



Niels Drost

Tsar-struck

*How Vladimir Putin uses
the history of the Russian Empire*



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Abstract

How does Vladimir Putin use imperial history? Scholars have written extensively about the ways in which the Russian president employs the past in his policy, but an overarching analysis of how Putin has instrumentalised the history of the tsars and the Russian Empire is still missing. Based on over 20.000 speeches and other primary sources that were scraped from the Kremlin website, this thesis supplements the existing literature by analysing how Putin has used history as a usable past to consolidate his power base. Systematically, it traces and plots the development in Putin's usage and timing of different historical modalities between December 1999 and December 2021. While Putin initially used imperial history as an inspirational tool to strengthen society and international ties, the past gradually transformed into a weapon. Putin waved and swunged this rhetorical sword at home and abroad to justify his actions and secure his power position. By analysing how this occurred, this thesis adds more insight into the cards that Putin holds and plays, as history is one of the key weapons of the Kremlin to uphold domestic support.

Keywords: Vladimir Putin, Russian Empire, tsars, usable past, applied history

“We have a history that, you know, reads like a detective story, like a romantic novel. You just have to present it in a beautiful, talented way.”
– Vladimir Putin, 2013

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Introduction

A Life for the Tsar

Soon after Vladimir Putin was inaugurated again as President of the Russian Federation in 2018, bombastic music started to echo through the halls of the Grand Kremlin Palace in Moscow. Canons fired their salutes outside as the orchestra played *Glory*. In this final act of the nineteenth century opera *A Life for the Tsar*, euphoric Russians are singing for their newly coronated sovereign on the Red Square:¹

Hail, hail, our Russian tsar!

The God-given sovereign tsar!

May your royal line immortalize,

*Through which the Russian people thrive.*²

While the melody of *Glory* could be heard inside the walls of the contemporary Kremlin as well, the choir at Putin's inauguration was accompanying it with different lyrics. They sang the *Ivan Susanin* version that was rewritten at the time of Joseph Stalin. This adaptation stripped *A Life for the Tsar* from its self-evident imperial theme that was irreconcilable with Soviet rationale after the 1917 revolution.³ Performing this version, the choir now no longer sang of glory to the tsar, but instead only of glory to the Russian motherland.⁴ Nonetheless, they were doing so a stone's throw away from the location where the tsars used to be

¹ Anna Tittmann and Charles Tittmann, *The Standard Operaglass; Detailed Plots of Two Hundred and Thirty-Five Celebrated Operas, with Critical and Biographical Remarks, Dates, Etc.* (New York: Brentano's, 1920), 700.

² Translated from Russian, slightly altered to remain the rhyme and rhythm of the original: "Slav'sja, slav'sja, nash Russkij Car'!/ Gospodom dannyj nam Car'-Gosudar'!/ Da budet bessmertn tvoj carskij rod./ Da im blagodenstvuet russkij narod," in: Mikhail Ivanovich Glinka and Egor Fjodorovich Rozen, 'Slav'sja, Slav'sja, Ty Rus' Moja', *Teksty pesen*, 9 February 2018, <http://teksti-pesenok.ru/21/Hor-Znamenie-STAROVER/tekst-pesni-Slavysya-slavysya-ty-Rus-moya---M-Glinka-E-Rozen#>.

³ Marina Frolova-Walker, *Russian Music and Nationalism: From Glinka to Stalin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 61–62.

⁴ Mikhail Ivanovich Glinka, 'Hor "Slav'sja" iz opery "Ivan Susanin"', AllLyr.ru - vsja muzyka mira, accessed 5 October 2021, <https://alllyr.ru/lyrics/song/151745-m-i-glinka-hor-slavysya-iz-opery-ivan-susanin/>.

coronated,⁵ in an opera that was commissioned with the personal support of tsar Nicholas I. The tsar attended several rehearsals before it premiered in his attendance, and afterwards it remained to be played in his court at festivities such as his birthday and name day.⁶

Even though the contemporary choir was not singing for the tsar, Putin is repeatedly accused of being one – especially in Western publications. The article by former United States (US) ambassador Michael McFaul a few months after the Russian annexation of Crimea is a good example of this, in which he argues that “Putin the (not so) Great” dreams of being compared to Peter the Great or Catherine the Great.⁷ Similarly, other authors speak of “Putin the Great” too, as well as “Putin the Terrible”, “a new emperor”, or that we should “recognise the tsar” in the Russian president.⁸ Such comparisons are not limited to Western authors and can be found in Russian media too. In January 2020, when Putin proposed the constitutional reforms that would nullify his number of presidential terms, a political columnist of the independent yet Kremlin-critical Russian newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* argued that Russia will have a tsar.⁹ This line of reasoning is met with wide response among the Russian opposition. The jailed opposition activist Alexei Navalny has denounced Putin as a “naked, thieving emperor” when the Kremlin was about to demolish his opposition movement,¹⁰ and at anti-Putin protests in Eastern Russia, demonstrators chanted “down with the tsar!” in 2020.¹¹ Interesting enough, strong supporters of Putin make such comparisons too, though in a positive light. A group of conservative Russians, led by influential business magnate Konstantin Malofeev, even wishes to see their current President become the tsar of a Russian constitutional monarchy.¹² And after the 2018 presidential election, the editor in

⁵ ‘Crowning and Coronation’, The Moscow Kremlin State Historical and Cultural Museum and Heritage Site, accessed 28 October 2021, <https://www.kreml.ru/en-US/exhibitions/virtual-exhibitions/venchanie-na-tsarstvo/>.

⁶ Frolova-Walker, *Russian Music and Nationalism*, 59–61.

⁷ Michael McFaul, ‘Putin the (Not So) Great’, *POLITICO Magazine*, 4 August 2014, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/08/putin-the-not-so-great-109711>.

⁸ Susan B. Glasser, ‘Putin the Great: Russia’s Imperial Impostor’, *Foreign Affairs*, October 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2019-08-12/putin-great>; Joseph V. Micallef, ‘Putin the Terrible: Understanding Russia’s New Tsar’, HuffPost Contributor platform, 3 October 2015, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/putin-the-terrible-unders_b_8200544; Anton Troianovski, ‘A New “Emperor”’: Russia Girds for 16 More Years of Putin’, *The New York Times*, 11 March 2020, sec. WORLD; Europe, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/11/world/europe/russia-putin.html>; Beatrice De Graaf, ‘Herken de tsaar in Poetin’, *NRC*, 13 January 2017, sec. Opinie.

⁹ Yulia Latynina, ‘Nikakih peremen’, *Novaja gazeta*, 17 January 2020, sec. Column; Politics.

¹⁰ Marc Bennets, ‘Alexei Navalny: Thief Putin Has Turned Us All into Slaves’, *The Times*, 29 April 2021, sec. World, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/putin-betrayed-russia-says-alexei-navalny-mkxh9vrp8>.

¹¹ Daniel Bellamy and AP, ‘“Down with the Tsar!” Anti-Putin Protests Erupt over Arrest of “popular” Regional Governor’, *Euronews*, 11 July 2020, sec. Russia, <https://www.euronews.com/2020/07/11/down-with-the-tsar-rare-anti-putin-protests-erupt-over-arrest-of-popular-regional-governo>.

¹² Max Seddon, ‘The Russian Oligarch Who Wants Vladimir Putin to Be a Tsar’, *Financial Times*, 13 March 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/63e0342c-5e2f-11ea-b0ab-339c2307bcd4>; Troianovski, ‘A New “Emperor”’.

chief of the Russian government news network RT (formerly Russia Today) tweeted that “[Putin] was just our president and could be changed. Now he is our *vozhd*. And we will not let him be changed.”¹³ While *vozhd* literally translates to chief(tain) or leader, it is strongly associated with Stalin. He led the Soviet Union as *vozhd* of the Bolshevik Party until 1933, which evolved into a personality cult in which he was portrayed as a god-like leader and “father of the people” through propaganda.¹⁴ As *vozhd* implies a leader who rises above history,¹⁵ its significance is kindred to that of a tsar. But how does Putin feel about being called a tsar? The Russian government owned news agency TASS asked him exactly this question in an interview in 2021. His answer was that it is not true:

Maybe someone else can be called a tsar. On the contrary, I work every day, I do not reign. A tsar is someone who just sits, looks down from above and says: here is an order, and there is something to be done. While he just tries on a hat and looks at himself in the mirror. I work every day.¹⁶

In similar fashion, Putin has gently ridiculed those who idealise tsarism at a variety of occasions, indicating for example that his ancestors used to live as serfs in the Russian Empire.¹⁷ But despite such mockery and the conviction that he works as a president rather than reigns as a tsar, Putin has been inspired by those who once did reign the Russian Empire. He loves to read history books and admires the different rulers and thinkers that played a significant role in Russia’s past. Especially the tsars that safeguarded the strength and stability of the state.¹⁸ As such, Putin finds inspiration in history and creates a *usable past* for the present, a concept that Van Wyck Brooks introduced in 1918 and which I will elaborate

¹³ Margarita Simonyan, ‘Twitter post’, Tweet, @M_Simonyan, 19 March 2018, https://twitter.com/M_Simonyan/status/97569419655304965.

¹⁴ Sarah Davies, ‘The “Cult” of the Vozhd’: Representations in Letters, 1934–1941’, *Russian History* 24, no. 1/2 (1997): 133–34; Peter Kenez, *A History of the Soviet Union from the Beginning to the End* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 122–23.

¹⁵ Fred Weir, ‘With Russians Feeling Besieged, Some Give Putin a Loaded Title: Vozhd’, *Christian Science Monitor*, 2 April 2018, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2018/0402/With-Russians-feeling-besieged-some-give-Putin-a-loaded-title-vozhd>.

¹⁶ Andrej Vandenko, ‘Putin ob obraze carja: planah posle 2024 goda’, TASS, 18 March 2020, <https://putin.tass.ru/ru/o-planakh-posle-2024/>.

¹⁷ Marlene Laruelle, ‘Ideological Complementarity or Competition? The Kremlin, the Church, and the Monarchist Idea in Today’s Russia’, *Slavic Review* 79, no. 2 (2020): 351, <https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2020.87>.

¹⁸ Shaun Walker, *The Long Hangover: Putin’s New Russia and the Ghosts of the Past* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 20.

upon in the theoretical framework.¹⁹ The ways in which Putin instrumentalises this historical inspiration in his policy has been written about extensively by a variety of scholars, and some touch upon Russian imperial history as part of their studies. But only few take this at the heart of their research. An overarching analysis of how Putin has instrumentalised Russian imperial history in his policy and through which modalities he has done so is still missing. This gap of knowledge will be addressed in this thesis through the following research question:

How does Vladimir Putin use the history of the tsars and the Russian Empire as a usable past, to build and develop his power base, in his verbal and written expressions between 1999 and 2021?

To answer this research question, the following subsidiary questions will be answered:

- 1) *What is understood here by referring to a 'usable past', and how can we apply Van Wyck Brooks' concept to the context of modern day Russia?*
- 2) *Around which moments does Putin refer to the tsars and imperial Russian history in his speeches, meetings, articles, letters, and interviews between 1999 and 2021?*
- 3) *What modalities does Putin instrumentalise when he makes such references and why does he do so?*

The hypothesis of this thesis, is that answering these questions broadens our understanding of how Putin creates a usable past out of the tsars and imperial Russian history to further reinforce his domestic power base. Although Brooks initiated the concept of a usable past in the context of free democracies, in which different actors in society can creatively and unreservedly reach out into history to find inspiration for the present, it is applicable as well in the Russian context, as I will explain in the theoretical framework.

This thesis is explicitly not a fact-checking or *fake news* thesis, nor is the aim to debate with Putin or debunk his statements – the central purpose is to analyse Putin's rhetoric and how he uses history. However, where his arguments are blatantly wrong, I will provide the necessary facts and historical context. Additionally, this thesis it is not a study into the

¹⁹ Van Wyck Brooks, 'On Creating a Usable Past', *The Dial: Criticism and Discussion of Literature and the Arts* LXIV, no. 764 (11 April 1918): 337–41.

perception of Putin's use of history or how his approach resonates in Russian society. My aim is not to condone Putin, but rather to unpack and deconstruct which cards he is playing. In the current climate of renewed tensions between Russia and the West, a better understanding of how Putin has been using the past is especially of importance for Western policy makers. It gives insight into the historical underpinnings of Putin's policy, which seem to function both as inspiration for and justification of his course of action – both domestically and abroad.

Theoretical Framework: an introduction into applied history

To analyse how Vladimir Putin uses the history of the tsars and the Russian Empire as a usable past, to build and develop his power base, I will engage with this topic through the lens of the usable past and applied history – two intertwined concepts.

What sets applied history apart from mainstream history, is that applied historians use historical knowledge to make sense of contemporary questions and challenges.²⁰ Their way of working is therefore somewhat different. While traditional historians tend to analyse historical sources to (re)construct events, applied historians rather take a contemporary issue as starting point for their research and engage with historical sources to make sense of their subject. Following Allison Graham and Niall Ferguson, this helps to “provide perspective, stimulate imagination, find clues about what is likely to happen, suggest possible policy interventions, and assess probable consequences.”²¹ History can also show us how things could be different, warn us of the dangers on the pathways ahead that have already been explored in the past, and assist us in asking the right questions regarding the present, as Margaret MacMillan argues.²² Although applied history is a subfield of history today, history has already been *applied* throughout the past. In their historiographical overview, Harm Kaal and Jelle van Lottum show how different historians and societies have made historical knowledge meaningful for contemporary purposes.²³ This goes back to Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian war in the fourth century BC, as well as Machiavelli's *The Prince* in the sixteenth century – both examples of historians (among other roles) that conveyed lessons

²⁰ Christopher L. Colvin and Paul Winfree, ‘Applied History, Applied Economics, and Economic History’, *Journal of Applied History* 1, no. 1–2 (10 December 2019): 28–41, <https://doi.org/10.1163/25895893-00101001>.

²¹ Graham Allison and Niall Ferguson, ‘Applied History Manifesto’, *Harvard Kennedy Center*, October 2016, 10.

²² Margaret Olwen Macmillan, *The Uses and Abuses of History* (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2008), 172.

²³ Harm Kaal and Jelle van Lottum, ‘Applied History: Past, Present, and Future’, *Journal of Applied History* 3, no. 1–2 (2 December 2021): 2–6, <https://doi.org/10.1163/25895893-bja10018>.

from the past. But as history became an established science throughout the nineteenth century, historians predominantly embraced objectivity and a professional distance, “studying a past that had broken off from the present.”²⁴ In the beginning of the twentieth century, the American historian Benjamin Shambaugh started to break a lance for making history useful (again) for society, introducing his peers to what he called “applied history” in 1909.²⁵ Shambaugh’s initial application of the concept consisted of historical analysis of legislative developments – collecting evidence from a variety of sources to inform elected officials and voters.²⁶ However, his approach did not take off, and the way in which historians and history were instrumentalised for totalitarian ideologies in the decades that followed had negative consequences for the reputation of the field. As history was used to provide legitimacy for the *Übermenschen* theory in Nazi Germany, for example, or communism and Marxist theory, applied history fell into discredit.²⁷ It was not until the 1980’s that the applied history movement really gained momentum. One of the most influential works at the time was *Thinking in Time* by Ernest May and Richard Neustadt, in which the authors show through different case studies how policy makers have (failed) to make use of history – as well as how they could do better.²⁸ May and Neustadt outline how experiences from the past give guidance for the present and indicate how even Thucydides made this point as well twenty-four centuries before them, in his account of the Peloponnesian Wars.²⁹ Around the eighties, a large number of scholars argued in favour as well of the idea that historians should apply their knowledge to assist in finding solutions for contemporary issues. For example, Seymour Mandelbaum argues that historians could “meet the intellectual demands” of those who formulate and implement policy.³⁰ Otis Graham makes the case that while history is useful, historians no longer have a monopoly on it. So as policymakers will carry on (mis)using history anyway, historians might as well take back the lead and show how the past can be used in a wiser way.³¹ And Andrew Achenbaum argues that “while their crystal balls are no

²⁴ Kaal and Lottum, 4.

²⁵ Rebecca Conard, ‘From the New History to Applied History’, in *Benjamin Shambaugh and the Intellectual Foundations of Public History* (Iowa City: University Of Iowa Press, 2013), 33.

²⁶ Conard, 34–35.

²⁷ Beatrice De Graaf, ‘The Next Big Thing in History: Geschiedenis Op de Frontlijn van Het Heden? Applied History En Usable Past Als (Her)Nieuwde Uitdaging Voor de Geschiedwetenschap’.

²⁸ Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (New York: Free Press, 1986).

²⁹ Neustadt and May, 233.

³⁰ Seymour Mandelbaum, ‘The Past in Service to the Future’, *Journal of Social History* 11, no. 2 (1977): 193–205.

³¹ Otis L. Graham, ‘The Uses and Misuses of History: Roles in Policymaking’, *The Public Historian* 5, no. 2 (1983): 6–7; 19.

less foggy than [the ones of] other analysts,” historians are able to help decision makers with asking the right questions, considering which analogies are applicable, and what conclusions one can draw from these.³²

Recently, applied history has enjoyed another impulse as a variety of historians have written manifestos to rejuvenate the field. In 2014, Jo Guldi and David Armitage appealed in favour of history’s public mission and relevance in their *History Manifesto*. Similarly to Graham in the eighties, they observe how historians have relinquished their participation in the “public arena”, but that their distinctive views are needed urgently today.³³ Also noteworthy is the *Applied History Manifesto* by Graham Allison and Niall Ferguson in 2016, who explain how their *Applied History Project* at the Harvard Kennedy School pursues a revitalisation of the field.³⁴ In their work, they give different examples of how Western leaders fail to know their history – especially concerning the Middle East, but also regarding the special relationship between Russia and Ukraine. As such, their work builds upon the foundation laid by the “twentieth century giants” May and Neustadt, as well as Thucydides.³⁵ And in 2020, Beatrice de Graaf, Lotte Jensen, Rina Knoeff, and Catrien Santing published their *Manifest for “Applied History”*, in which they argue that historians should be willing to think along on the wicked problems of today, with answers that look deeper into time.³⁶ Around the same time, the *Journal of Applied History* was founded by the aforementioned Harm Kaal and Jelle van Lottum, which is devoted to historical thinking on issues of contemporary concern – giving a platform for historians who engage in such research.³⁷ All these initiatives have contributed to the development of applied history and an applied approach to the past, which are now studied and practiced at various universities and institutes around the world. Already in the eighties, Peter Stearns and Joel Tarr outlined how their programme in applied history at Carnegie-Melon university trains historians for policy work.³⁸ And today, a great number of universities offer graduate and post-graduate studies

³² W. Andrew Achenbaum, ‘The Making of an Applied Historian: Stage Two’, *The Public Historian* 5, no. 2 (1983): 45.

³³ Jo Guldi and David Armitage, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), <https://www.cambridge.org/core/what-we-publish/open-access/the-history-manifesto>.

³⁴ Allison and Ferguson, ‘Applied History Manifesto’.

³⁵ Allison and Ferguson.

³⁶ Beatrice De Graaf et al., ‘Dossier Toegepaste Geschiedenis – Aan de Slag! Een Manifest Voor ‘applied History’’, *Historici.nl*, 13 May 2020, <https://www.historici.nl/aan-de-slag-een-manifest-voor-applied-history/>.

³⁷ Harm Kaal and Jelle van Lottum, ‘Editorial’, *Journal of Applied History* 1, no. 1–2 (8 June 2020): 1–3, <https://doi.org/10.1163/25895893-bja10005>.

³⁸ Peter N. Stearns and Joel A. Tarr, ‘Applied History: A New-Old Departure’, *The History Teacher* 14, no. 4 (1981): 517–31; Peter N. Stearns and Joel A. Tarr, ‘Curriculum in Applied History: Toward the Future’, *The Public Historian* 9, no. 3 (1987): 111–25.

that approach history in an applied manner as well. The Higher School of Economics in Moscow, one of Russia's most prominent universities, offered a master's programme in *Applied and Interdisciplinary History «Usable Pasts»*,³⁹ for instance, and the master's in *International Relations in Historical Perspective* at Utrecht University is a good example as well – in fulfilment of which I am writing this MA thesis.⁴⁰

At the heart of this research is the concept of a *usable past*, which is strongly related to applied history. This concept finds its origins in the work of the American literary critic and cultural historian Van Wyck Brooks in 1918, who explains the value that history has for the present.⁴¹ It stimulates creativity as a source of inspiration:

The past is an inexhaustible storehouse of apt attitudes and adaptable ideals; it opens of itself at the touch of desire; it yields up, now this treasure, now that, to anyone who comes to it armed with a capacity for personal choices.⁴²

Yet, the problem for Brooks was that the past was not engaged with as such. While plenty of “apt attitudes and adaptable ideals” can be found in the experiences of the past, he believed that the American interpreters of these treasures neglected to represent the living value of history.⁴³ So, Brooks asked, if this version of the past is not usable, then why not create new ones? Doing so would answer the question of “what is important for us?” – as well as “what, out of all the multifarious achievements and impulses and desires of the American literary mind, ought we to elect to remember?”⁴⁴ These questions are answered differently across the world: a variety of usable pasts are discovered and invented in diverse states. As an example of this, Brooks explains that the way in which Italians look at French history is completely different from how the English perceive this same French history, or Italian history.⁴⁵ So, in relation to this thesis; in Russia there can be completely different interpretations of the Russian past, as well as the past of others – due to how this usable past is constructed. When

³⁹ ‘Programme Overview — Master’s Programme “Applied and Interdisciplinary History «Usable Pasts»” — HSE University’, Higher School of Economics, 5 May 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210505234546/http://spb.hse.ru/en/ma/apphist/about>; Anna Chemyakhovskaya, ‘Constructing Usable Pasts – Why Have Interdisciplinary Approaches to History?’ (Saint Petersburg, 2014), <https://www.hse.ru/en/news/research/120601965.html>.

⁴⁰ Utrecht University, ‘International Relations in Historical Perspective - Masters - Utrecht University’, accessed 2 November 2021, <https://www.uu.nl/masters/en/international-relations-historical>.

⁴¹ Brooks, ‘On Creating a Usable Past’.

⁴² Brooks, 339.

⁴³ Brooks, 337, 339.

⁴⁴ Brooks, 340.

⁴⁵ Brooks, 339.

answering these questions of what should be remembered, and thus constructing a usable past, Brooks argued that (1) they need to be approached through a creative impulse, he (2) stressed the need to look for tendencies, and (3) to ask questions regarding *why* and *how* things happened, as well as (4) to ask *what* came next.⁴⁶ In the past decades, a wide range of scholars have argued as well in favour of the value that history can have for the present. Think of Ernest May, who writes that the past is, in theory, an immensely rich resource for policy makers, but also outlines how those policy makers “ordinarily use history badly” with a variety of examples.⁴⁷ Similarly, Margaret Macmillan writes about *The Uses and Abuses of History*, arguing that as long as handled carefully, the past can assist us in formulating appropriate questions about the present, offer alternatives, as well as give warnings for potential mistakes.⁴⁸ Such a careful handling of the past is important, as it can also be done with mischievous intentions, such as legitimising totalitarian ideologies. As mentioned above, this brought applied history into discredit in the twentieth century. But the way in which Brooks suggested to use the past is highly different from the way in which the past was used by these totalitarian ideologies. Brooks posited his ideas in the context of free and open societies, in which a variety of actors should use history freely and creatively to contribute to society. So, this is very different from the Russian context, where history is arguably “an uncritical reconstruction of collective memory to suit the government’s agenda,” to follow James Pearce,⁴⁹ and as such perhaps closer to propaganda. However, the usable past as concept is nevertheless applicable to Putin. Although Russia is not a free democracy and Russian society cannot be characterized as an open society of the kind in which Brooks applied his concept, it still is a society where different voices can be heard. The Russian government does attempt to silence certain voices, of which the recent closing of the prominent human rights organisation *Memorial* (that strived to keep the memory of Soviet totalitarianism and its victims alive) is a strong example.⁵⁰ But Putin nevertheless needs to use the public space to mobilize support for his rule, and he does so by means of wielding historical analogies. But how does he do this?

⁴⁶ Brooks, 340–41.

⁴⁷ Ernest R May, *Lessons of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1979), xi–xiv.

⁴⁸ Macmillan, *The Uses and Abuses of History*, 172; 187.

⁴⁹ James C. Pearce, *The Use of History in Putin’s Russia*, Series in Politics (Delaware Malaga: Vernon Press, 2021), xxvii.

⁵⁰ Ivan Nechepurenko and Andrew E. Kramer, ‘Russian Court Orders Prominent Human Rights Group to Shut’, *The New York Times*, 28 December 2021, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/28/world/europe/russia-memorial-human-rights.html>.

There are different ways in which those in power can instrumentalise history. As a framework in this thesis, along which I am analysing the way that Putin is doing so, my hypothesis is that these can be organized around the following four modalities: identity building, praising and denouncing, polarizing, and justification of contemporary actions. In (1) the first technique, leaders are using history to shape and mould a (new) collective identity for the citizens of a state. This can happen both by framing the things that make “us” who we are, as well as the things that make others different from us. As will be elaborated upon in the historiography, this identity shaping happened especially in Russia throughout the nineties, when the Soviet Union fell apart and a new identity of the Russian Federation came into being. (2) The second option relates to how those who are in power can praise the events and figures of the past, as well as condemn these. As such, they can be a positive or negative example for the present – as well as an inspiration and opening towards the future. The Russian victory over Nazi Germany is a strong example of this, as the historiography will show as well. (3) In the third method, history is used to polarize matters and divide society into sharply contrasting groups. An example of this is the *foreign agent* label that is currently being attached on a large scale in Russia to critical individuals and organisations who are involved in politics and receive funding from abroad. This happens with journalists, but also with human rights organisations such as the aforementioned *Memorial*.⁵¹ The *foreign agent* label stems from Soviet times and for Russians, it still has a strong negative connotation with this history. The intention of this modality might overlap with identity building, but is perhaps rather aimed at diverting attention from negative domestic issues, such as economic turmoil. The rationale: *the fault cannot lie in Russia, so it must be from abroad*. (4) And last, in the fourth modality, leaders can use history to support or justify their contemporary actions. They can show with examples from the past that this is the right course of action, that something has been done before, or that their actions are just precisely because something has not been done before. An example of this is the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, which according to Putin is not an annexation but rather a reunion, as the peninsula “has always been an integral part of Russia in people's hearts and minds” – that it was given away in the past was a mistake (to what extent this claim does justice to history, I will elaborate upon in chapter 3).⁵² My point of departure is that this framework contributes to a better

⁵¹ BBC News, ‘Memorial: Russia Moves to Close Major Human Rights Group’, *BBC News*, 11 November 2021, sec. Europe, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-59252717>.

⁵² Vladimir Putin, ‘Obrashhenie Prezidenta Rossijskoj Federacii’ (Speech, Moscow, Russia, 18 March 2014), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>.

understanding of when and especially *how* Putin uses history in his expressions. In the coming chapters, therefore, I will analyse the development in Putin's usage and timing of these different modalities in his expressions between 1999 and 2021.

Historiography

History is of crucial importance for Putin, and the way in which the Russian president has employed it in his policy has been analysed by a variety of scholars.

Particularly noteworthy is the work of James Pearce, who outlines how history is used in Putin's Russia to shape the identity of citizens, justify policy choices, and create consensus on this governance of the country.⁵³ Both Soviet and imperial history are suitable for these purposes, as long as the historical moments of Russian glory that are appealed to convey a message of historic continuity, the strength of the state, and how Russian culture flourishes, according to Pearce.⁵⁴ Especially the sixth chapter of his book is relevant for this thesis, in which Pearce analyses the use of anniversaries and memorabilia in Russia. He explains how the stories of imperial Russia were actively wiped out from public memory in the Soviet Union but are now once again being acknowledged and (re)told under Putin.⁵⁵ Examples of this are how positive commemorations of the Romanovs have become quite regular, the unveiling of a statue of Grand Prince Vladimir in 2016, and a monument for the Russian soldiers who fought and fell in World War I.⁵⁶

Other authors make similar observations. According to Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy, Putin employs history as a policy tool and highly appreciates the power that useful history can have. Considering himself to be a student of history as well as a maker of it, Putin is even "moving increasingly into the dangerous territory of writer, manufacturer and manipulator of history" they argue.⁵⁷ Håvard Bækken and Johannes Due Enstad observe this control over the official Russian historical narrative too. They argue that the Russian elite under Putin has selectively securitized history, as a result of which patriotic and state-centred views of Russia's past have been promoted primarily.⁵⁸ And Nikolay Koposov writes about

⁵³ Pearce, *The Use of History in Putin's Russia*.

⁵⁴ Pearce, 149.

⁵⁵ Pearce, 124.

⁵⁶ Pearce, 125–30.

⁵⁷ Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy, 'Putin and the Uses of History', *The National Interest*, no. 117 (2012): 22–23.

⁵⁸ Håvard Bækken and Johannes Due Enstad, 'Identity under Siege: Selective Securitization of History in Putin's Russia', *The Slavonic and East European Review* 98, no. 2 (2020): 343, 344, <https://doi.org/10.5699/slaveasteurorev2.98.2.0321>.

how Russian history politics changed after Putin was elected as President in 2000: the new president made serious attempts to advance a "cult of the state", accompanied by the suggestion that Russian history has been continuous since tsarist times. But finding appropriate symbols for this cult proved a challenge. As symbols from the Russian Empire were considered incompatible with the democratic ambitions of the Russian Federation, the latter could only carefully use representations of the first.⁵⁹

Although there are only limited studies dedicated to how Putin uses the history of the tsars and the Russian Empire specifically, and only few focus on how he makes historical appeals in his verbal and written expressions, quite some researchers have touched upon these topics. These authors tend to employ a thematic focus in their work, analysing which historic episodes Putin has engaged with throughout his presidencies. They also show how Putin has instrumentalised different modalities at certain moments, but do not in particular point out the development in these modalities over time. In line with the theoretical framework I propose above, the existing literature indicates that Putin has primarily been occupied with identity building, praising the past, and in particular justifying his policies.

Laruelle, for example, analyses how "the monarchist idea" has revived in Russia and how the authorities have deployed "symbolic politics" to achieve "the largest social consensus possible"⁶⁰ – thus using tsarist history to support contemporary policy. Putin emphasizes the historical continuity of Russian history when he refers to the tsars according to Laruelle, similarly to what Pearce and Koposov mention above. Although the Romanovs are an element in this, the Kremlin prefers to keep their role to a symbolic one – "welcomed as part of a *Zeitgeist*, a cultural nostalgia for the early twentieth century," but without political legitimacy.⁶¹ And Eve Levin has written about how during the first two presidencies of Putin, the 17th century had become the new "usable past" for Russia.⁶² Although she does not clearly define this concept, nor mentions Brooks, she explains how the official interpretation uses "the mythologization of the past constructed by historians of the late imperial period".⁶³ Levin argues that this was part of the Kremlin's search for a Russian identity that was not indebted to the Soviet Union or the West. As such, the Russian eye fell

⁵⁹ Nikolay Koposov, "The Only Possible Ideology": Nationalizing History in Putin's Russia', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 3 September 2021, 3–4, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2021.1968148>.

⁶⁰ Laruelle, 'Ideological Complementarity or Competition?', 363.

