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ARTICLE



Symbolic state-building in contemporary Russia

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ABSTRACT

Vladimir Putin has made state-building a central goal of his presidency and recent scholarship has demonstrated that Russian formal institutions have indeed been deliberately reformed. Unlike studies that assess state-building vis-à-vis a particular outcome, our research examines *what kind of state* Russian political elites seek to build, and focuses on symbolic state-building strategies. To capture symbolic state-building in the Putin era, we examine the *Pryamaya Liniya* broadcasts: annual, high-profile TV broadcasts in which citizens pose questions to the president. We find that a broad range of formal institutions appear to be central to Putin's state-building project, a finding that runs counter to claims that governance is largely deinstitutionalized, informal and personal. We argue that symbolic state-building seeks to reconcile personalism and institutionalism, by conveying a dual image of a state in citizens' everyday lives – emphasizing both formal institutions, while also affirming Putin as the personal guarantor of the state's authority.

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State-building in Putin's Russia: personalism versus institutionalism?

Vladimir V. Putin has made the strengthening of the Russian state, or state-building, a central goal of his presidency (e.g., Taylor 2013; Wengle 2015). While most observers have noted that the state under Putin regained control of material resources and centers of authority that had been autonomous under Boris Yel'tsin, studies disagree about whether control has translated into state capacity and strength (Way 2005; Taylor 2013).¹ Rather than assessing the Russian state-building project vis-à-vis a particular outcome, this paper asks *what kind of state* Russian political elites seek to project to the public, and via *what processes* is this particular image of the state constructed and strengthened?² To answer these questions, we provide a detailed analysis of symbolic state-building processes in contemporary Russia. Symbolic state-building refers to rhetorical strategies and practices that contribute to upholding the authority of the state.³ We turn to the symbolic realm, because as Henry Hale has pointed out, the notions of state-society relations that underpin Russia's post-Soviet state-building project are very different from the liberal/democratic model that often serves as an implicit benchmark (Hale 2002, 306–307) – hence the nature of the state's authority under construction deserves closer scrutiny.

A clearer understanding of symbolic state-building sheds new light on a contradiction in recent scholarship on personalism versus institutionalism in post-Soviet countries.⁴ On the one hand, these countries are routinely described as “deinstitutionalized,” that is, governed by personalistic and informal networks (Wilson 2005; Ledeneva 2013; Dawisha 2014; Lipman 2016). This assessment is compelling, since there is clear evidence of personalistic networks, dynastic succession and cults of personality in these countries. In the Russian case, Vladimir V.

Putin is clearly at the center of power and *sistema* – a vast and elaborate informal power network – is key to the functioning of the Russian state (Ledeneva 2013). This emphasis on personalism follows a consensus of the literature on hybrid and authoritarian regimes more broadly, that has foregrounded the absence or malfunctioning of formal governance institutions (Brownlee 2002; Levitsky and Way 2010; Hale 2014). Yet, how does evidence of “deinstitutionalization” square with accounts that Russia under Putin has managed to build at least a relatively strong state (Levitsky and Way 2010), and with studies that show how many formal institutions were deliberately reformed, reshaped, and used in pursuit of political priorities (Wengle 2015; Reuter and Robertson 2014; Forrat 2016, 2018; Remington 2016)? Moreover, more recent works in neo-institutional literature on authoritarian regimes have established that formal institutions are important for regime durability. Legislatures and dominant parties, for example, are recognized as useful tools for autocrats intent on staying in power – they are used to diffuse social protest and provide information and private goods to elites (e.g., Gandhi 2008; Svoboda 2012; Reuter and Robertson 2012, 2014; Reuter 2017).⁵

Both strands of this debate are invested in demonstrating the relevance of one type of authority, but do not explain whether and how they can coexist. Prima facie, the two modes of authority are in tension with each other: institutionalism implies rule-bound and arms-length dealing with societal grievances, while personalism is connected with informality and personal involvement by leaders in resolving social problems. As the latter is by nature at least somewhat arbitrary and selective, it may preclude the proper functioning of the former – hence the potential for tensions and resistance to personalism.

We find that a key feature of state-building in contemporary Russia is an image of a state that functions through both these modes of authority, co-exist in an easy, nonconflictual way. In the symbolic realm, the state is shown to govern efficiently through formal institutions, while it also, at the same time, affirms the role of Putin as the personal guarantor of the state’s authority and effectiveness. Rhetorical strategies and practices symbolically strengthen virtually all the key institutions in Russian society – the pension system, educational institutions, the media, the military, regional and municipal administrations, etc. But Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin is also simultaneously shown to be at the apex of institutional structures and personally involved in societal affairs. Our research suggests that Putin’s elites have consistently been conveying a *dual image of authority* – of a modern state that is responsive to popular concerns through institutions, but also of personal authority that has significant discretion and power to control societal autonomy. The dual image of the authority is meant to shape attitudes and expectations about how power is exercised in daily lives, and to mitigate, or ease, the perception that personalism precludes or undermines institutional structures.

We arrive at this conclusion based on an in-depth analysis of a unique corpus of high-profile media rituals, the *Pryamaya Liniya* [Direct Line] broadcasts, a set of 14 live, interactive call-in television broadcasts, produced annually between 2001 and 2016, with the exceptions of 2004 and 2012.⁶ Some observers describe these broadcasts as entirely “fake,” that is, highly artificial, staged performances, while others think of them mainly as a tool to deflect blame away from the elites and hold lower level bureaucrats accountable, in the “good tsar, bad boyars” genre. Both of these interpretations of the show are partly accurate. They also, however, unduly diminish the *Pryamaya Liniya*’s significance, which derives precisely from the show’s very artificiality and performativity. Each broadcast is a carefully staged and technologically sophisticated theatrical performance, the product of thousands of deliberate and negotiated decisions by media elites about selection of viewer questions, state responses, the use of media, the configuration of the studio, and much more.

