase its global influence. The role of the Security Council – and security agencies in general – was to prevent such a form of subversion.

However, Patrushev's ambition did not end with defending Russia but was more global. In his mind, Russia should be in charge of other countries and nations aiming to defend their own sovereignty. This approach has made Russia the beacon of illiberalism and could serve as one of the explanations for the invasion of Ukraine. Patrushev interpreted this event as the liberation of a Ukrainian nation that was under the rule of an illegitimate governor trying – due to orders from its Western masters – to destroy its own traditional values. It would be interesting to observe how his perception of the conflict continues to evolve over time since Ukrainians have proven to be rather unwelcoming to Russian attempts for alleged liberation. Although the research does not cover this period, it is possible to assume that his mind – tending as it does towards conspiratorial thinking – will find a way to deal with this contradiction.

The reason it is not possible to describe Patrushev's worldview as an ideology is not only its vagueness but also its lack of a positive agenda. He was able to quite suggestively describe threats that Russia is allegedly facing but did not provide any alternative worth defending, except more of the same. For instance, he did not comment on how the goal to sustain traditional values should be reflected in the institutional setting of the regime or its policies. The lack of imagination on the side of Patrushev is reflective of a wider problem of the Russian regime, which fails to offer a compelling ideological vision to its citizens. Therefore, it is possible to expect that the importance of people like Patrushev will only increase since the security apparatus will be needed to coerce the population and political elite into subordination.

8. General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation Gennady Zyuganov

One possible classification of the Russian regime is competitive authoritarianism, which provides space for the existence of multiple political parties (Levitsky & Way 2010). Some of these parties – like United Russia – are closely linked to the regime and present its tools to maintain control over the legislative assembly and exercise its power over society (Roberts 2011). However, since the regime aims to maintain at least a resemblance of competition, there is also space for parties which are allowed to express criticism towards some aspects of the regime, compete for certain posts and promote particular policies. The position of this “systemic opposition” is always precarious since the regime can change the roles of the game and put these actors under further pressure. Nonetheless, parties of “systemic opposition” remain some of the few places where it is possible to formulate an alternative vision to the regime’s ideological worldview and, therefore, they should be studied (Helms 2022).

In the Russian context, the key representative of “systemic opposition” is the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF), which can benefit from its long-term tradition, widespread network of local organisations and loyal voter base (March 2015). This characteristic allowed the CPRF’s long-term General Secretary, Gennady Andreyevich Zyuganov, not only to survive in Vladimir Putin’s regime but also to occasionally challenge him to gain political concessions, as was the case, for instance, during the protests following the Duma elections in 2021 (Pertsev 2021a). Zyuganov’s undisputable achievement was securing the survival of CPRF through the dissolution of the Soviet Union, turbulent 1990s and Putin’s political regime. One of the key elements of his success was his ability to formulate a distinct ideology of left-wing conservatism. In this ideology’s view, communism is a natural way of governance inspired by the traditional values of Russian society. This perspective allows the CPRF to collaborate with the Orthodox Church as well as endorse Russian ethnonationalism. Zyuganov argues that his party is, in fact, the best embodiment of traditional Russian values, which serves him as a starting point for criticism of its political opponents – the corrupt “party of power” in the State Duma or the government still too infected by Western liberalism. When it comes to relations with the President, Zyuganov presented the CPRF as a real representative of Putin’s interests and himself as a man who is not afraid to speak with Putin about the country’s problems. Since Zyuganov perceived Ukraine as a natural part of the Russian world, he welcomed the invasion and praised the Kremlin for finally deciding to defend its natural sphere of influence. At the

same time, he tried to utilise the war in domestic politics and argued that it is about time to mitigate the influence of liberal ideology within Russia.

There might be relevant objections to the decision to focus research on Gennady Zyuganov's opinions. Zyuganov has already been present in Russian politics since the 1960s, and in the period of perestroika in the late 1980s, he emerged as one of the leading critiques of reformist tendencies. The peak of his power occurred in 1996 when – as Chairman of the rebranded Communist Party – he lost narrowly in contested presidential elections against Boris Yeltsin. Since then, his relevance has only been diminishing, as has his ability to reinvent his ideological positions. Also, in the context of the CPRF, he becomes more and more of a representative figure whose opinions are not reflective of new cadres within the party ranks. Therefore, it might seem that analysis of Zyuganov's speeches is a pointless exercise since it has little to add to existing knowledge and ignores more interesting trends occurring on the political left in Russia. The author understands such criticism but decided to focus on Zyuganov's rhetoric not only because this choice is consistent with the overall setting of the research but also because he believes that attention to this political actor can still provide some new insights. Firstly, the writing on Zyuganov (and the CPRF's ideological position more broadly) is not as excessive as one might think, given the predominant focus of the literature on the opinions of the leading political actors such as President Vladimir Putin. By analysing the Communist Party Chairman's speeches from the latest period, it is possible to observe how his older views have adjusted to the new realities, such as constitutional amendments or the invasion of Ukraine. Secondly, since the research is interested not only in opinions but also reflects how political rhetoric have translated into power struggles among various institutions, Zyuganov is an interesting case to follow. Since he – as the representative of the “systemic opposition” – has been balancing for more than two decades on the edge between loyalty and criticism of the political regime, his rhetoric in relation to other political actors uncovers what is important for survival in Russian politics far more crudely than for any other person described in this research. Finally, the author must acknowledge that Zyuganov is indeed a man of the past, and his ideological positions (and maybe even his political tactics) are not transmittable to the new realities of the CPRF and the Russian political regime as a whole. However, given by the period under analysis, it was hard, bordering impossible, to select any other political figure that was politically relevant and, at the same time, more reflective of contemporary views represented by a younger generation of Russian communists (for some innovative tendencies in the CPRF, see Seongcheol 2022). The author hopes that his academic peers, with the benefit of historical

hindsight, will be able to provide such an analysis which will be beneficial not only for the understanding of Russian politics but also for improving the knowledge of the role and possibilities of “systemic opposition parties” in turbulent times.