⁶¹ Laruelle, 350–51.

⁶² Eve Levin, 'Muscovy and Its Mythologies: Pre-Petrine History in the Past Decade', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 12, no. 4 (2011): 773–88, <https://doi.org/10.1353/kri.2011.0058>.

⁶³ Levin, 774.

on the 17th century because this allowed the Kremlin to draw a parallel. This was the time in which Russia overcame its Time of Troubles, and under Putin's leadership, Russia has overcome the troublesome nineties.⁶⁴

When it comes to Putin's use of history in his expressions, the writings of Malinova are particularly noteworthy, which show how Putin has engaged with identity building, praising the past, and justifying his policy. In one of her studies, she has analysed the official historical narrative in the speeches of the Russian presidents since 2000. These only concern speeches on officially established public holidays, however, related to historical events and opening ceremonies. She argues that 28 per cent of these memorial speeches concern Russian pre-revolutionary history.⁶⁵ This average is especially high because of the speeches since 2012, when 34 per cent of Putin's memorial speeches were devoted to Russian imperial history. Malinova argues that particularly since 2010, a shift of attention was required from the "problematic and controversial Soviet period" towards a "glorious past" that was more distant.⁶⁶ In another study, Malinova also analysed how Russian presidents have used the past in their yearly addresses to the Russian parliament – with a few "logically complementary speeches" in addition.⁶⁷ Interesting enough, Malinova argues that these speeches contain virtually no direct references to the Russian pre-revolutionary history. The only exception to this is a reference to the Russian Empire's *zemstvo* reform, as well as a few references to cultural figures.⁶⁸

In line with the findings by Malinova, Konstantin Pakhalyuk argues that most of the monuments unveiled since Putin's third presidency are related to Russian pre-revolutionary history.⁶⁹ These include monuments in Moscow to Alexander I outside the Kremlin in 2014, to Prince Vladimir in 2016, and to Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich within the Kremlin in 2017.⁷⁰ He notes that this was part of a development, as historical memory was increasingly "securitized" and used to justify important political decisions during Putin's third presidential

⁶⁴ Levin, 774.

⁶⁵ Olga Malinova, 'Kto i Kak Formiruet Oficial'nyj Istoricheskij Narrativ? Analiz Rossijskih Praktik', *The Journal of Political Theory, Political Philosophy and Sociology of Politics Politeia* 3, no. 94 (2019): 108, <https://doi.org/10.30570/2078-5089-2019-94-3-103-126>.

⁶⁶ Malinova, 108–10.

⁶⁷ Olga Malinova, 'Tema proshlogo v ritorike prezidentov Rossii', Carnegie Moscow Center, 23 August 2011, 107, <https://carnegie.ru/proetcontra/45428>.

⁶⁸ Malinova, 107.

⁶⁹ Konstantin Pakhalyuk, 'Istoricheskoe Proshloe Kak Osnovanie Rossijskoj Politii', *The Journal of Political Theory, Political Philosophy and Sociology of Politics Politeia* 91, no. 4 (2018): 6–31, <https://doi.org/10.30570/2078-5089-2018-91-4-6-31>.

⁷⁰ Pakhalyuk, 21.

term. Pakhalyuk argues this based on a discourse analysis of Putin's speeches between 2012 and 2018, of the ones that mentioned "history" and "memory".⁷¹ In general, Putin also uses history to claim what the origins of the Russian state are (identity building), and point out good examples of virtuous behaviour.⁷²

Also very relevant is the work of Laura Vansina, who analyses how Putin and Dmitry Medvedev have instrumentalised the past in their speeches since 2000 to support their contemporary policy. Her MA thesis and subsequent book chapter employ a general approach to Russian history, as part of which she touches upon the tsars and Russian imperial history.⁷³ Her corpus includes all the official English translations of speeches by Putin and Medvedev. Vansina stresses how important history is for both former presidents, based on the frequency at which they invoke it in their speeches.⁷⁴ The phrase "history" was mentioned 723 times in Putin's first two presidential terms, and 1064 times in Putin's speeches since 2012.⁷⁵ But their application of history is a selective and subjective one, which serves to create "a climate in which their political decisions can count on the support of the people" according to Vansina.⁷⁶ Particularly the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany is of importance, but she shows cases of how pre-revolutionary history is used as well. Putin and Medvedev make references to Kievan Rus and the 16th and 17th century when talking about Ukraine, to the baptising of Prince Vladimir in the tenth century, and to how the Russian Empire helped the US become independent, for example.⁷⁷ Vansina only considers three tsars in the selection criteria of her research, however: Nicholas I, Alexander I, Catherine the Great, and Peter the Great. But she does take a significant number of other names into consideration, as well as many years, events, and locations.⁷⁸

The work of Vardan Jernestovich Bagdasarjan, Pavel Pavlovich Baldin, and Sergej Ivanovich Resnjanskij is very relevant as well for this thesis. They analyse how Russian

⁷¹ Pakhalyuk, 14.

⁷² Pakhalyuk, 22–23.

⁷³ Laura Vansina, 'A people that does not remember its past has no future', in *Rusland, onveranderlijk anders?: Russische identiteit in politiek, cultuur en geschiedenis*, ed. Lien Verpoest (Leuven: Universitaire Pers Leuven, 2020); Laura Vansina, "'A People That Does Not Remember Its Past Has No Future' - De Russische Instrumentalisering van Het Verleden Onder Poetin En Medvedev, 2000-2018' (MA thesis, Leuven, KU Leuven, 2018), de Vlaamse Scriptie Bank, <https://scriptiebank.be/scriptie/2018/people-does-not-remember-its-past-has-no-future-de-russische-instrumentalisering-van>.

⁷⁴ Vansina, "'A People That Does Not Remember Its Past Has No Future' - De Russische Instrumentalisering van Het Verleden Onder Poetin En Medvedev, 2000-2018', 100.

⁷⁵ Vansina, 19.

⁷⁶ Vansina, 'A people that does not remember its past has no future', 143.

⁷⁷ Vansina, "'A People That Does Not Remember Its Past Has No Future' - De Russische Instrumentalisering van Het Verleden Onder Poetin En Medvedev, 2000-2018', 86, 101.

⁷⁸ Vansina, 117.

presidents since 1994 have talked about the history of Russia in their yearly addresses for the Russian parliament, in the context of the governance of the state.⁷⁹ The word “history” can be found in every speech without exception according to them, and they give examples of how Putin has referred to Russian imperial history. Instances of this are the strong currency of Russia in pre-revolutionary times, how the *Zemstvo* reform in the Russian Empire was a successful experience, and how Vladimir the Great’s baptism has an enormous historical importance for Russia.⁸⁰ As Vardan and his co-authors only analyse the yearly addresses of the President to the Russian parliament, like Malinova in one of her studies mentioned above, their corpus is rather limited. Nevertheless, the authors stress the importance of not just history in Russian policy, but also how the words of Putin can be used to research this. They argue that their work demonstrates how these parliamentary speeches of the president can be used for the reconstruction of the state ideology and historical policy.⁸¹

Last, it is also worth mentioning that in the literature on how Putin uses history, the greater part is dedicated to the importance of the Great Patriotic War, as the Russians call World War II, although this term has previously also been used for the 1812 French Invasion in Russia. Malinova, for example, explains that it is still of enormous importance in the usable past of Russia. Compared to tsarist events, the Soviet victory in the war is much livelier and Russians still have active memories of it. It also helps that the Soviet legacy of commemorating it persists;⁸² think of the yearly Victory Day march, on the 9th of May on the Red Square, that stems from Soviet times. Elizabeth Wood argues that Putin has made a sacred event out of the Great Patriotic War.⁸³ And Pearce also argues that the Great Patriotic War, by passing on the stories of heroism and sacrifice, is of great importance and had previously even shaped Soviet identity. The Victory Day that commemorates this Soviet triumph remains to be the most important Russian holiday.⁸⁴ Shaun Walker argues that the Great Patriotic war proved to be “an anchor of national legitimacy in an ocean of historical

⁷⁹ Vardan Jernestovich Bagdasarjan, Pavel Pavlovich Baldin, and Sergej Ivanovich Resnjanskij, ‘Poslanija prezidenta Rossijskoj Federacii Federal’nomu sobraniju kak istochnik izuchenija istoričeskoj politiki Rossii’, *Vestnik Sankt-Peterburgskogo Universiteta. Istorija* 66, no. 2 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.21638/11701/spbu02.2021.206>.

⁸⁰ Bagdasarjan, Baldin, and Resnjanskij, 3–9.

⁸¹ Bagdasarjan, Baldin, and Resnjanskij, 12.

⁸² Olga Malinova, ‘Constructing the “Usable Past”: The Evolution of the Official Historical Narrative in Post-Soviet Russia’, in *Cultural and Political Imaginaries in Putin’s Russia*, ed. Niklas Bernsand and Barbara Törnquist-Plewa (Leiden: BRILL, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004366671>.

⁸³ Elizabeth A. Wood, ‘Performing Memory: Vladimir Putin and the Celebration of World War II in Russia’, *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 38, no. 2 (2011): 172–200, <https://doi.org/10.1163/187633211X591175>.

⁸⁴ Pearce, *The Use of History in Putin’s Russia*, 34.

uncertainty,”⁸⁵ and crystallising the memory of it has been the main focus of Russian domestic history policy according to Marlene Laruelle.⁸⁶ As such, especially the Great Patriotic War has been the subject of the securitization, Bækken and Enstad argue: “pushing professional historians aside.”⁸⁷

As discussed above, the historiography has so far mapped out quite generally how Putin uses history and sometimes manipulates it. Implicitly, the authors indicate what the functionalities of this are, or centre their work around a single modality (such as policy justification). But in the aforementioned literature, these functionalities are not distinguished and elaborated upon, nor do the authors provide a wide-ranging analysis of the development in the usage and timing of these different functionalities. This thesis has the following added value: it systematically charts and plots this, with which I want to supplement the historiography about this aspect of Putin’s usable past.

Methodology and sources

To answer my research question, I have analysed the transcripts of Putin’s speeches, meetings, interviews, articles, and letters between 1999 and 2021. These primary sources are published on the site of the Kremlin: the speeches and letters can be found on the *Stenogrammy [Transcripts]* and *Telegrammy [Telegrams]* pages,⁸⁸ and Putin’s opening remarks at the security council meetings are issued on the *Sovet Bezopasnosti [Security Council]* page.⁸⁹ One minor issue, however, is that all these primary sources are related to the Russian president, which was Medvedev between 2008 and 2012. Yet the archive of the Russian government website, where the speeches of prime minister Putin should be published, only goes back to the 10 May 2012,⁹⁰ and thus lacks these documents. However, as

⁸⁵ Walker, *The Long Hangover*, 20.

⁸⁶ Marlene Laruelle, ‘Commemorating 1917 in Russia: Ambivalent State History Policy and the Church’s Conquest of the History Market’, *Europe-Asia Studies* 71, no. 2 (7 February 2019): 264, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2018.1552922>.

⁸⁷ Bækken and Enstad, ‘Identity under Siege’, 343–44.

⁸⁸ Prezident Rossii, ‘Stenogrammy · Prezident · Sobytija’, Prezident Rossii, accessed 3 December 2021, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts>; Prezident Rossii, ‘Telegrammy · Prezident · Sobytija’, Prezident Rossii, accessed 3 December 2021, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/letters>; Prezident Rossii, ‘Sovet Bezopasnosti · Sobytija’, Prezident Rossii, accessed 3 December 2021, <http://kremlin.ru/events/security-council>; Prezident Rossii, ‘Bank dokumentov · Dokumenty’, Prezident Rossii, accessed 3 December 2021, <http://kremlin.ru/acts/bank>.

⁸⁹ Prezident Rossii, ‘Stenogrammy · Prezident · Sobytija’; Prezident Rossii, ‘Telegrammy · Prezident · Sobytija’; Prezident Rossii, ‘Sovet Bezopasnosti · Sobytija’; Prezident Rossii, ‘Bank dokumentov · Dokumenty’.

⁹⁰ ‘Stenogrammy’, Internet-portal Pravitel’stva Rossijskoj Federacii, accessed 2 December 2021, <http://archive.government.ru/transcripts/>.

it is plausible that Medvedev would not give a speech or take certain actions that Putin would not approve of (as I will elaborate upon in chapter 2), I am considering these primary sources of Medvedev as if they are from Putin. It is also worthy to mention that at first, I had included the decrees, orders, and federal laws signed by the president in my research as well. These are published on the *Bank Dokumentov [Document Bank]* page of the Kremlin website – with links to their corresponding publications on the official Russian internet portal for legal information.⁹¹ However, as the 32.758 legal documents contained little to no references to the tsars or imperial Russian history, I have omitted these sources from my analysis.

To collect all the speeches, meetings, interviews, articles, and letters from the Kremlin website, I have written a scraping code for the *R Project for Statistical Computing* that runs in the *RStudio Desktop* software.⁹² This code is based on examples in online tutorials and can be found in Table 2 in the annex.⁹³ In short, this allowed me to automatically visit the individual pages of all the relevant sources on the website of the Kremlin since the 9th of August 1999 (the day that Putin became prime minister) until the 31st of December 2021, and download the transcripts as individual text files, organised in categories. This resulted in a total corpus of 20.415 sources, as outlined and split out in Table 1.

| Source category | Quantity | Date of first | Date of last |
|----------------------------------|----------|--------------------------|--------------|
| Articles | 49 | 09/11/2000 | 12/06/2021 |
| Community meetings | 1920 | 06/06/2000 | 24/12/2021 |
| Interviews | 227 | 04/01/2000 | 13/11/2021 |
| Letters | 7451 | 12/01/2000 | 19/11/2021 |
| Messages to the Federal Assembly | 13 | 05/11/2008 ⁹⁴ | 21/04/2021 |
| Press conferences | 592 | 19/01/2000 | 23/12/2021 |
| Security council meetings | 493 | 12/05/2008 ⁹⁵ | 26/11/2021 |

⁹¹ Prezident Rossii, ‘Bank dokumentov · Dokumenty’.

⁹² R Core Team, *R: The R Project for Statistical Computing* (Vienna, Austria: R Foundation for Statistical Computing, 2021), <https://www.r-project.org/>; RStudio Team, *RStudio: Integrated Development for R*, version 1.4, MacOS (Boston, US: RStudio, 2021), <https://www.rstudio.com>.

⁹³ Especially the explanation by Dataslice was particularly helpful: Dataslice, *Web Scrape Text from ANY Website - Web Scraping in R (Part 1)*, vol. 1, 4 vols (YouTube, 2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v8Yh_4oE-Fs.

⁹⁴ Transcripts of Putin’s yearly messages to the Federal Assembly (the State Duma and Federation Council; the lower and upper houses of parliament) of before 2008 are not published on the website of the Kremlin.

⁹⁵ The transcripts of Putin’s opening remarks at the security council meetings of before 2008 are neither published here.

| | | | |
|----------------------------------|---------------|--------------------------|------------|
| Speeches and addresses | 1129 | 07/05/2008 ⁹⁶ | 31/12/2021 |
| Statements on major issues | 595 | 31/12/1999 | 23/12/2021 |
| Working meetings and conferences | 3667 | 05/01/2000 | 29/12/2021 |
| Uncategorised | 4279 | 31/12/1999 | 26/11/2021 |
| <u>Total number of sources:</u> | <u>20.415</u> | | |

Table 1 Overview of scraped and analysed sources from Kremlin.ru, split out by category

Although this gives a good overview of the different types of sources in which Putin has expressed himself since 1999, this categorization by the Kremlin should not be followed too strictly. The Kremlin sometimes archives negligently, which I discovered during my analysis. Important sources, such as the first speech that Putin had given as acting president, were initially missing. It turned out that the Kremlin had not provided a large number of speeches (4279) of a category, and as I had followed these categories when scraping the website, these were missing from my corpus. By scraping everything once again, but without taking sections into account, I added these uncategorised speeches later on as well. It is also worth mentioning that some of the speeches are archived in multiple categories, but in the qualitative analysis of the sources I have removed these duplications. After collecting the primary sources, I compiled a list of keywords related to the tsars and the Russian Empire. This list can be found in Table 3 in the annex and contains (1) the tsars in all the different names that can be used for them and (2) various triggers about imperial history, such as the wars, battles, and other notable during their reign (such as the Time of Troubles). While I have also added (3) general terminology such as “tsar” and “Russian Empire” to this list, I have limited such terms to the most relevant ones to keep my research within the scope of an MA thesis. Due to cases in Russian grammar, I have shortened most keywords and let them end with an asterisk. Doing so, the term *Екатерин* II*, for example, not only gave results for *Екатерина II*, but also for *о [about] Екатерине II*, *для [for] Екатерины II*, and *с [with] Екатериной II*.⁹⁷ Using the *AntConc* corpus analysis toolkit by Laurence Anthony,⁹⁸ I have filtered the primary sources for their relevance. This software shows in which primary sources my keywords are present, as well as the frequency and concordance of these

⁹⁶ Speeches and addresses from before 2008 are not published in this category, but rather organised in other sections of the Kremlin website, such as the *statements on major issues* section.

⁹⁷ *Екатерина II*, or *Ekaterina II* in the Latin script, is the official title of Catherine the Great.

⁹⁸ Laurence Anthony, *AntConc*, version 3.5.9, MacOS, 2020, <https://www.laurenceanthony.net/software/antconc/>.

keywords. Thus giving an indication of where and when Putin uses the relevant words in his expressions.

Finally, I have used these results in *AntConc* to answer my research question with a qualitative analysis. Working chronologically through the references that Putin has made to the tsars and the Russian Empire in his expressions, I have analysed *when* and *where* Putin has instrumentalised *which* modalities. My linguistic skills allow me to do so. Although my Russian is not fully fluent (B1/B2 level), I can properly navigate my way through Russian sources and accurately understand them using a dictionary and other translation tools.⁹⁹ To put these references in perspective, as well as to be able to indicate *around which moments* Putin uses this history, I have interweaved my results with news reporting from the *New York Times* between 1999 and 2021. I have chosen for this newspaper for its good reputation as reliable news source, but also because it is internationally oriented, which means that it only reports about the most significant news in Russia, rather than everyday events. Moreover, this choice is also practical: my *New York Times* subscription grants me unlimited access to their archives, which is searchable in an accessible way. In summary, this approach allows me to analyse *how Vladimir Putin uses the history of the tsars and the Russian Empire as a usable past*, offer an interpretation of how Putin does so to *build and develop his power base*, as well as why he might have done so.

⁹⁹ I have worked with similar primary sources before: in my BA thesis I have analysed Putin's Russian speeches on their content and rhetoric techniques. See: Niels Drost, 'Ethos, Pathos and Putin: How Vladimir Putin Weaves a Narrative That Justifies His Foreign Policy' (BA-thesis, Leiden University, 2020), <https://studenttheses.universiteitleiden.nl/handle/1887/133360>.

Russia rises

1999 – 2008

On the last day of the twentieth century, Russian president Boris Yeltsin made a surprising announcement. Sitting in front of the Russian flag and a Christmas tree, he apologized for not living up to “the expectations of those who believed that [Russia] could jump from the grey, stagnating totalitarian past into the bright, rich and civilised future in one clear-cut swoop.”¹⁰⁰

He said he had done everything he could, and announced to voluntarily step down.

Consequently, a relatively unknown figure greeted Russians in the traditional New Year’s speech on television a few hours later on the 31st of December 1999. In a calm yet somewhat unaccustomed manner, former prime minister Vladimir Putin addressed the Russian people in his new role. “Just like you, I was going to listen to Russian President Boris Yeltsin’s words of welcome with my family and friends,” Putin said, “but it turned out differently.”¹⁰¹ At the turn of the millennium, the now acting president explained that he had been entrusted with the duties of the head of state and that new elections would follow in three months. At the time, Putin was perceived to be an underdog and it was not set in stone that he would win these elections. But his popularity rose quickly, particularly due to Putin’s display of power in the devastating war against separatist rebels in Chechnya. As the *New York Times* wrote: “No one expected a man unschooled in politics and so bland in personality and appearance to seize the Russians’ imagination.”¹⁰² Yet, Putin won the elections with a narrow majority, and was inaugurated as president shortly after.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Boris Yeltsin, ‘Zajavlenie Borisa El’cina’, Speech, 31 December 1999, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24080>.

¹⁰¹ Vladimir Putin, ‘Novogodnee obrashhenie ispolnjajushhego objazannosti Prezidenta Vladimira Putina k grazhdanam Rossii [Acting President Vladimir Putin’s New Year address to the citizens of Russia]’, Speech, 31 December 1999, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22280>.

¹⁰² Michael Wines, ‘ELECTION IN RUSSIA: THE OVERVIEW; Putin Wins Russia Vote in First Round, But His Majority Is Less Than Expected’, *The New York Times*, 27 March 2000, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/03/27/world/election-russia-overview-putin-wins-russia-vote-first-round-but-his-majority.html>.

¹⁰³ Michael Wines, ‘Putin Is Made Russia’s President In First Free Transfer of Power’, *The New York Times*, 8 May 2000, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/05/08/world/putin-is-made-russia-s-president-in-first-free-transfer-of-power.html>.

Throughout his first two presidencies, Putin made a wide range of references to the tsars and the time of the Russian Empire. This already began in one of his very first speeches as acting president, where Putin highlighted that Peter the Great intended Saint Petersburg to be a “window to Europe” and that this was still relevant for all of northwestern Russia today.¹⁰⁴ Putin also made such references visually. At his inauguration a few months later, on the 7th of May 2000, the ceremonial guards were wearing blue uniforms decorated with yellow adornment, with the guard in front of the standard-bearer wielding a scimitar from the Great Patriotic War of 1812. Both underlined “the inseparable bond of the modern army” with this war against Napoleon, the eighteenth-century general Alexander Suvorov, as well as all others who fought for the fatherland.¹⁰⁵ These examples are illustrative of the way in which Putin instrumentalised the history of the Russian Empire during his first presidencies. On dozens of occasions, Putin evoked this past through two modalities: to (re)define Russian identity and to praise Russian history as an inspiration and opening towards the future. In this chapter, I will analyse when and why Putin has used these modalities, and just as significantly, when Putin has *not* done so in relation to key events in this period.

War in Chechnya

On his first day as acting president, Putin visited the Russian soldiers fighting in Chechnya.¹⁰⁶ These soldiers were there as part of the Russo-Chechen conflict, which has deep historical roots that go beyond the scope of this thesis.¹⁰⁷ But what is important to note here, is that a series of bombings in Russian residential buildings (particularly in Moscow) in August and September 1999 arguably led then-prime minister Putin to start a second war in Chechnya – which helped him in consolidating power.¹⁰⁸ After Putin had visited the front on the 1st of January 2000, it took two weeks until the capital Grozny was heavily bombed and a

¹⁰⁴ Vladimir Putin, ‘Vstupitel’noe slovo na zasedanii Koordinacionnogo soveta Associacii «Severo-Zapad»’, Speech, 12 January 2000, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24120>.

¹⁰⁵ Vladimir Putin, ‘Ceremonija vstuplenija Vladimira Putina v dolzhnost’ Prezidenta Rossii’, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21410>.

¹⁰⁶ Celestine Bohlen, ‘IN A BUSY START, NEW RUSSIA LEADER GOES TO CHECHNYA’, *The New York Times*, 2 January 2000, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/01/02/world/in-a-busy-start-new-russia-leader-goes-to-chechnya.html>.

¹⁰⁷ For a comprehensive overview of the historical origins of the conflict and the two Russo-Chechen wars, see: John Russell, *Chechnya - Russia's 'War on Terror'*, BASEES/Routledge Series on Russian and East European Studies 34 (London ; New York: Routledge, 2007).

¹⁰⁸ Russell, 76.

few more weeks until Russian forces captured the city.¹⁰⁹ Throughout these events, Putin did not reach back to imperial history. Neither did Putin do so two years later, when armed rebels took the audience of the Dubrovka theatre in Moscow hostage;¹¹⁰ a crisis that continued for four days in which at least 67 hostages and fifty Chechens died.¹¹¹ And in September 2004, when at least 250 people died after armed guerrillas took a school hostage in Beslan (in North Ossetia, bordering Chechnya),¹¹² there were no references to imperial Russian history either. Only in 2005, in an interview with a Dutch journalist, the Russian empire was raised in relation to the Russo-Chechen conflict. The journalist asked if Putin would consider letting Chechnya go, and in response, Putin invoked the Time of Troubles (1598-1613) to indicate that Russia has endured many conflicts on its territory throughout history. In this Time of Troubles, the Russian army was united to liberate Moscow, Putin said: “I would rather think about what unites the country than what creates problems.”¹¹³ Here, Putin instrumentalizes the history of the Russian Empire to briefly justify his choices.

What goes for the Russo-Chechen conflict is applicable to the disaster with the Kursk as well. On the 12th of August 2000, this nuclear submarine sank to the bottom of the Barents Sea during a naval exercise.¹¹⁴ When it became clear that the 118 seamen on board could not be rescued, the country mourned and Putin – who was criticized for his handling of the crisis – took responsibility for what happened.¹¹⁵ Only a year later, the Kursk was successfully

¹⁰⁹ Michael R. Gordon, ‘Russians Blast Grozny, Trying To Finish It Off’, *The New York Times*, 18 January 2000, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/01/18/world/russians-blast-grozny-trying-to-finish-it-off.html>; Michael R. Gordon, ‘Russian Troops Capture What Remains of Grozny’, *The New York Times*, 7 February 2000, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/02/07/world/russian-troops-capture-what-remains-of-grozny.html>.

¹¹⁰ Michael Wines, ‘Armed Men Take Moscow Theater Audience Hostage’, *The New York Times*, 23 October 2002, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/10/23/international/armed-men-take-moscow-theater-audience-hostage.html>.

¹¹¹ Michael Wines, ‘HOSTAGE DRAMA IN MOSCOW: THE RAID; At Least 67 Captives and 50 Chechens Die in Siege’, *The New York Times*, 27 October 2002, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/10/27/world/hostage-drama-moscow-raid-least-67-captives-50-chechens-die-siege.html>.

¹¹² C. J. Chivers and Steven Lee Myers, ‘250 Die as Siege at a Russian School Ends in Chaos’, *The New York Times*, 4 September 2004, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/04/world/europe/250-die-as-siege-at-a-russian-school-ends-in-chaos.html>.

¹¹³ Vladimir Putin, ‘Interv’ju niderlandskomu telekanalu «Nederland 1» i gazete «NRC Handel’sblatt»’, 31 October 2005, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/23243>.

¹¹⁴ Sabrina Tavernise With Christopher Drew, ‘Frantic Russian Effort To Rescue Crew of Sub’, *The New York Times*, 15 August 2000, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/08/15/world/frantic-russian-effort-to-rescue-crew-of-sub.html>.

¹¹⁵ Michael Wines, ‘Bereft Russia Hears Putin’s Mea Culpa on Sub Accident’, *The New York Times*, 24 August 2000, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/08/24/world/bereft-russia-hears-putin-s-mea-culpa-on-sub-accident.html>.

raised in a 15-hour long effort with European help.¹¹⁶ Just like the all-out war with Chechen rebels (with one exception), Putin did not seem to involve imperial history in relation to the Kursk. Both are fraught topics and can be considered Russian national dramas, which might be the reason why Putin has not appealed to this history here. It seems that Putin reserved the history of the tsars and the Russian Empire between 1999 and 2008 for positive occasions of national pride, and not for national tragedies.

Praising the past to shape a Russian identity

Two months after his inauguration, on the 14th of July 2000, Putin made it clear in a speech that the Russian Federation is a new Russia: “We do not have a tsar, nor a General Secretary, who essentially ruled for life and with even greater powers than the autocrat.”¹¹⁷ But what *are* the things that constitute a Russian identity in this new Russia? In a variety of speeches, Putin defines this using positive examples from the time of the Russian Empire.

First, Russia is a country with a glorious past in the eyes of Putin. Writing to the workers of the Admiralty Shipyards in Saint Petersburg to congratulate them on their 300th anniversary, Putin noted how their docks were founded by Peter the Great and constituted to the establishment of Russia as largest sea power – leaving a bright mark on the history of its fleet.¹¹⁸ This importance of the Russian navy is strengthened further by Putin at his closing speech at the World Congress of Compatriots in the same city two years later, in October 2006, where he quoted Alexander III in saying that “Russia has only two allies: its army and navy.”¹¹⁹ And Saint Petersburg was founded during the heyday of Russian statehood, Putin argued in an interview: it was not just Russia’s breakthrough into the future, but also encompassed the spirit of innovation that is inherent in the city.¹²⁰ This was the time when Russia was on the rise, Putin shared with students of Moscow State University at the 250th

¹¹⁶ Sophia Kishkovsky, ‘In 15 Hours, Submarine Kursk Is Raised From Sea Floor’, *The New York Times*, 9 October 2001, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/09/world/in-15-hours-submarine-kursk-is-raised-from-sea-floor.html>.

¹¹⁷ Vladimir Putin, ‘Zakljuchitel’noe slovo na soveshhanii po voprosam razvitija Ural’skogo federal’nogo okruga’ (Speech, Nizhny Tagil, 14 July 2000), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21491>.

¹¹⁸ Vladimir Putin, ‘Trudovomu kolektivu i veteranam federal’nogo gosudarstvennogo unitarnogo predpriyatija «Admiraltejskie verfi»’, 5 November 2004, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/letters/25617>.

¹¹⁹ Vladimir Putin, ‘Zakljuchitel’noe slovo na Vsemirnom kongresse sootchestvennikov’, Speech, 24 October 2006, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/23862>.

¹²⁰ Vladimir Putin, ‘Interv’ju telekanalu RTR-Sankt-Peterburg i gazete «Nevskoe vremja»’, 10 July 2002, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21638>.

anniversary of their university, so the foundation of the city was not a coincidence.¹²¹ And during the Russian Empire, Russia was a rather tolerant country: multi-national as well as multi-confessional, Putin shared at the 2007 edition of the Valdai Discussion Club.¹²² We can see here how Putin establishes the gloriousness of the Russian past in terms of military and naval greatness, how Russia developed, and its diversity.

Second, Putin uses imperial history to argue that Russia is a European country with deep European roots. On several occasions he stressed the strong connection between Russia and Europe. At a meeting with politicians and businesspeople in Essen in 2001, for example, Putin explained that his country has felt part of the European continent since the time of Peter the Great. “Today, the basic European values are becoming an organic part of the Russian way of life. On this - the European way - Russia will only strengthen its positions and assert its identity,” Putin said.¹²³ And in 2003, speaking to the French scientific and cultural elite in Paris, he explained how this European desire had been present in Russia for a long time – especially during the enlightening, when Peter the Great was inspired by the French Royal Academy of Sciences on his visit to France.¹²⁴ In another meeting at the Elysée in 2005, on invitation of the French president Jacques Chirac, Putin stressed how the Russian elite was bilingual in the seventeenth century, so for quite some time Russia contributed to the development of the French language and promotion of its culture.¹²⁵ And when the 50th anniversary of the European Union’s Treaty of Rome came around in 2007, Putin saw this as an opportunity to write an article in which he argued that Russia played a central role here. Since Peter the Great brought Russia firmly into European politics, Putin argued: “Russia has shared all the triumphs and all the tragedies of Europe (-). Twice we played a decisive role in thwarting attempts at the forcible unification of Europe” – after which Putin continued his argument by saying that the current European integration would not even have been possible without this effort.¹²⁶ Through these statements, Putin not just indicates that the

¹²¹ Vladimir Putin, ‘Vstrecha, posvjashhennaja 250-letnemu jubileju Moskovskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta imeni M.V.Lomonosova’, Speech, 25 January 2005, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22796>.