We look at these deliberate decisions as they are apparent in the 915 question-and-answer dyads aired between 2001 and 2016 – because they offer, we argue, a rich archive to understand how the political elites conceive of authority and the state’s role in governing citizens’ everyday lives. The analysis is focused on three distinct aspects of the *Pryamaya Liniya* broadcasts: (a) the

range of citizen concerns that are represented on air; (b) the president's answers to these concerns; and (c) the role of journalists as mediators between the state and citizens. Each question-answer dyad is coded with a series of classifications that characterize the questioner, the type of question, the type of answer, and the nature of the journalistic intervention (see [Appendix 1](#)). We analyzed trends in each of these categories and selected specific topics and varieties of question for more detailed, interpretative analysis. Finally, we conducted a word frequency analysis to corroborate key findings of our manual coding (see [Appendix 2](#)).⁷ Based on this multimethod analysis, we highlight the following observations:

- (1) Questions are exceptionally broad and diverse, critical voices are not screened out, and very serious social problems are raised routinely. Broadcasters seek to collect data about authentic popular grievances and mediate them back to citizens. Citizens' performances on screen serve to *validate a wide range of authentic grievances*.
- (2) Citizens' economic woes consistently dominate questions that are aired on the show. Everyday economic concerns and complaints about salaries, pensions, the cost of living, etc. are thus explicitly marked as a set of concerns shared by citizens and the state. This suggests that the frequently observed reorientation toward nationalist, patriotic, and irredentist legitimization is incomplete, and that constructing the image of a state that appears *responsive* to economic concerns remains a priority of the Putin administration.⁸
- (3) Though a very wide-ranging set of authentic citizens' concerns are aired, a number of topics appear only through a particular lens or frame, and some social issues are clearly off limits. This suggests the state *controls* the range of acceptable concerns.
- (4) Political elites involved in orchestrating the show represent the authority of the state as *both essentially personal and institutional*. The show clearly establishes Putin personally as the linchpin of public authority. Power emanates from Vladimir Vladimirovich, the person, through a number of rhetorical strategies. Yet, at the same time, it is extremely important that the bulk of the president's answers refers to laws or institutions and formal authority structures, to past and ongoing reforms thereof, thus performing authority as essentially rational, legal, and institutional.
- (5) Journalists appear as *authoritative, but loyal* mediators between the state and citizens, reflecting a longstanding Russian tradition.⁹ Media are shown to be subservient to the executive and do not appear in opposition to the state. At the same time, they are afforded an important role, as an institution that provides capable and necessary mediation between state and citizens.

In sum, we find a state-building strategy that projects the image of a state that responds to societal concerns with impartial/rule-bound, autonomous institutions, and, at the same time, clearly controls and limits societal expressions via a form of authority that is ultimately underwritten by Vladimir Putin personally. This dual image of the state contributes to constituting the state through the symbolic work of mitigating potential tensions and easing contradictions between institutional and personal authority. This finding contributes to theoretical debates on what is known as the control–responsiveness dilemma in authoritarian and hybrid regimes. It is well established that in these contexts, political elites seek to *control* political institutions for their own ends, while simultaneously wanting to legitimize their authority through the impersonal institutions of democracy, such as elections, the media, and decentralized and bureaucratic governance that promise broader *responsiveness* (e.g., Fitzpatrick 1999; Robertson 2011; Dimitrov 2014; Petrov, Lipman, and Hale 2014; Miller 2015; Little 2017). We leverage the Russian case to make a more general suggestion about why this type of symbolic state-building is employed – rhetorical practices that symbolically strengthen formal institutions are likely a useful tool for political elites to address the competing demands of control and responsiveness.

Contributions: symbolic state-building and the control–responsiveness dilemma

Our analysis of the *Pryamaya Liniya* thus makes two distinct and original contributions to our understanding of state-building. The first contribution is an unprecedented, detailed empirical analysis of symbolic state-building – that is, the rhetorical strategies and practices surrounding authority, conveyed by elites – in Putin’s Russia. The second contribution is a theoretical account of how symbolic state-building allows for the coexistence of institutionalism and personalism, and of responsiveness and control in Russia and beyond.

Symbolic state-building in Putin’s Russia

Empirically, this paper provides a novel account of symbolic state-building in contemporary Russia. Ed Schatz has defined symbolic state building as “. . . [the construction of] the symbolic apparatus to propagate ideas of a leader’s political legitimacy, cultural rectitude, and effectiveness in governance. In short, state building involves setting the terms of a normative regime” (2003, 9). Though landmark studies have drawn attention to symbolic state-building and symbolic processes (Wedeen 1999, 2008; Wortman 2013) and there is a growing interest in these processes in the post-Soviet region (e.g., Schatz 2003; Cummings 2010; Hill and Gaddy 2013; Gosילו 2013; Pisano 2014; Sperling 2015), the symbolic realm has received less attention than the coercive and material aspects of state-building.

The remainder of the paper will give a detailed analysis of what we identify as the defining characteristic of symbolic state-building under Putin – a complex, dual image of the state and its authority that is conveyed: as *responsive* to a vast array of authentic concerns (findings 1 and 2, introduced above), while also quite explicitly *selecting and delimiting*, and hence *controlling* concerns as it sees fit (finding 3). The broadcasts show that personal power and authority vested in formal institutions are *complementary, not contradictory* (finding 4). Putin’s symbolic centrality and entitlement to govern are clearly conveyed, along with showing him *connected, proximate, and responsive* to regular Russian citizens, who join him in the theater of power as active participants. At the same time, Putin uses this privileged position to teach citizens about a broad range of formal institutions that are shown to exist precisely in order to address their grievances. What is portrayed could be described as mutual dependence or a reflexive feedback loop between these two forms of authority, underlining their complementarity: Putin is clearly personally at the apex of power, but his power is also, in part at least, legitimated by and fulfilled via formal, institutional power presented as typical of a normal, modern state. This kind of performance ingeniously shows authoritative control by the state as reconcilable with impersonal institutions that are meant to guarantee accountability, accessibility, and flexible responsiveness to citizen concerns.

We need to be very clear where we stand on the question of how “effective” this symbolic state-building strategy is; in other words, in what way do symbolic performances of this type shape “real” governance institutions? Our analysis is squarely focused on charting *symbolic* state-building – on the rhetorical strategies and practices, and we do not make any claims to be able to assess whether or not “real” formal institutions are indeed strengthened by such performances. We do see very clearly, however, that the state-society interactions performed in the *Pryamaya Liniya* broadcasts seek to demonstrate to audiences that representatives of the state can simultaneously control societal autonomy and be responsive to popular concerns. Even though we cannot tangibly demonstrate citizens’ “learning,” we can show just how carefully and elaborately “lessons” are crafted.¹⁰ These broadcasts are clearly *intended* to shape expectations of citizens as they encounter the agencies and agents of the state. Furthermore, the Russian political elites that organize these broadcasts clearly *expect* that they are effective in shaping citizen attitudes, beliefs, and expectations: this is evident in the enormous resources devoted to the show and its status as one of the highest-profile media events every year.