Analysis of the opinions of Gennady Zyuganov about Russian statehood and the political regime was based on the dataset of his 72 speeches from the period between 2020 and 2022. The sources of these speeches were the official websites of the State Duma, websites with the transcripts of his speeches during the Duma sessions and the official website of the CPRF. Zyuganov’s speeches were usually lengthy, sometimes topically inconsistent and commented on numerous subjects with different levels of specificity and tone. Such a rhetorical style made analysis challenging, but it was still possible to uncover recurring topics and tropes, which enabled conclusions about his opinions on Russian politics and the role of the Communist party in it.

The CPRF as “systemic opposition” in the Russian political regime

Contemporary authoritarian regimes mostly utilise the façade of democratic institutions – elections, representative bodies or managed media environment – to strengthen their standing. Such a model of managed political competition has its advantages since it allows for the creation of an illusion of representation of critical voices, measurement of the opinions of and level of support from citizens, recruitment of cadres of talented politicians and application of pressure on members of the political elite to perform their ability to deliver desired results. The preservation of this model of governance is quite demanding since it requires a constant balance between managing political processes and creating the impression of its legitimacy for the population. The role of “systemic opposition” – political forces which are allowed to be critical towards certain aspects of the regime but, at the same time, have to act cautiously within constraints set by the ruling elite – embodies paradoxes inherent to this kind of authoritarianism (Levitsky & Way 2010). While public and often scholarly attention prefers to focus on stories of heroic non-systemic opposition confronting the regime directly (compare, for example, the attention dedicated to different Russian oppositional actors in Ross 2015), it would be mistaken to dismiss the relevance of parties included in the political regime yet not necessarily completely loyal to it. Representatives of these parties might be interesting for their political skills since they are performing the complicated balancing act of representing their voters and not overstepping the lines drawn by the regime (Armstrong, Reuter & Robertson 2020).

To reinforce the argument about the relevance of the “systemic opposition”, it is possible to refer to the classical observation of the transitology paradigm of regime change, which highlights the importance of the pact between moderate representatives of the ruling elite and oppositional forces during the transition towards democracy (O’Donnell, Schmitter & Whitehead 2013). The position of “systemic opposition” is particularly interesting since these parties might have an organisational structure, established relations with its constituency and a coherent political worldview, which might allow them to play a relevant role during regime change if they wish to do so. At the same time, such parties are not so closely connected with the regime structures and can also potentially face intimidation from its security forces which might lead them to occasional pragmatic cooperation with the non-systemic oppositions. For this reason, they are logical representatives of the moderate ruling elite, who make a pact with oppositional forces in order to form the new political regime. Therefore, it is relevant to understand the ideological position of these actors and their representatives – they might seem insignificant in normal times, but in the case of crises their relevance can increase quite substantially.

The CPRF is the heir of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and evolved from its Russian branch (established in 1990), which was banned after the failed coup attempt in August 1991. Despite being in a problematic position while representing the more conservative ideas of the dissolved Soviet Union and facing opposition from then-President Boris Yeltsin and other important actors of the Russian elite, the Communist Party managed to establish itself as a relevant political player. In 1996, its candidate, Gennady Zyuganov, was very close to winning the presidential elections, and in the short period between 1998 and 1999, representatives of the CPRF held positions in Yevgeny Primakov’s Cabinet (March 2002). Despite significant losses in the number of deputies in the 2003 elections, the party managed to reinvent itself and adapt to the condition of the political regime of Vladimir Putin when it started in its role of “systemic opposition” (Reuter & Robertson 2015). The important condition for maintaining its relative independence from the ruling elite – certainly in comparison with political factions represented in the State Duma – was the ability to formulate its political programme connecting the legacy of the Soviet Union with appeals to Russian nationalism. This ideological mix of left-wing conservatism formulated by Zyuganov in the 1990s allowed the party to present communism as the logical outcome of traditions of classical Russian political philosophy (Rabotyzhev 2014). Such a public image allowed the CPRF to consistently gain – even in the condition of constrained political competition – enough votes in elections to remain a significant political

power not only in the State Duma but also within the regions and municipalities. In the last two decades, Communists held approximately 50 seats in the State Duma, scoring between 12% and 19% of the votes. CPRF candidates regularly finished second in the presidential elections, scoring between 12% and 17% of votes. Most successes of the Communist Party were achieved on the local and municipal level where, for instance, it won in two administrative oblasts in the 2018 gubernatorial elections (Smyth 2020). While these results should be taken with caution since they were affected by fraudulent electoral practices common in the Russian context, they are still relevant since it demonstrates that the CPRF has a stable voter base and was able to represent – or create the impression of representing – a specific constituency (Sirke 2012).

Such a position allowed the CPRF to formulate its own political strategy independent of the Kremlin and to utilise the discontentment in society. This approach is hardly surprising since – as will be described in further detail – party rhetoric was rather critical to the political and socio-economic situation in Russia, which was blamed not only on foreign influences and reformist politicians from the 1990s but also on the current political elite. This position allowed the CPRF to attract the support of dissatisfied voters as well as to recruit political talents unwilling to take risks related to joining the anti-systemic opposition. For instance, the Communist Party was actively involved in demonstrations which occurred due to the preparation of pension reform in 2018 as well as those criticising manipulation during the 2021 parliamentary elections – subsequently pushing for the annulment of election results in Moscow. This event was important since the CPRF was the main beneficiary of so-called “smart voting” suggested by opposition activist Alexei Navalny, in which the public was encouraged to vote for parties other than United Russia (Pertsev 2021b). These interactions and their aftermath in the form of backroom deals which secured the position of the Communists in the State Duma uncover the complex interaction between different oppositional actors. While Zyuganov played the role of the negotiator who stayed away from the protests and tried to use them as a bargaining chip in political deals, other Communist representatives were less inclined to make a truce with the regime. It is a dynamic illustrative of the internal struggles within the CPRF since this party not only attracts those nostalgic for the Soviet era but also garners the support of a wide range of politicians with left-leaning views (Pertsev 2021c). As was stressed at the beginning of this chapter, the existence of such internal political life makes the Communist Party one of the political formations to watch during the transformation of Russian politics that is very likely to occur over the next decade.