¹²² Vladimir Putin, ‘Vstrecha s uchastnikami mezhdunarodnogo diskussionnogo kluba «Valdaj»’, Speech, 14 September 2007, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24537>.

¹²³ Vladimir Putin, ‘Vystuplenie na vstreche s predstaviteljami delovyh i obshhestvennyh krugov FRG’, Speech, 26 September 2001, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21342>.

¹²⁴ Vladimir Putin, ‘Vystuplenie na vstreche s nauchnoj i kul’turnoj jelitij v Institute Francii’, Speech, 11 February 2003, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21868>.

¹²⁵ Vladimir Putin, ‘Vstupitel’noe slovo na vstreche s rossijskimi pisateljami – uchastnikami XXV Parizhskogo knizhnogo salona’, Speech, 18 March 2005, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22862>.

¹²⁶ Vladimir Putin, ‘Polveka evropejskoj integracii i Rossija’, Article published in a number of European media outlets, 25 March 2007, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24094>.

Europeanness of his country goes a long way back, he also stresses how Russia unmistakably belongs to Europe. Interesting enough, Putin primarily talks about these European Russian roots abroad or in meetings with foreigners. When he talks to a Russian audience, Putin preserves his rhetoric of strong European origins for people in Saint Petersburg and North-Western Russia.

Third, Putin emphasizes how the new Russia is different from the Soviet Union. In 2006, at the reception for the 100th anniversary of the Russian parliament at the Tavricheskiy Palace (which was the seat of the Imperial State Duma of 1906), Putin referred to the Novgorod veche (a popular assembly) of the fifteenth century and the zemstvo assemblies of the nineteenth century to argue that Russia has a parliamentary tradition. And at this reception, Putin also warned that the October Revolution of 1917 ended this tradition and that we should not forget “the dire consequences” of political extremism.¹²⁷ Besides democracy, the new Russian Federation also differentiates itself in other fields. Putin gave an example of this at a meeting with businesspeople in Tokyo, by stressing that the new Russia not only honours the debts of tsarist Russia but also has almost paid them in full – contrary to the Soviet Union.¹²⁸ And in an interview with a Russian journalist, Putin proudly mentioned that Russia is once again a major grain exporter, just like in imperial times. The food shortages of the Soviet Union are now, “thank god”, something of the past.¹²⁹ In these fragments, Putin uses positive examples from the imperial past to signify a break with Soviet times, showing that Russia is now returning to its imperial heritage.

Fourth, the Russian Orthodox church has always played an important role in Russia, Putin argues, for which he uses positive examples from the imperial past. He has done so on different occasions, such as the third meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club in 2006. Here, Putin shared an anecdote about his family to stress the religious roots of Russia: they lived over 300 years in the same village and visited church weekly. “The church has always played a huge role in Russia. It was a state institution. It was a moral school, and to a certain extent even an administrative factor was essential.”¹³⁰ But also at his first presidential inauguration

¹²⁷ Vladimir Putin, ‘Vystuplenie na torzhestvennom prieme, posvjashhennom 100-letiju rossijskogo parlamentarizma’, Speech, 27 April 2006, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/23565>.

¹²⁸ Vladimir Putin, ‘Vstupitel’noe slovo na vstreche s rukovodstvom Japonskoj asociacii jekonomicheskikh organizacij Kjejdancij’, Speech, 5 September 2000, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21566>.

¹²⁹ Vladimir Putin, ‘Interv’ju sredstvam massovoj informacii Krasnodarskogo kraja’, 17 September 2002, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21722>.

¹³⁰ Vladimir Putin, ‘Stenograficheskij otchet o vstreche s uchastnikami tret’ego zasedanija Mezhdunarodnogo diskussionnogo kluba «Valdaj»’ (Conversation, Novo-Ogaryovo, 9 September 2006), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/23789>.

in 2000, the importance of the Orthodox church for Russia can be observed – even though Russia is officially a secular country. Patriarch Alexy II blessed Putin and gave him an icon as a present, as well as copies from the mosaic icons that used to decorate the Saviour and Nicholas gates of the Kremlin before the October Revolution of 1917. In return, Putin presented the Patriarch with an icon of Prince Alexander Nevsky.¹³¹ Additionally, the Russian Orthodox church forms the basis of Russia’s “spiritual unity” with Ukraine, Putin expressed on visits to Ukraine. Both at the consecration of the St. Vladimir's Cathedral on Crimea in 2001 and at a meeting with the hierarchs of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Kiev in 2004, Putin emphasized that Vladimir the Great started to baptise ancient Russia from there: “Orthodoxy began to spread among our peoples and in our countries.”¹³² We can see here how Putin already noted in 2001 and 2004 that Ukrainians and Russians have a “spiritual unity” – this is a very important development that will continue to simmer in the background in the years that follow. Later, this idea will constitute one of the foundations of Putin’s foreign policy vis-à-vis Ukraine and the West during his third presidency. I will elaborate upon this in chapter 3, as well as the extent to which this view does justice to history.

Fifth, Putin uses imperial Russian history as a source of inspiration for the official state symbols of the Russian Federation. Supporting a bill that was sent to the Duma to officially establish these symbols in December 2000, Putin explained in a speech that such laws had not been enacted before because both society and parliament considered symbols from the Russian Empire and Soviet Union inappropriate. Putin acknowledged that dark times existed in Russian history, but remarked the following:

If we follow only that logic, then we would have to forget about the achievements of our people over the centuries. What do we do about the achievements of Russian culture? What do we do about Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Tchaikovsky? What are we going to do about the achievements of Russian science, Mendeleev, Lobachevsky and many, many others? What will happen to much of what we are proud of today? Yet, these names and these achievements were also associated with these symbols.¹³³

¹³¹ Putin, ‘Ceremonija vstupenija Vladimira Putina v dolzhnost’ Prezidenta Rossii’.

¹³² Vladimir Putin, ‘Vystuplenie na ceremonii osvjashhenija Vladimirsogo sobora’, Speech, 28 June 2001, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21301>; Vladimir Putin, ‘Obrashhenie k ierarham Ukrainskoj pravoslavnoj cerkvi Moskovskogo patriarhata’ (Speech, Kiev, Ukraine, 24 January 2004), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22334>.

¹³³ Vladimir Putin, ‘Zajavlenie v svjazi s vneseniem na rassmotrenie Gosudarstvennoj Dumy zakonoproektov o gosudarstvennoj simvolike’, Speech, 4 December 2000, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21137>.

So, as a solution, Putin proposes to use all of the major symbols of the state. Concerning the Russian Empire, these symbols would be the traditional white-blue-red tricolour flag as well as the double-headed eagle as emblem – respectively 300 and 500 years old.¹³⁴ This is an example of identity shaping, based on praising (or at least not condemning) the past.

Last, the history of the Russian Empire is also a source of inspiration for Putin in his personal life. During his first two presidencies, as well as in the terms that followed, foreign journalists have asked him in different interviews which historical figures he admires, and on various occasions Putin mentioned the tsars.

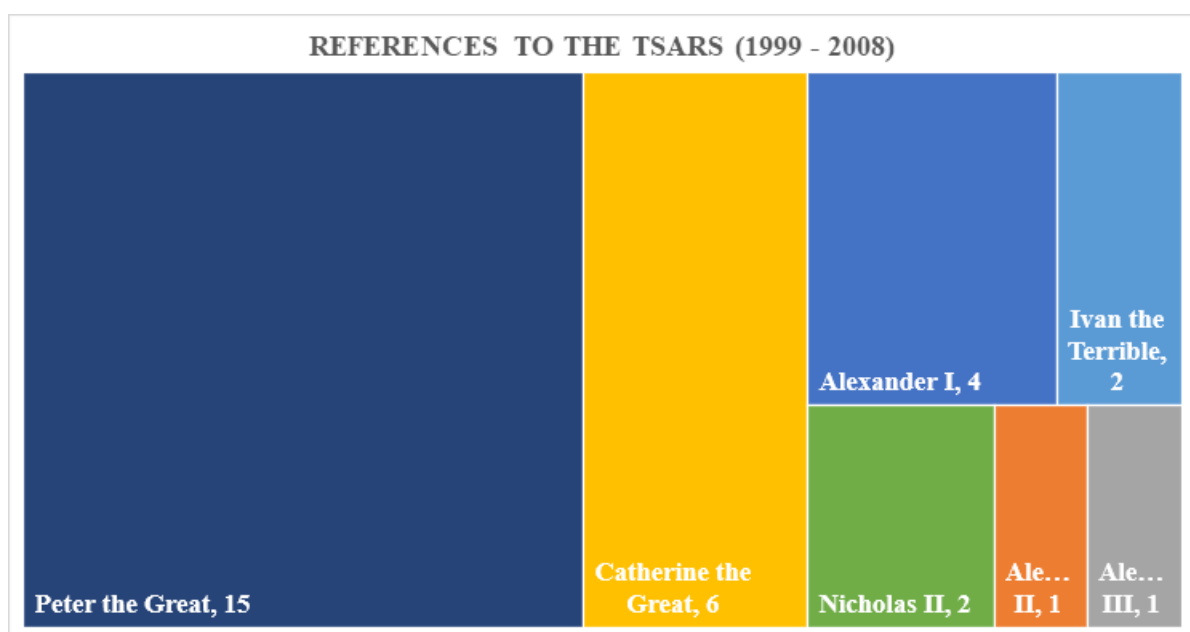


Figure 1 Treemap of Putin's references to the tsars between August 1999 and May 2008

Although he indicated that he would prefer to keep his idols and sympathies private, and that idolatry is dangerous, he explained that he appreciates the outstanding figures in Russian history. For him, these are Peter the Great, Catherine the Great, and Peter Stolypin.¹³⁵

Looking at the frequency at which Putin has made references to the tsars between 1999 and 2008, as summed up in Figure 1, this seems accurate.

¹³⁴ Putin.

¹³⁵ Vladimir Putin, 'Stenogramma internet-konferencii Prezidenta Rossii', Speech, 6 March 2001, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21201>; Vladimir Putin, 'Interv'ju kitajskoj gazete «Zhjen'min' zhibao», kitajskomu informacionnomu agentstvu Sin'hua i telekompanii RTR', 16 July 2000, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24168>; Vladimir Putin, 'Interv'ju finskoj gazete «Hel'singen sanomat'», 1 September 2001, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21315>; Vladimir Putin, 'Interv'ju nemeckoj gazete «Bil'd'», 18 September 2001, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21334>.

New relations with the West

Throughout the nineties and at the beginning of the new millennium, Russian relations with the West were fairly good – especially regarding the United States (US). Leaders of both countries regularly met with each other. At such meetings, Putin often used positive examples from the imperial Russian past to emphasize how deep the historical ties between their countries were. Arguably, this was not just a safer option than the Soviet times, as history from this period is strongly associated with the Cold War, but it also offered an opportunity for the new Russia to take a step back from this Soviet identity.

On different occasions, Putin stressed that Russia and the US have a great positive history. He often shared the anecdote of how the Russian Empire assisted the US in its Revolutionary War (1775-1783). As the story goes, the British king had asked Catherine the Great to send Russian soldiers to help suppress the rebellion in the American colonies. In a personal letter she politely yet insistently refused to do so – Putin shared a copy of this letter with President George Bush as a gift at their meeting in Saint Petersburg in May 2002. This Russian refusal played an important role in the US gaining their independence, according to Putin.¹³⁶ And both countries were together in WWI (and WWII) as well, Putin noted in an interview with *Time Magazine* in 2007: “So, there is something objective that always unites us in difficult times”.¹³⁷ In two earlier interviews in 2001, Putin argued that both countries cannot but support each other in facing the large-scale threats of today (terrorism) and that Russia and the US will not only be partners “when our destiny meets history again” but might as well be friends.¹³⁸ In these fragments, Putin praises positive examples of friendly relations in US-Russian history, and also lets them function as an inspiration for the future as well. Such positive remarks about US-Russian relations are quite typical for the period of Putin’s

¹³⁶ Vladimir Putin, ‘Vystuplenie pered predstaviteljami obshhestvenno-politicheskikh i delovykh krugov SShA’, Speech, 14 November 2001, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21398>; Vladimir Putin, ‘Interv’ju gazete «Uoll-strit dzhomjeb»’, 11 February 2002, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21498>; Vladimir Putin, ‘Vstrecha so studentami Sankt-Peterburgskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta’, Speech, 25 May 2002, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21607>; Vladimir Putin, ‘Vystuplenie i otvety na voprosy na vstreche s prepodavateljami i studentami Kolumbijskogo universiteta’, Speech, 26 September 2003, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22129>.

¹³⁷ Vladimir Putin, ‘Opublikovano interv’ju Vladimira Putina zhurnalu «Tajm»’, 12 December 2007, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/43528>.

¹³⁸ Vladimir Putin, ‘Interv’ju amerikanskoj telekompanii «Jej-bi-si»’, 7 November 2001, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21392>; Putin, ‘Vystuplenie pered predstaviteljami obshhestvenno-politicheskikh i delovykh krugov SShA’.

first two presidencies. Near the end of his second term, in 2007, Putin even went fishing with Bush at the Bush family compound in Maine (US).¹³⁹

Praising such positive examples of strong historical ties with another country are not reserved for the US only. It seems to be a key modality that Putin instrumentalised in Russian relations with other Western countries as well. On the evening of the 27th G8 summit in Italy in 2001, Putin wrote to the citizens of Genoa and went in detail on the deep ties between Russia, Genoa, and Italy: already in the 13th century, Genoese explorers visited the shores of the Black Sea, and in 1386 the Genoese embassy visited Moscow.¹⁴⁰ Putin made such historical references as well on his visit to the Netherlands in 2005. At a reception of Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands, Putin expressed his appreciation for the warm welcome and opportunities that the Netherlands gave to Peter the Great when he visited the country, as well as to Grand Duchess Anna Pavlovna, the wife of William II of the Netherlands in the 19th century.¹⁴¹ And when Putin was visiting Scotland, he outlined how a great deal of Scottish ancestors played a key role in Russian history. To illustrate his case, Putin mentioned Patrick Gordon (Peter the Great's first mentor), Prince Barclay de Tolly (commander-in-chief of the Russian troops in the wars against Napoleon), and James the Bruce (field marshal of the Russian army).¹⁴² And in similar fashion, Putin reached back to the history of the Russian Empire to foster contemporary bonds with other countries on visits to Finland, Germany, Portugal, and Spain too.¹⁴³ Of course, such statements by Putin could be considered standard diplomatic practice: when someone invites you to their home, you say something polite – just like in everyday life. However, Putin goes beyond diplomatic politeness in these statements and stresses how far these strong ties go in the past, indirectly contributing to the shaping of a European Russian identity.

¹³⁹ Jim Rutenberg, 'Putin Arrives in Kennebunkport for 2-Day Visit With the Bushes', *The New York Times*, 2 July 2007, sec. Washington, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/02/washington/02putin.html>.

¹⁴⁰ Vladimir Putin, 'Vladimir Putin obratilsja s privetstviem k zhiteljam Genui nakanune sammita «bol'shoj vos'merki»', 19 July 2001, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/42150>.

¹⁴¹ Vladimir Putin, 'Vystuplenie na gosudarstvennom prieme ot imeni Korolevy Niderlandov Beatriks', Speech, 1 November 2005, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/23245>.

¹⁴² Vladimir Putin, 'Vystuplenie i otvety na voprosy na vstreche s predstaviteljami nauchnyh, obshhestvennyh i delovyh krugov Shotlandii', Speech, 25 June 2003, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22037>.

¹⁴³ Vladimir Putin, 'Interv'ju finskomu telekanalu «Julejsradio»', 1 September 2001, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21316>; Vladimir Putin, 'Interv'ju portugal'skim SMI', 23 October 2002, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24609>; Vladimir Putin, 'Ceremonija vruchenija zolotogo kljucha Madridu Prezidentu Rossii', Speech, 8 February 2006, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/23423>; Vladimir Putin, 'Vystuplenie na plenarnom zasedanii rossijsko-germanskogo foruma obshhestvennosti «Peterburgskij dialog»', Speech, 15 October 2007, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24593>.

Combatting critique

Although not as much as other modalities, Putin instrumentalizes the history of the tsars and the Russian Empire in this period well to justify the state of affairs in contemporary Russia – particularly in relation to the gradual introduction of democracy.

Asked by a student from Irkutsk State University in February 2000 if Russia will remain a super-presidential republic, Putin explained that although he does not agree with that definition, Russia was created as a centralised state and remained to be one. This started with tsarism (after which communism followed) and now continues in the presidency.¹⁴⁴ Five months later, in an interview with a French magazine in July, Putin also stressed that this tsarist (and communist) background of Russia goes hand in hand with the Russian preference for a centralised state.¹⁴⁵ But that does not mean that Russia is undemocratic, according to Putin. When he was criticized about the (un)democratic situation in Russia by an American journalist from *NBC* in July 2006, Putin argued that already in ancient Novgorod, people gathered at squares and voted directly. According to Putin, this was direct democracy in the most direct sense of the word. Similarly, in contemporary Russian elections, people vote directly for their president, Putin noted – unlike American presidential elections where people vote indirectly through the electoral colleges. So, Putin asked: “Where is more democracy in deciding the most important question of power: yours or ours?”¹⁴⁶ Here we can see how Putin praises the democratic traditions of Russia in the past, while simultaneously using history as an argument: Russia was and is a democracy. Putin even returns critique on his policy in such a way that Russia comes out as more democratic than the US – at least in his rhetoric.

In the origins of everyday institutes, the past persists

The last modality that is prevalent in the expressions of Putin during his first two presidencies, is that he regularly praises examples of institutions founded in tsarist times that continue to exist today. While Putin seems to take examples from a wide range, they can be grouped in a few categories. The first is the judiciary system. Speaking at the fifth edition of

¹⁴⁴ Vladimir Putin, ‘Vstrecha so studentami Irkutskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta (vyderzhki)’ (Meeting, Irkutsk, Russia, 18 February 2000), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24139>.

¹⁴⁵ Vladimir Putin, ‘Interv’ju francuzskomu ezhenedel’niku «Pari-match»’, 6 July 2000, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24166>.

¹⁴⁶ Vladimir Putin, ‘Interv’ju telekanalu Jen-Bi-Si (SShA)’, 12 July 2006, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/23699>.

the All-Russian Congress of Judges in 2000, Putin emphasized that Russian courts are "swift, right and fair" – principles formulated in the judiciary reform of 1864. Many years have passed, but these demands on the Russian courts remained relevant according to Putin.¹⁴⁷ And at the All-Russian Meeting of Prosecutors in 2001, Putin noted that although there were problems facing the prosecutor's office, as it was sometimes referred to as a totalitarian relic, its roots go back to the time of Peter the Great and Catherine the Great, as well as the reforms of Alexander I.¹⁴⁸ The second category of examples that Putin used is related to the press. Both in 2001 and 2003, Putin congratulated media heads and ordinary Russians on the Day of Russian Press, accentuating that the first newspaper of Russia was published in 1703 by decree of Peter the Great. "Russian journalism has come a long way in the past three centuries, establishing strong professional traditions. In the twists and turns of history, Russian journalists have repeatedly shown examples of civic courage and fidelity to their cause," according to Putin.¹⁴⁹ Last, Putin also praised many historical examples from a more general category. These are ranging from the Sberbank that was founded 160 years ago by tsar's degree, up to the General Intelligence Directorate (GRU) that was created in 1812 by Alexander I in the year of Napoleon's invasion of Russia.¹⁵⁰ By praising the long history of these institutions, ranging from the judiciary to the press and everyday institutions, Putin gives (rhetoric) authority to these institutions: they all have a lot of experience.

The past as inspiration for the present

During his first two presidencies, Putin primarily instrumentalised the history of the Russian Empire to cultivate and shape Russian identity, as well as to praise the past that preceded the Soviet Union. As such, history functioned as a source of inspiration. In Figure 2 we can clearly see how these modalities were omnipresent in this period:

¹⁴⁷ Vladimir Putin, 'Vystuplenie na V Vserossijskom s"ezde sudej', Speech, 27 November 2000, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21125>.

¹⁴⁸ Vladimir Putin, 'Vystuplenie na Vserossijskom soveshhanii prokurorov', Speech, 11 January 2001, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21161>.

¹⁴⁹ Vladimir Putin, 'Vstupitel'noe slovo na vstreche s rukovoditeljami rossijskikh sredstv massovoj informacii', Speech, 13 January 2001, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21162>; Vladimir Putin, 'Pozdravlenie', 13 January 2003, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/letters/26561>.

¹⁵⁰ Vladimir Putin, 'Poseshhenie Vernadskogo otdelenija Sberbanka (vyderzhki)' (Speech, Moscow, Russia, 12 November 2001), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21396>; Vladimir Putin, 'Otvat na vopros zhurnalistov po okonchaniu vstrechi s rukovodjashhim sostavom Glavnogo razvedyvatel'nogo upravlenija General'nogo shtaba Vooruzhennyh Sil i veteranami voennoj razvedki', Interview, 5 November 2001, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21389>.

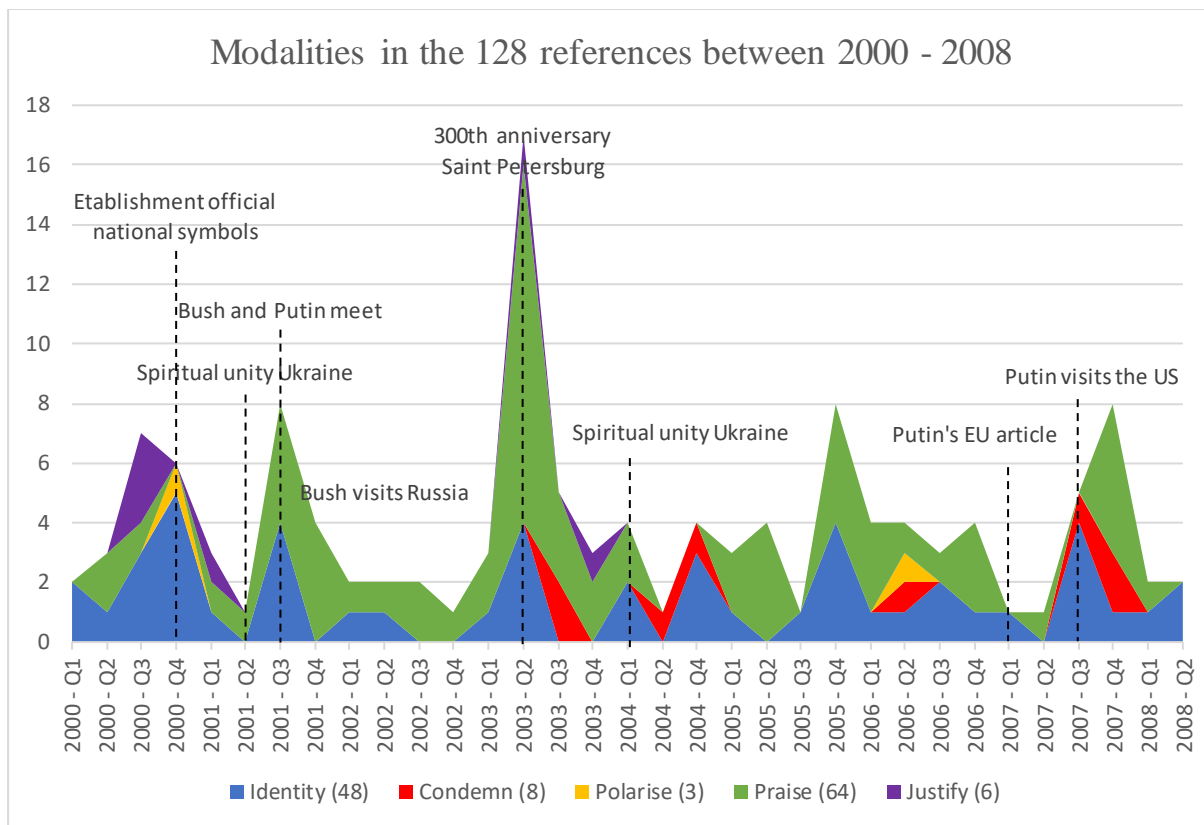


Figure 2 Stacked area chart of the modalities that Putin instrumentalised during his first two presidencies, between January 2000 and May 2008, combined with key events in this period.

Particularly in 2003 a surge in such references can be observed, when the 300th anniversary of Saint Petersburg was celebrated. But also throughout the whole period, the vast majority of references functioned as identity shaping (48 out of 128) and praising the past (64 out of 128) – together constituting 88 per cent of the imperial references.

With one exception, Putin did not invoke this history in the war with Chechen rebels or in relation the sinking of the Kursk submarine. Rather, Putin reserved it for brighter occasions, such as highlighting (1) the glorious military and naval achievements in Russia’s past, (2) stressing the deep European roots and other imperial heritage to which Russia is returning, (3) emphasizing the importance of the Orthodox church, (4) reinstating official state symbols – the tricolour and two headed eagle – from imperial times, (5) expressing his admiration for tsars such as Peter the Great and Catherine the Great, to whom he refers most frequently in this period, and (6) underlining how everyday Russian institutions have origins in the time of the Russian Empire. In line with Russia’s European roots, Putin repeatedly used history to strengthen its relations with other countries. This applies especially to the US, where Putin stressed the great historical ties that both countries used to have with examples from the time of the Russian Empire – as this was long before the tensions before the Cold

War, this seems to be a logical choice. And with other Western countries, Putin did this too, going beyond diplomatic politeness by firmly stressing the common European roots of Russia and other European countries.

By referring to the imperial past almost exclusively on pleasant occasions between 1999 and 2008, Putin instrumentalises this history in quite a friendly manner – it virtually seems to be a celebration of returning to aspects of a distant past.

3.

It takes two to tandem

2008 – 2014

Switching positions

Late 1575, tsar Ivan the Terrible abdicated from the throne. He appointed the Tatar khan Simeon Bekbulatovich as Grand Prince of All Rus' to take over his rule, yet took over power again from Simeon about a year later.¹⁵¹ During this interval, Ivan appeared to have taken a step back. He moved to the former oprichnina fortress on the other side of the Neglinnaya river, travelled the streets of Moscow in a humble carriage, and sat at a distance from the tsar's throne when he visited Simeon in the Kremlin.¹⁵² Although it remains unclear which powers Ivan had given to Simeon exactly, Ivan did maintain his title Tsar of All Rus' (which Simeon did not receive) and remained solely in charge over foreign relations.¹⁵³ All this caused a great deal of confusion back then and still puzzles and divides historians, who offer different interpretations of Ivan's intentions.¹⁵⁴

A few centuries later, a journalist from *Time Magazine* shared this story in an interview with Putin in December 2007. There were only a few months left before Putin was required to step down because he had reached the constitutional limit of two presidential terms, and Putin repeatedly said that he would remain influential after leaving the presidency.¹⁵⁵ Noting how the power shuffle of Ivan and Simeon brought disharmony to the state, the journalist wondered if such an affair could repeat itself. Putin denied this possibility: "No, because we do not have a monarchy, we live within the framework of the

¹⁵¹ Isabel De Madariaga, *Ivan the Terrible: First Tsar of Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 351; 364.

¹⁵² R. G. Skrynnikov and Paul Williams, *Reign of Terror: Ivan IV*, Eurasian Studies Library : History, Societies & Cultures in Eurasia, volume 6 (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2016), 455.

¹⁵³ De Madariaga, *Ivan the Terrible*, 351.

¹⁵⁴ Some argue that Ivan's abdication was a political masquerade, while others interpret it as a return to the oprichnina, as well as a variety of other potential reasons. For a brief overview of the academic debate, see: De Madariaga, 352–54.

¹⁵⁵ Andrew E. Kramer, 'With Putin as Prime Minister, a Role Recast', *The New York Times*, 11 December 2007, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/11/world/europe/11iht-moscow.4.8697020.html>.

current constitution, and everyone, including the highest state officials, must understand this. They are obliged to obey basic law, that is all.”¹⁵⁶ Around the time of this interview, Putin handpicked his successor Dmitry Medvedev, who won the presidential elections in March 2008. And after his victory, Medvedev announced that he would govern the country together with Putin as his prime minister.¹⁵⁷ This partnership in the presidential term that followed between 2008 and 2012 is characterised as the *tandem*: the co-leadership in which Medvedev officially held the steering wheel as president, yet many saw prime minister Putin as the one who really pulled the strings.¹⁵⁸ Four years onwards, the two did shuffle positions when Putin resumed to the presidency, albeit under very different circumstances than the switch that Ivan and Simeon made in the sixteenth century. Looking back at Medvedev’s presidency, Joseph Laurence Black concluded that at first glance, “Medvedev appeared to function as a proxy president only rarely stepping outside the confines of evolutionary Putinism, to which he added a ‘liberal’, legalistic, and perhaps even moral scaffold.”¹⁵⁹ Interesting enough, while Putin had told *Time Magazine* in 2007 that a shuffle scenario would be impossible due to the Russian constitution, it was precisely the Russian constitution that allowed Putin and Medvedev to make their shuffle in 2014. According to the constitution at the time, “the same person may not hold the office of President of the Russian Federation for more than two consecutive terms”,¹⁶⁰ meaning that Putin was able to become president again after the Medvedev interval – fully according to the Russian constitution.¹⁶¹

What characterises the period covered in this chapter (May 2008 – January 2014), is that Medvedev and Putin both appealed to the history of the tsars and the Russian Empire to justify their foreign and domestic policy, praise this glorious past, and mould Russian identity in the process. In this chapter, I will identify these three modalities over the years, note how specific themes became more and less salient at specific points in time, and will try to explicate how this is the case.

¹⁵⁶ Putin, ‘Opublikovano interv’ju Vladimira Putina zhurnal’u «Tajm»’.

¹⁵⁷ Clifford J. Levy, ‘Medvedev Wins Russian Presidential Vote, but Is He in Charge?’, *The New York Times*, 3 March 2008, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/03/world/europe/03iht-russia.3.10656448.html>.

¹⁵⁸ Joseph Laurence Black, *The Russian Presidency of Dmitry Medvedev, 2008-12: The next Step Forward or Merely a Time Out?*, Routledge Contemporary Russia and Eastern Europe Series 57 (London: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2015).

¹⁵⁹ Black noted that it was still too early in 2015 to conclusively assess Medvedev’s influence in the wider context of Putin’s governance. Yet, after two more of Putin’s presidential terms and a third one anticipated upon, I would argue that his judgement was fairly accurate. See: Black, 213.

¹⁶⁰ Underlining added to the original for emphasis.

¹⁶¹ Prezidenta Rossijskoj Federacii, ‘Konstitucii Rossijskoj Federacii Ot 30.12.2008 # 7-FKZ’, 81 Stat’ja § (2008), <http://pravo.gov.ru/proxy/ips/?docbody=&nd=102027595&rdk=11>.