The “real effect” of the *Pryamaya Liniya* thus lies in its pedagogic role as one of the most important media events symbolically constituting the authority of the state as dual – as institutional/responsive *and* as personal/controlling. Our claim is thus that these performances contribute to symbolically constituting the state. Yet, how precisely does this happen – that is, how can a high-profile, public performance construct and maintain symbolic power? Skeptics would say that these are mere fig leaves that have no bearing on real, functioning institutions. Richard Wortman’s concept of “scenarios of power” (2013) is helpful here to clarify the effects of performances of power.¹¹ Wortman showed that imperial Russian elites staged “particular realizations of the governing myth” in court ceremonies and theatrical productions (more so than texts or written doctrines), and argued that this “theater of power” was instrumental in the legitimation and exercise of imperial power (2013, 3). He argues that these performances matter, because they reflect, propose and propagate particular “attitudes towards authority and modalities of public conduct” (Wortman 2013, 3).

The theater of power, then, whether in court ceremonies or on TV, is important not only as a *reflection* of visions and attitudes related to state–citizen interactions, but it also plays a role in “propagating” and teaching citizens about the authority of the state. Performances constitute authority because the images they purvey inform the understanding and expectations of citizens as they encounter the agencies and agents of the state. Research on high-profile media rituals such as *Pryamaya Liniya* suggests they are highly staged and broadly celebrated across multiple media platforms precisely because they intend to shape the interpretation of experiences.¹² Schatz points out that symbolic state-building efforts may be especially important “in contexts where the state struggles to deliver services to its public,” and for regimes that are “more effective in using (often monopolizing) *media* resources to get its message to domestic and international audience (Schatz 2003, 9, emphasis added).¹³ Schatz’s emphasis on media resources is borne out by the Russian case. Interestingly, it also mirrors what political theorists have highlighted in democratic polities – Judith Butler (2017) has called for attention to the power that politicians derive from *on-screen* performances in democratic polities, and Jeffrey Green (2009), conversely, to the significance of “citizen-spectator’s gaze” that observes and judges public figures on TV screens.¹⁴

Of course, expectations may clash with experiences of the state and authorities. Symbolic performances can also never fully resolve tensions between personalism and institutionalism – and the discrepancies and differences between forms of authority are likely to be salient for some citizens. Yet, expectations are likely to shape interpretation of experiences, and at least matter alongside whatever experience a citizen may have with real-life institutions. Performances such as the *Pryamaya Liniya* broadcasts can create – ephemerally in the moment of performance and more enduringly via its extended preparation, *post-hoc* press coverage, and follow-up on viewers’ problems – the appearance that such discrepancies are not significant, and that control and responsiveness can be mutually reinforcing. These annual broadcasts are, moreover, just one example of the Putin administration’s growing reliance on what Petrov, Lipman, and Hale (2014) call “substitutes” for democratic institutions. These include the *obshchestvennaya palata*, a citizen complaint-gathering institution designed to partially rebuild the practices of information gathering and complaint-response that was central to all major Soviet state institutions.¹⁵

Control-responsiveness dilemma

We leverage the Russian case of symbolic state-building to develop a theoretical proposal to think about institutionalism vs. personalism, and responsiveness vs. control in other countries. As noted in the introduction, while a number of excellent studies on informal and personalistic forms of authority have asserted the relevance of this form of authority, we identify a form of symbolic state-building that sheds light on how extensive personalism and institutionalism coexist. A related debate centers on what has been identified as the “control-responsiveness dilemma”: many observers of authoritarian and hybrid regimes have observed that political elites in these countries

want to control society and be, or at least credibly appear, responsive and accountable to society. What is less clear is *how* these regimes seek to address these competing, and potentially contradictory, demands. The regime and neo-institutional scholarship has highlighted the role of formal institutions, but focuses on material pay-offs for key stakeholders through particular formal institutions, such as parties and legislatures, and on the informational dilemma (Gandhi 2008; Svolik 2012; Reuter and Robertson 2014; Reuter 2017; we discuss the informational dilemma below). We bring the symbolic realm to this discussion of the control–responsiveness dilemma: how do symbolic performances show authority at work in addressing problems of every-day lives?

While much extant literature on the control–responsiveness dilemma has focused on regime legitimacy and durability and the quality of democracy, Petrov, Lipman, and Hale (2014) have shifted the discussion to think of control–responsiveness as also a *governance* dilemma of hybrid and semiauthoritarian regimes. They argue that not only regime legitimacy, but the state’s authority and ability to *govern* are affected by this dilemma. It is the state’s “capacity [...] to perform for the benefit of its citizenry” that is at stake, not just the legitimacy and durability of a cohort of regime insiders (1). Of course, regime legitimacy is intricately linked to state-building in the Russian case. In part because the country’s experience of state-failure in the nineties, Putin’s regime seeks legitimacy in the claim to have effectively rebuilt the Russian state (e.g., Wengle, Monet, and Olimpieva [Forthcoming](#)). Yet, there may be a more general relationship between regime legitimacy and symbolic state-building that can be distilled from the Russian case. Leaders beyond Russia have found that strengthening the state, symbolically and through institutional reforms, can boost the regime’s claim to legitimacy and authority.¹⁶ The widespread use of direct call-in shows in a variety of countries offers a unique lens to assess to what extent that state’s institutions vs. personal/regime authority are emphasized in symbolic strategies; the conclusion will discuss evidence from these shows in other countries.

Petrov, Lipman and Hale (2014, 11) argue that what leaders do to manage the governance aspect of the control–responsiveness dilemma is to take on the “work” of identifying potential conflicts, “ad hoc manual policy adjustments,” and “brokering deals themselves.” Though deal-brokering and *ad-hocism* are clearly important in Putin’s Russia, there is another solution that Putin’s elites have embraced. Our project’s theoretical innovation is a suggestion that symbolic state-building processes may be a compelling “solution,” or a management tool of the governance dilemma. This is the case, precisely because of the kind of dual image of authority that characterizes state-building that can be conveyed: symbolic state-building allows elites to project an image of power and authority as emanating from not only the person of the leader, but as being exercised through impartial, “normal,” and responsive institutions of the state. The “work” that symbolic state-building undertakes is an easing of the contradictions between personalistic elements of state power, and the procedural, institutional aspects of statehood that are meant to guarantee the benefits of democratic governance. Since both the personalistic/paternalistic and institutional/legal aspects of authority can be explicitly and deliberately pursued in the symbolic realm, this image helps address the dilemma of hybrid regimes that want to both control societal expression and to appear responsive. An important question arises with regard to the effects of this form of accommodating the control–responsiveness dilemma; we address this question in the conclusion.

