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Putin’s Technological Deluge: Techno-Populism, Anti-Westernism, and the Strive for Global Leadership

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Abstract

This study explores techno-populism in Russia as the interweaving of technocratic and populist discourses. Analyzing eight Presidential Addresses to the Federal Assembly (between 2012 and 2020), it maps five themes through which techno-populist discourse manifests itself in the speeches of Vladimir Putin. The central theme of global leadership is supported by themes of preserving “Russian civilization,” maintaining geopolitical influence, praising military power, and the prospect of a high-tech future. This research contributes to a better understanding of the emergence and usage of the techno-populist antinomic *prima facie*.

KEYWORDS techno-populism, Putin, Russia, Ukraine, Presidential Address

INTRODUCTION

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has puzzled many experts with how illogical or irrational it was. Although the country has been on a steady track of growing authoritarianism for several years, the biggest war in Europe since 1945 that was caused by this regime needs a comprehensive explanation. The first months of the war showed how dramatically miscalculated the invasion was: the losses of military personnel, urgent retreats from the

Kharkiv region in September 2022, and the failure to control the invaded territories. The “partial mobilization” of 300,000 people confirmed suspicions that Russia’s army’s losses were terribly high (*The Guardian* 2022).

Had Putin gone mad when he started the war? Did he miscalculate the capacity of his army? Is he gambling and hoping the war will not undermine his regime? All these explanations are plausible, but as social scientists, we must find a reasoned explanation for these critical developments. Aside from the erosion of public support, another factor in the decision to invade was Putin’s steadily growing investment in the army (Radin et al. 2019). As Stockholm International Peace Institute’s (SIPRI, 2022) estimates suggest, from 2000 to 2021, Russia’s military expenditures grew from 9 to 66 billion US dollars, giving Russia the fifth-highest military budget globally. Rather, smooth military operations in Georgia (2008), Ukraine (2014), and Syria (2015) made Russian propaganda regularly push the narrative of Russia as the second most powerful army in the world after the US (Karpova 2016).

“You did not listen to us before. Then listen to us now”—Putin warned those in the West who listened to his address to the Federal Council in 2018 (Meduza 2022). The video on the big screen behind Putin showed intercontinental ballistic missiles flying toward the US. Putin warned that these exclusive weapons are the response to the disrespect the West showed to Russia post-1991. This address, made a few weeks before the presidential elections on March 18 and hence served as the key political statement, can be considered a major example of Putin’s faith in the technological prowess of the Russian army that will help his revision of the results of the Cold War. It had a shocking effect on many in the audience: journalists and experts alike (Rustamova and Tovkaylo 2022). Although known for its anti-Western attitudes, never before had the Russian establishment so openly endorsed the military conflict with the US by showing how the missiles flew toward the east coast of the US.

In this article we argue that Putin’s anti-Western quest of the 2010s, which was manifested in a radical form in the 2018 speech and peaked with the war in Ukraine in 2022, is partially based on the beliefs fostered by the Kremlin leaders in the technological prowess of the Russian state and its military-industrial complex. The ever-growing desire to challenge the outcome of the Cold War, which Putin signaled in 2005 in the remark about the collapse of the USSR, and to secure Russia’s global dominance and establish Russian civilization as the global alternative to the US-dominated world has been based on the cultivation of faith that technology is the key to Russia’s success in the fight with the West (Yablokov 2018).

WHAT IS TECHNO-POPULISM?

In this study, we define *techno-populism* as the intersection of technocracy and populism, both enhanced by technological means. There are two primary interpretations of this term. The first emphasizes technology's role in populist political activities. The second interpretation applies to regimes that embrace both technocratic and populist characteristics, which may also be termed "technocratic populism."

Originally, techno-populism was conceptualized to critique the partisan politics post–Cold War, warning that it could degrade democratic discussions into superficial and manipulative debates due to the misuse of participatory technologies (Lipow and Seyd 1995). Contemporary research highlights the dichotomy in technology's integration into political and administrative processes (Meijer 2015). On one side, technology facilitates engagement and direct democracy, exemplified by the use of online referendum (Homburg 2018). Conversely, it serves as a catalyst for polarization and dis/misinformation, often elevating populist leaders and enabling the manipulation of public opinion, especially through social media (Iosifidis and Nicoli 2020).

Additionally, technology's role in enhancing political accountability is becoming crucial, positioning technocracy as an appealing governance model (Armytage 2013; Esmark 2017, 2020). This fusion of populist and technocratic practices, reliant on widespread technology use, is sometimes labeled "techno-populist technocracies," reinforcing a technocracy-aligned neoliberal status quo under populist rhetoric (Bloom and Sancino 2019).