Russian involvement in the Caucasus

Three months into the tandem-presidency, war broke out between Russia and Georgia in August 2008. Two breakaway provinces in the north of Georgia on the Russian border were at the centre of this conflict: Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Both separated de facto from Georgia in the beginning of the 1990s and maintained ties with Russia, although they had not been recognised as independent yet. The conflict had been boiling in the background since, and when Mikhail Saakashvili became president of Georgia in 2004, he put a reunion with the breakaway regions at the heart of his presidency, as well as NATO membership for Georgia.¹⁶² So, when the Georgian military advanced into South Ossetia on Friday the 8th of August 2008 to bring this province back under control,¹⁶³ the Russian military moved there as well in support of the South Ossetians and bombed several targets in Georgia.¹⁶⁴ The conflict “moved toward full-scale war” when Russia increasingly bombed more targets in Georgia and sent its soldiers to Abkhazia as well by the next day.¹⁶⁵ The Russian army was by far superior to the Georgian. On Sunday, Georgia drew back and agreed upon a ceasefire, two and a half weeks later Medvedev announced that Russia recognised the independence of Abkhazia and South-Ossetia and would provide assistance to the territories, and Georgia and Russia cut off diplomatic ties with each other.¹⁶⁶

Soon after the conflict had stabilized again, Medvedev started to justify Russian involvement with Georgia and its breakaway republics using examples from imperial Russian history. Medvedev repeatedly stressed how close the Russian and Georgian people have always been and how Georgia was a region of the Russian Empire in the past. In September 2008, for example, the Russian pianist Denis Matsuev asked in a meeting with Medvedev if it

¹⁶² Michael Schwartz, Anne Barnard, and C. J. Chivers, ‘Russia and Georgia Clash Over Separatist Region’, *The New York Times*, 8 August 2008, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/09/world/europe/09georgia.html>.

¹⁶³ The New York Times, ‘Georgia Begins Offensive in South Ossetia’, *The New York Times*, 8 August 2008, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/08/world/europe/08iht-georgia.1.15110746.html>.

¹⁶⁴ Schwartz, Barnard, and Chivers, ‘Russia and Georgia Clash Over Separatist Region’.

¹⁶⁵ Anne Barnard, ‘Georgia and Russia Nearing All-Out War’, *The New York Times*, 9 August 2008, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/10/world/europe/10georgia.html>.

¹⁶⁶ The New York Times, ‘Georgia Pulls Troops out of South Ossetia and Calls for Cease-Fire’, *The New York Times*, 10 August 2008, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/10/world/europe/10iht-georgia.3.15148876.html>; The New York Times, ‘Russia Pledges Military Aid to Georgian Enclaves’, *The New York Times*, 31 August 2008, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/31/world/europe/31iht-georgia.4.15774549.html>; Andrew E. Kramer, ‘Georgia and Russia Cut Diplomatic Ties’, *The New York Times*, 29 August 2008, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/30/world/europe/30russia.html>.

would be safe for him to play at a concert in Georgia. Medvedev answered that he wished to believe that the centuries-old cultural relations between the two countries would survive: “These people are very close to us and they feel life in Russia very finely (...), towards whom we always had special sympathy, not to mention historical events, such as the Treaty of Georgievsk and so on.”¹⁶⁷ This Treaty of Georgievsk put the Eastern Georgian kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti under the protection of the Russian Empire in 1784, sixteen years before it would be annexed by tsar Paul I (which Alexander I ratified).¹⁶⁸ And when a journalist asked at another meeting if the trust between the peoples of Georgia and Russia could be restored, Medvedev said he hoped so, stressing that Georgia might not even have existed as a state without the Russian Empire.¹⁶⁹ In 2012, Medvedev again reached back to the Treaty of Georgievsk, saying it laid the foundation for the centuries-old friendship between the Russian and Georgian people, at a ceremony to present awards to artists who contributed to the strengthening of the Russian-Georgian brotherly ties.¹⁷⁰ Medvedev also made such arguments in relation to Abkhazia, giving historical examples to justify Russian support for the region. When an Abkhazian delegation came to Moscow in 2010 for top-level talks, for example, he noted how it was almost exactly 200 years ago when tsar Alexander I accepted Abkhazia under his patronage and established close Russian-Abkhazian relations.¹⁷¹ These justifications for Russian involvement in the South Caucasus, based on the imperial past, are a noteworthy development. Whereas Putin completely ignored the history of the Russian Empire in the military conflict with Chechnya, Medvedev is now actively instrumentalizing this history to justify his foreign policy in the South Caucasus. What might explain this difference in approach, is that one conflict concerns a domestic matter and the other a foreign one. Whereas the Kremlin considers the breakaway republic of Chechnya to be a fundamental part of the Russian Federation, it sees the breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as foreign territories entitled to independence. And while the conflict with Chechnya was a national drama, this is not the case in the conflict with Georgia.

¹⁶⁷ Dmitri Medvedev, ‘Stenograficheskij otchjot o vstreche s predstaviteljami obshhestvennyh organizacij’ (Speech, Moscow, Russia, 19 September 2008), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/1467>.

¹⁶⁸ David Marshall Lang, *The Last Years of the Georgian Monarchy, 1658-1832*, Studies of the Russian Institute, Columbia University (New York: uitgever, 1957), 184; 245–50.

¹⁶⁹ Dmitri Medvedev, ‘Vstrecha s predstaviteljami regional’nyh sredstv massovoj informacii’ (Meeting, Izhevsk, Russia, 18 November 2008), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/2120>.

¹⁷⁰ Dmitri Medvedev, ‘V Kremle sostojalas’ ceremonija vruchenija gosudarstvennyh nagrad’ (Speech, Moscow, Russia, 26 July 2010), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/8451>.

¹⁷¹ Dmitri Medvedev, ‘Nachalo rossijsko-abhazskih peregovorov v rasshirennom sostave’ (Speech, Moscow, Russia, 17 February 2010), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/6896>; Dmitri Medvedev, ‘Press-konferencija po itogam rossijsko-abhazskih peregovorov na vysshem urovne’ (Press conference, Moscow, Russia, 17 February 2010), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/6897>.

Even before the escalation of the conflict, Putin also stressed the centuries old relationship with the Georgian people in an interview with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, after he had been asked if he wanted to destroy Georgia economically due to its pro-American course. “No, of course not,” was Putin’s answer: “It is the choice of Georgian people. And we always respect that choice, because we have certain centuries-old relationships with that people. Georgia had asked to become a part of Russian Empire in its time. It was their wish.”¹⁷² After the escalation of the conflict, Putin made similar statements. Speaking about domestic territorial divisions, Putin emphasizes that there was no such division in the Russian Empire and Georgia did not even exist at the time.¹⁷³ And in the end of 2013, when Putin was asked if he would defend the interests of Russians on Crimea, just like he had done for the interests of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Putin noted that these situations cannot be compared: the breakaway provinces of Georgia wanted to remain a part of Russia after the collapse of the Russian Empire, instead of Georgia.¹⁷⁴ What stands out here, is that we can see specifically how Putin already used history as a shield to obfuscate his hard power interests and provide a legitimization for the operation – both beforehand and afterwards.

Domestic reforms and fending off critique

Characteristic of his presidency, is that Medvedev instrumentalised imperial Russian history not only in the realm of international relations (as described above), but also to fend off critique and justify domestic policy choices. And what sets him apart from Putin, is that Medvedev has done so more often than Putin did in his first two terms. One of the reforms that Medvedev justified with imperial Russian history concerns the name of the Russian police force. Since 1917, the police was called “militia” to underline their worker-peasant character according to Medvedev. However, Russia needs professionals, Medvedev argued, so he suggested to reinstate the old name by which they were called in tsarist times (“policija”).¹⁷⁵ Later on in 2012, but now with Putin as president, Putin also saw the necessity to reinstate old names from the Russian Empire – this time around for army regiments. He

¹⁷² Vladimir Putin, Interv’ju germanskoj gazete «Zjuddojche cajtung», *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 10 October 2006, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/23834>.

¹⁷³ Vladimir Putin, ‘Press-konferencija Vladimira Putin’ (Press conference, Moscow, Russia, 20 December 2012), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/17173>.

¹⁷⁴ Vladimir Putin, ‘Press-konferencija Vladimira Putin’ (Press conference, Moscow, Russia, 19 December 2013), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19859>.

¹⁷⁵ Dmitri Medvedev, ‘Vstupitel’ noe slovo na soveshhanii po proektu novogo zakona o milicii’ (Speech, Gorki, Russia, 6 August 2010), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/8588>.

suggested to revive the names of what were the most well-known Russian military units of the past in his eyes, mentioning the Preobrazhensky and Semyonovsky regiments of the Russian Empire as examples.¹⁷⁶ Another reform that was justified with the history of the Russian Empire related to the way in which governors came to power in the Russian regions. Governors used to be elected directly until reforms in 2004, after which they were appointed from above.¹⁷⁷ Medvedev reinstated these elections again in 2012, yet instrumentalised the tsars to justify the decision to abolish the elections in 2004 as well: Medvedev noted how governors should not be occupied with what voters might do in future elections, but rather focus solely on the future of the country: “We do not need regional tsars.”¹⁷⁸ These examples show how Medvedev and Putin used history as arguments for their reforms.

Especially in the first two years of his presidency, Medvedev was frequently criticized about the state of democracy in Russia by foreign journalists. To fend off this critique, Medvedev brought in the history of the Russian Empire. When a CNN journalist posed in 2009 that Russian democracy had gone backwards in terms of press freedom and opposition politics, Medvedev responded by saying that democracy was still young in Russia: “Russia has never had a democratic society until the new country emerged. Democracy never existed in tsarist times or in Soviet times. [It] only existed for 18 years.”¹⁷⁹ A few months later, a Danish journalist asked if Medvedev feared that a fully democratic Russia would lead to separatism, and Medvedev repeated the same answer by mentioning how the Russian state had only been democratic for 20 years of its more than 1000 year existence.¹⁸⁰ And when Polish media asked Medvedev about Russia’s progress in building a state based on the rule of law, Medvedev stressed how he has already made this point many times before: establishing democratic traditions is a difficult process that does not just happen in a matter of years – Russia had never been democratic under the Soviet Union and Russian Empire.¹⁸¹ But despite this lack of democratic traditions, Russia sees its role in the establishment of democracy

¹⁷⁶ Vladimir Putin, ‘Poslanie Prezidenta Federal’nomu Sobraniju’ (Speech, Moscow, Russia, 12 December 2012), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/17118>.

¹⁷⁷ Andrew Roth, ‘Russia: New Law Allows Governors to Be Appointed, Undoing Reform’, *The New York Times*, 3 April 2013, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/03/world/europe/russia-new-law-allows-governors-to-be-appointed-undoing-reform.html>.

¹⁷⁸ Dmitri Medvedev, ‘Vstrecha s predstaviteljami Obshhestvennogo komiteta storonnikov’ (Meeting, Gorki, Russia, 6 February 2012), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/14453>.

¹⁷⁹ Dmitri Medvedev, Interv’ju telekompanii «Si-Jen-Jen», CNN, 20 September 2009, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/5516>.

¹⁸⁰ Dmitri Medvedev, Interv’ju datskoj radioveshhatel’noj korporaciji, DR (Danish Broadcasting Corporation), 26 April 2010, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/7559>.

¹⁸¹ Dmitri Medvedev, Interv’ju pol’skim sredstvami massovoj informacii, Polish media, 6 December 2010, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/9707>.

around the world as very important, according to Medvedev: precisely because Russia has never been democratic and there was no democracy when the country was ruled by tsars and emperors.¹⁸² These statements by Medvedev are a continuation of the strategy that was set out by Putin in the years before him: acknowledging that the state of democracy is indeed not ideal in Russia, without taking responsibility: the Soviet Union and Russian Empire were never democratic, so do not expect Russia to transform so quickly.

Another theme of critique that Medvedev combatted with imperial Russian history was corruption. Medvedev had made the fight against corruption one of the central themes of his presidency and already devoted one of his first meetings as president to this topic.¹⁸³ Throughout his presidency, Medvedev used imperial Russian history to justify the existence of corruption in Russia and how hard it was to change this situation, but also to show how he nevertheless took unprecedented measures to do something about it. In an interview with *Novaya Gazeta* in 2009, for example, he stressed how good it was that for the first time in Russian history, all top officials now needed to share their income and the income of their family members, which neither happened under the tsars nor under the Soviets.¹⁸⁴ And in the years that followed, Medvedev argued that corruption is such an age-old problem for Russia that it cannot be solved with simple steps: it is institutionalised now and already flourished in the Russian Empire.¹⁸⁵ With this combination of comments, Medvedev tries to show that he is solving a problem that he inherited from a long time ago. Putin took over this line of defence when he returned to the presidency in 2012. At one of his yearly press conferences, he shared an anecdote of a conversation between tsar Peter the Great and his prosecutor general: “When [the prosecutor] brought up cases of theft, Peter the Great suggested that people be sent to Siberia or executed for even small crimes. To which the prosecutor general

¹⁸² Dmitri Medvedev, ‘Vstrecha s vedushhimi rossijskimi i zarubezhnymi politologami’ (Meeting, Yaroslav, Russia, 10 September 2010), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/8882>.

¹⁸³ Clifford Levy, ‘Medvedev Starts Fight against Rampant Corruption’, *The New York Times*, 31 July 2008, sec. Business, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/31/business/worldbusiness/31iht-ruble.4.14922245.html>; BBC News Russkaja sluzhba, ‘Medvedev i korrupcija: Rospil, deklaracii i SMI’, *BBC News Russkaja sluzhba*, 22 March 2012, https://www.bbc.com/russian/business/2012/03/120322_big_gvt_corruption.

¹⁸⁴ Dmitri Medvedev, Interv’ju «Novoj gazete», *Novaja Gazeta*, 13 April 2009, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/3761>.

¹⁸⁵ Dmitri Medvedev, Interv’ju shvejcarskim SMI, 18 September 2009, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/5505>; Dmitri Medvedev, Interv’ju nemeckomu zhurnalu «Shpigel’», *Spiegel*, 7 November 2009, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/5929>; Dmitri Medvedev, ‘Stenograficheskij otchjot o zasedanii Soveta po sodejstviju razvitiju institutov grazhdanskogo obshhestva i pravam cheloveka’ (Speech, Moscow, Russia, 23 November 2009), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/6074>; Dmitri Medvedev, Interv’ju telekanalu «Blumberg TV», *Bloomberg TV*, 27 January 2011, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/10165>.

replied: Who will you stay with, tsar? We are all thieves.”¹⁸⁶ Similar to what we can observe in how Medvedev and Putin have dealt with critique on Russian democracy, the presidents use history to show how corruption is an age-old problem that stems from long before their governance.

A third line of critique to which Medvedev (who has a background as a lawyer) responds with the history of the Russian Empire, concerns the Russian legal system. Similar to corruption, Medvedev frequently argued that the low trust of people in this institution is institutionalised and stemmed from the time of the tsars. “Russia is sick with disregard for the law,” Medvedev said in an interview with Russian journalists in 2010: “This was the way our society was organised, that there was never much faith in the law and in the courts. On the contrary, there was only faith in what: in a good tsar and in power.”¹⁸⁷ And when Medvedev reflected upon the results of a survey, in which 80 per cent of the Russian respondents did not believe in the fairness of court decisions, Medvedev again stressed that this had been the case for centuries and that people only trusted in a good tsar - not in courts or state institutions.¹⁸⁸ So, Medvedev noted in an interview with *Bloomberg TV* in 2011, it was necessary to foster respect for the court, as the judicial system developed poorly in the Russian Empire.¹⁸⁹ These references to a “good tsar” reflect upon the old idea in the Russian Empire that the tsar is a virtuous ruler and above suspicion: his ministers and advisers are to blame for poor governance. Interesting enough, however, Medvedev also praised the same Russian legal system in the same years on different occasions. Speaking about the upcoming 1150th anniversary of Russian statehood, Medvedev noted how the Code of Laws of the Russian Empire created a more advanced legal system that continued to develop in the centuries that followed and ensured Russian legal development.¹⁹⁰ And when he met in 2009 with Constitutional Court judges, Medvedev noted how the courts of the Russian Empire had such an elaborate section on punishment, which, although it should not cause much joy, did give

¹⁸⁶ Putin, ‘Press-konferencija Vladimira Putin’, 20 December 2012.

¹⁸⁷ Dmitri Medvedev, ‘Itogi goda s Prezidentom Rossii’ (Speech, Moscow, Russia, 24 December 2010), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/9888>.

¹⁸⁸ Dmitri Medvedev, ‘Stenograficheskiy otchjot o vstreche s chlenami Obshestvennoj palaty Rossijskoj Federacii’ (Speech, Moscow, Russia, 20 January 2011), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/deliberations/10106>.

¹⁸⁹ Medvedev, Interv’ju telekanalu «Blumberg TV».

¹⁹⁰ Dmitri Medvedev, ‘Zasedanie po voprosu podgotovki k prazdnovaniju 1150-letija zarozhdenija rossijskoj gosudarstvennosti’ (Speech, Vladimir, Russia, 22 July 2011), <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/12075>.

the court the tools to exert influence.¹⁹¹ Why does Medvedev use history to justify the low trust of society in the Russian judiciary, while he praises the same judiciary as well? This combination of strategies allows Medvedev to acknowledge the problems at hand (and thus show that he is still in touch with society), while simultaneously exonerating himself and encouraging improvement.

Celebrating imperial anniversaries

The year in which Putin and Medvedev switched their roles on the tandem was one filled with anniversaries of noteworthy dates from the past. Because of all these jubilee, the year 2012 was declared to be the *Year of Russian History*. In this year, a variety of anniversaries of events from the time of the Russian Empire were celebrated. Russia commemorated how it was 1150 years ago that Russian statehood was born, how it was the 400th anniversary of the end of the Time of Troubles, and how Napoleon was defeated in 1812 during the Patriotic War. And in 2011, the 150th anniversary of the abolition of serfdom was celebrated as well. And throughout the years of their presidencies, Medvedev and Putin made plenty of references to the tsars as well, as can be seen in Figure 3 and Figure 4.

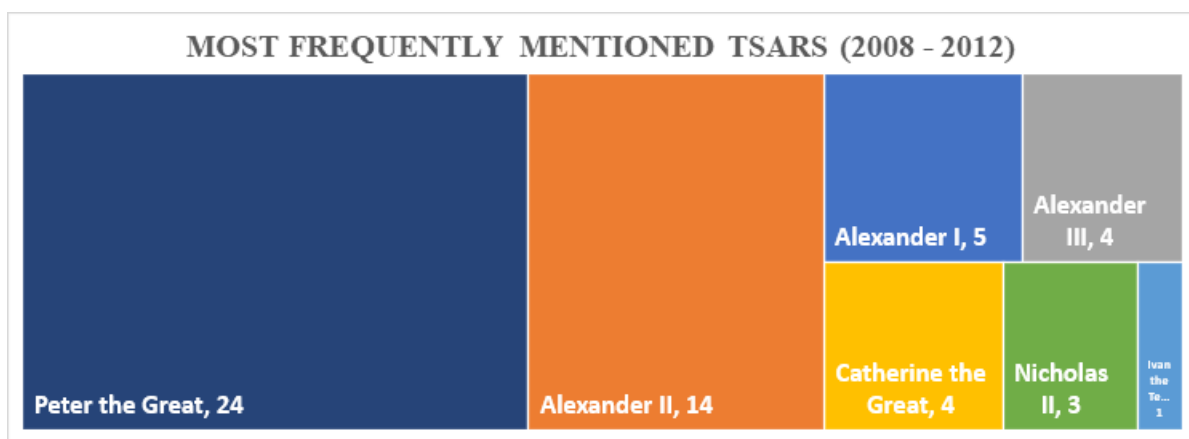


Figure 3 Treemap of Medvedev's references to the tsars between May 2008 and May 2012

¹⁹¹ Dmitri Medvedev, 'Vstrecha s sud'jami Konstitucionnogo Suda' (Meeting, Barvikha, Russia, 11 December 2009), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/6311>.



Figure 4 Treemap of Putin's references to the tsars between May 2012 and March 2014

What these celebrations have in common, is that they are all examples of when the Russian people came together – at least in the narrative of Medvedev and Putin. For example, at the fourth celebration of *National Unity Day* in 2008, Medvedev already explained how the origins of this holiday go back to “the old days of our glorious history” in 1612, as people from different nationalities and faiths united to save Russian statehood.¹⁹² When Medvedev met with historians in preparation for celebrating the 1150th anniversary of the birth of Russian statehood in 2011, he noted that these celebrations were a conscious choice, just like Alexander II celebrated the anniversary of Russian statehood in the 19th century intentionally as well. “This is always a consequence of certain social challenges faced by the country, the state, the rulers of the state at any given time in history when consolidation has to be pursued,” Medvedev said.¹⁹³ And in the *Year of Russian History*, Putin also noted how the weakness of the Russian state ended together with the end of the Time of Troubles, because the Russian people saved Russian independence, its historical perspective and cultural and spiritual identity.¹⁹⁴ Exactly one year later, Putin dwelled on the Time of Troubles on *National Unity Day* as well, reminding the Russian audience that we must remember and realize the “abyss of destruction” and victims that “disregard for national interests, forgetting the moral foundations and our own identity” can result into.¹⁹⁵ What is striking, is that these

¹⁹² Dmitri Medvedev, ‘Vystuplenie na torzhestvennom prijome, posvjashhjonnom Dnju narodnogo edinstva’ (Speech, Moscow, Russia, 4 November 2008), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/1966>.

¹⁹³ Dmitri Medvedev, ‘Vstrecha s uchjonymi-istorikami’ (Meeting, Vladimir, Russia, 22 July 2011), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/12073>.

¹⁹⁴ Vladimir Putin, ‘Prijom po sluchaju Dnja narodnogo edinstva’ (Speech, Moscow, Russia, 4 November 2012), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/16752>.

¹⁹⁵ Vladimir Putin, ‘Torzhestvennyj prijom po sluchaju Dnja narodnogo edinstva’ (Speech, Moscow, Russia, 4 November 2013), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19562>.

anniversaries of events from imperial times, which all function to stress the unity of the Russian people in contemporary times, were celebrated up at a time of rising unrest in Russian society.

Condemning political chaos in the past

The last two years of Medvedev's presidency and the beginning of Putin's third term (2011 - 2013), in which the government reached back to anniversaries from imperial history, were arguably a time when consolidation of the country through celebrations would be welcomed in the Kremlin. After the parliamentary elections of December 2011, large scale demonstrations emerged in Moscow to protest against alleged election fraud. A few thousand Russians went to the streets, chanting phrases such as "Russia without Putin!" and "Putin is a thief" to express their discontent with the government and its leadership.¹⁹⁶ Two months earlier, Medvedev had announced that he would switch positions with Putin, making it likely that Putin would continue to govern the country for at least one more term as president.¹⁹⁷ Although the Russian authorities attempted to crack down on the emerging protests in the beginning of December, these demonstrations spread to other cities such as Saint Petersburg and Tomsk as well, and became larger and larger – culminating in tens of thousands of protestors in Moscow on the 10th of December 2011.¹⁹⁸ Many of these demonstrators were wearing white attributes, such as flowers and ribbons, which became a symbol of the protests.¹⁹⁹ After five days, prime minister Putin was asked in his annual press conference if these white ribbons could be a sign of a new colour revolution (the name for some earlier protest movements in other post-Soviet states). In response, Putin compared the white ribbon to contraceptives, saying that he thought the protestors were fighting AIDS,²⁰⁰ and argued that

¹⁹⁶ Michael Schwartz and David M. Herszenhorn, 'Voters Watch Polls in Russia, and Fraud Is What They See', *The New York Times*, 5 December 2011, sec. World,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/06/world/europe/russian-parliamentary-elections-criticized-by-west.html>.

¹⁹⁷ Ellen Barry, 'Putin Once More Moves to Assume Top Job in Russia', *The New York Times*, 24 September 2011, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/25/world/europe/medvedev-says-putin-will-see-russian-presidency-in-2012.html>.

¹⁹⁸ Ellen Barry, 'Russia Cracks Down on Antigovernment Protests', *The New York Times*, 6 December 2011, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/07/world/europe/jailing-opposition-leaders-russia-moves-to-quell-election-protests.html>; Ellen Barry, 'Rally Defying Putin's Party Draws Tens of Thousands', *The New York Times*, 10 December 2011, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/11/world/europe/thousands-protest-in-moscow-russia-in-defiance-of-putin.html>.

¹⁹⁹ The New York Times, 'Russian Protests', *The New York Times*, 10 December 2011, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2011/12/10/world/europe/20111211-RUSSIA.html>.

²⁰⁰ 'Putin pro belye lentochki kak simvol «cvetnoj revoljucii»: pohozi na kontracetyvy', *Gazeta.ru*, 15 December 2011, https://www.gazeta.ru/news/lenta/2011/12/15/n_2135786.shtml.

these colour revolutions are a foreign scheme to destabilize countries.²⁰¹ Although Putin does not yet invoke imperial history in this statement, it is important to notice here how he uses polarization as a modality: he blames outsiders (foreigners) for the demonstrations.

When Putin, now president again, was asked about this statement again a few months later at the *Seliger Youth Forum* in July 2012, he clarified that he was simply offended by people using foreign technologies (colour revolutions). He then quickly noted that while many demonstrators are patriotic, there are also anarchists out there, and very closely related to this, are the people who want to see their country defeated in times of difficulty.²⁰² This is the point where Putin starts to invoke imperial history to denounce such treachery, which is a significant development, just like his reference to patriotism is. While I cannot prove that there is a direct causal link here, it is striking that Putin starts to use this modality after the large scale protests of 2011 emerged in Russia. Putin continued his answer to the question at the *Selinger* forum by explaining how after the Russian defeat in Tsushima (1905), some Russian public figures congratulated the Japanese emperor, and the Bolsheviks wished that Russia would lose World War I and contributed to reaching this result.²⁰³ A year later, when Putin was asked in an interview with *Associated Press* and *Pervij Kanal* if Russian elites were loyal to the state, Putin answered that this issue goes beyond just elites: “there are always some bacilli in society that are destroying this social organism or the state organism”²⁰⁴ – even Pushkin acknowledged that there are people in Russia that are not just against the state, they are against Russia, according to Putin.²⁰⁵ By making these statements, Putin polarizes and securitizes the issue of demonstrations in Russia. He divides society into loyal patriots at the one hand, and the *others* who form a threat to Russia as dangerous

²⁰¹ Luke Harding, ‘Vladimir Putin Question and Answer Session in Russia - Thursday 15 December 2011’, *The Guardian*, 15 December 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/blog/2011/dec/15/vladimir-putin-question-and-answer-session-in-russia-live>.

²⁰² Vladimir Putin, ‘Vstrecha s uchastnikami foruma «Seliger-2012»’ (Meeting, Seliger, Russia, 31 July 2012), 2012, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/16106>.

²⁰³ Putin, ‘Vstrecha s uchastnikami foruma «Seliger-2012»’.

²⁰⁴ It is remarkable that Putin refers to disloyal people here as “bacilli”, considering that Adolf Hitler used this word as well as a metaphor for the Jews. Although this falls slightly beyond the scope of this thesis, it is worth noting that this might not be a coincidence. Anders Åslund analysed the similarities between Nazi public advocacy in 1938-39 and a speech by Putin after the annexation of Crimea: “It almost appears as if Putin and his aides have studied the Nazi record carefully and decided to repeat its successes.” See: Åslund, ‘Explicating Putin’s Rhetoric: 12 Ways It Resembles Germany in the 1930s’, Peterson Institute for International Economics, *RealTime Economic Issues Watch* (blog), 19 March 2014, <https://www.piie.com/blogs/realtime-economic-issues-watch/explicating-putins-rhetoric-12-ways-it-resembles-germany-1930s>.

²⁰⁵ Vladimir Putin, Interv’ju Pervomu kanalu i agentstvu Assoshijeted Press, *Associated Press*, 4 September 2013, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19143>.

traitors. These traitors are the referent subject against which the motherland, the referent object, needs to be protected.²⁰⁶

Negative events in Russian (imperial) history such as the ones mentioned above were denounced by Putin on various occasions, both as prime minister and president. He did so especially when it concerned the collapse of state power. About a month between the news that Putin admired a third presidential term and the large demonstrations of 2011, for example, Putin already referred to the “very grave moments in our history when the supreme power abdicated, abandoned its authority and responsibility for the situation in the country: the Tsar resigned, and immediately these terrible, bloody events started” in a meeting with pensioners and veterans.²⁰⁷ And in the aforementioned interview with *Associated Press* and *Pervij Kanal* in 2013, in which Putin talked about the bacilli in society, the *Pervij* interviewer argued that the Russian Empire (and Soviet Union) collapsed to a large extent due to disloyalty of the elites. In response, Putin acknowledged that “maybe there is such a peculiar problem” regarding the (dis)loyalty of elites, and stated later in his answer:

There is no doubt that the loss of state identity during the collapse of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union was disastrous and destructive. We must understand this beforehand, and not allow the state to go to the point where it found itself at the end of World War I (...). We should all understand that as soon as revolutionary - not evolutionary, but revolutionary - changes begin, it can get worse, and a lot worse. And I believe that intellectuals should be the first to understand this. And it is precisely the intelligentsia that, realizing this, should warn against sudden movements and revolutions of various kinds and sorts. We have had enough, we have had so many revolutions and wars, we need decades of calm, rhythmic development.²⁰⁸

This quote is symbolic for Putin’s instrumentalization of history after the demonstrations of 2011. Through such statements, Putin stressed the importance of stability and the perils of

²⁰⁶ Securitization theory identifies security issues by looking at speech acts. Securitization occurs when an actor declares that a “referent subject” poses an urgent danger for the survival of a “referent object” and tries to convince an audience that extraordinary measures are justified because of this. For more on securitization, see: Columba Peoples and Nick Vaughan-Williams, *Critical Security Studies: An Introduction*, 3rd edition (Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2021); Beatrice de Graaf and Cornel Zwielerlein, ‘Historicizing Security - Entering the Conspiracy Dispositive’, *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung* 38, no. 1 (143) (2013): 46–64.

²⁰⁷ Dmitri Medvedev, ‘Vstrecha s pensionerami i veteranami’ (Meeting, Moscow, Russia, 17 November 2011), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/13555>.

²⁰⁸ Putin, Interv’ju Pervomu kanalu i agentstvu Assoshijetd Press.

revolutions. His underlying message seemed to be that demonstrations are dangerous: it is better to have a stable government than the chaos that might follow when power collapses.

Patriotism and military glory in a multi ethnic and multi religious state

In the analysis above, Putin repeatedly referred to the loss of state identity after the fall of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union. What is Russian identity according to the Medvedev-Putin tandem in this period? In speeches that moulded Russian identity, patriotism formed an important element. According to Putin, Russians have stopped with encouraging patriotism altogether: while representatives of Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism engaged with patriotism in the Russian Empire, the state no longer supports them nowadays in their effort.²⁰⁹ Putin, however, did make an effort to stress the importance of patriotism. When he presented state awards in the Catherine Hall of the Grand Kremlin Palace in 2012, he explained that true patriotism should be understood “as a civic responsibility and desire to devote your talent to Russia and your fellow citizens, as a readiness to always be with your motherland: both in moments of triumph and in times of trial and hardship”.²¹⁰ Examples of these are the heroic events that put an end to the Time of Troubles in 1612 and the Patriotic War of 1812 – events that should be treated with respect and the names of the Russian heroes should be cherished, Putin continued to argue at the ceremony. There, Putin also reintroduced the Order of St. Catherine from the Russian Empire.²¹¹ And when Putin met with the Russian Military Historical Society at their founding congress in 2013, he stressed how important their patriotic education for young Russians was: they continued the tradition of the Imperial Russian Military Society (1907 – 1917) by preserving Russia’s national memory.²¹² These occasions are examples of how Putin is putting patriotism at the heart of Russian identity.