Direct call-in shows such as the *Pryamaya Liniya* broadcasts also solve a related governance dilemma that many authors have pointed to – the problem of information gathering. Regimes that discourage the expression of societal interests and discontent through elections, free speech, and independent media are potentially hamstrung in their ability to understand and respond to societal grievances (Holquist 1997; Fitzpatrick 1999; Henry 2012; Petrov, Lipman, and Hale 2014; Miller 2015; Little 2017). Sheila Fitzpatrick (1999, 164) noted precisely this paradox about the Soviet government: “the Soviet regime was wary of allowing citizens to express uncensored opinions about matters of public import in public. At the same time, it was extremely anxious to know what people were thinking.”¹⁷ At different historical periods, the Soviet/Russian government’s desire to know

stemmed from various perceived needs – modernization, legitimacy, discerning the range of socially acceptable policies, etc. – and led to a range of mechanisms to collect information from secret police reports to the encouragement of open letters to newspapers. Laura Henry (2012) highlights the role of complaint-making, and Petrov, Lipman, and Hale (2014) stress the role of mass public opinion surveys, limited electoral competition, and a modicum of free press as information-gathering devices in post-Soviet Russia that allow elites to respond just enough to prevent public protests.

A unique feature of the *Pryamaya Liniya* broadcast relative to both contemporary opinion polling and Soviet and socialist East European precedents (Dimitrov 2014) is that it makes public the information that is gathered in elaborate public performances, along with the state's response, representing these legitimizing negotiations between state/leader and citizen back to a vast television audience.¹⁸ The voice of the public on the live broadcasts is a key tool to collect information about "authentic" concerns and a staging of these concerns, to millions of viewers, making the *Pryamaya Liniya* broadcasts a highly unique, flexible, and valuable information-gathering and teaching tool.¹⁹

Pryamaya Liniya and performances of power

We focus on the *Pryamaya Liniya* broadcasts for three reasons. First, they provide a unique, diachronic picture of the "scenario of power" and the "attitudes towards authority and modalities of public conduct," to rely on Wortman's terms, that the Russian government seeks to teach to citizens. Second, the show is unique because it features extensive engagement between the state and regular citizens. Third, the show is interesting precisely because it is highly staged and elaborately planned.

The *Pryamaya Liniya* archive is unique and valuable, for one, because the broadcasts are the most important and high-profile, prime-time "media events" (Dayan and Katz 1994, 1–24) of the Putin-era's "theater of power." The broadcasts' central features have also remained largely stable across time, despite regular adjustments to the show's precise format over time – suggesting that it is an important ritual of Russian public life. Live-televised, multihour, multimedia spectacles, the *Pryamaya Liniya* broadcasts are aired by several stations (Channel One, Rossiya-1, Rossiya-24, and several radio stations) and feature Vladimir Putin responding directly to Russian citizens across the country's vast territory. The questions from viewers are usually quite short, while Putin's responses, presented largely extemporaneously, are lengthy and extremely detailed. Though the broadcasts are aired once a year, the process of gathering and responding to citizen questions extends long before and after the broadcast. Produced in collaboration between the Putin administration, the state-owned television channels, local television stations, regional administrations, mobile-phone providers, and others, this annual media event is the culmination of a long process of planning. A months-long, multimedia process of soliciting and gathering viewer questions precedes the broadcasts. Each show is anticipated and later analyzed in the media long before and after the broadcast, and the broadcasts, transcripts, and ample statistics are accessible on several platforms, including a dedicated website, www.moskvaputinu.ru.

The *Pryamaya Liniya*'s prominence and continuity over the years and the resources expended on it suggest that it plays an important role, and other scholars have investigated it. Jessica Pisano has provided a fascinating analysis of the President's live exegeses as performances of power, describing them as *pokazhuka*, or "political window dressing" (2014, 224). Her analysis, though, focuses largely on the strategies and media appearances of Putin as the leader. A second reason why we chose to take a closer look at the *Pryamaya Liniya* is its interactive nature. The *Pryamaya Liniya* and other direct call-in shows offer an opportunity to understand authority as relational and reflexive, that is, not only as a top-down performance, but as both a response to authentic societal concerns and an attempt to shape or control them. Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy (2013) have recognized the interactivity and reciprocity of Putin's performances, though they single out *respect* as the specific

modality of the state–society interaction. They argue that Vladimir Putin’s performances pay “respect to a certain group and validates that group’s place in Russian society” and that “these performances create a sense of commonality and unity” (15). These are no doubt important goals of the show, although we find that the broadcasts indeed serve an even more important function. As outlined earlier, the shows strenuously build a scenario of power that makes the state appear accountable, interested, and responsive to citizens’ concerns through formal institutional channels.

Other media events on Russian TV are of course also important, such as the annual Valdai Forum with leading foreign experts, and an annual “Big Press Conference” [*Bol’shaya Press-Konferentsiya*] with regional and national journalists. The symbolic construction of authority is in many ways similar across these events, though the “message” is directed to different publics. Each of these events are staged to present Putin as a powerful and competent world leader, who is at once undoubtedly the “first person” (*pervoe litso*), while also being accessible, responsive, and largely guided by technocratic rationality. Each also serves somewhat different functions: if the *Pryamaya Liniya* broadcasts symbolically enact Putin’s accessibility to Russian citizens, the annual *Bol’shaya Press-Konferentsiya* demonstrates his openness to the domestic press and journalists as trusted mediators – while also showing clearly that he has the power to determine when and how journalists are able to speak. The Valdai Forum, in turn, communicates his engagement with the international scholarly and journalistic community. We focus exclusively on the *Pryamaya Liniya* here, because a core element of the show is unique: the symbolic enactment of the direct engagement between the state and citizens makes it the most interesting site for questions about the nature of state-building and governance. The scope of our argument about symbolic state-building is thus strictly speaking limited to the image of authority as it appears on the *Pryamaya Liniya*. Nonetheless, the prominence of the event, its ritualistic nature, its intention to reach and respond to large Russian audiences, and the fact that the basic “scenario of power” that we find on *Pryamaya Liniya* is mirrored in other media events, suggests that these broadcasts are representative of symbolic state-building under Putin more broadly.