The reaction of the CPRF to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 reaffirms this assumption from several perspectives. Firstly, support of the war from Communist leading representatives – including Zyuganov – shows that the space for dissenting opinions is shrinking in the Russian political regime. This places into question whether the position of the “systemic opposition” is still attainable or whether the CPRF will be forced to align itself completely with the regime. Even though it is still too early to answer this question, it will be demonstrated that such a development does not lead the Communist leader to completely abandoning his long-term political agenda but motivates him to reframe it to make it fit into the current context. On the other hand, three Communist legislators expressed their disagreement publicly with the invasion, and younger members of the party allegedly criticised it as an “imperialist war” (Sarafimov 2022). The existence of disagreements – even though they do not significantly change the position of the party leadership – shows that the CPRF will face not only external but also internal pressures that will force it to rethink its position within the context of the evolving Russian political regime.

Political career and personal views of Gennady Zyuganov

The whole political life of Gennady Zyuganov has been associated with the Communist Party, which he joined in 1966. At that time, he was only 22 years old. His career started shortly after when he became the Secretary of Komsomol and the regional chief for ideology and propaganda in his domestic Oryol oblast. Zyuganov climbed through the regional party ranks, received a university education in Moscow’s Academy of Social Sciences and, in 1983, relocated to the capital. There, he served as the instructor in the Communist Party propaganda department. In the era of perestroika symbolising a radical re-thinking of the Soviet political regime, this ideologically rigid institution fell under significant pressure and turned into one of the vocal opponents of reform. Since Zyuganov worked in the propaganda apparatus for his whole career, it is hardly surprising that he became a critic of the ongoing reconstruction of the Soviet Union. This position was manifested publicly, especially in May 1991 when the newspaper Sovetskaya Rossiya published his open letter “Architect Amidst the Ruins”. The letter was addressed to one of the key reformers, Alexander Yakovlev, and criticised the results of the perestroika policies. According to some sources, the text was actually written by KGB officers and should undermine the leading position of Mikhail Gorbachev (who favoured reform) in the Communist Party. Zyuganov’s patronage of the text would give it the clout to bring it into the public debate

(Lenta.ru 2023). Either way, this story clearly demonstrates Zyuganov's political position during the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Despite the probably personally deeply frustrating experience of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Gennady Zyuganov did not leave public life but instead found a place for the rebranded Communist Party in Russian politics. Due to his unquestionable merits in the establishment of the CPRF, he was elected as General Secretary in 1993, and has held this position since. The Communists' ability to appeal to citizens disappointed by reforms and captivated by Soviet nostalgia made the party one of the strongest in the State Duma, which often clashed with the interests of President Boris Yeltsin. This competition reached its peak in the presidential elections in 1996, into which Zyuganov entered as the favourite. However, the possibility that the hard-line Communist Party could rule in the Kremlin scared Russian oligarchs, who orchestrated a negative campaign which allowed Yeltsin to get re-elected. There were even reported irregularities in election results in several regions, suggesting that manipulation might have also occurred (McFaul 1996). For Zyuganov, his defeat in the presidential elections meant the culmination point in his political career, from which his influence over Russian politics started to slowly diminish. In 2000, he lost the presidential election against Vladimir Putin, whom he criticised as a "small-small Napoleon" (Lenta.ru 2023), but still managed to secure a notable 29% of votes. In the early 2000s, Zyuganov had to face internal opposition in the CPRF, which demanded his abdication. Also, it remains an open question as to how Putin will deal with the Communist party. These developments led Zyuganov to adopt the safe position of the leader of the "systemic opposition", which was able to cope with the demands of the ruling elite but, at the same time, keep its independence. While this strategy partly paid off since it allowed the CPRF to continue to exist, Zyuganov's cautious approach did not allow the party to react flexibly to the ongoing crisis of the regime and foster its position in Russian politics. For instance, when mass protests took place in 2011 against Putin's re-election to the presidential post, the Communists remained mostly passive (Volkov 2015). During the next decade, Zyuganov managed to play a balancing act between the regime demands, an ability to please voters and keeping order within the ranks of the party cadres (Pertsev 2021b). However, already at this point, it was clear that Zyuganov was unable to come up with a strategy that would allow for something more than securing the survival of the CPRF. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, this task will become even harder, and it remains an open question as to whether the experienced but ageing Zyuganov will be able to perform such complicated political acrobatics.

The establishment of the CPRF in the 1990s meant not merely the rebranding of the Russian Communists but also a significant rethinking of their ideological postulates. It is reasonable to assume that Zyuganov was one of the important engines of this process since he spent most of his career working with party propaganda and ideology. At the same time, it is worth noting how skilfully the Communist leadership oriented itself in the new political situation and reconnected the party's traditional emphasis on social justice and control of the strong state over the economy with the tradition of Russian nationalism and longing for an end to the chaotic atmosphere of the 1990s. Zyuganov basically reinvented the very communist ideology since it started to look for its origins not in the works of Karl Marx but among Russian conservative thinkers. In his opinion, communism was the necessary result of traditional Russian values and, henceforth, the most desirable organisation of political and economic life in the country (Rabotyazhev 2014 or Chebankova 2020). Such a perspective represented a compelling argument for reinforcement of the position of the CPRF in Russian political life. The ideological innovation distinguishing Zyuganov's left-wing conservatism from traditional communism is most obvious in two areas – relations with the church and Russian ethnonationalism. The Orthodox Church ceased to be the principal enemy and turned into an important ally in the building of the national project. This paradoxical rhetoric was possible to observe, for example, when Zyuganov reminisce with remorse that the dissolution of the Soviet Union was organised against the will of the people and, at the same time, appealed to Saint Sophia (patron of wisdom) whose blessing would not allow for repeating such a mistake (Zyuganov 2020a). Despite reminiscing about the dissolution of the multi-ethnic Soviet Union, Zyuganov openly endorsed Russian nationalism and claimed that Russians should be perceived as “first among equals” in the context of the many nationalities in the Russian Federation. He also advocated for including these amendments in the revised Constitutions (Zyuganov 2020b). Notably, his efforts were not successful since other important actors of the regime treated this question far more cautiously and maintained – at least rhetorically – that all nationalities and religions present on Russian territory should be treated as equal. Despite the fact that these ideological changes quite significantly reshaped the nature of the Russian Communist, it allowed for the establishment of the CPRF as the relevant player in the new political reality.