Closely linked to patriotism is military glory, at least in the rhetoric of the Kremlin. On frequent occasions, both Medvedev and Putin have praised (imperial) Russian military successes of the past – making it a part of what constitutes the Russian identity. When Medvedev congratulated schoolchildren with the beginning of the new year on Knowledge

²⁰⁹ Vladimir Putin, ‘Vstrecha s predstaviteljami obshhestvennosti po voprosam patrioticheskogo vospitaniya molodjozhi’ (Meeting, Krasnodar, Russia, 12 September 2012), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/16470>.

²¹⁰ Vladimir Putin, ‘V Kremle vrucheny gosudarstvennyye nagrady’ (Speech, Moscow, Russia, 29 August 2012), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/16316>.

²¹¹ *Putin*.

²¹² Vladimir Putin, ‘Vstrecha s uchastnikami uchreditel’nogo s"ezda Rossijskogo voenno-istoricheskogo obshhestva’ (Meeting, Novo-Ogaryovo, Russia, 14 March 2013), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/17677>.

Day, he shared the story of how the Georgian Prince Bagration and German Barclay de Tolly heroically fought Napoleon in 1812 – an example of how people with different nationalities united to save Russia. “Russia has honourably passed the toughest tests and has more than once saved the world from enslavement. It came to the aid of peoples whose very existence was threatened,” Medvedev said.²¹³ This was also about a year after the war with Georgia and Russia had recognized Abkhazia and South-Ossetia. And at the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Borodino in 2012, Putin made clear that while the Russian army had to temporarily retreat in this battle, the war against Napoleon turned into a true “people’s war” here: “It became clear that the invaders could no longer defeat the Russians. Here, the fate of Europe and the future of its peoples was decided.”²¹⁴ Later in 2012, Putin wondered if it was fair that there was still no worthy monument for the heroes of World War I. This war had been erased from (historical) memory according to Putin, while “the fighting spirit of the Armed Forces is based on traditions, on the living link to history, on the examples of the courage and sacrifice of heroes.”²¹⁵ Three months later, Putin clarified that Russia did not even lose World War I: it rather simply declared itself defeated and withdrew, shortly before Germany surrendered.²¹⁶ Such statements by both Medvedev and Putin create the metaphorical image of Russia as a glorious hero: Russians are heroic people who have fought not just for themselves, but for the freedom of others – willing to make a great sacrifice for it.

This military glory of (imperial) Russia was further solidified in contemporary Russian identity by Medvedev over the course of his presidency. He did so by awarding “City of Military Glory” titles to more than a dozen Russian cities. These cities of military glory have performed heroic deeds since the time of the Russian Empire, and deserved admiration for this. Kronstadt, for example, was founded by Peter the Great and became a city of maritime glory by repelling attacks and being the base from where the major naval victories of the 18th century were won.²¹⁷ And Volokolamsk, Bryansk, Nalchik, Vyborg and Kalach-on-Don took heroic blows from the enemy on various occasions: from the Time of Troubles

²¹³ Dmitri Medvedev, ‘Obrashhenie k shkol’nikam’, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/5317>.

²¹⁴ Vladimir Putin, ‘Torzhestva po sluchaju 200-letija Borodinskogo srazhenija’ (Speech, Borodino, Russia, 2 September 2012), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/16346>.

²¹⁵ Putin, ‘Poslanie Prezidenta Federal’nomu Sobraniju’.

²¹⁶ Putin, ‘Vstrecha s uchastnikami uchreditel’nogo s’ezda Rossijskogo voenno-istoricheskogo obshhestva’.

²¹⁷ Dmitri Medvedev, ‘Ceremonija vruchenija gramot o prisvoenii zvanija «Gorod voinskoj slavy» Vjaz’me, Kronshtadu i Naro-Fominsku’ (Speech, Moscow, Russia, 8 May 2009), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/4006>.

to the Great Northern War, and the Patriotic War of 1812.²¹⁸ Such titles have solidified the importance of the armed forces and military glory in Russian identity.

The third important element that constitutes contemporary Russian identity in this time period, is the multi ethnic and multi religious nature of Russia. Both Medvedev and Putin have repeatedly stressed the importance and imperial nature of this in their speeches from 2009 to 2013. This was in line with the celebration of the new *National Unity Day* (which came into being during Putin's second presidential term). In 2009, for example, Medvedev stressed how Buddhism is recognized as an official traditional religion and that Russia is the only European country that does so. "Today, original Buddhist culture is an integral and very valuable part of all-Russian historical and cultural heritage," Medvedev said.²¹⁹ Putin emphasized this exact same message about Buddhism in 2013,²²⁰ and repeated it in relation to Islam as well:

In fact, Islam was officially recognised at the state level as one of the traditional religions of Russia. Russia, the majority of whose population were Orthodox Christians, had set an example of tolerance and wisdom for the world at that time, and for Europe. This decision was dictated by our entire national history, which had never known religious wars or conflicts. It was dictated by our experience of building a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional state as a unique civilization linking East and West, Asia and Europe.²²¹

In 2011, Medvedev noted that 134 ethnicities and 30 religions can be found in Saint Petersburg, which was predetermined by Peter the Great when he created a new capital.²²² And at a meeting in preparation for the 1150th anniversary of Russian statehood, Medvedev stressed that Russian statehood developed on a unified and multinational basis – making the Russian Empire and Russian Federation so unique.²²³ Here in these statements, we can see how Medvedev and Putin indirectly emphasize that Russians have different nationalities,

²¹⁸ Dmitri Medvedev, 'Vrucheny gramoty o prisvoenii zvanija «Gorod voinskoj slavy»' (Meeting, Moscow, Russia, 22 July 2011), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/11666>.

²¹⁹ Dmitri Medvedev, 'Nachalo vstrechi s rossijskimi buddistami' (Meeting, Verkhnyaya Ivolga, Russia, 24 August 2009), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/5267>.

²²⁰ Vladimir Putin, 'Vstupitel'noe Slovo Na Vstreche s Lamami Buddijskoj Tradicionnoj Sanghi Rossii' (Meeting, Upper Ivolga, Russia, 11 April 2013), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/17875>.

²²¹ Vladimir Putin, 'Vystuplenie na torzhestvennom sobranii, posvjashhjonnom 225-letiju Central'nogo duhovnogo upravlenija musul'man Rossii' (Speech, Ufa, Russia, 22 October 2013), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/19473>.

²²² Dmitri Medvedev, 'Zasedanie prezidiuma Gossoveta o merah po ukrepleniju mezhnacional'nogo soglasija' (Speech, Ufa, Russia, 11 February 2011), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/10312>.

²²³ Medvedev, 'Zasedanie po voprosu podgotovki'.

ethnicities and religions. And they do not even have to live in the Russian Federation. In a meeting with Russian diplomats in 2012, Putin explained how he wanted to rethink the role of “compatriots” abroad as many of them felt the wish to support their “historic homeland”.²²⁴ Putin wished to grant them citizenship, and follows up on this idea. A few months later, Putin announced in his yearly speech to the Russian parliament that Russia would be “granting Russian citizenship to our compatriots: people who speak the Russian language and understand Russian culture and are direct descendants of people born both in the Russian Empire and in the Soviet Union”.²²⁵ The way in which Medvedev and Putin have stressed and shaped Russian identity in the examples above, based on history, is a key development in this period. According to them, Russians have multiple ethnicities, multiple nationalities, multiple religions, and can be anyone who (or who’s ancestors) lived in the Soviet Union or Russian Empire. This definition of Russianness means that the Kremlin considers a wide range of people to be Russian, even if they live outside of the borders of the contemporary Russian Federation. And as such, the Russian sphere of influence stretches to where these people live as well. Later, this definition of Russianness provided one of the key legitimations for the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, which will be covered in the next chapter.

History becomes a validation tool

The presidency of Medvedev has been a turning point in the instrumentalization of history. From the war with Georgia (2008) onwards, imperial history starts to be seriously used as a validation tool for foreign and domestic Russian policy. This has particularly been the case in the years of Medvedev’s presidency (2008 – 2012), as we can observe in Figure 5:

²²⁴ Vladimir Putin, ‘Soveshhanie poslov i postojannyh predstavitelej Rossii’ (Speech, Moscow, Russia, 9 July 2012), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/15902>.

²²⁵ Putin, ‘Poslanie Prezidenta Federal’nomu Sobraniju’.

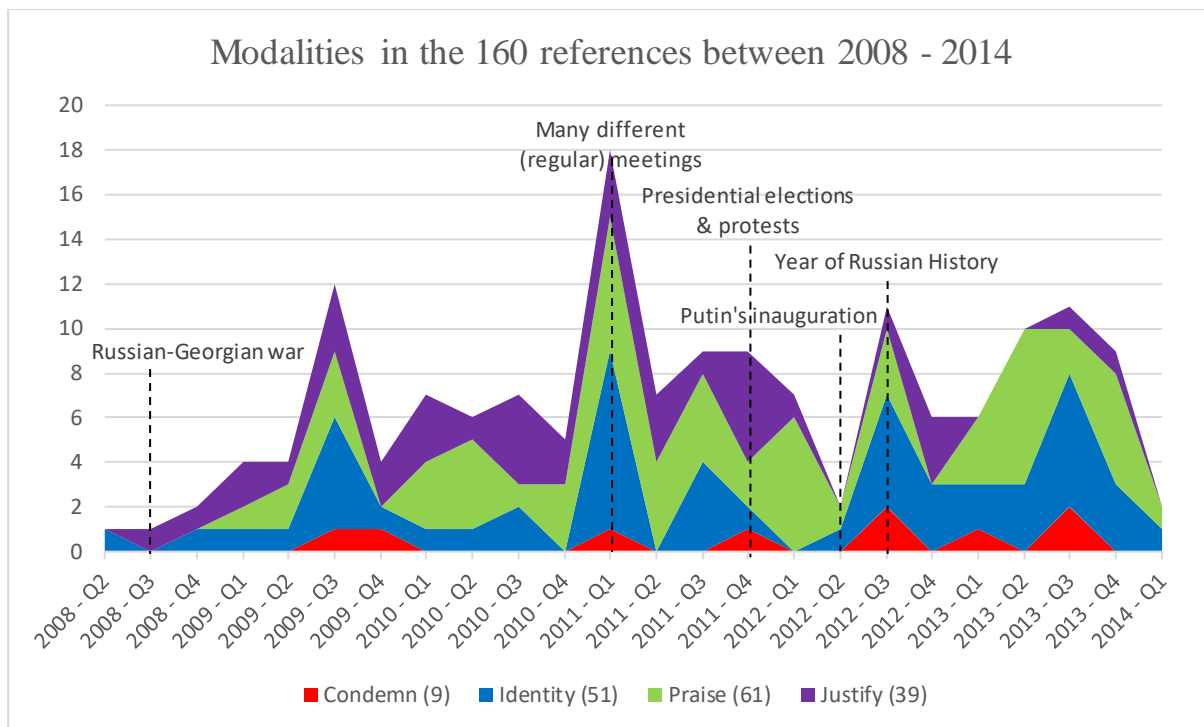


Figure 5 Stacked area chart of the modalities Medvedev (2008 Q2 – 2012 Q2) and Putin (2012 Q2 – 2014 Q1) instrumentalised between May 2008 and March 2014, combined with key events in this period.

The noticeable purple areas in these years are moments when Medvedev employed this modality. His justification made up about a quarter of all the references (24 per cent) in total. First, Medvedev appealed to the close Russian ties with the Georgian, Abkhazian, and South Ossetian people to validate Russian involvement in their conflict. By repeatedly emphasizing how Georgia and its breakaway republics were part of the Russian Empire, how Georgia did not even exist as a state before, as well as that Abkhazia and South Ossetia wished to remain part of Russia when the Empire collapsed, Medvedev created arguments for supporting the separatists. Similarly, Putin had mentioned the special Russian relationship with the region as well – both before and after the conflict escalated. Second, Medvedev used history for domestic reforms: he reinstated the name of the police from imperial times and utilized it to explain why elections for regional governors had been abolished before. Third, Medvedev actively instrumentalised history to fend off critique, which is a continuation of a trend set by Putin. Medvedev did so particularly with democracy, corruption, and the legal system in Russia. When he was critiqued about the state of affairs in these areas, Medvedev defended himself with a line of reasoning that follows the following pattern: *the current situation is a centuries old heritage, it takes time to solve the matters at hand and we are actively doing so*. As suck, Medvedev acknowledged the critique without having to take the blame for it.

In 2012, the Year of Russian History was organized in which different imperial anniversaries were celebrated: Russian statehood (1150th), the end of the Time of Troubles (400th), and the victory over Napoleon (200th). In the rhetoric of the Kremlin, these events were times when the Russian people came together, and as such they are a continuation of the yearly *National Unity Day* that was established in 2008. It is noteworthy that these events were largely celebrated amidst the background of rising civil unrest that culminated in the large protests of 2011. While I do not have evidence for a causal relationship, it is nevertheless important to observe a significant development here. After the protests, when Putin returned to the presidency, he repeatedly emphasized the importance of unity and denounce the political chaos in Russian history. With historic examples (see the red spikes in Figure 5), Putin denounced the loss of identity after the collapse of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. His underlying message seemed to be that non-systemic demonstrations are dangerous: it is better to have a stable government and change it from within the system, than to risk the chaos that followed after the collapse of state power in the past. Here, history is one of the key instruments for Putin to protect his power base.

Throughout the presidencies of Medvedev and Putin, shaping Russian identity with positive examples from the past were highly dominant modalities. As the presidents made 112 of such references, these modalities made up 70 per cent of the total. In this period, Russian identity was all about (1) patriotism, (2) the military glory of past victories and contemporary cities, (3) the multi ethnic and multi religious nature of Russia, and (4) how Russians can live outside of contemporary Russian borders as well. Especially these last two elements are very significant for the events that follow in the next chapter. As Russians can be anyone who(‘s ancestors) lived in the Soviet Union or Russian Empire, this definition of Russian identity means that the Kremlin considers a wide range of people to be Russian, regardless of state borders, ethnicity, or religion. As such, the Russian sphere of influence stretches to where these people are living.

4.

Imperial history as a usable past

2014 – 2021

Putin the applied “historian”

What unsolved mysteries of history would Putin like to find an answer to or unravel? In 2017, at a meeting with pupils in Sochi, one of the children asked Putin this question. Putin, at the heart of a circle surrounded by dozens of teenagers, started to ponder upon this topic:

Mysteries of which history? The history of our origins, of our universe and solar system? (-)
As for our country, what is particularly interesting to me and, hopefully, for you as well, is looking at how our country came out of critical situations and the most difficult of periods. How it got there in the *Time of Troubles* in the first place, and what the internal forces were that pulled the country out of the situation.²²⁶

Even though Putin is not a historian, we can see here how he embraces an applied perspective on history. He is not just interested in reconstructing historical events, he wants to learn from it as a source of inspiration for the present. In line with how Van Wyck Brooks intended his concept of a usable past (albeit in the context of open and free democracies), we can see in this quote how Putin wishes to look into the past to discover tendencies, ask questions on *why* certain situations came to be, as well as *how*.²²⁷ These were among the key principles that Brooks formulated, as outlined in the introduction of this thesis. Putin shared this perspective on history on multiple occasions, although he sees history more as a tool in the consolidation (and expansion) of Russian power, than of support for a democratic rule of law, obviously. For example, when a student talked about his ideas for modern history books with Putin in 2021, in which historical figures pop up to tell their stories after scanning a QR code, Putin noted the value of knowing how people used to live in the past. It is important “to understand what the basis for certain decisions were, what people were guided by when making

²²⁶ Vladimir Putin, ‘Vstrecha s Uchashhimisja Obrazovatel’ nogo Centra «Sirius»’ (Meeting, Sochi, Russia, 21 July 2017), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/55114>.

²²⁷ Brooks, ‘On Creating a Usable Past’.

decisions, what that led to, and what the result was, (-) this will allow us, I repeat, to use all this knowledge of the past to better understand today and make decisions that will affect the future,” Putin said.²²⁸ In this way, history is something that offers guidance for contemporary Russian policy – the Russian president shows his true applied history colours here.

This perception of the past characterises the way in which Putin instrumentalised history during his third and fourth presidency (2014 – 2021). After the annexation of Crimea, Putin has had to deal with a variety of challenges, both domestic and abroad. In this chapter, I will observe how Putin reached out to the history of the Russian Empire to deal with these issues, indicate where he flagrantly misrepresents the past, identify the modalities that he engaged with in the process, and offer explanations for why he has done so.

Krym nash – Crimea is ours

After weeks of unrest throughout Ukraine due to anti-government protests, which led to the ousting of president Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014, the new (EU oriented) course that was set out in Kiev took a different turn in the south of the country.²²⁹ On the 27th of February, anonymous gunmen had seized government buildings overnight in Simferopol, the capital of the Crimean peninsula. They raised the Russian flag and barricaded themselves inside, while a large number of pro-Russia protestors went to the streets chanting “Russia, Russia!” in Russian.²³⁰ The regional parliament of Crimea was now in control of pro-Russian forces and members of the assembly decided that a referendum would be held about independence from Ukraine.²³¹ In the week that followed, mysterious armed men in anonymous green uniforms without insignias appeared at large on the border between mainland Ukraine and Crimea, the Kremlin announced that it would be prepared to annex Crimea, and Russian forces took over Ukrainian military bases on the peninsula.²³² The

²²⁸ Vladimir Putin, ‘Vstrecha so shkol’nikami’ (Meeting, Vladivostok, Russia, 1 September 2021), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66554>.

²²⁹ David M. Herszenhorn, ‘Ukraine Rushes to Shift Power and Mend Rifts’, *The New York Times*, 23 February 2014, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/24/world/europe/ukraine.html>; Andrew Higgins, ‘Ukrainian Protesters See Too Many Familiar Faces in Parliament After Revolution’, *The New York Times*, 24 February 2014, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/25/world/europe/ukraine-parliament.html>.

²³⁰ Andrew Higgins and Steven Erlanger, ‘Gunmen Seize Government Buildings in Crimea’, *The New York Times*, 27 February 2014, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/28/world/europe/crimea-ukraine.html>.

²³¹ Andrew Higgins, ‘Grab for Power in Crimea Raises Secession Threat’, *The New York Times*, 27 February 2014, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/28/world/europe/ukraine-tensions.html>.

²³² Alison Smale, ‘Mystery Men at De Facto Crimean Border Help Fuel Suspicion and Dread’, *The New York Times*, 6 March 2014, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/06/world/europe/mystery-men-at-de-facto-crimea-border-help-fuel-suspicion-and-dread.html>; Steven Lee Myers, David M. Herszenhorn, and Rick

announced referendum on Crimea followed on the 16th of March 2014, in which two choices were offered:

- 1) Are you in favour of the reunification of Crimea with Russia as a subject of the Russian Federation?
- 2) Are you in favour of restoring the constitution of the Republic of Crimea of 1992 and for the status of Crimea as part of Ukraine?²³³

According to officials, 97 per cent of the voters had decided in favour of the first option: (re)joining Russia. Putin rapidly recognized this result and accepted Crimea and Sevastopol as new subjects of the Russian Federation.²³⁴ Neither the referendum nor the annexation were recognized by the United States and the European Union, who imposed sanctions on the Russian economy, and the referendum was internationally condemned as invalid in a resolution of the United Nations General Assembly by majority.²³⁵

This did not withhold Putin from acting, however, who argued that his actions were completely righteous and supported this argument with imperial Russian history. Already on the 4th of March 2014, two weeks before the annexation, Putin justified the possibility of using troops on Ukrainian territory. After a Reuters journalist had asked if this hypothetical scenario would be possible, as it would violate the *Budapest Memorandum* according to people in the West,²³⁶ Putin argued that this would not be a violation. As there had been an armed seizure of power in defiance of the constitution, a “revolution” according to the West,

Gladstone, ‘For First Time, Kremlin Signals It Is Prepared to Annex Crimea’, *The New York Times*, 7 March 2014, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/08/world/europe/ukraine.html>; C. J. Chivers and Noah Sneider, ‘Russia’s Grip Tightens With Shows of Force at Ukrainian Bases’, *The New York Times*, 10 March 2014, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/11/world/europe/ukraine.html>.

²³³ Vladimir Konstantinov, ‘O provedenii obshhekrymskogo referendumu’, 1702-6/14 Akta § (2014), <http://crimea.gov.ru/act/11689>.

²³⁴ Steven Lee Myers and Ellen Barry, ‘Putin Reclaims Crimea for Russia and Bitterly Denounces the West’, *The New York Times*, 18 March 2014, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/19/world/europe/ukraine.html>.

²³⁵ Steven Lee Myers and Neil MacFarquhar, ‘As Sanctions Start, Russia Feels a Sting’, *The New York Times*, 22 March 2014, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/22/world/europe/russia-starts-to-feel-effect-of-sanctions.html>; United Nations, ‘Territorial Integrity of Ukraine : Resolution / Adopted by the General Assembly’, A/RES/68/262 Resolution § (2014), <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/767565>.

²³⁶ As part of the Budapest Memorandum, Ukraine handed over all of its nuclear weapons in 1994, in exchange for which Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States had “reaffirm[ed] their commitment to Ukraine, in accordance with the principles of the CSCE Final Act, to respect the independence and sovereignty and the existing borders of Ukraine” and “reaffirm[ed] their obligation to refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of Ukraine”. See: Leonid D. Kuchma et al., ‘Memorandum on Security Assurances in Connection with Ukraine’s Accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons’, No. 52241 Memorandum § (1994), <https://treaties.un.org/Pages/showDetails.aspx?objid=0800000280401fbb>.

a new country was born, Putin said – just like after the revolution of 1917. “And we have not signed any binding documents with this state and with regard to this state.”²³⁷ Here, we see how Putin draws a parallel between the October Revolution and the Maidan Revolution to support his case. On various occasions, Putin has justified the Russian actions with history, in which the argument tends to go as follows: Crimea had always been an integral part of Russia, but for some incomprehensible reason the Bolsheviks transferred the peninsula and other areas to Ukraine. Putin explained his assertion in-depth on the seventh anniversary of the annexation of Crimea in 2021, in the centre of a crowded *Luzhniki* stadium in Moscow:

If you look at our map, our big map, Crimea and Sevastopol look like a small dot, but we are talking about the restoration of historical justice. We are talking about the importance of this land for our country and our people. Why? It is very simple. Our ancestors have been developing this territory since ancient times. In the 10th century a large part of it was simply incorporated into the Ancient Russian State. Prince Vladimir and his warriors were baptized here in Korsun or Chersonesus. This means that this is a sacred place, the centre of the formation of our spiritual unity. Eventually, this place became the foundation of the Russian nation and a united centralised Russian state. This place is vital to our heart, soul and faith. But there is more to it. Later, in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries these lands fully returned to their lawful owner, the Russian Empire. When foreign hordes invaded our country in 1853–1856, and when it was attacked by Nazi invaders in 1941–1945, every part of this land was soaked in the blood of Russian and Soviet soldiers. Of course, this is a holy land for us, for Russia.²³⁸

Putin paints a picture of Crimea here as if it has continuously been Russian in the past, except for a few short interludes. However, this does not do justice to historical reality. Only when Catherine the Great annexed the Crimean Khanate in the spring of 1783, Crimea became part of (imperial) Russia.²³⁹ Before that, the half-island had been home to different peoples and states. Between the seventh and fifth centuries BC, several Greek city-states had been established on Crimea,²⁴⁰ and in the time of the Huns, “predominantly Germanic Gothic

²³⁷ Vladimir Putin, ‘Vladimir Putin otvetil na voprosy zhurnalistov o situacii na Ukraine’ (Speech, Novo-Ogaryovo, Russia, 4 March 2014), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20366>.

²³⁸ Vladimir Putin, ‘Koncert v chest’ godovshhiny vossoedinenija Kryma s Rossiej’ (Speech, Moscow, Russia, 18 March 2021), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/65174>.

²³⁹ Kelly Ann O’Neill, *Claiming Crimea: A History of Catherine the Great’s Southern Empire*, 2018, 1, <https://doi.org/10.12987/yale/9780300218299.001.0001>.

²⁴⁰ Pavel Markovich Dolukhanov, *The Early Slavs: Eastern Europe from the Initial Settlement to the Kievan Rus* (London: Longman, 1996), 131.

entities retained their position in the Crimea”.²⁴¹ Even Chersonesus – the Crimean town where Vladimir the Great was baptised (the spiritual roots of the Russians and Ukrainians for Putin) – was in Byzantine possession at the time of his baptizing.²⁴² During the almost three hundred years before the annexation of Crimea by Catherine the Great, the people on the peninsula (“inhabited by Tatars, Greeks, Armenians, Karaites, and Roma, supported by a mixed economy, and ruled by a dynasty that grounded its legitimacy in its descent from Chingis Khan”) had been Ottoman vassals.²⁴³ Finally, in the time of Kievan Rus’, there was no historical sense of a great Russia: Rus’ “remained a loose confederation of regional arenas of power with strong separatist trends. (-) Towns, which emerged as both administrative and craft-and-trade centres, remained basically local market-places”.²⁴⁴ So, Putin is projecting his present-day ideals on history here, which could even be interpreted as falsification of history.

With this story about the historical bond between Russia and Crimea, Putin uses imperial Russian history to invoke two modalities at once. He (1) distinguishes Russian identity by noting how the historical events on Crimea were the foundation for the contemporary spiritual and national unity of Russia, and (2) justifies why Crimea is thus so important for Russia and how it had already belonged to Russia in the past. This explains why Putin consistently speaks of a reunification with Crimea instead of an annexation – despite that this is incorrect. Unsurprisingly, Ukrainians do not agree with Putin. In a survey in August 2021, the majority of Ukrainians (61 per cent) expressed that Crimea should be part of Ukraine, while only a small minority (7 per cent) believed it should be Russian.²⁴⁵

From 2018 onwards, this unity between Russia and Crimea went beyond rhetoric and laws as it became physical as well; in the form of the Crimean Bridge. This bridge over the Kerch Strait directly connected the peninsula with mainland Russia. While it was only constructed recently, Putin made sure to stress on multiple occasions how it was already planned in the Russian Empire under tsar Nicholas II. Putin shared this story at a construction

²⁴¹ Dolukhanov, 160.

²⁴² Dolukhanov, 196.

²⁴³ O’Neill, *Claiming Crimea*, 1–2.

²⁴⁴ Dolukhanov, *The Early Slavs*, 197.

²⁴⁵ Democratic Initiatives Foundation, ‘What Ukrainians Think about Future of Crimea’, Opinion poll (Democratic Initiatives Foundation, 23 August 2021), <https://dif.org.ua/en/article/what-ukrainians-think-about-future-of-crimea>.

meeting in 2016,²⁴⁶ in an interview with a French newspaper in 2017,²⁴⁷ at an inspection before completion in 2018,²⁴⁸ and finally at the opening of the bridge as well – after Putin drove himself across the Crimean Bridge to inaugurate it.²⁴⁹ And when rail traffic started to function on the bridge as well in 2019, Putin said that the historic connection between Saint Petersburg and Sevastopol was now restored, after it was established 145 years ago, “albeit via a different, but reliable, strong route”.²⁵⁰ By making these references to the history of the Russian Empire when talking about the Crimean Bridge, Putin further supports his argument that Crimea has always belonged to Russia and that it is rightful to incorporate it.

In 2016, a German journalist asked Putin about this Russian righteousness. If there was no violation of international law in Crimea, as Putin claimed, then how could he explain to Russians that the West imposed sanctions, from which they were now suffering? Putin replied that “the Russian people feel in their hearts and understand in their minds very well what is happening”, and then refers to the words of an imperial figure to strengthen this argument: “Napoleon once said that justice is the embodiment of God on earth. In this sense, the reunification of Crimea with Russia was a just decision.”²⁵¹ Although Napoleon was not a tsar, this quote does show how Putin refers to the grand individuals that featured in imperial Russian history to strengthen his contemporary arguments. Similarly, at a meeting with representatives of the Crimean Tatars in May 2014, Putin shared an anecdote about Ivan the Terrible. When Ivan seized Tatarstan, Putin told, he brought along a wooden church across the Volga river. So, in light of this story, Putin told that he would ensure that if the Crimean Tatars were missing anything, it would be added: “we have no other goal than one - that all the people who live in Crimea are happy, that they feel like full-fledged citizens and have prospects for development for themselves and their children”.²⁵² This notion of Russia as guarantor of peoples’ prosperity also came back a few months after the annexation of Crimea,

²⁴⁶ Vladimir Putin, ‘Soveshhanie po voprosam stroitel’stva Krymskogo mosta i social’no-jekonomicheskogo razvitiya Kryma i Sevastopol’ja’ (Speech, Tuzla island, 18 March 2016), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51534>.

²⁴⁷ Vladimir Putin, Interv’ju Vladimira Putina francuzskoj gazete Le Figaro, Le Figaro, 31 May 2017, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/54638>.

²⁴⁸ Vladimir Putin, ‘Osmotr gotovogo uchastka Krymskogo mosta’ (Speech, Tuzla island, 14 March 2018), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/57057>.

²⁴⁹ Vladimir Putin, ‘Otkrytie avtodorozhnoj chasti Krymskogo mosta’ (Speech, Taman, Kerch, 15 May 2018), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/57472>.

²⁵⁰ Vladimir Putin, ‘Otkryto zheleznodorozhnoe dvizhenie po Krymskomu mostu’ (Speech, Kerch - Taman, 23 December 2019), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/62388>.

²⁵¹ Vladimir Putin, Interv’ju nemeckomu izdaniju Bild. Chast’ 1, Bild, 11 January 2016, 1, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51154>.

²⁵² Vladimir Putin, ‘Vstrecha s predstaviteljami krymskih tatar’ (Meeting, Sochi, Russia, 16 May 2014), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/21028>.

in September 2014, when Putin attended the 100th anniversary of the unification of Tuva and Russia. Putin does not mention Crimea here in his speech, but it is striking that Putin noted how “as a result of Russia taking Tuva under its wing, the Tuvan people managed to preserve their identity, their culture, their language and the faith of their ancestors”. These references to Napoleon, Ivan the Terrible, and the incorporation of Tuva seem to serve the same purpose. Based on references to imperial history, they demonstrate how Russia is just and its actions are right; Russia has always held the interests of its people at its heart – both inside and outside of its contemporary borders. However, Putin’s rhetoric about Crimea here is a very one-sided (mis)representation of history.