A third reason why the *Pryamaya Liniya* is an interesting lens, somewhat paradoxically, is precisely the highly staged, intentional, and nonspontaneous character of the broadcast.²⁰ The shows are produced in close collaboration between media and political elites. It is precisely because of these extensive staging efforts that these broadcasts offer an opportunity to investigate *how* state media represent authority and societal concerns. In other words, the myriad of features we see displayed on the show – detailed in the remainder of the paper – are on display because they are part of the symbolic strategy of political elites under Putin. As for citizen participants, we have no reason to believe that the concerns they bring up are not actually “real,” that is, authentic and heartfelt grievances, even if some questions are suggested to participants by program organizers.²¹ Although it is the case that citizen-participants in the broadcasts are deliberately selected and reportedly receive instructions in advance, the concerns participants express on air nonetheless reflect widely recognized problems and sources of conflict in Russian society. We can thus strengthen our argument with a series of counterfactuals: if the involvement of citizens were less central and varied, if aired concerns were more obviously curtailed to a small range of trivial, noncontroversial matters, if economic hardship featured as a marginal problem, we would conclude that they were not meant to appear authentic and not meant to teach citizens anything about how to interpret these everyday problems and experiences. Similarly, if the shows were exclusively focused on Putin, and showcased only his personal involvement in citizens’ problems and his ability to solve them (neglecting the role of formal institutions), we would conclude that they were meant to strengthen primarily his role as a leader, and his regime. By contrast, the fact that they do portray authority as both institutional and personal in such a high-profile, elaborate, extensively publicized and widely viewed media event, offers strong evidence for the complex picture of symbolic state-building strategies that we suggest here.

In sum, we find that the *Pryamaya Liniya* broadcasts teach citizens that a very particular kind of state – both controlling and responsive, both personal and institutional – can address and resolve

Table 1. Russian political elites' multiple ambitions on display in *Pryamaya Liniya* broadcasts.

	Evidence of political elites' ambition to <i>understand</i> and <i>respond</i> to authentic concerns:	Evidence of political elites' ambition to <i>control</i> expressions of societal concerns and <i>limit</i> discussions:
In range of concerns:	Wide range of grievances aired, including problematic and critical issues	Explicit framing of particularly sensitive topics
In/out of focus:	Sustained attention to everyday economic hardships	Taboo topics
In images of authority:	Emphasis on institutional aspects of authority	Emphasis on personal aspects of authority
In role of the media:	Journalists play an important role; media as an institution is respected and legitimized	Journalists are loyal and deferential to Putin, never critical

their concerns. The empirical discussion that follows will show detailed evidence of the multiple ways in which Putin's elites want to appear to be responsive, while not relinquishing control (see Table 1).

The questions: performances of lived experience

The questions on the *Pryamaya Liniya* broadcasts are one way in which the state seeks to gather representative reflections of authentic societal concerns, which are then broadcast to demonstrate appropriate "attitudes towards authority and modalities of public conduct" (Wortman 2013, 3). The participating and viewing citizens and their concerns, at once genuine *and* staged, are key protagonists in this televised scenario of power. The broadcasts' producers seek to strike an extremely careful and highly deliberate balance between authenticity and artificiality, and between responsiveness and control. The selection of questions on particular issues, the order of their presentation, and all other aspects of this performance are carefully controlled. Despite the high level of intentionality and explicit choreography, the live appearances of "real" concerns by ordinary citizens create an illusion of unedited spontaneity and immediacy.

Citizens engage willingly and appear alongside the president, via a wide array of regularly updated and expanded media, including satellite live links, a telephone call center, email, text messaging, and the online submission of video questions. Over time, changes in the program's set have moved Putin closer to these viewer-participants. Since 2008, the program has moved out of its original set, a small room inside the Kremlin, and into a larger studio, which includes a studio audience made up of representative viewers that now play an active role. In 2009, the call center was likewise moved into the studio. Through these changes, the broadcasts have symbolically reduced the distance between Putin and Russian citizens and stressed his availability.

A closer analysis of the question reveals the following findings: First, a very broad range of "representative" and authentic grievances appears on the show. Second, economic issues are the most common concern almost every year and over the course of all shows. And finally, while the range of questions is broad, a number of issues that are likely concerns for many Russian citizens are either presented through a particular frame, or are notably absent. Each of these findings is explored in greater depth in the three subsections that follow.

Broad range of concerns and questions are aired on live broadcasts

Questions that appear on the broadcasts cover a very wide range of concerns and are brought up by residents of every corner of the country.²² Citizens are virtually always introduced with the name of the town or village of his/her residence. That they hail from every one of Russia's regions is meant to leave the impression that *every voice is being heard* and opinions from far-flung locations are welcome.²³ Children are explicitly and frequently allowed to address the president with their

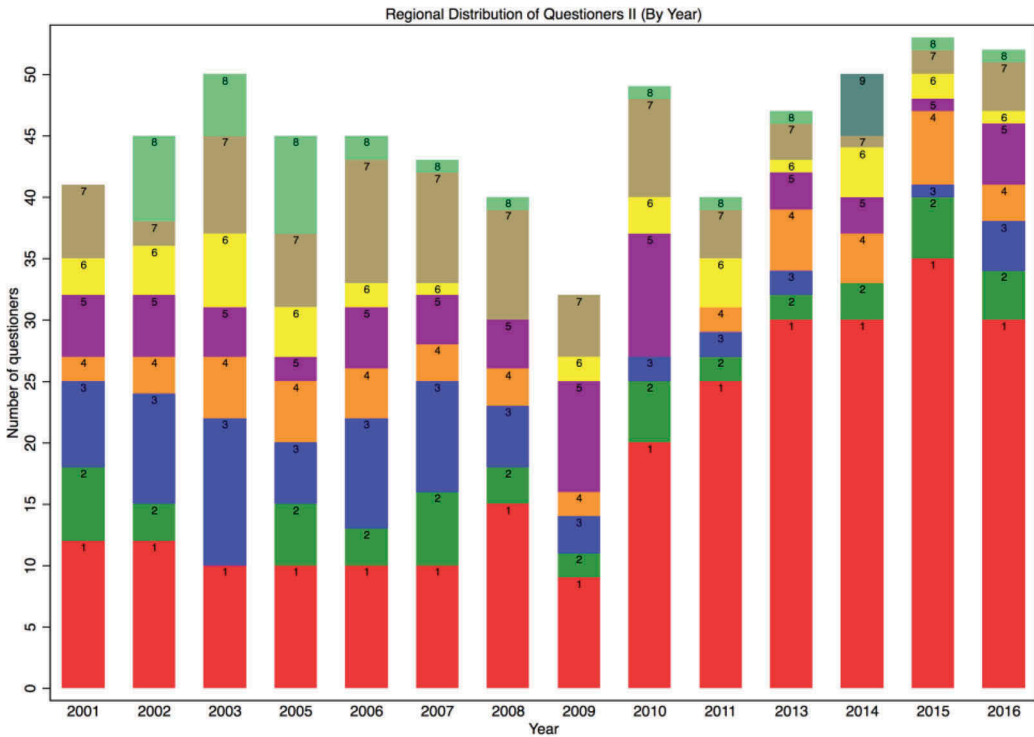


Figure 1. Regional (federal district) distribution of questions (by year).