Recent research has applied the term "techno-populism" to describe the evolution of populist parties adopting technocratic strategies, notably the Italian Five Star Movement and Spain's Podemos. These parties enhance their political clout through technological platforms that tap into collective intelligence (Bickerton and Accetti 2018; Guasti and Bušítková 2020). This blend of populism and technocracy, often seen as inherently contradictory—the former being "politics without policy" and the latter "policy without politics" (Bickerton and Accetti 2017; Deseriis 2017)—shares a common ground in seeking decisive solutions to complex issues, bypassing the need for a pluralistic debate (Caramani 2017).

Globally, techno-populism is described in various political landscapes, from democratic settings like France (Perottino and Guasti 2020), the Czech Republic (Guasti and Bušítková 2020), and Italy (Castaldo and Verzichelli 2020), to less liberal environments such as Venezuela (Hawkins 2009), Ecuador (De la Torre 2013), and parts of Central Europe (Havlík 2019). It also influences regional politics within the European Union, and in Asian countries

where technology and technocratic decision-making align with populist discourse (Bickerton and Accetti 2018; Hawkins 2009).

Scholars concur that techno-populism is a paradoxical blend of seemingly opposing forces, which, despite differing political processes, converge in unique forms of expression through rhetoric, public administration practices, and legislation, ultimately shaping its role in policy legitimacy and strategic reasoning (Aprasidze and Siroky 2020).

Techno-populism in the Russian context

Before the 2020 constitutional changes, Russia's political system was considered as a hybrid regime that adopted elements of electoral democracy with strong authoritarian elements (Robinson and Milne 2017). This regime simultaneously showcased characteristics of both technocracy and populism in domestic and foreign politics (Fishman 2017; Huskey 2012). Despite this, debates persist about classifying the current regime as populist. This uncertainty stems from a general absence of the foundational political pluralism in post-Soviet states, which is crucial for sustaining populist movements (March 2017).

While some scholars describe the political regime in modern Russia as populist (Casula 2013b; Medushevsky 2018), others reject this view, suggesting the regime leans more toward elitism than populism, reflecting its autocratic nature (Pain and Fediunin 2019). Yet, the researchers find the evidence substantial to claim Russian political system is populist (Medushevsky 2018), tracing a progression from the democratic populism of the 1990s to a more conservative brand post-2008 (Robinson and Milne 2017). Political communication frequently adopts populist tones, with leaders invoking neoconservative ideologies and an exceptionalist narrative or the "special path of modern Russia" (Medushevsky 2018; Yablokov 2018). This rhetoric bolsters the personalist regime centered around President Putin, aligning his leadership with the sentiments of "the people" and fostering a conservative, anti-Western stance (Burrett 2020). Moreover, populism in Russia is not only a rhetorical device but also a strategic element in electoral politics, utilizing fear, promises, and misinformation to galvanize community support (Kynev 2018). This dynamic is extended by the strategic use of polling and referenda to simulate engagement and consensus (supported by legislative changes that bolster state sovereignty and conservative values while tightening control over digital platforms (Greene and Robertson 2019).

Technocracy in Russia presents distinctive characteristics, diverging from traditional technocracy where political elites use semi-scientific methods for policymaking (Farukshin

2019). In the post-Soviet context, it is more closely linked with bureaucratic management and decision-making, where the governing elite is deemed to possess the requisite expertise and skills for policy formulation (Huskey 2012). This view permeates the executive branch, reflecting a belief in a technocratic order focused on efficient decision-making.

Along with the policy of centralization and the building of “vertical of power”¹ with the Kremlin on the top, the governance process is perceived as administering procedures rather than representing the interests of various communities within Russia (Monaghan 2020). A collective identity has been crafted to unify the nation toward a shared goal of prosperity, prompting individuals to often cede their decision-making role to authorities, based on the assumption that these decisions require specialized knowledge and experience.

The technocratic language pervades the communication of the political elite, focusing on public administration efficiency over substantive creation—the Russian political class had mastered the skill of creating images and ideas while losing the skill of creating something real (Inozemtsev 2016). For instance, in 2017, a cohort of technocrats was appointed as governors in Russian regions. They all were comparatively young, had no connection to local political elites, and placed their emphasis on economic policies. These appointments are commonly attributed to the political strategy of Sergey Kiriyenko, the head of the Presidential Administration since 2016, who was proclaimed a technocrat by Russian political observers (Afonskii and Oglobin 2021). However, critics argue that the revival of technocracy in regional governance is more rhetorical than substantive. Indeed, only half of these new appointees met the actual qualifications for technocratic leadership, while some ousted governors had already demonstrated such expertise (Pertsev 2017).

Hence, the emphasis on research and expertise in Russian politics is increasingly replaced with a focus on bureaucratic efficiency, with the government pushing for the digitization of public institutions. This shift aims to replace human labor with algorithms, seeking to reduce personal biases and vulnerabilities (Trudolubov 2020). It is seen as a way to make Putin’s inefficient state more efficient. The idea of technology as a panacea that will relieve the state machine of many human-caused problems has captured the minds of many in Putin’s top echelons of power.