Ukrainians, Russians and Belarusians as one people

In the run-up to the referendum in Crimea of March 2014, large pro-Russian protests emerged in a variety of southern and eastern Ukrainian cities as well. The situation there followed a repeating pattern for a couple of weeks: pro-Russian forces seized government buildings and Ukrainian officials would (attempt to) take back control again. This happened in Donetsk, where a regional administration building was occupied by pro-Russian powers for five days before it was vacated again by the police on the 6th of March.²⁵³ And in the Black Sea city Odessa as well, where protestors put the Russian flag on top of an administrative building after fighting with the police, and the Ukrainian flag was raised again after a few days on the 4th of March.²⁵⁴ After a month, however, the situation escalated further. A few hundred protestors in Donetsk announced in the beginning of April that they would be seeking independence and asked Russia for help,²⁵⁵ and at the end of the month, the Ukrainian (acting) president acknowledged that the government was no longer in control over the area surrounding Donetsk and Luhansk in the east of the country.²⁵⁶ Many ethnic

²⁵³ Andrew Roth, ‘Ukrainian Officials in East Act to Blunt Pro-Russian Forces’, *The New York Times*, 7 March 2014, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/08/world/europe/ukrainian-officials-in-east-move-to-blunt-pro-russia-forces.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

²⁵⁴ Andrew E. Kramer, ‘Fears of Impending Change Darken Normally Lighthearted Odessa’, *The New York Times*, 10 March 2014, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/10/world/europe/fears-of-impending-change-darken-normally-lighthearted-odessa.html>.

²⁵⁵ David M. Herszenhorn and Andrew Roth, ‘In East Ukraine, Protesters Seek Russian Troops’, *The New York Times*, 7 April 2014, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/08/world/europe/russia-crimea-ukraine-unrest.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

²⁵⁶ Alison Smale and Andrew Roth, ‘Ukraine Says That Militants Won the East’, *The New York Times*, 30 April 2014, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/01/world/europe/ukraine.html>.

Russians live in this densely populated area, and the majority of the population speaks Russian as native language, as shown in Figure 6:



Figure 6 A map of native russian speakers in southeastern ukraine (The New York Times, 2014).²⁵⁷

The separatists held a referendum on the 11th of May 2014 “in such a raw state of lawlessness that no one other than the organizers and perhaps their Russian patrons seemed likely to accept the results,” as the *New York Times* put it,²⁵⁸ and they declared the independence of the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic. In the months and years that followed, a bloody war erupted between the Ukrainian government and the secessionists, in which fighting and ceasefires followed up on each other and thousands of lives were lost. At the moment of writing, the conflict still continues.

The Kremlin officially and repeatedly denied that Russian soldiers have been fighting in the war. However, a substantial amount of evidence makes this claim hard to believe. Mark Galeotti, for example, outlines how the Russian strategy in Donbas consisted of “the

²⁵⁷ The New York Times, *Cease-Fire Takes Effect* (The New York Times, 5 September 2014), <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/02/27/world/europe/ukraine-divisions-crimea.html>.

²⁵⁸ Andrew E. Kramer, ‘Ukraine Vote on Separation Held in Chaos’, *The New York Times*, 11 May 2014, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/12/world/europe/ukraine-referendum.html>.

integrated use of militias, gangsters, information operations, intelligence, and special forces”²⁵⁹ and Andrew S. Bowen explains how Russia used “proxy and surrogate actors, along with military exercises and the injection of Russian troops” in eastern Ukraine.²⁶⁰ Even a Russian court seemed to acknowledge the presence of Russian soldiers in the area when it handled a lawsuit about the catering service for these troops in December 2021 – yet the Kremlin said that this was a mistake and impossible, as there are no soldiers there.²⁶¹ But while the Kremlin denies the presence of its soldiers on eastern Ukrainian territory, it does attempt to increase the number of Russian citizens in the region. In April 2019, Putin signed an executive order that allowed citizens of Donetsk and Luhansk to apply for Russian citizenship in a fast-track procedure.²⁶² The more Russians are living in these areas, the further this supports Putin’s argument that Russia has a right to be involved in (eastern) Ukraine.

Already in 2014, Putin made it clear that this is an appropriate course of action. During his annual *Direct Line* (in which Putin answers questions from Russians by phone on live television) in April 2014, a month after the annexation of Crimea, Putin noted how it is essential that the rights and interests of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers living in south-eastern Ukraine need to be safeguarded. He used history to support this argument:

Let me remind you, using the terminology from tsarist times, this is Novorossiia: Kharkov, Lugansk, Donetsk, Kherson, Nikolayev, and Odessa were not part of Ukraine in tsarist times; these are all territories which were transferred to Ukraine in the 1920s by the Soviet government. Why they did it, God knows. They were won after the respective victories of Potemkin and Catherine the Great in the famous wars cantered in Novorossiysk. Hence Novorossiia. Then, for various reasons, these territories were lost, but the people stayed there. Today, they live in Ukraine, and they should be full citizens of their country.²⁶³

²⁵⁹ Mark Galeotti, ‘Hybrid, Ambiguous, and Non-Linear? How New Is Russia’s “New Way of War”?’ , *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, no. 2 (3 March 2016): 282, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2015.1129170>.

²⁶⁰ Andrew S. Bowen, ‘Coercive Diplomacy and the Donbas: Explaining Russian Strategy in Eastern Ukraine’, *Journal of Strategic Studies* 42, no. 3–4 (7 June 2019): 312–43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2017.1413550>.

²⁶¹ Deutsche Welle, ‘Russian Court Says Country’s Soldiers Stationed in Ukraine’, *Deutsche Welle*, 16 December 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/russian-court-says-country-s-soldiers-stationed-in-ukraine/a-60153034>.

²⁶² Vladimir Putin, ‘Ob opredelenii v gumanitarnykh celjah kategorij lic, imejushhikh pravo obratit’ sja s zjavlenijami o prieme v grazhdanstvo Rossijskoj Federacii v uproshhennom porjadke’, 183 Ukaz § (2019), <http://pravo.gov.ru/proxy/ips/?docbody=&firstDoc=1&lastDoc=1&nd=102544718>.

²⁶³ Vladimir Putin, ‘Prjamaja linija s Vladimirom Putiny’ (Live broadcast, Moscow, Russia, 17 April 2014), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20796>.

Even though Putin accepts here that the people of historical Novorossiia are now Ukrainian citizens, it is important to notice that Putin uses this episode of imperial Russian history to validate his involvement in the affairs of eastern Ukraine. Putin repeats this modality on several other occasions as well, but also vis-a-vis the rest of Ukraine. In the 2017 edition of the *Direct Line* calls, for example, someone mentioned how the Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko celebrated the start of visa-free travel with the EU as a departure from the Russian Empire, quoting the lines “goodbye, unwashed Russia, land of slaves, land of masters” from a poem by Mikhail Lermontov.²⁶⁴ In response, Putin expressed his appreciation for Poroshenko’s interest in Russian poetry, dissected the poem in an analysis, and concluded that the regions of contemporary Ukraine used to be Russian and that Lermontov left towards another part of the Empire.²⁶⁵ Later in 2017, during his annual press conference, Putin again emphasized that Ukraine was incorporated into the Russian Empire in 1645 and that Kiev was at the heart of Kievan Rus’ before that. “In this sense,” Putin continued, “our historical, spiritual and other roots entitle me to say that basically we are one and the same people”.²⁶⁶ These statements are very important. Putin instrumentalises history here not only to justify his foreign policy vis-à-vis eastern Ukraine, but also to mould a collective identity for Ukrainians and Russians. In the eyes of Putin, they have always been together and belong together. This line of thinking offers a validation for Russian involvement in the affairs of all Ukrainians, which Putin acted upon later on as well. However, what Putin is saying here is simply not correct. To follow Andrew Wilson, who has dissected this historical claim by Putin: “the reality remains that Ukrainians and Russians have lived apart more than they have lived together; and when they lived together, they did not always get on”.²⁶⁷

Putin begins to express this idea of a united identity – in which Russians, Ukrainians, as well as Belarusians constitute one single people – in 2013, and its roots can be traced back to 2001. Already in his first year as president, Putin emphasized the common spiritual roots of the Ukrainian and Russian people on different occasions, as mentioned in chapter 1 of this thesis. Putin arguably had different intentions with these references back then, as he primarily

²⁶⁴ Vladimir Putin, ‘Prjamaja linija s Vladimirom Putinyim’ (Live broadcast, Moscow, Russia, 15 June 2017), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/54790>.

²⁶⁵ Putin.

²⁶⁶ Vladimir Putin, ‘Bol’shaja Press-Konferencija Vladimira Putina’ (Press conference, Moscow, Russia, 14 December 2017), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56378>.

²⁶⁷ Andrew Wilson, ‘Russia and Ukraine: “One People” as Putin Claims?’, *Royal United Services Institute (RUSI)*, 23 December 2021, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/russia-and-ukraine-one-people-putin-claims>.

instrumentalised imperial history to mould a European identity for Russia at the time, but it seems as if his ideas regarding the unity of the Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian people that emerged during his third presidency had already begun to germinate in 2001. So, when Putin attended a conference in Kiev to celebrate the 1025th anniversary of the baptism of Rus' in 2013, over a decade after he first noted the significance of this history for Russian and Ukrainian roots, he now emphasized the importance of it for "our entire people":

Of course, we understand today's realities, that there is a Ukrainian people, and a Belarusian people, and there are other peoples, and we respect all this heritage, but at the core are certainly our common spiritual values, which make us one people. Today the primate of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church was just talking about it. And it is difficult not to agree with this, one can only agree with this.²⁶⁸

Later in this speech, Putin adds that many "little Russians" (Ukrainians) served in the upper echelons of Russia, and that Ukraine developed very rapidly after its reunification with Russia in the 17th and 18th centuries.²⁶⁹ During an interview later that year with the Russian *Perviy Kanal* and *Associated Press*, Putin was asked why Ukraine and Russia were not able to calmly and rhythmically develop together. Putin's answer showed that this did not bother him: "no matter what happens and no matter where Ukraine goes, we will still meet at some point and somewhere. Why? Because we are one people".²⁷⁰ Putin made these references to the unity of Russians and Ukrainians already before the annexation of Crimea, noticeably at the time when Ukraine was in the process of establishing an association agreement with the EU. And after the events on Crimea and in Donbas, Putin continued to use imperial Russian history to emphasize a common Russian-Ukrainian-Belarusian identity as well. He did so in his annual press conference of 2017, as mentioned above, and also at the plenary session of the *St. Petersburg International Economic Forum* of 2019. Putin was asked at this *Economic Forum* about the unification of Russia with Belarus, and if this had something to do with 2024,²⁷¹ Putin answered that this was not the case and neither could be the case: "history has

²⁶⁸ Vladimir Putin, 'Konferencija «Pravoslavno-slavjanskije cennosti – osnova civilizacionnogo vybora Ukrainy»' (Speech, Kiev, Ukraine, 27 July 2013), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/18961>.

²⁶⁹ *Putin*.

²⁷⁰ Putin, Interv'ju Pervomu kanalu i agentstvu Assoshijetd Press.

²⁷¹ As Putin was in his fourth presidency at the time, there was still uncertainty about what would happen after the end of his term in 2024, when Putin would once again hit the constitutional limit (like in 2008). This question to Putin refers to a scenario in which the already existing Union State of Russia and Belarus would be finalised. If this project would be transformed from a paper tiger into a genuine state, a new country would come into being, of which Putin had not been president yet. For more about this Union State, see: Bob Deen, Barbara

turned out in such a way that our people are united, and I believe that the Belarusians, Russians and Ukrainians are one people, I have said it many times, many times, and this is what I believe, I am convinced".²⁷² And in an interview with the American film director Oliver Stone later that year, Putin repeated his argument that Russians and Ukrainians are one people, and added that they constitute a single nation as well because of (imperial) history.²⁷³ In July 2021, Putin explained in another edition of his yearly *Direct Line* calls that he had put a lot of thought into the unity of the Russian people(s), which used to be "Great Russians" (Russians), "White Russians" (Belarusians), and "Little Russians" (Ukrainians), and announced that he would write a separate article on the topic.²⁷⁴ Two weeks later, Putin followed up on this, as he published his article *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*.²⁷⁵ In over 5000 words, Putin outlined the ideas that he had formulated and expressed about a united Russian identity over the past years, now combined in one detailed essay. Once again, Putin summed up how the Russians and "Little Russian" Ukrainians were one people, how they thrived when they were together in the past, and how "true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia" – all substantiated with over a dozen examples of the history of the Russian Empire.²⁷⁶ Most Ukrainians, however, are not convinced by Putin's argument. In an opinion poll in September 2021, a large majority of the Ukrainian respondents (70 per cent) indicated that they disagreed with the main points raised by Putin in his article.²⁷⁷ And in another Ukrainian survey in July 2021, over half of the respondents (55 per cent) disagreed with Putin's claim that "Russians and Ukrainians are one

Roggeveen, and Wouter Zweers, 'An Ever Closer Union? Ramifications of Further Integration between Belarus and Russia' (The Hague: The Clingendael Institute, August 2021), <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2021/an-ever-closer-union/>.

²⁷² Vladimir Putin, 'Plenarnoe zasedanie Peterburgskogo mezhdunarodnogo jekonomicheskogo foruma' (Speech, Saint Petersburg, Russia, 7 June 2019), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/60707>.

²⁷³ Vladimir Putin, Interv'ju Oliveru Stounu, interview by Oliver Stone, 19 July 2019, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61057>.

²⁷⁴ Vladimir Putin, 'Prjamaja linija s Vladimirom Putiny'm' (Live broadcast, Moscow, Russia, 30 June 2021), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/65973>.

²⁷⁵ The article was published in Russian, Ukrainian and English. For the original, see: Vladimir Putin, 'Stat'ja Vladimira Putina «Ob istoricheskom edinstve russkih i ukraincev»', *Prezident Rossii*, 12 July 2021, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>; For the English version, see: Vladimir Putin, 'Article by Vladimir Putin "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians"', *President of Russia*, 12 July 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

²⁷⁶ The article was published in Russian, Ukrainian and English. For the original, see: Putin, 'Stat'ja Vladimira Putina «Ob istoricheskom edinstve russkih i ukraincev»'; For the English version, see: Putin, 'Article by Vladimir Putin "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians"'.²⁷⁷

²⁷⁷ Razumkov Centr, 'Ocinka hromadyanamy Ukrayiny holovnyx tez statti V. Putina "Pro istorychnu yednist' rosiyan ta ukrajinciv" (lypen"–serpen" 2021r.)' (Kiev, Ukraine: Razumkov Centr, 11 September 2021), <https://razumkov.org.ua/napriamky/sotsiologichni-doslidzhennia/otsinka-gromadianamy-ukrainy-golovnykh-tez-statti-v-putina-pro-istorychnu-iednist-rosiiian-ta-ukraintsiv>.

people who belong to the same historical and spiritual space” – as Putin’s position was paraphrased.²⁷⁸ While a significant part (41 per cent) of the respondents agreed with this statement, this does not mean they agree with Putin because of the formulation of the question. As Oleksiy Haran argued in an interview with the *Kyiv Post*, this phrasing “is simply manipulative”, as it combined the united people aspect with the shared roots. “While the ‘one people’ claim is utter nonsense, it’s different in the case of ‘Ukraine and Russia share the same history’ because they do”, Haran added.²⁷⁹ But even though there are common chapters in Ukrainian and Russian history, Putin misrepresents this in his article. Additionally, Putin also invokes polarization as a modality in his article about the unity of Russians and Ukrainians. Putin blamed the Ukrainian elites for the dispersing of the cultural, spiritual, and economic ties of the united people:

In essence, Ukraine's ruling circles decided to justify their country's independence through the denial of its past, however, except for border issues. They began to mythologize and rewrite history, edit out everything that united us, and refer to the period when Ukraine was part of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union as an occupation. The common tragedy of collectivization and famine of the early 1930s was portrayed as the genocide of the Ukrainian people. Radicals and neo-Nazis were open and more and more insolent about their ambitions. (-) Step by step, Ukraine was dragged into a dangerous geopolitical game aimed at turning Ukraine into a barrier between Europe and Russia, a springboard against Russia. (-) The owners of this project took as a basis the old groundwork of the Polish-Austrian ideologists to create an "anti-Moscow Russia"²⁸⁰

These fragments show how Putin uses the history of the Russian Empire to reach mutually reinforcing goals through four different modalities. He (1) shapes a common identity for Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians, (2) praises the times when these people were still united and condemns that the Bolsheviks ruined this, (3) blames the elites of contemporary Ukraine for the problems at hand and rift within a united people, which altogether (4) provides a justification for Russia to be involved in the affairs of Ukraine.

²⁷⁸ Rating Group Ukraine, ‘Obshchestvenno-Politicheskie Nastroyeniya Naseleniya (23-25 Ijulja 2021)’, Opinion poll (Kiev, Ukraine: Rejting, 27 July 2021), 20, http://ratinggroup.ua/ru/research/ukraine/obshchestvenno-politicheskie_nastroyeniya_naseleniya_23-25_ilyulya_2021.html.

²⁷⁹ Kvitka Perehinets, ‘Poll Shows 41% of Ukrainians Agree with Putin’s “one Nation” Claim, but Question Was Tweaked - KyivPost - Ukraine’s Global Voice’, *KyivPost*, 28 July 2021, <https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/poll-shows-41-of-ukrainians-agree-with-putins-one-nation-claim-but-question-was-tweaked.html>.

²⁸⁰ Putin, ‘Stat’ja Vladimira Putina «Ob istoricheskom edinstve russkih i ukraincev»’.

The timing when Putin is making these statements is remarkable, especially regarding his article *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians* on the 12th of July 2021. This publication came amidst flare-ups in tensions between Russia, Ukraine, and the West that had been simmering in the background. In April 2021, Russia gathered an estimated 110.000 soldiers on the border with Ukraine and withdrew these again partially by the end of the month,²⁸¹ and by November, Russia had built up a comparable amount of soldiers on the Ukrainian border again – United States intelligence officers now warned that a Russian invasion could be at hand.²⁸² But in the eyes of Putin, Russia was not threatening anyone, as he explained in his annual press conference in December 2021. It was NATO who came to Russian borders and now Ukraine would even become a member of it as well, so Putin demanded “unconditional guarantees for Russia’s security today and in the historical perspective”, and stressed that eastward NATO expansion was unacceptable for Russia.²⁸³ These statements by Putin are in line with the narrative of the Russian fortress being under siege, which Putin substantiated with history during his third and fourth presidencies.

Russia under siege: sanctions and (un)made promises about NATO expansion

After the annexation of Crimea, the relations between Russia and the West spiralled downwards. The European Union, the United States, and other Western countries imposed sanctions on the Russian economy and Russian individuals from March 2014 onwards.²⁸⁴ In response, Russia imposed counter-sanctions and banned the imports of a variety of foods and agricultural products from these states in August 2014.²⁸⁵ These sanctions hurt the Russian

²⁸¹ Andrew E. Kramer, ‘In Russia, a Military Buildup That Can’t Be Missed’, *The New York Times*, 16 April 2021, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/16/world/europe/russia-ukraine-troops.html>; Andrew E. Kramer and Anton Troianovski, ‘Russia Orders Partial Pullback From Ukraine Border Region’, *The New York Times*, 22 April 2021, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/22/world/europe/russia-ukraine-military-pullback.html>.

²⁸² Julian E. Barnes and Eric Schmitt, ‘U.S. Warns Allies of Possible Russian Incursion as Troops Amass Near Ukraine’, *The New York Times*, 20 November 2021, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/19/us/politics/russia-ukraine-biden-administration.html>; Michael Crowley, ‘U.S. Intelligence Sees Russian Plan for Possible Ukraine Invasion’, *The New York Times*, 4 December 2021, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/04/us/politics/russia-ukraine-biden.html>.

²⁸³ Vladimir Putin, ‘Bol’shaja press-konferencija Vladimira Putina’ (Press conference, Moscow, Russia, 23 December 2021), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67438>.

²⁸⁴ European Union, ‘EU Sanctions against Russia over Ukraine’, European Council, 2021, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/eu-sanctions-against-russia-over-ukraine/>; ‘Ukraine-/Russia-Related Sanctions’, U.S. Department of the Treasury, n.d., <https://home.treasury.gov/policy-issues/financial-sanctions/sanctions-programs-and-country-information/ukraine-russia-related-sanctions>.

²⁸⁵ Vladimir Putin, ‘O primenenii otdel’nyh special’nyh jekonomicheskikh mer v celjah obespechenija bezopasnosti Rossijskoj Federacii’, 560 Ukaz § (2014), <http://pravo.gov.ru/proxy/ips/?docbody=&firstDoc=1&lastDoc=1&nd=102356998>.

economy, and as worldwide oil prices (on which the Russian economy is very dependent) dropped around the same time, the Russian economy went through an economic crisis. Adding to this, the Russian counter-sanctions led to rising prices in Russia: as imports decreased, the inflation on food raised considerably from 6 per cent to 20 per cent between 2013 and 2015.²⁸⁶ For Putin, the sanctions and international condemnation of Russian actions provided an opportunity to sketch a narrative in which Russia was under siege because it had become too powerful, which he underpinned with historical examples.

When Putin was asked at his *Direct Line* calls in 2017 if Russia was ready to live under sanctions for decades, he answered that Russian history showed how the country had lived under sanctions whenever it got back on its feet and felt strong. “When our partners in the world felt that Russia was a serious competitor, restrictions were introduced on various pretexts”, even before 1917, he noted.²⁸⁷ When Putin visited the Lebedinsky mining company a month later, one of the workers asked him if the state would continue fighting for Russian history. Putin answered that Russia had always been challenged through historical distortions, because, as Alexander III once said: everyone is afraid of Russian greatness for it has the army and the navy as two allies. Putin continued by talking about the legend that Ivan the Terrible killed his son, but that according to many researchers, “he did not kill anyone at all” and this legend was a lie that the nuncio of the pope made up when Ivan refused to convert to catholic Christianity:

They made Ivan the Terrible out of him, such a super cruel man. (-) This is a method of fighting our country, this is a competitive struggle that is always ongoing in the world, constantly. And as soon as any rival emerges, all other participants in the process start thinking: no, wait, we have to hold him back.²⁸⁸

At an informal summit of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in 2019, Putin again mentioned that Russia is used to scare people, in its tsarist, Soviet, and contemporary form.²⁸⁹ And in 2021, Putin once more referred to the words of Alexander III and mentioned

²⁸⁶ William M Liefert et al., ‘The Effect of Russia’s Economic Crisis and Import Ban on Its Agricultural and Food Sector’, *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 10, no. 2 (July 2019): 119–35, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1879366519840185>.

²⁸⁷ Putin, ‘Prjamaja linija s Vladimirom Putinym’, 15 June 2017.

²⁸⁸ Vladimir Putin, ‘Poseshhenie Lebedinskogo gorno-obogatitel’nogo kombinata’ (Speech, Gubkin, Russia, 14 July 2017), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/55052>.

²⁸⁹ Vladimir Putin, ‘Neformal’nyj sammit SNG’ (Meeting, Saint Petersburg, Russia, 20 December 2019), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/62376>.

that whenever Russia becomes too strong, reasons will be found to restrain Russia's development.²⁹⁰ Through these statements, Putin instrumentalizes history to condemn how Russia has always been besieged when it became too powerful, while simultaneously condemning the West for the restrictions that it imposed. This could have been a strategy to deflect domestic public attention from the economic hardships at the time.

Putin uses the same modalities when it comes to NATO, which also contributes to the besieged fortress mentality. In an interview with *Bild* in 2016, talking about the eastward expansion of NATO, Putin argued that NATO just wanted to "reign" and sit on a "throne" – with crisis situations as result.²⁹¹ Russia and its interests were not being listened to. Putin repeated this at different occasions, although not in the context of imperial history, such as at his yearly press conference in 2021: "We remember, as I have mentioned many times before and as you know very well, how you promised us in the 1990s that [NATO] would not move an inch to the East".²⁹² But was this promise ever made? Already in the nineties, Yeltsin protested against Polish NATO membership because he believed this was a violation of "the spirit" of a treaty that "prohibit[ed] the deployment of foreign troops within the eastern lands of the Federal Republic of Germany", as Mary Elise Sarotte explains.²⁹³ Based on declassified documents and interviews with participants in the events at the time, Sarotte concludes that "while Moscow's claim was wrong in substance, it had psychological weight" (168; 346).²⁹⁴ She also argues that this Russian claim should have been "discussed soberly, not dismissed out of hand" at the time (168).²⁹⁵ The notion that Russia is not being listened to here is in line with what Putin has told earlier as well, a few months after the annexation of Crimea. When he unveiled a monument to the heroes of World War I (WWI) in August 2014, in relation to the 100th anniversary of the start of this war, he stressed that while Russia has always championed strong and trusting relations with other countries, its calls remained unheard. So, when the conflict between Austria-Hungary and Serbia escalated (1914), "our country had no choice but to rise to the challenge, defend a brotherly Slavic people and protect our own country and people from the foreign threat".²⁹⁶ Later in this speech, Putin

²⁹⁰ Vladimir Putin, 'Zasedanie Rossijskogo organizacionnogo komiteta «Pobeda»' (Meeting, Novo-Ogaryovo, Russia, 20 May 2021), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/65618>.

²⁹¹ Putin, Interv'ju nemeckomu izdaniju *Bild*. Chast' 1, 1.

²⁹² Putin, 'Bol'shaja press-konferencija Vladimira Putina'.

²⁹³ M. E. Sarotte, *Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of Post-Cold War Stalemate*, The Henry L. Stimson Lectures Series (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 168.

²⁹⁴ Sarotte, 9; 168; 346.

²⁹⁵ Sarotte, 346.

²⁹⁶ Vladimir Putin, 'Otkrytie pamjatnika gerojam Pervoj mirovoj vojny' (Speech, Moscow, Russia, 1 August 2014), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46385>.

talked about the numerous examples in world history of “what a terrible price we pay for refusing to listen to each other, or for trampling on others’ rights and freedoms and lawful interests in the name of our own interests and ambitions”.²⁹⁷ All the while Russia just wants a peaceful foreign policy, as Putin said two weeks later at a meeting with members of political parties in the Duma, after Vladimir Zhirinovskiy of the LDPR party argued that the tsar made a mistake when he sent his army to Serbia, instead of humanitarian aid.²⁹⁸ Here, Putin uses history to support his argument: Russia just wants to live in peace, but when it is not being listened to, it will act to protect its interests. Considering the timing of his statements about WWI, it seems likely that Putin attempts to draw a parallel here to the annexation of Crimea, where Russia merely defended the rights of the Crimean people in the rhetoric of Putin.

Domestic upheaval

In addition to the narrative that Russia is besieged, Putin also gives increased intention to what he perceives to be internal threats during his third and fourth presidencies. During these terms, large scale protests emerged in different waves all over Russia. In the beginning of 2017, for example, people demonstrated against corruption, Putin, and his government in various cities.²⁹⁹ In 2018, people went to the streets throughout Russia to protest against the upcoming presidential elections, which the demonstrators did not perceive to be genuine elections due to a an absence of real choice.³⁰⁰ And in 2021, tens of thousands of people gathered in cities across the country in support of anti-corruption blogger and opposition figure Alexei Navalny.³⁰¹ This most recent wave of demonstrations followed after Navalny –

²⁹⁷ Putin.

²⁹⁸ Vladimir Putin, ‘Vstrecha s chlenami frakcij politicheskikh partij v Gosudarstvennoj Dume’ (Meeting, Yalta, Crimea, 14 August 2014), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46451>.

²⁹⁹ Andrew Higgins, ‘Aleksei Navalny, Top Putin Critic, Arrested as Protests Flare in Russia’, *The New York Times*, 26 March 2017, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/26/world/europe/moscow-protests-aleksei-navalny.html>; Neil MacFarquhar, ‘Thousands of Russians Present Letters of Protest in Demonstrations’, *The New York Times*, 29 April 2017, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/29/world/europe/russia-protests-anticorruption-open-russia.html>; Andrew Higgins, ‘5 Years After Crackdown, an Anti-Kremlin Protest Resumes’, *The New York Times*, 6 May 2017, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/06/world/europe/russia-vladimir-putin-protests.html>; Neil MacFarquhar and Ivan Nechepurenko, ‘Across Russia, Protesters Heed Navalny’s Anti-Kremlin Rallying Cry’, *The New York Times*, 12 June 2017, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/12/world/europe/russia-aleksei-navalny-kremlin-protests.html>.

³⁰⁰ Neil MacFarquhar and Ivan Nechepurenko, ‘Russians Brave Icy Temperatures to Protest Putin and Election’, *The New York Times*, 28 January 2018, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/28/world/europe/russia-protests-navalny.html>.

³⁰¹ Anton Troianovski, Andrew E. Kramer, and Andrew Higgins, ‘In Aleksei Navalny Protests, Russia Faces Biggest Dissent in Years’, *The New York Times*, 23 January 2021, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/23/world/europe/navalny-protests-russia.html>.

who had just recovered in a German hospital because he had been poisoned on a flight from Siberia to Moscow with a Novichok nerve agent³⁰² – was immediately arrested and jailed upon his return to Russia. A week after these protests in support of Navalny had begun, a student at Kazan University asked Putin what his thoughts were regarding the situation. Putin answered this question with a reference to history:

I want to emphasise that everyone has the right to express their opinion within the legal framework. Anything outside the law is not just counterproductive. It can be dangerous.

Throughout the history of our country, we have, many times, seen the situation go far beyond the law and rock society and the state to the point where everyone, not just those who were involved in challenging the state and society, was affected by it. This was the case after WWI as a result of the October Revolution. What kind of good intentions were the people who stirred things up in the Russian Empire pursuing, and what did it lead to? I will not even go there.³⁰³

We can see here how Putin draws a parallel between the demonstrations in contemporary Russia and the revolutionary upheaval in the Russian Empire. This is something that Putin does on other occasions as well. A few months later, at Putin's yearly press conference in December 2021, the *BBC* asked a question about Navalny, who was prisoned after being poisoned, and the journalist argued that whenever power was concentrated in the hands of a single person in Russian history, combined with an active confrontation with the West, this plunged the country into wars and revolutions. So, the *BBC* journalist wondered: "Do you not think that you, possessing all the power, are now perhaps laying the groundwork for perhaps such wars and revolutions?"³⁰⁴ In response, Putin answered:

Our opponents have been saying throughout the centuries that Russia cannot be defeated, but can only be destroyed from within, which they successfully accomplished during World War I, or rather, after it ended, and then in the 1990s, when the Soviet Union was being dismantled from within. Who was doing it? Someone serving the interests of others that run counter to

³⁰² Michael Schwartz and Melissa Eddy, 'Aleksei Navalny Was Poisoned With Novichok, Germany Says', *The New York Times*, 2 September 2020, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/02/world/europe/navalny-poison-novichok.html>.

³⁰³ Vladimir Putin, 'Vstrecha s uchashimisja vuzov po sluchaju Dnja rossijskogo studenchestva' (Meeting, Zavidovo, Russia, 25 January 2021), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64922>.

³⁰⁴ Putin, 'Bol'shaja press-konferencija Vladimira Putina'.

the interests of the Russian and other peoples of the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and the Russian Federation today.³⁰⁵

Putin then continues his answer by talking about “the person who was allegedly poisoned”, as he never calls Navalny by his name, and that inmates, “do not commit criminal offences under the guise of political activity”.³⁰⁶ Again, we can see here how Putin uses history to portray the protestors in contemporary Russia as people who engage in illegal activities in an attempt to crush their country from the inside.