As will be shown in the following sections, Zyuganov remains ideologically consistent with many of the basic postulates of his left-wing conservatism. For this reason, it is even more interesting to follow how he is able to reframe his consistent opinions in a way that is fitting to the new political realities – including such an extreme as the war in Ukraine – and to leverage

them in order to maintain the political relevance of the CPRF. Equally interesting is his ability to pick fights which uncover the level of publicly visible competition allowed in the context of the Russian political regime. Even though the scholar looking for contemporary ideological debates with Russian Communists – or more broadly, the political left – would probably benefit more from different actors than Zyuganov, this politician, due to the persistence of his opinions and limited yet relevant power, remains the unique source for understanding the dynamic in current Russian politics.

Gennady Zyuganov: nature of the regime

Gennady Zyuganov's ability to formulate general ideological constructs also proved itself in his perception of the Russian state. Apart from other actors described in the analysis, he avoided technocratic language and, instead of focusing on formal mechanisms and institutional settings, tried to explain his argumentation in the broader value framework. When talking about the Russian state, he did not mean only the legal entity but understood it as a leading representative of the Russian world, which is a broader community sharing the same values which are more than one thousand years old (Zyuganov 2022a). This community should be transnational and also include Ukraine and Belarus (Zyuganov 2021a). The core qualities uniting this community should be shared language and the memory of victory in the Second World War – the event which Zyuganov bombastically called “the most important holiday on Earth” (Zyuganov 2022b). Other values defining this community were its “strong and clever ruling authorities, high level of spirituality, the feeling of justice and national collectivism” (Zyuganov 2021b). The emphasis on ethnic nationalism favouring Russians among other peoples, including in the Russian world, was also apparent in his speeches (see, for example, Zyuganov 2020c). Zyuganov argued that it is crucial to maintain such uniqueness and, therefore, the Russian state or community must defend its sovereignty against outside influences. In a way, this ability has also become the defining feature of the Russian state since, in human history, “only two countries – us (Russia) and England – were able to not lose their sovereignty in last five hundred years” (Zyuganov 2022c). In this sense, Zyuganov's opinions are quite consistent with the majority of statist in the Russian ruling elite (compare Fomin 2022), but his ability to interlink the key points of his ideology of left-wing conservatism with the main virtues of the Russian community is notable.

For Gennady Zyuganov, the ability of the Russian ruling elite to uphold the abovementioned principles is closely related to the success of the state. Similar to many members of the Russian political elite, he was very critical towards the situation in the 1990s. However, his analysis was more complex, and he was also not afraid to point out the negative practices and harmful opinions that were maintained by the ruling elite up to present day. Zyuganov claimed that the deterioration of the Russian state started with Gorbachev's reforms which were, in fact, part of the subversive plan of Western powers going from "perestroika" to "democratisation" and, finally, culminating in "liquidation" (Zyuganov 2022c). Russian liberal elites and reformers failed to understand this situation and, by applying Western recipes to reform the economy, only supported the plan that should, in the end, lead to the destruction of the state. The result of these misguided policies was not only poverty and undermining of sovereignty but mainly the loss of human capital. Zyuganov repeatedly claimed that, in 1990s, Russia lost 20 million people (Zyuganov 2020d). However, this problem was not properly addressed during Vladimir Putin's rule either, and the Communist leader repeatedly attacked more economically liberal-minded members of the ruling elite – in particular, Alexei Kudrin and German Gref – for advocating policies which are harmful to the Russian state (Zyuganov 2022d). In this context, the invasion of Ukraine was perceived positively by Zyuganov since it meant that Russia was willing to stand up to the United States and liberate the Ukrainian brotherly nation from the rule of "Nazis and Banderites" who illegitimately took power in the country (Zyuganov 2022a). Even more importantly, the extraordinary situation of the war created an opportunity to abandon the misguided liberal economic programme and introduce national mobilisation that would lead to the revival of the planned economy (Zyuganov 2022e). In Zyuganov's understanding, the war meant a final break in the negative process that started in Russian politics during the time of perestroika and might allow Russia to become a fully independent international actor adhering to its natural values of left-wing conservatism.

The debate about constitutional amendments was very important for Gennady Zyuganov, and he wanted the CPRF to play an active role in this process. He emphasised that this exercise's main aim is to adjust documents to current realities and reinforce the country's strength. In a historical perspective, he argued that similar steps were taken in the past when Soviet constitutions were amended to fit the needs of the time (Zyuganov 2020b). In his mind, it was necessary since carrying on with the current political regime would lead to a political crisis (Zyuganov 2021c). Zyuganov stressed that the constitution is the "agreement between people and the state power" but highlighted that the main obligation is for the executive power

(Zyuganov 2020b). This rhetoric underlined the argument for an increase in the control of the State Duma above the government. In this approach, he was aligned with Vyacheslav Volodin, who was also understood the amendments as an opportunity to increase the power of the legislative body. This united effort supports the hypothesis about the relevance of institutional setting and written legal norms in the context of the Russian political regime. Amending the Constitution also represented an opportunity for Zyuganov to include in the basic laws more provisions reflecting the Communist programme. Therefore, his party suggested 108 amendments, out of which 15 were considered crucial. In the end, the Communists failed to put across any of them, which was bitterly reflected by Zyuganov (Zyuganov 2021d). Despite that, he still took advantage of the new text of the Constitution in supporting his political agenda when criticising the budget suggested by the government for the period 2023-2024. He claimed that the suggested document does not reflect the commitment to upholding the principles of “societal” government written in the Constitution but instead introduced provisions that will lead to “oligarchic and police government” (Zyuganov 2021e). Such argumentation shows how the written norms can be used even by the actors of the “systemic opposition” to gain political leverage in Russian political regimes.