¹ The “vertical of power” is a term used in Russian politics to describe the political system. Most commonly it refers to the vertical hierarchy of the executive power implemented by the increasing manageability and accountability of the authorities of the constituent entities to the federal center. The system was criticized heavily for the violation of the principles of federative structure and separation of powers.

CONCEPTUALIZATION AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The concept of techno-populism, as explored in this study, underscores the narrative of technocratic efficiency and populist engagement within the Russian political discourse under Vladimir Putin's leadership. Drawing upon the analysis of Putin's Presidential Addresses to the Federal Assembly between 2012 and 2021, in this study we outline the manifestation of techno-populism through themes that coalesce around the aspiration for global leadership, the preservation of "Russian civilization," geopolitical influence, military prowess, and the envisioning of a high-tech future. Central to this exploration is the acknowledgment of technology as both a facilitator of and a catalyst for the propagation of a political ideology that merges the technocratic emphasis on efficiency and expertise with populist appeals to national identity and sovereignty (Bickerton and Accetti 2018).

This amalgamation is not merely rhetorical but deeply embedded in the style of public administration and strategic communication that define Putin's regime. The techno-populist discourse serves to legitimize the Kremlin's actions, rallying support for the regime by highlighting Russia's technological advancements and military might as symbols of national pride and resilience (Meijer 2015; Bloom and Sancino 2019). Furthermore, the narrative strategically positions Russia against the West, tapping into anti-Western sentiments to bolster Putin's image as a defender of Russian values and a challenger to Western dominance. By doing so, techno-populism in Russia intricately links technological prowess with populist governance, creating a unique framework that underpins Putin's quest for reasserting Russia's global leadership while navigating the complexities of contemporary international politics and internal governance (Huskey 2012; Greene and Robertson 2019).

In synthesizing these themes, we highlight the dynamic interplay between asserting technological advancement and mobilizing populist support for proclaimed national and international goals. Techno-populism, as conceptualized in this study, emerges as a force in Russian politics, shaping policy directions, legislative actions, and the broader political landscape. It illustrates how Putin's Russia leverages techno-populism to craft a narrative of resilience, defiance, and ambition on the global stage, simultaneously appealing to the Russians' sense of national pride and identity while advocating for a vision of Russia as a technologically advanced and sovereign power.

This research's empirical section analyzes the Presidential Addresses to the Federal Assembly. These annual gatherings are an important source in understanding the Kremlin's agenda. These

addresses were constructed by Putin's advisers in early years in the Kremlin as one of the ways for the Kremlin to communicate with the broader world—bureaucrats, people inside Russia, and foreign governments. Each speech represents the president's public agenda and gives an insight into state-level and strategic developments by covering similar topics, including social politics, economy, culture, and foreign affairs (Paranyushkin 2013). Moreover, these speeches can be seen as a tool for projecting the Kremlin's worldview to the nation (Ambrosio and Vandrovec 2013). Given the dominant position of the president in the political system, these addresses are essential to tracing the developments in domestic Russian politics (Zaznaev 2008; Gel'man and Zavadskaja 2021). Bureaucrats across Russia adopt these speeches to set their own goals and shape local politics. Each Presidential Address is broadcast live on TV and receives comprehensive media coverage, thus reaching most of the population through the heavily controlled traditional and digital outlets.

We certainly acknowledge the role of other crucial texts (i.e., Putin 2021) or indeed informal communications (Ledeneva 2013) with stakeholders that shape the Kremlin's policies or help understand the decision-making process of the late Putin era (Gaaze 2017). However, throughout the last two decades, federal addresses proved to be a valuable source of understanding of what the Kremlin's plans could be and trace changes in its policies. Their consistency is crucial to trace permanent narratives and changes in Putin's official rhetoric that is appreciated by scholars of contemporary Russia (Malinova 2022).

We chose to look at the addresses given by Putin between 2012 and 2021. The selected period captures the two most recent terms of Vladimir Putin in the Kremlin, which marked a new shift in domestic and foreign politics associated with the repressive turn. The period saw the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine—the most dramatic turns in Russia's modern history (Burrett 2020; Tipaldou and Casula 2019) prior to the war in 2022. The last decade in Russia also shows a clear growth in populist politics. Putin's rally around the flag is at the center of domestic politics post-2012 and the key strategy for constructing the new post-Soviet, Russian identity (Sharafutdinova 2020). Inventing internal enemies and starting international conflicts has, for many years, helped to mobilize the people in support of the regime (Greene and Robertson 2019). In any case, the debate over the nature of Russia's political regime and the degree of populism in it is an important matter for Russian politics. We acknowledge that first the constitutional reform of 2020 and then the war in Ukraine in 2022 significantly changed the way how Putin's regime can be defined or analyzed and what could be the value of our findings. Nevertheless, we believe that the retrospective look at the

evolution of Putin's ideas can provide significant insights into the current state of ideology as well as the future of Putinism (Taylor 2018).