Putin has used the history of WWI and the Russian Revolution that followed repeatedly as a lesson to be learned. In November 2014, at a meeting with young scientists and history teachers, Putin notes that Russia did not lose battles on the front in WWI, but was rather ruined from within.³⁰⁷ Later that year, at the 2014 edition of the *Seliger Youth Forum*, Putin talks about the non-systemic opposition in Russia and explains how it consists of patriots, as well as people who want to see their fatherland defeated – just like the Bolsheviks in WWI, who rocked Russia from within until it collapsed and declared itself lost.³⁰⁸ Two years later at another meeting, Putin again mentions how WWI was lost to a losing country because of the internal power struggle.³⁰⁹ And in 2017, the year of the 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution, Putin shared the following message at a meeting of the *Valdai Discussion Club*: “Was it not possible, not to develop through revolution, but along the path of evolution, not at the cost of the destruction of the state, the ruthless destruction of millions of human lives, but by gradual, consistent progress?”³¹⁰ Four years later, at another *Valdai* meeting in 2021, Putin noted how the revolutionary upheaval about a century ago led to the collapse and disintegration of a great country, which repeated itself 30 years ago. “These examples of our history allow us to assert that revolution is not the way out of the crisis, but the way to exacerbate it. No revolution has ever been worth the damage it has done to human

³⁰⁵ Putin.

³⁰⁶ Putin.

³⁰⁷ Vladimir Putin, ‘Vstrecha s molodymi uchjonymi i prepodavateljami istorii’ (Meeting, Moscow, Russia, 5 November 2014), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46951>.

³⁰⁸ Vladimir Putin, ‘Vserossijskij molodjozhnyj forum «Seliger-2014»’ (Speech, Seliger, Russia, 29 August 2014), 2014, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46507>.

³⁰⁹ Vladimir Putin, ‘Zasedanie mezhhregional’nogo foruma ONF’ (Meeting, Stavropol, Russia, 25 January 2016), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51206>.

³¹⁰ Vladimir Putin, ‘Zasedanie Mezhdunarodnogo diskussionnogo kluba «Valdaj»’ (Meeting, Sochi, Russia, 19 October 2017), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/55882>.

potential”, according to Putin.³¹¹ These statements by Putin serve the same modalities. By condemning the destruction of state power in the past, which happened from within, Putin repeatedly reinforces the idea that revolutions are not the way forward. As such, they contribute to the solidification of his power base: it is better to go for gradual evolution along the rules of the system.

Putin’ the tsars on a pedestal

From his third presidential term onwards, more and more people start to call Putin a tsar. A diverse group of (primarily Western) authors, Russian opposition politicians, as well as staunch supporters of the president have been doing so since 2014, as mentioned in the introduction of this thesis. Putin reflected upon these comparisons in a variety of interviews. For example, when an American journalist asked in 2014 if the title of tsar was fitting, Putin answered that it is not, and it neither matters how he is called.³¹² At the *Valdai* meeting of 2016, Yuri Slezkine (professor of Russian history at UC Berkeley) asked Putin what would be covered in the chapters of future history books about the Putin era, and noted that the president is already being compared to Catherine the Great and Peter the Great amongst others. Putin replied that he “do[es not] look like Catherine, certainly in terms of gender”.³¹³ And when an Austrian journalist remarked in 2018 how some people say that Putin is a tsar, having turned a country headed towards democracy into an authoritarian state, Putin answered that this is false and completely detached from reality.³¹⁴ It is not surprising that Putin does not wish to be called a tsar and that he considers such comparisons to be incorrect. Nevertheless, he finds inspiration in their stories, as he has told on several occasions.

Sometimes Putin is very open about this topic, at other moments, he is not. When Putin had an interview with the Italian newspaper *Il Corriere della Sera* in 2015, for example, the interviewer asked which historical figure inspired him the most – considering that there were four emperors hanging in the room. Putin explained that he gets this question a lot and that he preferred to avoid it, “because it leads to all kinds of interpretations.

³¹¹ Vladimir Putin, ‘Zasedanie Mezhdunarodnogo diskussionnogo kluba «Valdaj»’ (Meeting, Sochi, Russia, 21 October 2021), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66975>.

³¹² Vladimir Putin, Interv’ju amerikanskomu zhurnalistu Charli Rouzu dlja telekanalov CBS i PBS, CBS and PBS, 29 September 2015, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50380>.

³¹³ Vladimir Putin, ‘Zasedanie Mezhdunarodnogo diskussionnogo kluba «Valdaj»’ (Meeting, Sochi, Russia, 27 October 2016), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53151>.

³¹⁴ Vladimir Putin, Interv’ju avstrijskomu telekanalu ORF, ORF, 4 June 2018, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/57675>.

(Laughter.) So I'd rather answer like this: I try not to make idols for myself'.³¹⁵ But even though Putin attempts to do so, he was very open about the historical figures he admires in interviews that followed later. In 2017, he gave to understand that if he could meet the great Russians of the past, it to be a meeting with Peter the Great and Catherine the Great.³¹⁶ Later that year, Putin shared that he considered Alexander III to be an outstanding figure in Russian history, one of the builders of the Russian state.³¹⁷ At a meeting with the heads of international news agencies in 2019, Putin shared that one of his most important Russian heroes is Alexander Pushkin (the meeting was on the date of his birth), and that Peter the Great comes then. Peter not only founded Saint Petersburg, where Putin was born, but was a great reformer who transformed Russia. But, Putin added, it is impossible to focus on just one person: he loves the music of Tchaikovsky as much as Mozart's.³¹⁸ A few weeks later, in an interview with the *Financial Times*, Putin again mentions Peter the Great as someone he admires the most. When the interviewer responds that he is dead, indicating that he would like to hear about a present-day leader, Putin replies by saying that "[Peter the Great] will live as long as his cause is alive just as the cause of each of us".³¹⁹ And in his *Direct Line* call of 2021, Putin pondered upon the best period in Russian history:

There were many glorious periods in the history of Russia, even back before Peter the Great, who implemented major reforms, which changed the country. The reign of Catherine the Great was a period of our largest territorial acquisitions. And during the reign of Alexander I Russia became a superpower, as we say now. It is an obvious fact. Therefore, we can and must study all these eras and also many other periods. We must remember this, revere the memory of those who achieved these outstanding results, and try to measure up to their examples.³²⁰

Here we can see how Putin uses history to praise his heroes from the times of the Russian Empire, even though he does so upon request. What the tsars mentioned by Putin have in

³¹⁵ Vladimir Putin, Interv'ju ital'janskoj gazete Il Corriere della Sera, Il Corriere della Sera, 9 June 2015, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/49629>.

³¹⁶ Vladimir Putin, 'Mediaforum regional'nyh i mestnyh SMI «Pravda i spravedlivost'» (Speech, Saint Petersburg, Russia, 3 April 2017), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/54172>.

³¹⁷ Vladimir Putin, 'Vstrecha s laureatami Vserossijskogo konkursa «Uchitel' goda – 2017»' (Meeting, Moscow, Russia, 5 October 2017), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/55782>.

³¹⁸ Vladimir Putin, 'Vstrecha s glavami mirovyh informagentstv' (Saint Petersburg, Russia, 6 June 2019), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/60675>.

³¹⁹ Vladimir Putin, Interv'ju gazete The Financial Times, *The Financial Times*, 27 June 2019, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/60836>.

³²⁰ Putin, 'Prjamaja linija s Vladimirom Putiny'm', 30 June 2021.

common, is that they either developed or transformed the state and brought glory and greatness to Russia – in the form of territory or international recognition. Putin refers to these tsars regularly, as we can see in Figure 7:

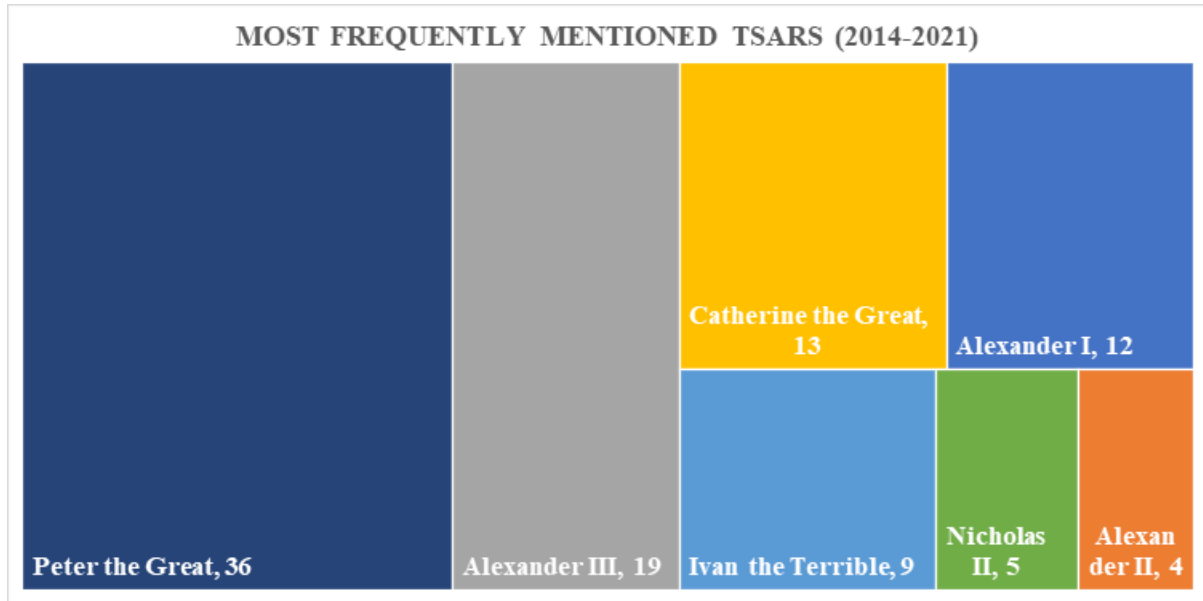


Figure 7 Treemap of Putin’s references to the tsars between March 2014 and December 2021.

The answer to which tsars Putin admires can not only be found in his rhetoric, but also in the statues and monuments that have been dedicated to them since Putin’s third presidency. On the 20th of November 2014, 200 years after the *Treaty of Paris* had been signed in 1815, Putin unveiled a monument to Alexander the I in the Alexander Garden – right outside the walls of the Kremlin. After a cloth had fallen from the statue to reveal it and the orchestra finished playing *Glory* from Mikhail Glinka’s *A Life for the Tsar*, Putin explained in his speech why this monument was dedicated to the tsar:

Alexander I paid an enormous role in bringing [people of all ranks and nationalities] together and in firmly upholding the country’s independence. (-) Alexander I has gone down in history as the man who defeated Napoleon, as a forward-looking policymaker and diplomat, as a political leader who was fully aware of his responsibility for the safe development of Europe and the world. The Russian Emperor stood at the foundation of the European international security system of the time, and it met the requirements of that period. It was then that

conditions for the so-called balance were created, based not only on mutual respect for the interests of different countries, but also on moral values.³²¹

It is important to notice here that Putin said this a few months after it had annexed Crimea, at a time when Russia was becoming increasingly frustrated with the international order. In 2016, Putin inaugurated another statue to one of the great figures of Russian history in Moscow. This time for Vladimir the Great, who baptized Kievan Rus'. While Vladimir the Great was not a tsar, his statue is noteworthy enough to mention here briefly, since Putin actively instrumentalised Vladimir's baptism as "the common spiritual source for the peoples of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine" during his third and fourth presidencies.³²² And in 2017 as well as 2021, Putin unveiled monuments for Alexander III: the first one on Crimea, the second one at the Grand Gatchina Palace south of Saint Petersburg.³²³ In his first speech, Putin praised the tsar for being an exceptional leader and patriot:

He always felt a tremendous personal responsibility for the country's destiny: he fought for Russia in battlefields, and after he became the ruler, he did everything possible for the progress and strengthening of the nation, to protect it from turmoil, internal and external threats. Contemporaries called him the Peacemaker tsar. However, according to Sergei Vitte, he gave Russia 13 years of peace not by yielding but by a fair and unwavering firmness. Alexander III stood up for the country's interests directly and openly, and that policy ensured the growth of Russia's influence and authority in the world.³²⁴

That Putin honoured these tsars with these statues further confirms what Putin has indicated in his rhetoric as well: he appreciates how these tsars protected the interests of Russia internationally and were prepared to fight for this.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that a striking increase of references to the tsars and imperial Russian history can be observed after 2014 by the people around Putin. Out of the 747 total references in Putin's speeches between March 2014 and December 2021, a little less

³²¹ Vladimir Putin, 'Otkrytie pamjatnika Aleksandru I' (Speech, Moscow, Russia, 20 November 2014), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47044>.

³²² Vladimir Putin, 'V Den' narodnogo edinstva v Moskve otkryt pamjatnik knjazju Vladimiru' (Speech, Moscow, Russia, 4 November 2016), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53211>.

³²³ Vladimir Putin, 'Otkrytie pamjatnika Aleksandru III v Gatchinskom dvorce' (Speech, Leningrad Oblast, Russia, 5 June 2021), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/65751>.

³²⁴ Vladimir Putin, 'Otkrytie pamjatnika Aleksandru III' (Speech, Crimea, 18 November 2017), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56125>.

than half (349) of these references were made by others. Vladimir Zhirinovskiy of the LDPR party is a good example of this, who has frequently made references to the tsars and Russian Empire in his meetings with Putin. And this goes for Vladimir Medinsky as well, who was the Russian Minister of Culture between from 2012 to 2020. This might indicate that the tsars have become a source of inspiration for others too, either out of their own interest, or as a result of the proactive approach by Putin.

History as a weapon

In this chapter, we have seen how Putin started to weaponize history during his third and fourth presidencies – using the tsars and the Russian imperial past to address some of the key issues he had to deal with. First and foremost, Putin instrumentalised this history to justify his foreign policy vis-à-vis Ukraine and to protect his power base from opposition protests. As we can see in Figure 8, Putin did so in about a quarter (60 out of 230) of his references:

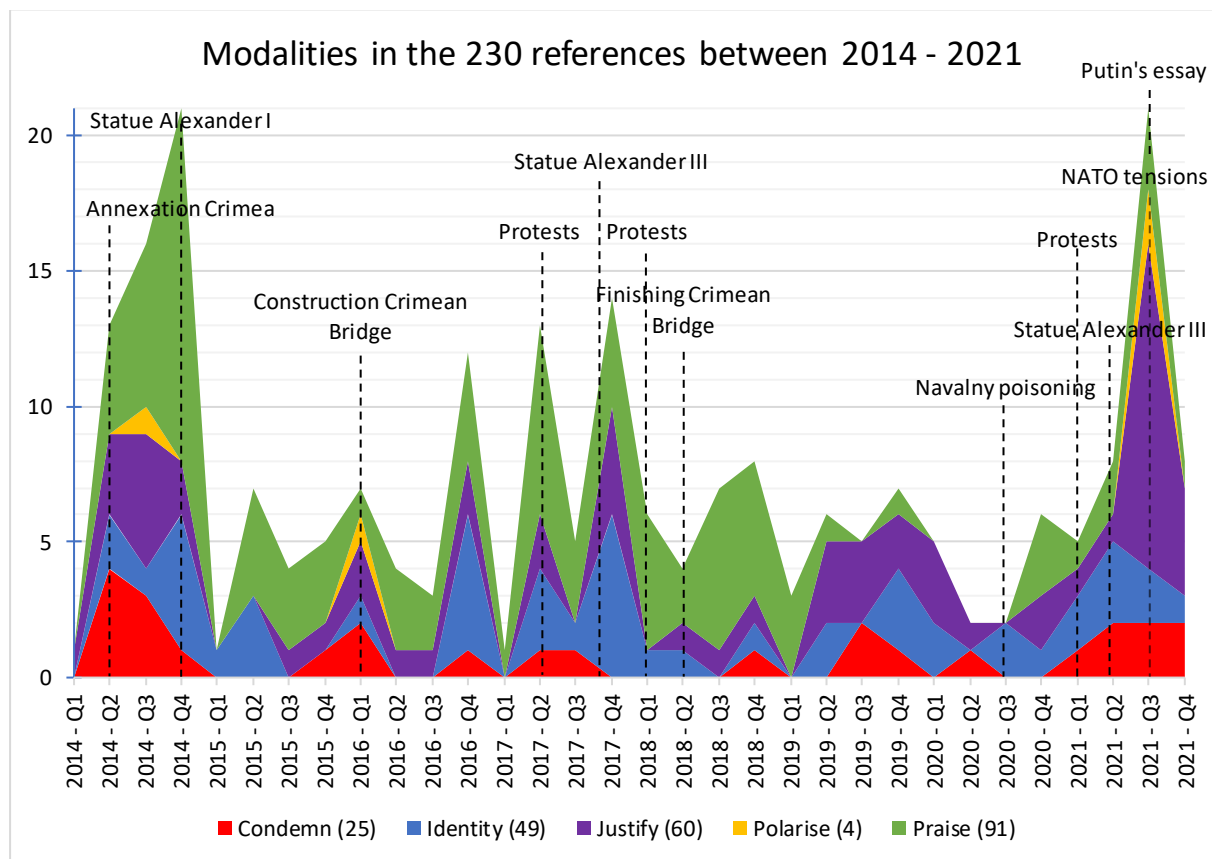


Figure 8 Stacked area chart of the modalities that Putin instrumentalised between March 2014 and December 2021, combined with key events in this period.

Especially at the start and end of this period, we can see a clear surge in purple references that serve to support Russian policy. First, Putin underpinned the annexation of Crimea in 2014 with arguments based on imperial history. In Putin's rhetoric, Crimea had always been Russian and it had now finally been "reunified" again with the Russian Federation – a process in which Russia held the interests of its people at heart. In reality, however, the peninsula only became truly part of the Russian Empire after Catherine the Great annexed in 1783. Additionally, Putin has also drawn a parallel between the October Revolution of 1917 and Maidan Revolution of 2014 to justify his actions, as this gave him an opportunity to argue that the Russian promise in the Budapest Memorandum to respect the territorial integrity of Ukraine was no longer valid. Next, Putin used the history of the Russian Empire to shape a common Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian identity. This formed the basis for Putin's justification to be involved in the affairs of Ukraine and draw a red line at NATO membership for Ukraine. This is one of the key developments in this period: while Putin had mentioned the common spiritual roots that underpin his argument already during his first presidency in 2001, Putin now actively used this episode of history to justify his foreign policy. He praised the times when the "Great Russians", "White Russians", and "Little Russians" were still together, condemned the Bolsheviks for ruining this, and blamed the contemporary Ukrainian elites for dispersing this cultural, spiritual, and economic bond of the united Russian people. However, similar to Putin's statements about Crimea, this claim is neither historically correct, nor does the majority of Ukrainians agree with the idea Russians and Ukrainians as a single people.

After Russia and Western countries imposed sanctions on each other in 2014, Putin increasingly reached back to imperial Russian history to draw a parallel with the past. According to him, Russia had always been besieged by others whenever it became too strong. This line of reasoning allowed Putin to blame the West for the renewed tensions, as well as deflect attention from the economic problems that Russia was experiencing. This also strengthened Putin's power base: the Kremlin is needed to fend off the outside threat. And Russia was also besieged from the inside, according to the rhetoric of Putin. As different waves of protests emerged in Russia between 2017 and 2021, Putin used history to frame the demonstrators as revolutionaries. He primarily drew a parallel to the revolutionary upheaval of the Russian Revolution. The lesson that Putin tried to convey with his historical examples seemed to be oriented at protecting his power base: it is better to follow the rules of the system and gradually improve it, than breaking it altogether with catastrophic results. These

statements can be found back in Figure 8 as red and yellow peaks, showing when Putin condemned the past (25 times) and blamed the West in particular (4 times).

While Putin does not want to be called a tsar and disagrees with this title for himself, he does find inspiration in the tsars. He particularly admires Peter the Great, Catherine the Great, Alexander I, and Alexander III, and expressed his esteem for all of them in his speeches and dedicated statues to the two Alexanders. As Figure 7 shows, Putin made 98 references to the tsars in this period. Putin respects these tsars because they have developed or transformed the state, brought it glory and greatness, and guarded Russian interests internationally.

Conclusion and discussion

How to portray history?

At the 2013 edition of the *Seliger Youth Forum*, a historian asked Putin how history could be made interesting for young people, so that they realise its value for being true patriots or good citizens. Putin, sitting in front of the audience on a large yellow couch and with his empty sleeved jacket hanging loosely over his shoulders – almost as if it were a mantle – shared in response how captivating and interesting Russian history is:

We have a history that, you know, reads like a detective story, like a romantic novel. You just have to present it in a beautiful, talented way. Look: most people know that Peter the Great married Catherine I, right? You know this, and the majority of people know where she came from. She was – it seems indecent to say this today, but it was so – she was a war trophy. And what happened? Let’s just think about it for a minute. I want you to hear this: Peter the Great was such a strong personality and so “cool”, as it is fashionable to say now, and self-confident, that he took this woman, who was the spoils of war of his soldiers, and made her the empress of a great nation. And, you see, here is a love story. It can be so interesting and captivating... and here, I’m only bringing up one segment of our history. I don’t even want to get into the military victories now, or the grandeur of those victories, because clearly, if they hadn’t happened, there would have been no such nation as Russia.³²⁵

This encounter with the historian and the way in which Putin uses history in his answer are illustrative of how Putin has instrumentalised the past throughout his presidencies. First, this rather inappropriate story that Putin shared about Catherine I is an oversimplified account of history in which nuance is missing.³²⁶ Frequently, Putin takes such historical shortcuts or

³²⁵ Vladimir Putin, ‘Molodjzhnyj forum «Seliger-2013»’ (Meeting, Seliger, Russia, 2 August 2013), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/18993>.

³²⁶ Although Henri Troyat writes about the past of Catherine I “as a soldiers’ whore” in his biography of *Terrible Tsarinas*, Lindsey Hughes is much more nuanced in her encyclopaedia entry about Catherine I and biography of Peter the Great. Hughes writes about how the later empress (named Martha Skavronska at the time) came across the Russian army in Livonia in 1702 and “apparently became the mistress first of a field

misrepresents the past altogether. Second, he is using history here to substantiate an argument: praising the past to support his contemporary ideas. Putin consistently employs such modalities in his expressions. Third and last, the context in which Putin is doing all of this is very telling as well. Even the Russian historian who asked the question seems to perceive history as a tool for creating good and patriotic citizens.

Since Putin became president on the turn of the millennium in 1999, he has used the history of the tsars and the Russian Empire as a usable past. Even though this concept was once initiated by Van Wyck Brooks in the situation of open and democratic societies, in which everyone can reach back into history as a source of inspiration,³²⁷ it is nevertheless applicable to the Russian context. Although Russia is not a true democracy, the country is neither an applause machine where the leader is blindly followed. The Kremlin needs to have public opinion behind it and uses history as an instrument to achieve this, consolidating and protecting the president's power base. A clear development can be seen in the way Putin has instrumentalised imperial history since 1999, which progressed in three phases.

During his acting presidency and first two presidencies (1999 – 2008), Putin used history as a source of inspiration, predominantly on sunny occasions. In the vast majority of references (88 per cent) that he made to the imperial past, history was a tool to shape Russian identity and praise a past that preceded Soviet times. The glorious Russian military and navy from back then, the deep European roots of the country, and the Orthodox Church constituted central elements in this identity. Putin also reinstated the Russian tricolour and two headed eagle as official state symbols and expressed his admiration for tsars such as Peter the Great and Catherine the great. In the different sources under analysis, Putin mentioned the tsars 31 times by name – Peter and Catherine most frequently. This past was also used by Putin to foster relations with the United States and other Western countries, where referring to elements from the time of the Russian Empire seemed more suitable for this purpose than Soviet history. These instrumentalizations show how in the beginning, Putin mainly used imperial history in a rather friendly manner as a source of inspiration – almost in celebration of returning to elements from the pre-revolutionary past.

marshal, then of Peter I's favorite, Alexander Menshikov, then of Peter himself'. See: Henri Troyat, *Terrible Tsarinas: Five Russian Women in Power* (New York, UNITED STATES: Algora Publishing, 2001), 9–10, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uunl/detail.action?docID=318623>; Lindsey Hughes, 'Catherine I', in *Encyclopedia of Russian History*, ed. James R. Millar, vol. 1 (New York, NY: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004), 204, <http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX3404100209/GVRL?sid=bookmark-GVRL&xid=a0ff24d9>; Lindsey Hughes, *Peter the Great: A Biography* (New Haven, UNITED STATES: Yale University Press, 2002), 68, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uunl/detail.action?docID=3421602>.

³²⁷ Brooks, 'On Creating a Usable Past'.

After Medvedev took over the presidency from Putin in 2008, the two appear to govern Russia together on the *tandem* and their instrumentalization of history started to change. The war with Georgia proved to be a turning point as their approach became more radical: it is here that imperial history begins to be actively employed as justification for Russian foreign policy. Medvedev and Putin emphasized how Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia used to be regions of the Russian Empire and how close Russian ties are with the people living there. This provided a reason to be involved in their conflict. Next, Medvedev began to repel critique on the state of democracy, corruption, and judiciary in Russia with history. Although Putin used this technique as well, he did so much less systematically than Medvedev is doing now. Together, these justifications make up a quarter (24 per cent) of all the references in this period. After considerable protests broke out in 2011 and Putin returned to the presidency in 2012, another significant development can be observed. Putin increasingly started to underline the importance of unity and patriotism, and in the Year of Russian History (2012), different examples from imperial times when the Russian people came together were celebrated. And around the same time, Putin repeatedly denounced how state power had been lost in the past and how revolutions are perilous. Both function to protect Putin's power base: the message of the Kremlin seemed to be that it is better to be united behind a stable government, than risking the chaos that could follow otherwise. Finally, imperial history was used during this period to extend Russianness outside of contemporary Russian borders: as Russia is a multi ethnic and multi religious state, and (the ancestors of) anyone who used to live in the Soviet Union or Russian Empire can be Russian, the Russian sphere of influence stretches to where these people live.

In March 2014, after the annexation of Crimea, imperial history really began to be used as a weapon by Putin. He waved and swunged this rhetorical sword at home and abroad to justify his actions and secure his power position during the years that followed. First, Putin supported his annexation of the Crimean peninsula with a very one-sided portrayal of the past that did not do justice to history. To shortly paraphrase his argument, Crimea had always been Russian throughout history except for some brief breaks, and now it was rightfully reunified with Russia again. However, in reality it was only in 1873 that Crimea was annexed into the Russian Empire. Later, Putin instrumentalised – or, rather cherry picked – the past as well to shape a common Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian identity. While Putin referred to their common spiritual past during his first presidency as well, Putin was using this history from 2013 onwards to argue that they are all one single people. This provided him with an argument to be involved in the affairs of Ukrainians in particular, and draw a red line at

NATO membership for these “Little Russian” Ukrainians. Yet, again Putin made historical claims here that are incorrect, as there was no understanding of a larger Russian identity a 1000 years ago, and neither does a majority of contemporary Ukrainians agree with the idea. Finally, after Russia and Western countries imposed sanctions on each other, Putin painted a picture of Russia being under siege. By condemning historic examples from imperial times, he argued that this had always been the case when Russia became too powerful. As the state was needed to protect Russia from this threat, this directly contributed to consolidating Putin’s power base. And a siege came from inside Russia as well in Putin’s rhetoric: amid a wave of protests between 2017 and 2021, Putin framed the demonstrators as revolutionaries who want to destroy Russia from within, using comparisons to the Russian Revolution of 1917. This was a continuation from the course he had set out a decade before, and once again, the underlying message served to protect Putin’s power position: breaking the system through revolution, rather than developing it via evolution, has had catastrophic results in the past.

In sum, Putin has used the history of the tsars and the Russian empire since 1999 as a usable past to consolidate his power base in three stages. While he began to employ it as an inspirational tool to strengthen domestic society and international ties, the past slowly transformed into a weapon after his first two presidential terms. During his *tandem* with Medvedev from 2008 onwards, more and more Russian actions started to be justified with imperial history, abroad as well as domestically. This approach culminated and radicalised after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, when Putin used imperial history to justify his actions in the key issues he had to deal with. From his involvement in Ukrainian affairs to dealing with domestic opposition, Putin invoked the history of the tsars and the Russian Empire to support his arguments. This version of history did not always do justice to reality, however, and could sometimes even be interpreted as outright falsifications of the past.

Finally, I would like to add some comments here as well. The focus of this thesis is on Putin and *how* he instrumentalises imperial history. While I have accompanied his statements with the necessary context where I deemed it necessary to do so, this is explicitly not a fact-checking thesis. The added value of my work is in the mapping and presentation of Putin’s perspective and his historical methods. The full aspect of how far his claims are historically accurate could be a fruitful topic for follow-up research. This also goes for the perception of his expressions in Russia and other countries: it would be valuable to compare the impact of the different historical modalities on Russian public opinion. Additionally, the focus of this thesis could be expanded upon. To keep my work within the scope of an MA thesis, I have limited my selection of keywords to the tsars and important events during their reign, as well

as some relevant general terminology (see Table 3). In future studies, it could be valuable to analyse what happens when more keywords related to this period are added, as well as other chapters in Russian history. Would my conclusions still hold true if the history of the Soviet Union is also included? How do other prominent Russians, within as well as outside of the Kremlin, use the past? And how does this compare to the way in which Soviet leaders have done so? Further research in the spirit of these questions would contribute to our knowledge of the instrumentalization of history in Russia.

Understanding how this works is incredibly important, as history is one of the key weapons that Putin employs. As mentioned earlier, Russia cannot be categorised as a true democracy, but neither is it an applause machine. With history, Russian leaders rally the population behind them – knowledge of how they are doing so offers an insight into the cards the Russian president holds and plays.