Perception of other institutional actors: President and government

Similar to the other analysed actors, Gennady Zyuganov’s speeches combined a manifestation of his loyalty to the President along with attempts to depict himself as the person close to Vladimir Putin. He frequently referred to the President’s speeches and opinions and claimed that the CPRF’s goals are in line with the wishes of the head of state. For instance, he repeatedly reminded audiences that the Communists are committed to making sure that Russia will become one of the five most developed countries in the world, which was also the commitment of the Presidential Administration (Zyuganov 2021f). Zyuganov not only tried to show to Vladimir Putin that his party can be useful to him as he tries to achieve his goals, but also used this rhetoric to criticise the “party of power” in the State Duma – as will be described in more detail in the next section – while claiming that the actions of the Unite Russia party undermine the ambitions of the President. Such rhetoric was not limited only to conflicts in the legislative body, but the Communist leader also used the trope of “good tsar and bad boyars” more broadly. In one of his speeches, Zyuganov lamented the general deterioration of situation in the country and, at the same time, endorsed Putin as the only political force which is trying to fight these challenges (Zyuganov 2021g). Similarly, in the context of the invasion of Ukraine, Zyuganov

not only supported state policy, but tried to actively look for ways in which his party could contribute to the integration of occupied territories in the Russian Federation (Zyuganov 2022f).

Zyuganov's rhetoric could serve as the tool allowing the "systemic opposition" to demonstrate loyalty to the most important person in the regime and, therefore, also reinforce Vladimir Putin's position and authority. The Communist leader not only stressed his programmatic agreement with the President, but also tried to depict himself as someone with informal ties with the President. As someone who was Putin's political opponent in the earlier stage of his career, he could hardly try to refer to shared past experiences. Instead, Zyuganov stressed his regular meetings with the President and argued that he does not always necessarily agree with Putin and is willing to tell him hard truths about the realities in the country (Zyuganov 2020e). Evoking this message seems to be a good weapon against political opponents – to whom he actually threatened that he would complain about their behaviour directly to the President (Zyuganov 2022g). However, it might also have implications for party members and core voters who might appreciate Zyuganov's access to the highest echelons of power and his ability to defend their interests vis-à-vis the most important political actors in the state.

Gennady Zyuganov's perception of Mikhail Mishustin's government was informed by his opposition role in the State Duma. At the beginnings of the cabinet, he clearly distanced his party from it since, despite speaking highly about the Prime Minister himself, he stressed that he did not support the government with his votes since he wanted to decide according to its actions (Zyuganov 2020f). Due to this distance, Zyuganov could approach the decisions made by the government selectively and rhetorically demonstrate that he still represents the interests of dissatisfied voters and is committed to the ideology of left-wing conservatism. This became especially visible in Zyuganov's criticism of the Mishustin government's socio-economic policy. He claimed that the cabinet is not able to change the established economic course and still relies on discredited recipes of liberal economical thinking (Zyuganov 2021h). After the invasion of Ukraine, already mentioned appeals for national mobilisation and nationalisation of the economy brought him into direct conflict with policies promoted by Mishustin. As was already mentioned in relation to the constitutional amendments, Zyuganov endorsed attempts to undermine government positions and make it more subordinate to the State Duma since this would increase his ability to influence government agenda even from the side of the opposition. In this sense, the CPRF played a relevant role in strengthening the State Duma as a whole in the Russian political regime.

As shown above in the context of the constitutional amendments, Gennady Zyuganov was able to play a constructive role when it came to reinforcing the position of the State Duma in the Russian political regime. Generally, he also positively reflected the existence of the dialogue among political parties (Zyuganov 2021i) and the effectiveness of the work of the legislative assembly (Zyuganov 2020g). However, when it came to specifics, Zyuganov was very critical, in particular, towards the United Russia party, which he labelled the “party of power” (for example, Zyuganov 2021d). While these criticisms were made primarily on the field of the legislative assembly, and Zyuganov addressed them to the party and its representatives, it is possible to see them in a broader context as negative assessments of the regime in general.

One of the lines of criticism was based on the ideological views of the CPRF, which Zyuganov tried to position into the role of the guarantor of the social politics of the state. As was already mentioned, he raised this point also in relation to the government when he argued the unwillingness of the ruling elites to uphold the requirement of the societal state stated in the Constitution. Also, in other cases, he was able to leverage topics generally resonant within the regime with his criticisms of the “party of power”. For example, when he criticised the lack of funding for education, Zyuganov tried to frame this topic in relation to state sovereignty, which is a quality universally embraced by the regime elite. He claimed that the degradation of the Russian school system would lead to the inability to produce high-quality products and innovative inventions, which would undermine the position of the country and make it more vulnerable to the interference of other states (Zyuganov 2022h). On another occasion, Zyuganov criticised the unfair practices of the “party of power” during elections, which he depicted as problematic not due to not corresponding to democratic standards, but because it might undermine regime security. He claimed that such a usurpation of power would only create favourable conditions for the Russian Maidan, which was a situation he perceived as highly undesirable (Zyuganov 2021d).

The most serious clash between the Russian regime and Gennady Zyuganov and his party during the analysed period occurred during elections. The campaigns before the regional elections in 2020 and the 2021 parliamentary elections were full of criticism of the ruling elite. The CPRF launched an elections campaign with the expected emphasis on the topic of social justice and quality of living summarised in the programme “10 steps towards a life in dignity”.

In Zyuganov's opinion, the "elections were the conflict of two ideas – this one favouring continuation of a criminal-oligarchic course and this one which is for a strong state, stable and strong economy, educated population and sovereign political position" (Zyuganov 2020d). It is probably not necessary to add which of these ideas Zyuganov perceived as the credo of the CPRF. In the parliamentary elections, he defined the Communist Party against the "party of power" even more openly when he said that United Russia had, in the last 20 years, pursued policies "absolutely devastating" for Russia (Zyuganov 2021j). While such talk could be dismissed as pre-election rhetoric, it is quite striking how critically these words evaluate the era of Vladimir Putin. Even more importantly, Zyuganov's criticism was not related only to politics but also focused on electoral procedures. He warned the Presidential Administration about possible attempts to manipulate the results and claimed that they might easily escalate into violence in the streets caused by dissatisfied citizens (Zyuganov 2020d). In the aftermath of the 2021 parliamentary elections, Zyuganov and his fellow party comrades went even further and openly suggested that massive electoral fraud had taken place and accused the "party of power" of playing with fire (Zyuganov 2021k). The party refused to acknowledge the results at first and supported demonstrations against them (Zyuganov 2021l). While his comrades protested, he was making the rounds in the corridors of power and tried to bargain for the best possible result. At one point, he allegedly asked for an annulment and repetition of the vote in Moscow, where the suspected manipulation with online voting significantly changed the expected results. Such a radical demand that would represent massive reputational damage to the regime and local authorities was obviously refused, but it is still assumed that Zyuganov was able to exchange it for a better position for the CPRF in the State Duma (Pertsev 2021a). In this sense, it is possible to perceive all the fuss around the 2021 parliamentary elections as a demonstration of the capabilities of "systemic opposition" to achieve the maximum possible within the condition of the Russian authoritarian regime.