Note: 1 = Central; 2 = South; 3 = Northwest; 4 = Far East; 5 = Siberia; 6 = Urals; 7 = Volga; 8 = North Caucasus; 9 = Crimea.

questions. Especially in the early years (2002–2009), questioners from the most populous Central District were under-represented to give airtime to voices from other regions (see Figure 1). In 2014, a bevy of questions from Crimea appeared on the show. The show consistently uses the term associated with civic nationhood – *rossiiskii*, while the term associated with ethnic Russian nationalism, *russkii*, is used far less frequently (almost 5× fewer), which suggests a conscious attempt to make the show relevant to all citizens.²⁴ The vast majority of questions concern issues that are, or are presented as, being relevant to at least an entire region, and most often the entire country – and hence universally interesting, rather than parochial (see Figure 2). Journalists on the show frequently emphasize this, noting for example, that they have received similar questions from other cities across Russia’s large territorial expanse. Finally, the fact that geographic representation is important to the producers of the show is also evident in the detailed information about the frequency and geographic distribution of concerns on the show’s dedicated website.

The breadth of questions and the openness to critical (social and political) questions strongly suggest that the government is interested in gathering, and broadcasting, a representative reflection of authentic societal concerns. The official website provides an extensive list of suggestive categories (e.g., social welfare, subsidies to single mothers, military, etc.). While a few citizen concerns are clearly entertaining, soft-ball questions (“... will you move the capital from Moscow to Petersburg?”), many others reveal harsh realities. A question about low salary for public-sector workers ends in an exclamation, that “we are not living, we are merely subsisting!” Alcoholism, drug-consumption, and drug-trafficking, the AIDS epidemic, homelessness, and many aspects of economic hardship are addressed repeatedly in the broadcasts. Even the issue of hazing in the military (*dedovshchina*) comes up once, in a 2003 question from a

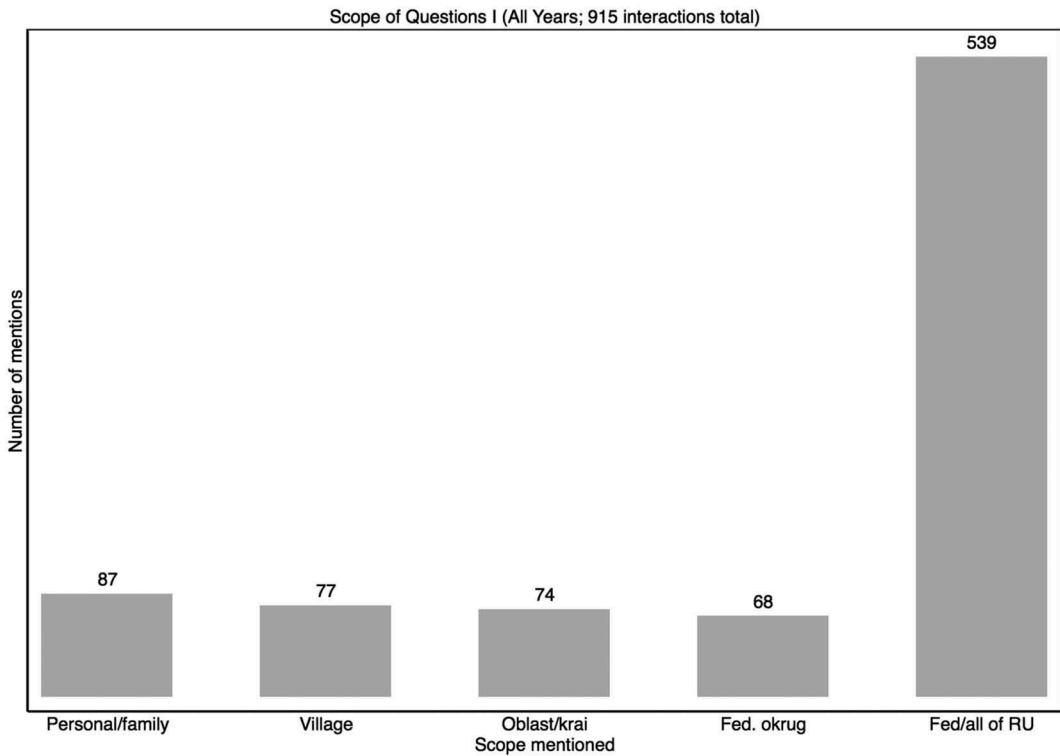


Figure 2. Scope of questions (all years).

young Russian who fears joining the army because of it; this is remarkable, given that the army enjoys wide respect. Broadcasters also do not shy away from including explicitly political questions; in fact, such questions came up with increasing frequency in the later years of the Putin presidency. An interesting spike in political questions occurs in 2011, the year of first major public protest under Putin and again in 2014, when the broadcast followed just weeks after Russia's annexation of the Crimea. Note also a notably higher frequency in questions about foreign policy in the same year (2014; see [Figure 3](#)). Political questions usually concern routine aspects of Russian politics, for example, upcoming Duma and presidential elections, or United Russia or Putin's own platform or position on certain issues. They also include more critical questions, for example, whether judicial reforms will help common people, about the political opposition to United Russia, and public protests.²⁵

Shared concerns about economic hardship

Viewers' top concerns are economic issues seen through the lens of the lived experience of post-Soviet everyday lives. Economic questions address a myriad of concerns ranging from insufficient pensions and public benefits, to low and unpaid salaries, the availability of jobs, property disputes, etc.²⁶ A typical example of an economic question is the very first question of the 2013 broadcast: an emergency medical technician from the Kuzbass region (explicitly described as a "representative of the viewing public") expresses concern about low salaries for medical professionals. A subset of economic questions serves to showcase achievements of Russian industry, with live-links that show off gleaming equipment and smart workers in orderly, modern factory floors. Questions are framed both in terms of household-level economic problems and experiences as well as in macro-economic terms, about economic policies, trade, and, since 2014, about the economic sanctions.