We engaged with the corpus through a process of open and axial coding. Initially, we each read every address to identify recurring themes, motifs, and narratives, facilitating the emergence of distinct nodes of analysis. This initial phase of open coding allowed us to gain a detailed understanding of the content of the speeches, setting the stage for the subsequent axial coding process (Paranyushkin 2013; Ambrosio and Vandrovec 2013).

During the axial coding phase, we further examined and organized the previously identified nodes into coherent themes that encapsulate the overarching messages and strategies Putin employed. This phase was crucial for refining our analysis, enabling us to outline five primary themes through which techno-populism manifests in Putin's rhetoric. These themes—global leadership, preservation of 'Russian civilization,' geopolitical influence, military prowess, and the vision of a high-tech future—collectively represent the techno-populist discourse underpinning the Kremlin's agenda (Greene and Robertson 2019; Sharafutdinova 2020).

We anchored our thematic analysis within the broader context of Russia's political development over the past decade, acknowledging the role of populist politics and the strategic mobilization of national identity in consolidating Putin's regime. By methodically mapping the development of techno-populist rhetoric in Putin's official addresses, we provide perspectives on how technology and technocratic-populist governance converge to influence Russia's domestic and foreign policy orientations. Our methodological approach, based on an in-depth examination of key textual sources, offers an understanding of the dynamics of techno-populism in Russia, contributing to the broader discourse on the role of techno-populism in contemporary political landscapes. The results of the analysis are presented in Figure 1.

[Place Figure 1 near here]

DISSECTING THE DREAMS OF THE NATIONAL LEADER

All Putin's addresses that we analyzed carry a strong populist appeal to the people of Russia and create a sense of the constant struggle of the people and the state to obtain Russia's sovereignty and protect the country from all sorts of enemies. Technocratic bureaucracy helps achieve these goals as it brings a solution to help resolve many problems of the current regime. Technocracy also provides a vision of a future Russia and enables a path to be laid out for achieving the country's leading positions. Putin's technocratic bureaucracy manifests efficiency in the operation of the government, providing the means to "be firmly focused on

obtaining a specific result” (Putin 2018). This guarantees that Russian society will be protected and on the right track of development toward shared prosperity.

Indeed, the style through which Putin produces the image of a strong and decisive leader can also be described as populist and technocratic at the same time. The choice of informal words, sometimes aggressive, contributes to the creation of fear—a typical style used by populist leaders to mobilize the support of the population (Wodak 2015). Putin uses it to highlight his strength and proximity to the people. This proximity allows Putin to address various bureaucrats’ inefficiency or lack of empathy toward the people and their problems. At the same time, the notes of technocracy emerge when Putin shows knowledge of particular issues that the population faces. Appealing to concrete numbers or metrics, for instance, highlights his expertise and presents him as an effective manager, a primary trait of a technocratic style (Guriev and Treisman 2022). However, the technocratic style is “accompanied by what would have been called charisma” (Sakwa 2008, 882).

Central Theme: Russia’s Global Leadership

The idea of global leadership manifests itself through competition and cooperation with other countries, seeking international approval and active conflict. However, Putin’s whole concept of leadership is equivalent to being powerful. This is the power to confront threats and fight the enemy, the ability to remain independent in decision-making despite pressure from the international community, or the ability to make a technological breakthrough.

Our analysis presented in the following subsections unpacks the main pillars of Putin’s ideology and helps deduce the four elements of his techno-populist rhetoric that will allow Russia to succeed: (1) restoration of “Russian civilization,” (2) Russia’s geopolitical influence, (3) its military power, and (4) the image of the technologically advanced future.

Altogether these create the superpower status that the Russian elites strive to restore for more than three decades of the post-Soviet history and return the sense of the national pride among the citizens. As in the 1990s and early 2000s, a large part of the Russian political elite suffered from the loss of the superpower status caused by the Soviet collapse (Oldberg 2007; Tsygankov 2005). Putin’s addresses have precisely this function: to return the sense of belonging to the nation/culture that is just a few steps from regaining its lost global leadership.

Putin often states that the country must be powerful, and the first thing it needs is an influential leader. The recurring discussion about the decisive role the government plays in the world is aligned with the primary goal of the state: “to preserve **Russia as a civilisation** with its own

identity, rooted in centuries-long traditions and the culture of our people, our values and customs” (Putin 2019). Such an attitude sets the imperative for nationalist thinking by highlighting the superiority of the Russian civilization against other cultures. Putin’s speeches suggest focusing on its dominant position rather than celebrating cultural differences.