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Annex

1 Scraping code

```
library(rvest)
library(dplyr)
library(stringr)

get_speech = function(speech_link) {
  speech_page = read_html(speech_link)
  speech_name_full = speech_page %>% html_nodes(".p-name") %>% html_text()
  speech_published = speech_page %>% html_nodes(".read__published") %>% html_text()
  speech_text_list = speech_page %>% html_nodes(".read__internal_content > p") %>% html_text()
  speech_text_merged_n = speech_text_list %>% paste(collapse = "\n")
  speech_text = gsub("\n", " ", speech_text_merged_n)
  speech_filename = substr(speech_name_full, 1, 200)
  filename_unclean = paste0(speech_published, " - ", speech_filename, ".txt")
  filename = str_remove_all(filename_unclean, "[/><|=?;:<|!@#%^&*()]"")
  write.table(speech_text_list, file = filename, row.names = FALSE, col.names = FALSE, append = FALSE,
quote = FALSE, eol = "\r\n")
  random_number = runif(1, 1.5, 3)
  Sys.sleep(random_number)
  return(speech_text)
}

for (page_result in seq(from = 1, to = 577, by = 1)) {
  link = paste0("http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/page/", page_result)
  page = read_html(link)

  name = page %>% html_nodes(".p-name") %>% html_text()

  speech_links = page %>% html_nodes(".hentry__title_special a") %>% html_attr("href") %>%
paste("http://kremlin.ru", ..sep = "")
  meta = page %>% html_nodes(".hentry__meta") %>% html_text()
  date_spaces = sub(" года.*", "", meta)
  date = substring(date_spaces, 3)
  location_spaces = sub(".*сайта Президента России", "", meta)
  location = substring(location_spaces, 2)
  text = sapply(speech_links, FUN = get_speech)

  everything = rbind(everything, data.frame(name, date, location, text, stringsAsFactors = FALSE))
  print(paste("Page:", page_result))

  random_number = runif(1, 1.5, 3)
  Sys.sleep(random_number)
}

csv_filename = paste0("sources up to ", page_result, ".csv")
write.csv(everything, file = csv_filename)
```

Table 2 Scraping code for collecting all primary sources from Kremlin.ru between August 1999 and December 2021

2 List of keywords

| | What | Antconc search term | Category |
|----|--|----------------------------|-----------------|
| 1 | coronation | коронаци* | General |
| 2 | emperor | император* | General |
| 3 | emperor of all the Russias | император* всероссийск* | General |
| 4 | empress | императриц* | General |
| 5 | Godunov | Годунов* | General |
| 6 | Grand Duchy of Moscow | велик* княжест* Московск* | General |
| 7 | Imperial Russia | Императорск* Росси* | General |
| 8 | Kievan Rus | Киевск* Рус* | General |
| 9 | mestnichestvo | местничеств* | General |
| 10 | Moscovian Russia | Московск* Рус* | General |
| 11 | Muscovy | Москови* | General |
| 12 | okolnichy | окольнич* | General |
| 13 | reign | царствовани* | General |
| 14 | Romanov | Романов* | General |
| 15 | Romanov dynasty | династ* Романов* | General |
| 16 | Rurik | Рюрик* | General |
| 17 | Rurikid Muscovy | Рюрикид* Москови* | General |
| 18 | Russian Empire | Российск* импери* | General |
| 19 | Russian Empire | Россииск* импери* | General |
| 20 | Russian throne | русск* престол* | General |
| 21 | Russian throne (alt) | русск* трон* | General |
| 22 | Shuysky | Шуйск* | General |
| 23 | Shuysky | Шуиск* | General |
| 24 | tsar, tsardom, tsarevich, tsarevna, tsarina, tsarism, tsarist, tsars | цар* | General |
| 25 | Tsardom of Russia | Царств* Росси* | General |
| 26 | Ivan the Terrible | Иван* Васильевич* | Tsars of Russia |
| 27 | Ivan the Terrible (alt.) | Иван* Грозн* | Tsars of Russia |
| 28 | Ivan the Terrible (alt.) | Иван* IV | Tsars of Russia |
| 29 | Ivan the Terrible (alt.) | Иван* Четверт* | Tsars of Russia |
| 30 | Feodor I | Фёдор* Иванович* | Tsars of Russia |
| 31 | Feodor I (alt.) | Феодор* Звонар* | Tsars of Russia |
| 32 | Feodor I (alt.) | Феодор* Блаженн* | Tsars of Russia |
| 33 | Feodor I (alt.) | Фёдор* I | Tsars of Russia |
| 34 | Feodor I (alt.) | Федор* Перв* | Tsars of Russia |
| 35 | Boris Godunov | Борис* Фёдорович* Годунов* | Tsars of Russia |
| 36 | Feodor II | Фёдор Борисович Годунов | Tsars of Russia |
| 37 | Feodor II (alt.) | Фёдор* II | Tsars of Russia |
| 38 | Feodor II (alt.) | Фёдор* Втор* | Tsars of Russia |

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| 39 | False Dmitry I | Лжедмитр* I | Tsars of Russia |
| 40 | False Dmitry I (alt.) | Лжедмитр* Перв* | Tsars of Russia |
| 41 | False Dmitry I (alt.) | Дмитрий Иванович* | Tsars of Russia |
| 42 | False Dmitry I (alt.) | Император* Димитр* | Tsars of Russia |
| 43 | False Dmitry I (alt.) | Дмитрии Иванович* | Tsars of Russia |
| 44 | Vasili IV | Васил* Иванович* Шуиск* | Tsars of Russia |
| 45 | Vasili IV (alt.) | Васил* Иванович* Шуйск* | Tsars of Russia |
| 46 | Vasili IV (alt.) | Васил* IV | Tsars of Russia |
| 47 | Vasili IV (alt.) | Васил* Четверт* | Tsars of Russia |
| 48 | Władysław IV Vasa | Владислав* Жигимонтович* | Tsars of Russia |
| 49 | Władysław IV Vasa (alt.) | Владислав* IV | Tsars of Russia |
| 50 | Władysław IV Vasa (alt.) | Владислав* Четверт* | Tsars of Russia |
| 51 | Feodor I (alt.) | Федор* Иванович* | Tsars of Russia |
| 52 | Feodor I (alt.) | Федор* I | Tsars of Russia |
| 53 | Feodor II (alt.) | Федор Борисович Годунов | Tsars of Russia |
| 54 | Feodor II (alt.) | Федор* II | Tsars of Russia |
| 55 | Feodor II (alt.) | Федор* Втор* | Tsars of Russia |
| 56 | Michael (alt.) | Михаил* Федорович* | Romanovs |
| 57 | Michael (alt.) | Михаил* Федорович* Романов* | Romanovs |
| 58 | Feodor III (alt.) | Федор* Алексеевич* | Romanovs |
| 59 | Feodor III (alt.) | Федор* III | Romanovs |
| 60 | Feodor III (alt.) | Федор* Трет* | Romanovs |
| 61 | Peter the Great (alt.) | Петр* Алексеевич* | Romanovs |
| 62 | Peter the Great (alt.) | Петр* Алексеевич* Романов* | Romanovs |
| 63 | Peter the Great (alt.) | Петр* I | Romanovs |
| 64 | Peter the Great (alt.) | Петр* Велик* | Romanovs |
| 65 | Michael | Михаил* Фёдорович* | Romanovs |
| 66 | Michael (alt.) | Михаил* Фёдорович* Романов* | Romanovs |
| 67 | Michael (alt.) | Михаил* I | Romanovs |
| 68 | Michael (alt.) | Михаил* Перв* | Romanovs |
| 69 | Alexis | Алексе* Михайлович* | Romanovs |
| 70 | Alexis (alt.) | Алексе* Михайлович* | Romanovs |
| 71 | Alexis (alt.) | Алексе* Михайлович* Тишайш* | Romanovs |
| 72 | Alexis (alt.) | Алексе* Михайлович* Тишайш* | Romanovs |
| 73 | Alexis (alt.) | Алексе* I | Romanovs |
| 74 | Alexis (alt.) | Алексе* Перв* | Romanovs |
| 75 | Feodor III | Фёдор* Алексеевич* | Romanovs |
| 76 | Feodor III (alt.) | Фёдор* III | Romanovs |
| 77 | Feodor III (alt.) | Фёдор* Трет* | Romanovs |

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| 78 | Ivan V | Иван* Алексеевич* | Romanovs |
| 79 | Ivan V (alt.) | Иван* V | Romanovs |
| 80 | Ivan V (alt.) | Иван* Пят* | Romanovs |
| 81 | Peter the Great | Пётр* Алексеевич* | Romanovs |
| 82 | Peter the Great (alt.) | Пётр* Алексеевич* Романов* | Romanovs |
| 83 | Peter the Great (alt.) | Пётр* I | Romanovs |
| 84 | Peter the Great (alt.) | Пётр* Велик* | Romanovs |
| 85 | Catherine I | Екатерин* Алексеєвн* | Emperors of Russia |
| 86 | Catherine I (alt.) | Екатерин* Михайлов* | Emperors of Russia |
| 87 | Catherine I (alt.) | Екатерин* Алексеєвн* Михайлов* | Emperors of Russia |
| 88 | Catherine I (alt.) | Екатерин* Алексеєвн* Михайлов* | Emperors of Russia |
| 89 | Catherine I (alt.) | Екатерин* Михайлов* | Emperors of Russia |
| 90 | Catherine I (alt.) | Екатерин* I | Emperors of Russia |
| 91 | Catherine I (alt.) | Екатерин* Перв* | Emperors of Russia |
| 92 | Catherine I (alt.) | Март* Самуиловн* Скавронск* | Emperors of Russia |
| 93 | Catherine I (alt.) | Март* Скавронск* | Emperors of Russia |
| 94 | Peter II | Пётр* Алексеевич* | Emperors of Russia |
| 95 | Peter II (alt.) | Пётр* II | Emperors of Russia |
| 96 | Peter II (alt.) | Пётр* Втор* | Emperors of Russia |
| 97 | Anna | Анн* Иоанновн* | Emperors of Russia |
| 98 | Anna's reign | бироновщин* | Emperors of Russia |
| 99 | Ivan VI | Иван* Антонович* | Emperors of Russia |
| 100 | Ivan VI (alt.) | Иван* VI | Emperors of Russia |
| 101 | Elizabeth | Елизавет* Петровн* | Emperors of Russia |
| 102 | Peter II (alt.) | Петр* Алексеевич* | Emperors of Russia |
| 103 | Peter II (alt.) | Петр* II | Emperors of Russia |
| 104 | Peter II (alt.) | Петр* Втор* | Emperors of Russia |
| 105 | Peter III (alt.) | Петр* Федорович* | Emperors of Russia |
| 106 | Peter III (alt.) | Петр* III | Emperors of Russia |
| 107 | Peter III (alt.) | Петр* Трет* | Emperors of Russia |
| 108 | Peter III | Пётр* Фёдорович* | Emperors of Russia |
| 109 | Peter III (alt.) | Пётр* III | Emperors of Russia |
| 110 | Peter III (alt.) | Пётр* Трет* | Emperors of Russia |
| 111 | Peter III (alt.) | Карл* Петер* Ульр* | Emperors of Russia |
| 112 | Catherine II (the Great) | Екатерин* Алексеєвн* | Emperors of Russia |
| 113 | Catherine II (the Great) (alt.) | Екатерин* II | Emperors of Russia |
| 114 | Catherine II (the Great) (alt.) | Екатерин* Втор* | Emperors of Russia |
| 115 | Catherine II (the Great) (alt.) | Екатерин* Велик* | Emperors of Russia |
| 116 | Catherine II (the Great) (alt.) | Софи* Август* Фредерик* | Emperors of Russia |
| 117 | Paul I | Павел* Петрович* | Emperors of Russia |

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| 118 | Paul I (alt.) | Павел* I | Emperors of Russia |
| 119 | Paul I (alt.) | Павел* Перв* | Emperors of Russia |
| 120 | Alexander I | Александр* Павлович* | Emperors of Russia |
| 121 | Alexander I (alt.) | Александр* I | Emperors of Russia |
| 122 | Alexander I (alt.) | Александр* Перв* | Emperors of Russia |
| 123 | Alexander I (alt.) | Александр* Благословенн* | Emperors of Russia |
| 124 | Grand Duke Konstantin Pavlovich of Russia | Константин* Павлович* | Emperors of Russia |
| 125 | Nicholas I | Никол* Павлович* | Emperors of Russia |
| 126 | Nicholas I (alt.) | Никол* Перв* | Emperors of Russia |
| 127 | Alexander II | Александр* Николаевич* | Emperors of Russia |
| 128 | Alexander II (alt.) | Александр* II | Emperors of Russia |
| 129 | Alexander II (alt.) | Александр* Втор* | Emperors of Russia |
| 130 | Alexander II (alt.) | Александр* Освободител* | Emperors of Russia |
| 131 | Alexander II (alt.) | Александр* Вешател* | Emperors of Russia |
| 132 | Alexander III | Александр* Александрович* | Emperors of Russia |
| 133 | Alexander III (alt.) | Александр* III | Emperors of Russia |
| 134 | Alexander III (alt.) | Александр* Миротворец* | Emperors of Russia |
| 135 | (Saint) Nicholas II | Никол* Александрович* | Emperors of Russia |
| 136 | (Saint) Nicholas II (alt.) | Никол* II | Emperors of Russia |
| 137 | (Saint) Nicholas II (alt.) | Свят* Никол* | Emperors of Russia |
| 138 | (Saint) Nicholas II (alt.) | Никол* Стратотерпец* | Emperors of Russia |
| 139 | (decree on) compulsory peasants | обязанн* крестьян* | Noteworthy history |
| 140 | (decree on) Free Peasants | вольн* хлебопашц* | Noteworthy history |
| 141 | (Revolt by) Ivan Bolotnikov | Иван* Болотников* | Noteworthy history |
| 142 | Abdication of Nicholas II | отречен* Никол* | Noteworthy history |
| 143 | Abolition of serfdom | отмен* крепостн* | Noteworthy history |
| 144 | Anglo-Russian war | Англ*-русск* войн* | Noteworthy history |
| 145 | Anglo-Russian war | Англ*-русск* воин* | Noteworthy history |
| 146 | anti-French coalitions | Антифранцузск* коалиц* | Noteworthy history |
| 147 | Assignment ruble | Ассигнационн* рубл* | Noteworthy history |
| 148 | Astrakhan revolt | Астраханск* восстан* | Noteworthy history |
| 149 | Bar Confederation | Барск* конфедерац* | Noteworthy history |
| 150 | Bashkir Rebellion | Башкирск* восстан* | Noteworthy history |
| 151 | Bashkir uprising | Башкирск* восстан* | Noteworthy history |
| 152 | Basmachi movement | Басмачеств* | Noteworthy history |
| 153 | Battle of Austerlitz | Битв* @ Аустерлиц* | Noteworthy history |
| 154 | Battle of Austerlitz (alt.) | Аустерлиц* Битв* | Noteworthy history |
| 155 | Battle of Borodino | Бородинск* сражен* | Noteworthy history |
| 156 | Battle of Borodino (alt.) | сражен* @ Бородинск* | Noteworthy history |
| 157 | Battle of Cesme | Чесменск* бо* | Noteworthy history |
| 158 | Battle of Grogama | Гренгамск* сражен* | Noteworthy history |

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| 159 | Battle of Grogama (alt.) | сражен* @ Гренгам* | Noteworthy history |
| 160 | Battle of Kozluci | Сражен* @ Козлудж* | Noteworthy history |
| 161 | Battle of Kozluci (alt.) | Козлудж* сражен* | Noteworthy history |
| 162 | Battle of Kunersdorf | Кунерсдорфск* сражен* | Noteworthy history |
| 163 | Battle of Kunersdorf (alt.) | сражен* Кунерсдорфск* | Noteworthy history |
| 164 | Battle of Navarino | Наваринск* сражен* | Noteworthy history |
| 165 | Battle of Navarino | сражен* Наваринск* | Noteworthy history |
| 166 | Battle of Poltava | Полтавск* битв* | Noteworthy history |
| 167 | Battle of Poltava (alt.) | битв* Полтавск* | Noteworthy history |
| 168 | Battle of Smolensk | Смоленск* сражен* | Noteworthy history |
| 169 | Battle of Smolensk (alt.) | сражен* @ Смоленск* | Noteworthy history |
| 170 | Battle of Tsushima | Цусимск* сражен* | Noteworthy history |
| 171 | Battle of Tsushima (alt.) | сражен*Цусимск* | Noteworthy history |
| 172 | Berlin Congress | Берлинск* конгресс* | Noteworthy history |
| 173 | Bezдна unrest | Бездненск* волнен* | Noteworthy history |
| 174 | Black Division | хожден* @ народ* | Noteworthy history |
| 175 | Black Division | Черн* передел* | Noteworthy history |
| 176 | Bloody Sunday | Кровав* воскресен* | Noteworthy history |
| 177 | Bolshevik Revolution | Большевиствск* революц* | Noteworthy history |
| 178 | Boxer rebellion | Ихэтуаньск* восстан* | Noteworthy history |
| 179 | Breakthrough of Gorlitz | Горлицк* прорыв* | Noteworthy history |
| 180 | Brusilov offensive | Брусиловск* наступлен* | Noteworthy history |
| 181 | Brusilovsky breakthrough | Брусиловск* прорыв* | Noteworthy history |
| 182 | Bulavin Rebellion | Булавинск* восстан* | Noteworthy history |
| 183 | Capture of Ishmael | взят* Измаил* | Noteworthy history |
| 184 | Capture of Ochakov | взят* Очаков* | Noteworthy history |
| 185 | Capture of Paris | взят* Париж* | Noteworthy history |
| 186 | Capture of Polotsk | взят* Полоцк* | Noteworthy history |
| 187 | Caucasian War | Кавказск* войн* | Noteworthy history |
| 188 | Caucasian War | Кавказск* воин* | Noteworthy history |
| 189 | Congress of Vienna | Венск* конгресс* | Noteworthy history |
| 190 | Conquest of Eastern Siberia | завоеван* Восточн* Сибир* | Noteworthy history |
| 191 | Construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway | строительств* Транссибирск* | Noteworthy history |
| 192 | Copper revolt | медн* бунт* | Noteworthy history |
| 193 | coronation of Ivan IV | коронац* Иван* IV | Noteworthy history |
| 194 | Cotton rebellion | восстан* Хлопк* | Noteworthy history |
| 195 | Decembrists | Декабрист* | Noteworthy history |
| 196 | Deulin Armistice | Деулинск* перемир* | Noteworthy history |
| 197 | February Revolution | Февральск* революц* | Noteworthy history |
| 198 | Finnish war | Финляндск* войн* | Noteworthy history |
| 199 | Finnish war | Финляндск* воин* | Noteworthy history |

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| 200 | First World War | Перв* миров* войн* | Noteworthy history |
| 201 | First World War | Перв* миров* воин* | Noteworthy history |
| 202 | Fixed years | урочн* лет* | Noteworthy history |
| 203 | Forbidden Years | Заповедн* лет* | Noteworthy history |
| 204 | Founding of Saint-Petersburg | Основани* Санкт*-Петербург* | Noteworthy history |
| 205 | gathering of the Russian lands | собрание русск* земел* | Noteworthy history |
| 206 | Georgievskiy Treaty | Георгиевск* трактат* | Noteworthy history |
| 207 | Great Northern Expedition | Велик* Северн* экспедиц* | Noteworthy history |
| 208 | Great Northern War | Северн* войн* | Noteworthy history |
| 209 | Great Northern War | Северн* воин* | Noteworthy history |
| 210 | Great Patriotic War (1812) | 1812 Отечественн* войн* | Noteworthy history |
| 211 | Great Patriotic War (1812) | Отечественн* войн* @ 1812 | Noteworthy history |
| 212 | Great Patriotic War (1812) | 1812 Отечественн* воин* | Noteworthy history |
| 213 | Great Patriotic War (1812) | Отечественн* воин* @ 1812 | Noteworthy history |
| 214 | great peasant rebellion | велик* крестьянск* восстан* | Noteworthy history |
| 215 | Great Turkish War | Велик* Турецк* войн* | Noteworthy history |
| 216 | Great Turkish War | Велик* Турецк* воин* | Noteworthy history |
| 217 | Guria uprising | Восстан* @ Гур* | Noteworthy history |
| 218 | Guria uprising (alt.) | Гур* Восстан* | Noteworthy history |
| 219 | Holy Alliance | Священн* союз* | Noteworthy history |
| 220 | Hundred Heads Council | Стоглав* собор* | Noteworthy history |
| 221 | Issuance of Assygnat | выпуск* ассигнац* | Noteworthy history |
| 222 | Kamchatka Expedition | Камчатск* экспедиц* | Noteworthy history |
| 223 | Kazakh Khanate | Казахск* ханств* | Noteworthy history |
| 224 | Khodynka Tragedy | Ходынск* катастроф* | Noteworthy history |
| 225 | Khodynka Tragedy (alt.) | Давк* @ Ходынск* | Noteworthy history |
| 226 | Kiselev's reform | Реформ* Киселёв* | Noteworthy history |
| 227 | Kiselev's reform | Реформ* Киселев* | Noteworthy history |
| 228 | Kishinev pogrom | Кишиневск* погром* | Noteworthy history |
| 229 | Kosciuszko uprising | восстан* Костюшк* | Noteworthy history |
| 230 | Kościuszko Uprising | Восстан* Костюш* | Noteworthy history |
| 231 | Labour Liberation Group | Освобожден* труд* | Noteworthy history |
| 232 | Land and Will | Земл* и вол* | Noteworthy history |
| 233 | Lena goldfields shootings | Ленск* расстрел* | Noteworthy history |
| 234 | Lena mines | Ленск* прииск* | Noteworthy history |
| 235 | Livonian War | Ливонск* войн* | Noteworthy history |
| 236 | Livonian War | Ливонск* воин* | Noteworthy history |
| 237 | Manifesto on abolition of serfdom | Манифест* @ отмен* крепостн* | Noteworthy history |
| 238 | Manifesto on freedom of the nobility | Манифест* @ вольност* дворянств* | Noteworthy history |
| 239 | Morozovskaya strike | Морозовск* стачк* | Noteworthy history |

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| 240 | Mukden | Мукден* | Noteworthy history |
| 241 | Nakaz (of Catherine the Great) | Наказ* Екатерин* | Noteworthy history |
| 242 | Napoleon | Наполеон* | Noteworthy history |
| 243 | Narodnaya Volja | Народн* вол* | Noteworthy history |
| 244 | Narodnaya Volja (alt.) | народовольц* | Noteworthy history |
| 245 | Novgorod Pogrom | Новгородск* погром* | Noteworthy history |
| 246 | October 17 Manifesto | Манифест* 17 октябр* | Noteworthy history |
| 247 | October 17 Manifesto (alt.) | Манифест* семнадц* октябр* | Noteworthy history |
| 248 | October Revolution | Октябрьск* революц* | Noteworthy history |
| 249 | <i>oprichnina</i> | опричнин* | Noteworthy history |
| 250 | Oprichnina | опричнин* | Noteworthy history |
| 251 | Organic Code | Соборн* уложен* | Noteworthy history |
| 252 | Partition of Poland | раздел* Польш* | Noteworthy history |
| 253 | Partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth | раздел* Реч* Посполит* | Noteworthy history |
| 254 | Peace of Tilsit | Тильзитск* мир* | Noteworthy history |
| 255 | Peasants War | Крестьянск* войн* | Noteworthy history |
| 256 | Peasants War | Крестьянск* воин* | Noteworthy history |
| 257 | Pereyaslavskaya rada | Переяславск* рад* | Noteworthy history |
| 258 | Polish revolt | Польск* восстан* | Noteworthy history |
| 259 | Polish uprising | Польск* восстан* | Noteworthy history |
| 260 | Polish–Muscovite War | Русск*-польск* войн* | Noteworthy history |
| 261 | Polish–Muscovite War | Русск*-польск* воин* | Noteworthy history |
| 262 | Prut campaign | Прутск* поход* | Noteworthy history |
| 263 | <i>Pugachev revolt</i> | Пугачевск* восстан* | Noteworthy history |
| 264 | <i>Pugachev revolt (alt.)</i> | восстан* Пугачёв* | Noteworthy history |
| 265 | <i>Pugachev revolt (alt.)</i> | восстан* Пугачев* | Noteworthy history |
| 266 | Revolt of the Semyonovsky Regiment | восстан* Семеновск* полк* | Noteworthy history |
| 267 | Russian Kingdom of Poland | Русск* царств* @ Польш* | Noteworthy history |
| 268 | Russian Revolution | Русск* революц* | Noteworthy history |
| 269 | Russian Social Democratic Labour Party | Российск* социал*- демократическ* рабоч* парти* | Noteworthy history |
| 270 | Russian Social Democratic Labour Party | Российск* социал*- демократическ* рабоч* парти* | Noteworthy history |
| 271 | Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (abr.) | РСДРП | Noteworthy history |
| 272 | Russian-Austrian war | Русск*-австрийск* войн* | Noteworthy history |
| 273 | Russian-Austrian war | Русск*-австрийск* воин* | Noteworthy history |
| 274 | Russian-Crimean war | Русск*-крымск* войн* | Noteworthy history |
| 275 | Russian-Crimean war | Русск*-крымск* воин* | Noteworthy history |
| 276 | Russian-French war | Русск*-французск* войн* | Noteworthy history |
| 277 | Russian-French war | Русск*-французск* воин* | Noteworthy history |

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| 278 | Russian-Japanese war | Русск*-японск* войн* | Noteworthy history |
| 279 | Russian-Japanese war | Русск*-японск* войн* | Noteworthy history |
| 280 | Russian-Persian war | русск*-персидск* война | Noteworthy history |
| 281 | Russian-Persian war | русск*-персидск* война | Noteworthy history |
| 282 | Russian-Prussian war | Русск*-прусск* войн* | Noteworthy history |
| 283 | Russian-Prussian war | Русск*-прусск* войн* | Noteworthy history |
| 284 | Russian-Swedish war | Русск*-шведск* войн* | Noteworthy history |
| 285 | Russian-Swedish war | Русск*-шведск* войн* | Noteworthy history |
| 286 | Russian-Turkish war | Русск*-турецк* войн* | Noteworthy history |
| 287 | Russian-Turkish war | Русск*-турецк* войн* | Noteworthy history |
| 288 | Salt riot | Солян* бунт* | Noteworthy history |
| 289 | Sell of Alaska | прода* Аляск* | Noteworthy history |
| 290 | Seven Years War | Семилетн* войн* | Noteworthy history |
| 291 | Seven Years War | Семилетн* войн* | Noteworthy history |
| 292 | Seven Years' War | Семилетн* войн* | Noteworthy history |
| 293 | Seven Years' War | Семилетн* войн* | Noteworthy history |
| 294 | Seven-Boyarshchina | Семибоярщин* | Noteworthy history |
| 295 | Shoorcha rebellion | Акрамовск* восстан* | Noteworthy history |
| 296 | Siege of Kazan | Взят* Казан* | Noteworthy history |
| 297 | Siege of Kazan (alt.) | Осад* Казан* | Noteworthy history |
| 298 | Siege of Pskov | Оборон* Псков* | Noteworthy history |
| 299 | Siege of Pskov | Осад* Псков* | Noteworthy history |
| 300 | Sino-Russian border conflicts | Русск*-цинск* пограничн* конфликт* | Noteworthy history |
| 301 | Smolensk War | Смоленск* войн* | Noteworthy history |
| 302 | Smolensk War | Смоленск* войн* | Noteworthy history |
| 303 | Sobor code | Соборн* уложен* | Noteworthy history |
| 304 | Socialist Social Revolutionary Party | парт* эсеров* | Noteworthy history |
| 305 | Solovetsky revolt | Соловецк* восстан* | Noteworthy history |
| 306 | Speransky's draft of reforms | реформ* Сперанск* | Noteworthy history |
| 307 | Streltsy uprising | Стрелецк* бунт* | Noteworthy history |
| 308 | Sviatopolk-Mirsky | Святополк*-Мирск* | Noteworthy history |
| 309 | Svod zakonov | Свод* закон* | Noteworthy history |
| 310 | Third Section | Трет* отделен* | Noteworthy history |
| 311 | Time of Troubles | Смутн* врем* | Noteworthy history |
| 312 | Treaty of Aigun | Айгунск* договор* | Noteworthy history |
| 313 | Treaty of Aigun | Айгунск* договор* | Noteworthy history |
| 314 | Treaty of Gulistan | Гюлистанск* мир* | Noteworthy history |
| 315 | Treaty of Kuchuk-Kainardji | Кючук*-Кайнарджииск* догов* | Noteworthy history |
| 316 | Treaty of Kuchuk-Kainardji | Кючук*-Кайнарджийск* догов* | Noteworthy history |

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| 317 | Treaty of Nystadt | Ништадтск* мирн* | Noteworthy history |
| 318 | Treaty of Nystadt | Ништадтск* догов* | Noteworthy history |
| 319 | Treaty of Paris | Парижск* догов* @ 1814 | Noteworthy history |
| 320 | Treaty of Paris (alt) | 1814 мирн* догов* | Noteworthy history |
| 321 | Treaty of Paris (alt) | 1814 Парижск* догов* | Noteworthy history |
| 322 | Treaty of Paris (alt) | мирн* догов* @ 1814 | Noteworthy history |
| 323 | Treaty of Pereyaslav | Переяславск* догов* | Noteworthy history |
| 324 | Treaty of Portsmouth | Портсмутск* догов* | Noteworthy history |
| 325 | Treaty of Stolbovsky | Столбовск* мир* | Noteworthy history |
| 326 | Treaty of Tilsit | Тильзитск* догов* | Noteworthy history |
| 327 | Treaty of Yermak-Zapolsky | Ям*-Запольск* мир* | Noteworthy history |
| 328 | Truce of Pluss | Плюск* перемир* | Noteworthy history |
| 329 | Tsushima | Цусим* | Noteworthy history |
| 330 | Ulozhenny Commission | уложенн* комисс* | Noteworthy history |
| 331 | Union of Struggles for the Liberation of the Working Class | Союз* борьб* за освобожден* рабоч* класс* | Noteworthy history |
| 332 | Uprising in Petrograd | восстан* @ Петроград* | Noteworthy history |
| 333 | urban uprisings | городск* восстан* | Noteworthy history |
| 334 | Vilna truce | Виленск* перемир* | Noteworthy history |
| 335 | War of Polish succession | Воин* @ польск* наследств* | Noteworthy history |
| 336 | War of Polish succession | Войн* @ польск* наследств* | Noteworthy history |
| 337 | War of the Austrian succession | Войн* @ австрийск* наследств* | Noteworthy history |
| 338 | War of the Austrian succession | Воин* @ австрииск* наследств* | Noteworthy history |
| 339 | War of the fifth coalition | Войн* пят* коалиц* | Noteworthy history |
| 340 | War of the fifth coalition | Воин* пят* коалиц* | Noteworthy history |
| 341 | War of the fourth coalition | Войн* четвёрт* коалиц* | Noteworthy history |
| 342 | War of the fourth coalition | Воин* четвёрт* коалиц* | Noteworthy history |
| 343 | War of the fourth coalition (alt.) | Воин* четверт* коалиц* | Noteworthy history |
| 344 | War of the fourth coalition (alt.) | Воин* четверт* коалиц* | Noteworthy history |
| 345 | War of the second coalition | Войн* втор* коалиц* | Noteworthy history |
| 346 | War of the second coalition | Воин* втор* коалиц* | Noteworthy history |
| 347 | War of the seventh coalition | Войн* сем* коалиц* | Noteworthy history |
| 348 | War of the seventh coalition | Воин* сем* коалиц* | Noteworthy history |
| 349 | War of the sixth coalition | Войн* шест* коалиц* | Noteworthy history |
| 350 | War of the sixth coalition | Воин* шест* коалиц* | Noteworthy history |
| 351 | War of the third coalition | Войн* трет* коалиц* | Noteworthy history |
| 352 | War of the third coalition | Воин* трет* коалиц* | Noteworthy history |
| 353 | Western Zemstvo crisis | Западн* земск* кризис* | Noteworthy history |
| 354 | Zapiski okhotnika | Записк* охотник* | Noteworthy history |
| 355 | Zaporozhian Sich | Запорожск* Сеч* | Noteworthy history |
| 356 | zemski sobor | земск* собор* | Noteworthy history |

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| 357 | Zemstvo | земств* | Noteworthy history |
| 358 | Alexandrian reforms | реформ* александровск* | Noteworthy years |
| 359 | alexandrian times | александровск* реформ* | Noteworthy years |
| 360 | Catherine times | екатерининск* времен* | Noteworthy years |
| 361 | Nicholas times | николаевск* времен* | Noteworthy years |
| 362 | Petrine times | петровск* времен* | Noteworthy years |

Table 3 List of keywords for data analysis in AntConc