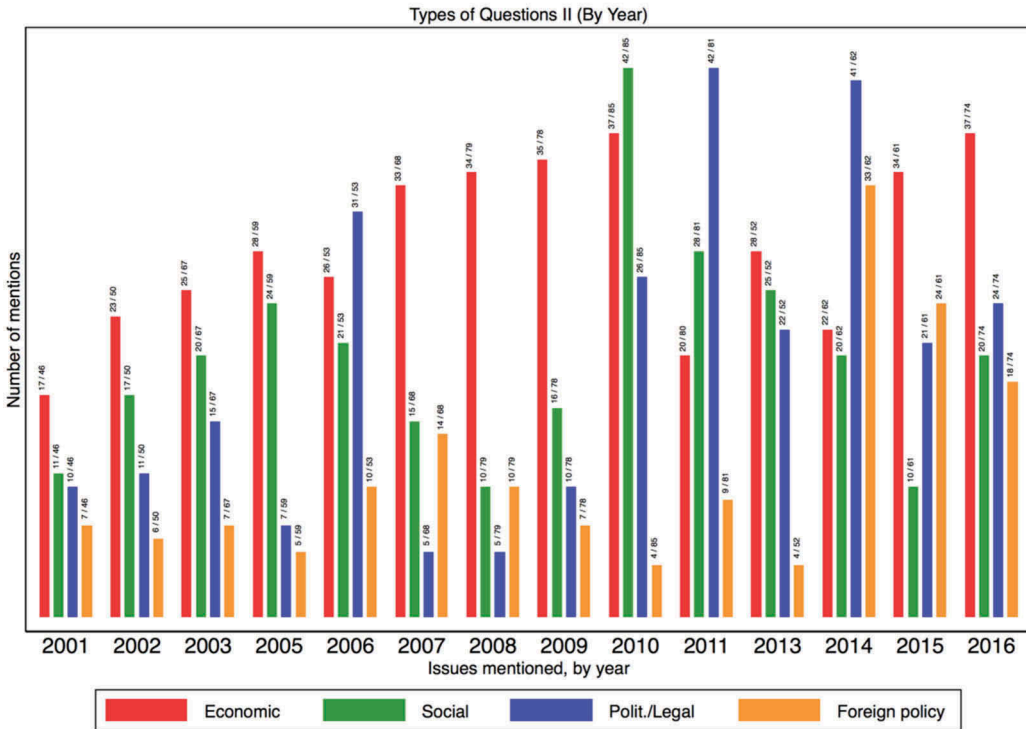


Figure 3. Types of questions by year.

In an interesting mixture of micro and macro trends, a pensioner in the 2001 broadcast asked whether falling energy prices would lead to lower pensions.²⁷

The dominance of economic questions was consistent over time, remaining the top category in every year except for 2011 and 2014. We draw several conclusions from the consistent emphasis on economic issues. First, this focus is likely a legacy of the Soviet-era social contract, which made the state responsible for guaranteeing standards of living (Zavisca 2012, 165). Judging by their prominence, economic struggles thus represent an area of continued and significant consensus between elites and the public and do not require extensive coordination or control from the program's producers. Many observers have noted that amidst a slowing down of economic growth after 2008, the government has sought to reframe its legitimacy pact with citizens: away from economic performance legitimacy, and toward symbolic concerns, such as Russia's past as a great power (Lipman and Petrov 2015; Lipman 2016). Yet, according to the questions on the *Pryamaya Liniya* broadcasts, in five out of the seven years after 2008, economic concerns still dominated. The word frequency analysis confirms that terms related to economic issues are in fact mentioned slightly *more* frequently in the seven most recent years (2009–2016) than in the years of economic prosperity (2001–2008). While the government has no doubt introduced new pillars of legitimacy, it clearly is not able (or willing) to neglect economic hardship and material elements of the social contract.

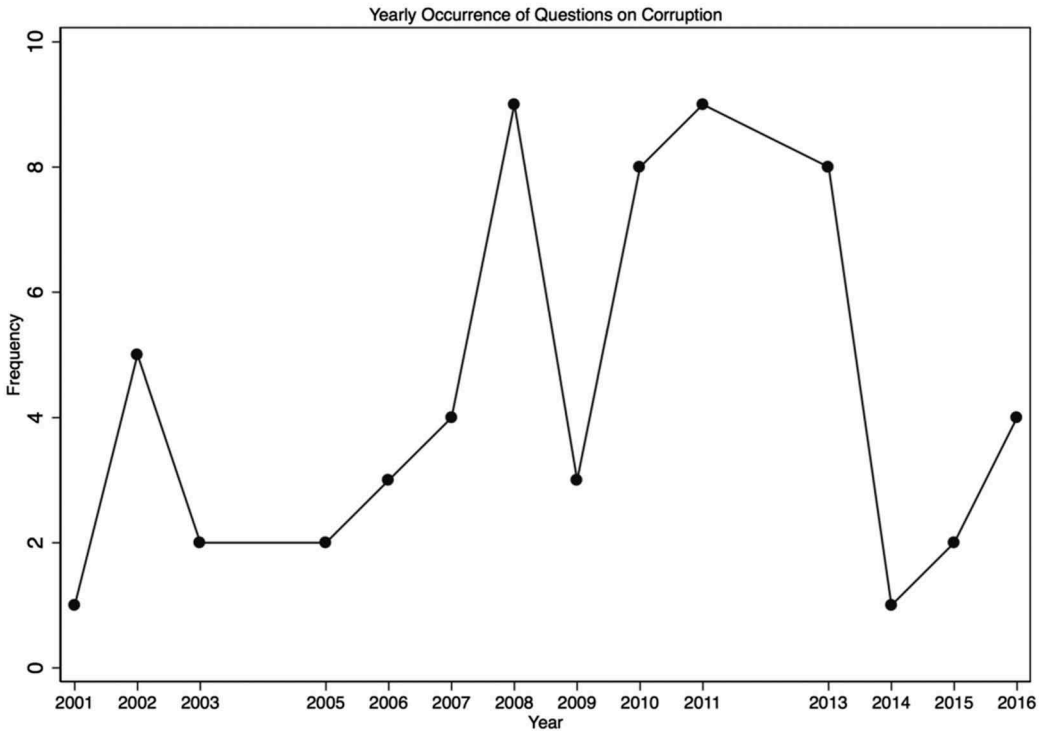


Figure 4. Questions about corruption over time.

Taboos and selective framing

While presenting a broad range of authentic questions, the *Pryamaya Liniya* broadcasts also show that Russian authorities want to control the message about citizens' grievances. The broadcasts' handling of the subject of corruption is telling – as questions (and answers) about corruption clearly create or reinforce a particular view of this issue. While the problem of corruption is raised frequently (see Figure 4), viewers consistently frame the issue by asking why budget money allocated at the center did not arrive at its intended destination. Putin tends to respond by saying he does not understand why the money has not arrived, and by promising that he will look into the particulars of this local situation. This response leaves open the question of whether local officials have in fact engaged in corrupt acts, and circumvents the problem of Putin's own responsibility for and relationships with the allegedly corrupt officials. These interactions communicate multiple messages: (1) it shows that the president shares citizens' concerns about the problem of corruption and its social costs; (2) it also shows that he is willing to confront it on behalf of citizens and yet, because he is relatively cautious to admit to instances of corruption, there are limits to the extent that he is willing to expose this behavior. This matters for the discussion on institutionalism below, in that it signals that institutions are on the whole functioning, that is, not critically in jeopardy by corrupt officials. (3) Finally, and perhaps most importantly, his performances seek to demonstrate that Putin himself and his inner circle are not responsible for corruption. Indeed, Putin is positioned as a (potential) fellow victim, as his social investments are undercut by theft further down the chain of command – that is, instances of the “good tsar, bad boyars” phenomenon. Concerns about corruption perpetrated by regional and local administrations are high in the years between 2010