Gennady Zyuganov: perception of politics

Gennady Zyuganov has a very clear vision of the Russian polity, which was based on traditional values of spirituality, justice and collectivism. He argues that the state and its institutions and policies must be in line with these values to be representative of the nature of Russian society. The connection of the ideology of left-wing conservatism with the nature of Russian polity was politically beneficial since it allowed him to present communism as a reflection of the local historical tradition and the CPRF as its natural representative. From this position, Zyuganov

could launch attacks against the party's political opponents. He criticised the "party of power" for being corrupt and incompetent, which endangers the very existence of the regime. His criticism of the government aims at its alleged liberal mindset, which should be at odds with the nature of the regime.

At the same time, Zyuganov could be a team player and supported steps allowing the State Duma to gain more control over the government. Similarly, he knows very well the red lines in place and, after the sharpened campaign before the parliamentary elections in 2021 and subsequent protests, took the role of negotiator, which allowed him to gain various benefits for the CPRF. Zyuganov praised the President and tried to present the CPRF as the only political force which is truly supporting his policies and himself as an honest ally who is willing to tell Vladimir Putin uncomfortable truths. Similar to other actors analysed in the research, he used references to the President as the tool to propose his own political objectives.

In Zyuganov's mind, Russia was the leader of the broader community of nations connected by the same language and cultural traditions. Ukraine obviously belonged to this group and, therefore, the CPRF General Secretary perceived the invasion positively as a way of liberating a brotherly nation from an illegitimate government imposed by the West. Zyuganov also hoped that the invasion would change Russian internal politics since it would create an opportunity to deal with the part of the elite infected by liberal ideology imported from the West. However, it seems that he did not appreciate that internal changes in the regime can also make the position of "systemic opposition" untenable since the Kremlin will not be willing to accept any opposition. If this is the case, it would be a failure not only for the General Secretary, who might lose his party but also for the experiment of competitive authoritarianism in Russia. Therefore, the future development of the CPRF is something researchers should examine to be able to better understand the internal dynamics of the Russian regime.

9. Conclusion

The research aimed to contribute to the theoretical debate about the role of elites and their ideological positions in non-democratic regimes, through providing insights into the opinions of four members of the Russian elite about politics in Vladimir Putin's Russia between 2020 and 2022. The in-depth case studies of their worldviews focus on three areas – polity, politics and policy. In other words, the research aimed to capture their understanding of the nature of the regime in Russia, its internal mechanisms and programmatic priorities. The primary aim was to describe the opinions of the analysed actors and, by doing so, to contribute to increasing understanding of the worldviews among the political elite in Russia. However, the comparison among individual politicians also enabled the drawing of more general conclusions about the functioning of the Russian political regime and contemporary non-democratic regimes in general.

Before summarising the research findings, it is worth reiterating the usefulness of the method of political discourse analysis even in the context of non-democratic regimes. The author is convinced that the presented research findings will show that the public speeches of Russian officials should not be dismissed as pure propaganda and, instead, scholars should dedicate serious attention and use them as one of the avenues for a better understanding of developments in the regime. The practical reasoning for this approach is that creating datasets for analysis is straightforward since public speaking is still an important part of political life in Russia – not only for the President but also for other actors aiming to introduce their talking points into the public space. Some of them even do that proactively by trying to explore new communication platforms, as demonstrated by Volodin's case in this research but also elsewhere (for example, Rodina & Dligach 2019). Therefore, the gathering of sufficient research material that would allow the construction of the dataset does not seem to be a problem – at least for some political actors. Instead, the challenge seems to be the overwhelming amount of data, which makes the close reading approach time-consuming. Nonetheless, the research demonstrates that this method can provide useful findings since the opinions of political actors are not often manifested in an elaborated and concise manner in one text – Nikoli Patrushev's article criticising universal values (Patrushev 2020a) is rather exceptional in this sense – but instead spread throughout speeches in the form of specific terms, short references or recurring themes. The task of research, then, is to gather these individual pieces and carefully construct from them the mosaic of opinions of given political actors.

Since this approach is time-consuming and relies on the ability to interpret data properly, the research suggests several recommendations that have proven beneficial. As already mentioned, it should not be expected that political actors will present their views in a concise manner in one speech. Therefore, a sufficiently large dataset was gathered for this research, enabling a convincing demonstration of which worldviews remain constant and which themes recur in different times and context. Since the themes and topics are specific for each political actor, the qualitative approach seems to be more accurate, especially in an under-researched area such as the political views of Russian elite members. Therefore, the author would be cautious with qualitative approaches, or the use of methods enhanced by computational software, such as topic modelling, since he is convinced that important nuances could be lost. Instead, he suggests focusing more on the case studies of individual political actors, which might provide a more grounded view on ideological camps within the Russian elite. The possibility to put the opinions of individual actors into perspective – as done, for example, by Ivan Fomin (2022) – proves to be useful since it allows us to understand his position in context and provide further insight for the analysis. For instance, Mikhail Mishustin's lack of comments about the full-scale invasion of Ukraine become even more meaningful when compared with the reactions of other analysed actors who actively endorsed the war and incorporated this topic into their speeches. Since the close reading approach tends to be time-consuming, a useful shortcut is to focus on the focal points of development in political life – such as constitutional amendments in this research. Speeches related to this topic also uncovered a broader set of opinion of the given actors and shed light on the mechanisms of the regime. For instance, an interesting topic providing further insights into relations with the government, State Duma and political parties could be discussion about the state budget. While these methodological recommendations might seem obvious, the author considers it important to mention them since he is convinced that the community of scholars focused on Russia (and authoritarian regimes in general) would benefit from discussion about the benefits of political discourse analysis. Attention to this method and its possible application in a non-democratic context is important as field research – in particular, in the Russian context – becomes significantly more challenging, which increases the relevance of political speeches as a data source. Moreover, taking the speeches of politicians in non-democratic regimes seriously would allow for a balancing of the debate and creation of an alternative to the current overfocus on propaganda, lies and manipulations. While this perspective is undeniably useful in some cases, it can make one forget that not everything happening in non-democratic regimes is a smokescreen and that even pragmatic and unpleasant individuals, such as autocratic leaders, can hold genuine personal convictions.