Further, striving for global leadership appears in discussions about foreign affairs, where the president speaks about reaching new areas of influence and protecting the balance of forces in the world. Putin’s international ambitions aim to cross borders in forming the Eurasian Union as a “*globally competitive integrative association*” (Putin 2018; emphasis added). Even military development is articulated as strategy for global domination. In one of the addresses, Putin stated that “Russia’s growing military power is a solid guarantee of *global peace on planet Earth* as . . . [it] remains a key factor of international security after WWII and up to the present day” (Putin 2018; emphasis added).

Finally, the goal of a high-tech future, which was developing in the addresses over the past five years, proclaims that “Russia must become [not just] the transportation hub of the planet . . . but the world centre for storage, processing and transfer of big data” (Putin 2018).

Theme 1: Russian Civilization

The theme of “Russian civilization”—as Putin formulates it—carries strong nationalist sentiments and creates an image of the people similar to right-wing populist movements elsewhere (Moffitt 2016). It proclaims Russia’s supremacy in all spheres of life, both material and spiritual. Putin appeals to the people by constructing a flattering image of a great nation. He references the history of Russians, emphasizing their physical strength, modesty, conservatism, and traditionalism. He highlights the pride of the country’s great achievements of the past and its “special path” that helps defend traditional values: a heterosexual family with multiple children that shares the Kremlin-nurtured vision of patriotism and religious commitment.

In his addresses, President Putin consistently emphasizes the primacy of the Russian people within the state apparatus, asserting that their needs and voices ought to be acknowledged, given their role as the fundamental bearers of Russia’s sovereignty. He articulates that sovereignty is imperative for the defense of Russian civilization against an array of threats, calling for an ongoing mobilization effort against these threats. Consequently, Putin strategically invokes the concept of Russian civilization as a means of consolidation and

defense, effectively utilizing it as a mechanism to sustain his leadership and the prevailing political order.

The intrinsic dangers for the regime, such as violation of territorial integrity or a change in political course, are compared to and juxtaposed with the consequences of the collapse of the Soviet Union, which was followed by the political and economic turbulence of the 1990s. This undoubtedly painful period in Russian history has been demonized throughout Putin's years in the Kremlin (Yablokov 2018). Putin builds a strong link between the change in regime and the loss of order and territory, which had been protected by the iron fist of a strong political leader. Added to the memories of living witnesses of financial difficulties, crime, and the economic uncertainty of the 1990s, this message strongly resonates with the electorate (Prozorov 2005). Therefore, it serves well to legitimize the state's actions and grant popular support for the state leader as the guarantor of security and stability in the country.

Another threat comes with sustaining the Russian civilization in the changing world in which "many nations are revising their moral values and ethical norms, eroding ethnic traditions and differences between peoples and cultures" (Putin 2013). The image of Russian civilization, as opposed to the idea of the West, is presented as losing traditional moral and ethical foundations in the lifestyle of their citizens and tradition of public administration (Drozdova and Robinson 2019). Moreover, this threat to cultural preservation is supplemented by the threat to independent political decision-making. It became the most salient with the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 and the ensuing sanctions imposed by the US and many European states. Conceptualizing annexation as an act of reunifying Russia with its historically owned territory and returning the "historical borders" of the Russian civilization, Putin presents it as a decision of a mature nation to protect its people from the coup d'état in Ukraine—the official Kremlin's interpretation of Ukraine's "Revolution of Dignity." Moreover, the president legitimizes the annexation and the consequent economic difficulties by emphasizing the broader support of the people:

Russia has done this thanks to its citizens, thanks to your work and the results we have achieved together, and thanks to our profound understanding of the essence and importance of national interests. (Putin 2014)

This message would be reinforced and adapted to a broader range of threats in the following years as the difficulties caused by economic isolation continue. By keeping the nation mobilized and complicit in the situational victories, Putin triggers patriotic and nationalist

sentiments in society, shifting the focus away from the social and political problems at the domestic level.

Patriotic sentiments are delivered as devotion, and sense of attachment to a homeland and alliance with other citizens who share the same sentiment. Nationalist sentiments, meanwhile, extend this concept to include a sense of pride in one's country's achievements and culture, often coupled with the belief in the country's superiority and an emphasis on national sovereignty.

Putin's appeal to these sentiments is crucial for its strategic deployment as a unifying force amid external pressures and internal discontent. By emphasizing the collective identity and shared destiny of the Russian people, he redirects public attention from domestic grievances and sociopolitical issues toward external achievements and the broader narrative of national revival. This redirection is not merely rhetorical but is reinforced through tangible actions, such as the annexation of Crimea and military interventions in Syria, which are presented as milestones in restoring Russia's stature and technological prowess on the global stage.