The research demonstrates that members of Russian political elites hold various worldviews regarding their understanding of politics. The research argues that these views are meaningful since they are also influencing their policy priorities and, henceforth, inform their actions. To support its conclusions, the research refers to the high level of consistency in the speeches of the analysed political actors. While they might be using different words, each person expressed similar positions throughout the period under research despite different contexts or platforms. More broadly, the presented opinions were, in the end, quite unsurprising since they reflected their political biographies. For example, Mikhail Mishustin was clearly influenced by the worldview of technocratic modernisers, while Nikolai Patrushev's ideas reflected his career in the security services. However, the research aimed to go beyond these labels and investigate in detail their exact opinions about politics. Even though the analysed actors differed significantly in the level of nuance and sophistication of their ideological positions, their speeches showed consistent worldviews. This could be most clearly exemplified in the way their interpretations of the individual dimensions of politics informed each other. It is possible to demonstrate that the way in which a given actor perceived the nature of the regime (dimension of polity) then informed his understanding of the political process (dimension of politics) and his programmatic priorities (dimension of policy). These findings support the thesis that politicians in non-democratic regimes cannot be analysed solely as rent-seekers, but that the emphasis must be placed on their beliefs, worldviews and ideological positions.

The research confirmed the thesis about the persistence of paradigmatic pluralism in the Russian elite by uncovering significant differences among the analysed political actors. These differences were notable, even at very basic description of the regime and its key values. All political actors highlighted that the people comprise the key source of the legitimacy of power. However, they suggested significantly different ways in which the interactions between people and state/regime should be organised and the implications for political life. Mikhail Mishustin argued that the well-being of the people should be the key priority and, therefore, the first duty of the state is to take care of the needs of its citizens. This view was then reflected in his ambition to pursue digitalisation, which was framed mainly as a tool facilitating the interaction between states and their citizens in the context of a service-oriented state. Vyacheslav Volodin stood for a proceduralist approach; he argued that Russia is a democracy and tried to demonstrate this point by pointing out various elements of its institutional procedures. He boasted the existence of truly competitive elections, a multi-party system and the ability of the State Duma to represent the interests of ordinary citizens. Meanwhile, Nikolai Patrushev and

Gennady Zyuganov suggested essentialist perspectives and claimed that Russian polity has specific values that have to be reflected in political life. Their conservative worldview warned against attempts to undermine traditional values that would lead to the loss of sovereignty of the state. Patrushev took a mostly defensive stance and presented himself as a protector of the existing institutional order against all kinds of subversions – including the ideological one – from the outside world. For Zyuganov, his appeals to the traditional values of polity served as a starting point for criticism of certain elements of the regime, which – in his view – were imported from abroad and opposed to the nature of Russian society. Interestingly, he was also the only analysed political actor who openly endorsed Russian ethnonationalism. This summary shows that analysed political actors held different views about the nature of the Russian polity, which then reflected in their approach to the institutional setting of the regime and programmatic priorities. Their views were not only different but even contradictory, which shows the ability of Vladimir Putin's regime to incorporate various ideological worldviews and manage their competition.

The flexibility afforded by the vague ideological framework of Putinism allows different policy tendencies to exist. The analysed political actors seem to be aware of this context and tried to use its features to their advantage. An interesting example was a different interpretation of sovereignty, which is the sacrosanct principle of the contemporary Russian regime. Since this term is vague and open to multiple interpretations, the analysed political actors clashed over their interpretations of this nodal point of the regime discourse during the debate about ways to adapt the economy to the war in Ukraine. Mikhail Mishustin argued that the best way to maintain sovereignty in the economic area is to pursue liberal market policies and stimulate trade with countries that are willing to do business with Russia. For him, the nature of sovereignty meant having an alternative to trading relations with the Western states. On the contrary, Nikoali Patrushev and Gennady Zyuganov argued for a closed model of economy that is, to a large extent, controlled by the state and self-sufficient as far as possible. Their understanding of sovereignty was in isolation of the country from the rest of the world. The results of this clash of opinions are not that relevant for the research. The important takeaway is that different political actors utilised the vocabulary of the regime to pursue fundamentally different policy objectives. Therefore, the conflict about policy objectives was also reflected in the contest about the interpretation of terms defining the nature of the regime. More studies exploring these conflicts about nodal points in discourse are very much needed since they can provide interesting insights into the power dynamics within ideological camps in the elite.