Such appeals not only galvanize public support during times of crisis but also weave the fabric of a renewed Russian civilization narrative. This narrative, rooted in historical pride and a sense of exceptionalism, serves to consolidate Putin's leadership and legitimize the regime's actions by casting them as essential defenses of the nation's sovereignty and rightful place in the world order. Through this, Putin adeptly harnesses patriotic and nationalist sentiments not just as emotional responses, but as strategic tools in navigating Russia through the complex dynamics of contemporary global politics.

The theme of Russian civilization and its populist appeal to the people is central in the addresses. A source of pride and public support, it legitimizes the political regime and contributes toward achieving global leadership. This theme is semantically placed against the picture of the West and shapes another theme in the official discourse—that of geopolitical influence.

Theme 2: Geopolitical Influence

Geopolitics and international relations are essential for Putin's idea of global leadership. A significant part resides in the ideological confrontation between the Russian civilization and the Western world. The confrontation is based on moral values, economic rivalry, and military competition. However, the ambition for global leadership requires establishing cooperative

relationships with other parties and attempts to be the leader in these relationships, which becomes a part of his agenda.

Putin builds his strategy for foreign affairs on a forced opposition to the Western world and the need to protect his country's interests, making this strategy "conflict-dependent" (Domańska 2017). It is forced by the aggressive moves of opponents that threaten the country, while the default position, which is recurrent in all his speeches, rests on the premise of Russia's defense against foreign attacks and respect for the country's neighbors:

We do not claim to be any sort of superpower with a claim to global or regional hegemony; we do not encroach on anyone's interests, impose our patronage onto anyone, or try to teach others how to live their lives. However, we will strive to be leaders, defending international law, striving for respect, national sovereignty, and peoples' independence and identity. (Putin 2013)

Tied to the idea of a sovereign state, Putin uses what he describes as reactive foreign politics: a response to the actions of other states that may threaten Russia's sovereignty (Ziegler 2012). Most of the actions in foreign affairs are presented as a response to threats. This can be seen in the decision to build up armaments to maintain the power balance in the world, particularly after the US withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (in 2001) and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (in 2019).

Terrorism is another geopolitical threat. When addressing the issue, Putin draws on an image of Russia as a country fighting it alone. A series of conspiracy theories regarding the support of terrorists by the Western states appears in almost all his speeches. These claims, however, never name the country or countries directly, just hinting at the possible beneficiaries and letting listeners build up their own picture of the potential enemy. It contributes to creating an image of the savior, highlighting the leadership role of Putin himself and the role of Russia as the fighter against evil.

Foreign politics are critical for Putin's agenda. Presidential Addresses show Russia's leading role in maintaining a peaceful world order as a sovereign country that follows its interests. However, many stances where Russia does interfere are proclaimed to be a response of the victim state against the aggressor's economic, cultural, or military pressures and threats. Meanwhile, there is an attempt to balance the ostracism by Western countries via sanctions by expanding partnerships with other developing nations. Most frequently discussed are

developing relationships with other BRICS countries² and the Eurasian Union project³. These are presented as evidence of growing international recognition and as part of the endeavors to build a genuinely multipolar world (Chebankova 2017).

Yet, given the threats, Putin emphasizes another aspect of Russia's global leadership: military power to protect the country and ensure its headship.

Theme 3: Military Power

The military-industrial complex (MIC), its development, and its achievements have taken a primary role in Putin's presentations. Emphatically, the MIC is a source of pride and a tool for competition for Russia on the world stage, pushing defense to the forefront of the political agenda (Hakvåg 2017). The MIC is one of the few prosperous areas in the modern Russian economy. In his addresses, Putin celebrates the MIC and its achievements, highlighting the level of development of modern weaponry, its technological advancement and superiority, and the greatness and strength of the Russian army. Military technology, presented in 2018, serves strategic goals as it "sober[s] up the potential aggressor" (Rudischhauser 2018).

However, the MIC is not only busy with serving its primary function of building up a defense. Its second purpose is to share its expertise and technological advancements with civilian industry. Putin declared increasing the contribution of the MIC's technologies to the civil sector as his primary goal. In 2016 he stated: "in the next decade, its share should be not less than 1/3 of the total defence industry" (Putin 2016). This is a historical trap of catch-up modernization into which second-tier countries often fall (Kasapoglu 2015). Keeping in mind the success of the Internet as a technology initially developed in the US for military objectives, Putin invests in military technology to use it further in non-military settings. Yet, as it develops, Putin praises the technological success of the MIC, making it a national achievement, a "difficult, complex work . . . done by our engineers, workers and scientists" (Putin 2019).

The MIC is aimed to lead directly to the world leaders as it contributes to the growth of national pride, strength, and protection for Russian civilization, adding to Putin's nationalist populism. Military spending in Russia reached a record 5.3% of the GDP in 2015, and the population predominantly supported further spending for large-scale military exercises (SIPRI 2022).