Table 2: Summary of worldviews of analysed political actors

Actor	Polity	Politics	Policy
Mikhail Mishustin, Prime Minister, and career bureaucrat	Service-oriented state that takes care of the needs of its citizens	Informal relations with the President (“man with direct access”) Interactions with State Duma are conducted through established institutional channels	Modernisation via digitalisation aiming to improve well-being of citizens
Vyacheslav Volodin, Chairman of the State Duma, and politician closely associated with Vladimir Putin’s regime	Russia as democracy with established institutions able to reflect the demands of citizens	Informal relations with the President (“man anticipating President’s wishes”) Use of various institutional means to increase influence over the government	Leading role in adoption of constitutional amendments increasing powers of State Duma
Nikolai Patrushev, Secretary of the Security Council of Russia, and the most influential member of the silovki faction	State is protector of traditional values of given community and must remain sovereign	Institutions have to reflect values of given community	Maintaining state sovereignty and fight global struggle for justice (for example, in the context of full-scale invasion of Ukraine)

Gennady Zyuganov, General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, and politician representing systemic opposition against Vladimir Putin's regime	Left-wing conservatism is natural ideology for Russia	Informal relations with the President ("man willing to tell President unpleasant truths") Constitution as authoritative document for interactions among institutions	Playing the role of opposition to certain elements of the regime (for example, criticising government for disregarding Russian traditional values)
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The research showed that analysed political actors, despite their different worldviews and programmatic priorities, perceive certain aspects of politics similarly. Since the recurring themes in their speeches were related to the area of politics, they can be interpreted as features of mechanisms within the Russian regime. Most analysed actors highlighted the role of Vladimir Putin within the regime. The descriptions of each political actor was not related primarily to the presidential office but was usually associated with Putin personally. This personal undertone was also visible in speeches mentioning the President. Mikhail Mishustin presented himself as someone with direct access to Putin and praised the latter's ability to listen and provide good advice on various problems. Vyacheslav Volodin vocally supported Putin and referred to him not as an ordinary politician but as a historical figure. Some of his comments were borderline parody when he, for instance, argued that Russia has an advantage while dealing with the coronavirus pandemic since it is ruled by Putin. In contrast, Gennady Zyuganov consistently, with his oppositional role, presented himself as the only person who was willing to speak the full truth to Putin and, therefore, is appreciated by the autocrat. The only exception was Nikolai Patrushev, who did not make any significant statement about the President. This position is possible to explain by the fact that it is widely known that Patrushev and Putin are close political allies and, therefore, such vocal manifestation of loyalty was not necessary. At first sight, such rhetoric might confirm the thesis about personalised autocracy and the dominance of Vladimir Putin within the Russian political regime. However, this is only part of the story since a closer look at the speeches of analysed actors showed that they used references to Putin's will often when they needed to pursue their own political agendas. The very ability for each person to present himself as someone who acts in accordance with autocratic wishes

would become the source of their political power. This, on one hand, reinforces Putin's authority but, on the other, demonstrates his lack of control over day-to-day politics since various sides can try to capitalise on his authority. The term "weak strongmen" (used by Frye 2021) accurately captures this dynamic.

The other area of consensus was the relevance of institutions and formal procedures. This finding supports the thesis about the relevance of formal procedures in Putin's regime. Debates about constitutional amendments are illustrative examples. Vyacheslav Volodin dedicated significant time to this topic and repeatedly argued that the change of power balance between the government and State Duma must also be reflected in day-to-day politics. The Communist Party failed to pursue its preferred changes in the Constitution but, despite that, Gennady Zyuganov referred to this document when criticising government policies. Nikolai Patrushev presented defending the constitution as one of the key tasks of the Security Council. Similarly, the analysed actors often spoke about the role of their institutions within the political regime and tried to position them against other institutional actors. Therefore, it is possible to say that, on a formal level, politics followed established legal procedures, which gave them meaning in facilitating political actions. As already mentioned, the construction of the state budget could be an interesting way to investigate processes ongoing within Russian politics in detail (as already observed by Noble 2017). While it is possible to conclude that institutions play an important role, it is important to consider that this is only the case until they do not. Volodin's approach to the State Duma is an interesting case since, despite his talk about democracy and opinion plurality, at the beginning of the war, he stressed that in a given circumstance, all legislators have only "one party – our country [Russia]" (Volodin 2022k) and have to mobilise themselves to support the war effort. However, this should not be interpreted as an argument against the role of institutions in non-democratic regimes. The author suggests that this question should not be treated as binary but instead further elaborated since it can lead to interesting findings about the dynamics of non-democratic regimes. Apparently, in some cases and contexts, institutions matter, and political actors respect formal rules and procedures. However, there are also exceptional circumstances when these no longer apply. Asking what entails such circumstances and who can decide this – in Carl Schmitt's terms – "state of exception" can be a useful framework for understanding the power dynamics in non-democratic regimes (as already explored by Lewis 2020).

Unexpectedly, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 provided a different context for the research since it put the analysed political actors in a completely new situation. Since the analysis is based on the first four months of the war, the research does not have the ambition to reach overarching conclusions about the opinions of individual actors, or even the elite as a whole. The mapping concluded by the research presents a possible starting point for other scholarly work dedicated to this topic. The research showed that the analysed political actors chose various approaches to the war. Vyacheslav Volodin reinvented himself as a warrior and was one of the first officials who publicly supported the invasion. As already mentioned, he also tried to mobilise the State Duma to adopt legislation supporting the war effort. Gennady Zyuganov endorsed the war but adapted its interpretation to his long-term worldview. He highlighted that the conflict has important internal dimensions since it creates an opportunity to finally get rid of the influence of imported liberal ideas that are still present in the thinking of part of the Russian elite and to establish rule in accordance with the country's traditional values. Nikolai Patrushev presented war as a mission for liberating the Ukrainian nation from the oppression of a fascist government that was the puppet of the Western states. In his mind, this conflict was only one of the steps in the campaign against the liberal order globally enforced by the United States. This shows that views and interpretations of the conflict differed even among elite members supporting the invasion. Even more interesting was the position of Mikhail Mishustin, who tried to distance himself from the conflict and did not mention it in his speeches. Instead, he vaguely referred to a difficult situation – not dissimilar to the coronavirus pandemic – that his government had to deal with. Despite this reluctant approach, he did not lose his position and, at the time of writing, remains Prime Minister. How long this will be possible remains to be seen, but it seems to be the case that there is a part of the Russian elite that was not enthusiastic about the war and wanted to dissociate itself from this endeavour by being silent and considering further political strategy.

These political strategies are something to watch, since the regime built by Vladimir Putin will end sooner or later. When its creator and ruler is no longer in place, ideological struggles that are currently hidden will come to the surface and will define the political struggle for the future of Russian politics. As this research demonstrates, this struggle will be meaningful since different members of the political elite have fundamentally different visions for Russia. Studying these visions should be of interest to scholars so they can contemplate multiple alternative scenarios for the future.

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