² BRICS is an acronym for Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. This group of major emerging economies was established to enhance cooperation between member countries.

³ Eurasian Union is an economic and political union of former Soviet republics, led by Russia to enhance economic cooperation. Officially known as the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), it includes countries like Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia.

Justifications for an increased MIC share in the Russian economy merge into the need to protect the state from enemies, emphasizing the terrorist threat and anti-Western attitudes, such as responding to the military maneuvers of NATO troops at the border. It fuels populist rhetoric, feeding a national pride constructed against the idea of Russia's military might, and legitimizes state politics. Moreover, the technological advancements in the MIC are expected and ordered to make a difference and support the development of technological breakthroughs, which are claimed to define the high-tech future of Russia, to save its sovereignty and privileged place in the world arena.

Theme 4: High-Tech Future

The futuristic picture of high-tech Russia gradually develops in the addresses. It became apparent in 2014 when the national technological initiative proclaimed that the global leadership of Russia must be technological:

I am confident that Russia is capable . . . of becoming a supplier of ideas and technology for the whole world, emerging as a leading producer of goods and services that would shape the global technology agenda. Russian companies will embody national success and pride, just as our nuclear and space projects once did. (Putin 2014)

For Putin, technology becomes another source of power that must be presented to the rest of the world as evidence of its leadership. At the same time, the country's technological development becomes tied with other themes—the need for a strong, resilient nation to defend itself against growing threats. In the case of the high-tech future, Putin reiterates the narrative of a dangerous, unpredictable world in which Russia needs to be competitive to secure its place in the global market, stating it in a win-or-lose fashion. According to Putin, Russia's potential enemies rapidly change their economies by infusing technological advancements in civil and military spheres. Therefore, it becomes a question of survival for Russia if it stays behind in this technological race.

However, technology is not just a matter of military or civilizational survival. Technology has become a solution for many problems that Russia is facing. A technologically advanced economy will generate huge revenues turning it into a highly competitive global power. Furthermore, information technology is expected to be embedded in healthcare and education to achieve anticipated growth in the agricultural sector and make them work smoothly and efficiently.

Putin does not just limit convergence between military and civil technologies; a recurrent message of his addresses is the need for collaboration between research centers, public institutions, technological businesses, and governmental corporations. In 2014 he coined the name of the program: National Technological Initiative, which deals precisely with this governmental priority. In theory, this convergence of various research-oriented institutions should ensure Russia's future technological breakthrough. That breakthrough is a regular feature of Putin's addresses, an example of the leader's wishful thinking.

The concept of technological breakthrough unfolds through the dualistic portrayal of reality. Just as a breakthrough is meant to bring the country to the top world position and prosperity, the opposite of it, technological inferiority, is portrayed as the most significant danger for not just the success of the country but to its core existence, which in Putin's terms is granted by its sovereignty:

Technological inferiority, dependency, the reduced security and economic capacities, and the loss of sovereignty after all. This is how it works. (Putin 2018)

Therefore, this is the only high-tech breakthrough, based on the developments of the MIC, that will help achieve recognition and fight the problems and threats the country faces. The picture of a high-tech future represents a synthesis of technocratic and populist rhetoric, setting up a perfect example of techno-populist discourse. The objective for technological development is articulated using mobilizing, win-or-lose populist terms, and it links with the idea of efficiency, surveillance, and control, which characterize Russian technocracy. However, the picture is distinctly futuristic, provoking speculation that such rhetoric will be chosen to be expanded into other areas of the public agenda.

The one element that has rapidly emerged in the daily life of Russians—digitization and automation of governmental services—also occupies an important place in Putin's addresses since 2014.

All document circulation between state agencies should be digitized, which is important both for the state agencies and for citizens, so as not to browse the Internet for hours looking for information. It will be possible to get everything in one place. I will add that digitalisation of the entire public administration system, and its greater transparency is also a powerful factor in fighting corruption. (Putin 2018)

It is presented as a way of helping people on a day-to-day basis. It is a solution for a whole package of problems: from avoiding the inconvenience of bureaucratic procedures to getting

rid of corruption by making all interactions between citizens and the state transparent. With technology, government management aims to bring a leadership position, as Putin believes that integrating digital systems would lead to economic growth and more transparency in public management.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The concept of techno-populism offers a nuanced framework for analyzing political phenomena that merges references to technology, technocratic policymaking, public administration, and populist rhetoric. This approach recognizes how technology not only supports but also shapes political narratives and strategies, creating a unique blend of technocratic ideals with populist appeals. Techno-populism highlights the role of technology in public administration and national identity, positioning technological advancements as both a response to the population's needs and a source of national pride.

The case of Russia under Putin illustrates the role of techno-populism as a source of political power within the country. First, Putin's addresses showcase his efficiency as a leader—an essential feature of a modern authoritarian ruler (Guriev and Treisman 2022). Second, they emphasize Russia's technological and military capabilities as central to its national identity and global posture, portraying the country as a powerful entity capable of challenging the Western hegemony. These narratives boost Putin's image domestically as a potent leader and foster a sense of national pride among the Russian people, thereby garnering support for the regime.

Techno-populism in this case also reflects the public administration style and the country's stance in international affairs. Putin's techno-populist rhetoric often casts Russia as a bastion of traditional values facing external threats and internal challenges. Presenting technological and military advancements as essential for national defense and protection of values, Putin melds populist calls for unity and resistance with a technocratic vision for public administration. This combination of themes rallies support for the regime's policies and positions Russia in the eyes of domestic audiences as a resilient and defiant global actor.

Moreover, techno-populism in Russia influences tangible policy directions and legislative actions. The focus on digitalization, military modernization, and the development of native technologies underlines a strategic effort to enhance Russia's autonomy and global influence. Highlighted in Putin's addresses as achievements, these initiatives showcase the practical embodiment of techno-populism, where technology advancement is integral to the populist narrative of national resurgence and opposition to external pressures.

The theme of Russian civilization and its populist appeal to the people are central in the addresses. A source of pride and public support, they legitimize the political regime and its actions contributing toward the greatest dream of Kremlin's elite: Russia's global leadership. Its central tenets are anti-Westernism, faith in the greatness of "Russian civilization" as opposed to the West, and confidence in the technological prowess of the Russian military.

Geopolitical and military ambition is there to demonstrate the state's growing power. Being powerful becomes the end product of the elite's efforts. Power enables sovereignty for the country, which means conserving Putin's political regime for Russia. Nevertheless, the need to be powerful is justified through a constant articulation of threats that the government is exposed to, feeding hatred and fear against the enemies of the state. This enemy comes in different disguises: through the threat to the "traditional Russian values" by popular Western culture (Loftus 2019); or the US arms race triggered by a violation of mutual agreements; sanctions on public officials, aiming to weaken the state as part of a "containment policy"—a long-lasting threat for strong and independent Russia (Roberts 2017); or as the danger of losing in the newly announced technological race.

Within the rhetoric of the constant struggle of Russia against the world, a need for mobilization against this danger is established, legitimizing the dominant discourse and political decision-making. However, this striving for global leadership is portrayed as the only plausible solution for the state to remain a sovereign nation. And in precisely this context the language of technology is crucial. With the challenge of globalization and the country's integration into the global world via consistent technological development, technology has become a desired tool for the political struggle. Now the discourse of officialdom is linked to the country's futuristic vision, the fantasy of being a world leader, which does not represent the people's interests as it claims to do. When brought to the discussion, technology highlights the striking contradictions of the regime: combining progressive futurism and patriarchy, combining futurism and nostalgia, fostering modernization and guarding traditions.⁴

Technological development is portrayed as a driver for change, hope for the future, and a problem-solving tool. Technology brings the salvation and threat of technological competition for global leadership. It interweaves into populist and technocratic discourses that connect the past and the future. Putin's talk about technology follows the same articulatory logic—technological development is a vital necessity for the country to remain; it is, therefore, done

⁴ Even the Federal address of February 2024 contains similar utopian thoughts despite the major cutoff of the country's economy from international markets.

by and for the Russian people. It is linked to the fulfillment of national projects and is generally seen as a tool to fix most of the country's problems. The digital transformation goals spread to healthcare institutions, schools, higher education, and the agricultural sector. It is simultaneously grotesque and convenient. Such contrast is vivid in comparing the plans to develop Russia into the digital hub of the planet and to create a system for administering prescriptions.

The technological narrative aims to rehabilitate the political discourse as it is gradually reduced—narrowing the diversity of topics and complexity of articulations. While the 2013 speech and earlier addresses comprised an agenda that represented the interests of diverse population groups, every speech from then on was primarily focused on the themes we have outlined. Official discourse becomes repetitive and vague, and plans replace the achievement. Aiming for the greater goal of global leadership, Putin's perception of reality is far from the actual state of things in the country. The moments when the leader talks about the real lives of ordinary people show extreme contrast between pressing problems and the vision of Russia's future.

The multiple videos of destroyed Russian military equipment that filled social media after February and especially September 2022 demonstrate how far Putin's rhetoric was from reality. The allure of the technologization of politics has created faith in a prospering state. The success of Russian start-ups and big tech companies has instilled the belief that Russia is close to being on par with its main rival, the US. The glorious reports by law enforcement agencies and the Army General Staff made Putin believe that his army was prepared to embark upon the path of regaining what was lost in 1991. Despite the efforts made by the Kremlin in the two years of the war to sustain the economic and industrial stability, the dreams have clashed with a grim reality, causing hundreds of thousands of deaths.

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