and 2013, perhaps as citizens realize that they *can* ask about corruption and as the federal government allows these grievances to be aired (see [Figure 4](#)). The word frequency analysis confirms a spike in verbatim references of corruption in 2011 and 2013 (10 and 12, respectively, compared an average of three mentions per broadcast in all other years).²⁸ In 2014, however, the theme of corruption drops off sharply. This curtailment of questions and references is likely not a reflection of lesser popular concern, but of a government that was less willing to talk about them in the wake of mass protests. This trend may have begun to move in the opposite direction since 2015, when, along with post-Crimean annexation triumphalism, the broadcasts' participants again raised the question of (local and regional) corruption more frequently.

Viewer queries about Putin's personal life in all years of the broadcast could only very rarely, and indirectly raise questions about Putin's own wealth (and by extension, his involvement in corruption), and they are largely fawning and uncritical. One exception was a question about whether his daughters studied and live in Russia or abroad, which was widely understood as a coded question about the way Putin's wealth insulates his family from the concerns of regular Russians.

While myriad manifestations of economic hardship are represented on the broadcasts, a range of other issues are notably absent. The virtual absence, for example, of domestic violence and violence against woman more generally, violence against the LGBT community, and conditions in Russian prisons suggests that a number of real conflicts and problems in Russian life are unspeakable. While references to domestic violence are entirely absent, there are occasionally questions about salary inequalities between men and woman (i.e., the economic angle) and gender inequality in high politics or at the level of the family. In 2003, for example, a young woman called in and asked "will the benefits for single mothers be raised?" Putin's response immediately moved to generalize this question away from the specifically female problem of economic survival as a single mother and to the broader category of all social programs. "Of course," he replied, "here, as in other social areas, one wishes for more [*long pause, hopeless hand gesture*]. We will look at the possibilities in the budget for 2004..."²⁹ Putin's response acknowledged the problem (a typical response, see [Figure 5](#)), but also emphasized that the specific problems of Russian women were just a small drop in the large bucket of Russian social problems affecting *all* groups.

Questions of gender equality are often classified as part of the miscellaneous "other questions" category, referred to by some journalists and YouTube commenters as *neformatnye* [literally "nonformat"] questions (Novaya Gazeta 2015). As a category that is not acknowledged by the broadcasts' producers, these questions can only enter the broadcast indirectly, as part of questions that at first appear exclusively personal, humorous, or trivial. While these questions are often dismissed precisely because they are presented as trivial, they frequently function to introduce topics that cannot be raised directly. One widely noted *neformatnyi* question on the 2015 broadcast raised the question of male control over women in the home through a seemingly trivial concern. The question, from a group of women, was framed as a request to help their friend whose very strict husband, a military man, would not allow her to buy a dog. The husband would listen, the women argued, to Putin in his role as head of the Russian armed forces. The question was framed as a playful, joking matter, and Putin's answer characteristically included a variety of issues, including military men's purported attractiveness to woman, as well as the need for spouses to consult with each other. Still, Putin ultimately refused to enter the dispute, except by asking the man politely to consider his wife's wishes, citing the man's authority in his own home. Putin's answer thus affirmed the state's unwillingness to take any stance on questions within the household, particularly if it might undermine male authority there. This question and answer thus strikingly foreshadowed a 2017 law that decriminalized nonaggravated domestic violence, thereby limiting the state's involvement in these forms of violence (Boldyrev 2013). More broadly, the virtual exclusion of gendered everyday violence from the *Pryamaya Liniya* broadcasts confirms the prominent role of paternalism as a strategy of

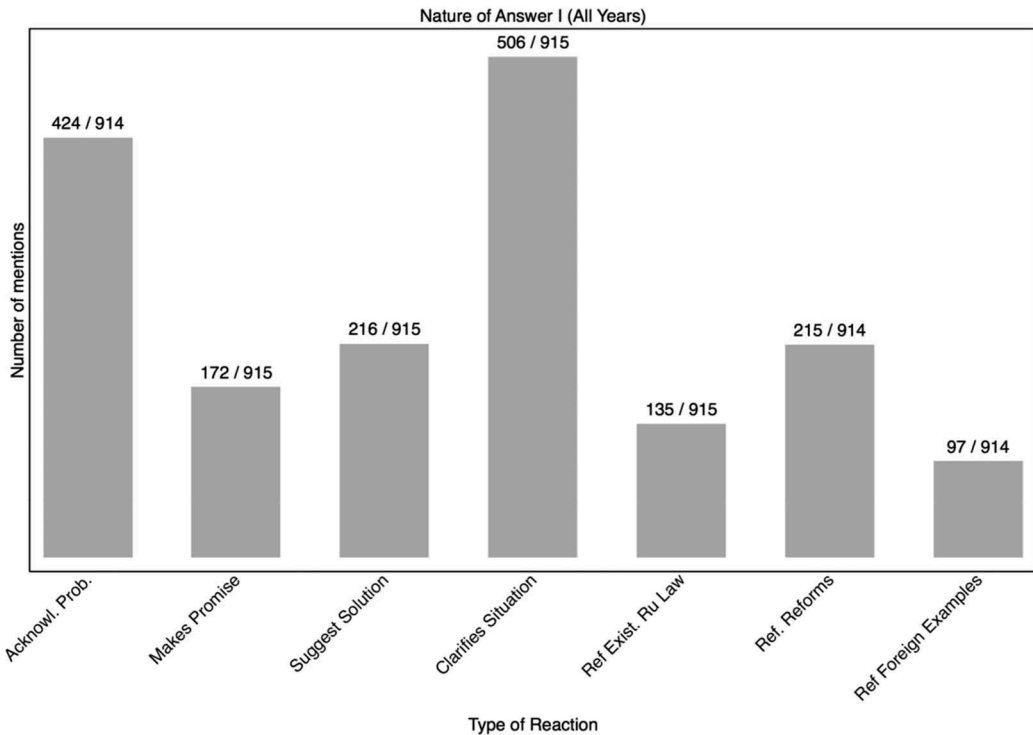


Figure 5. Nature of answers, all years.

power in Russia, and as a feature of the presidential call-in show both in Russia and in other states (Hayes 2000; 80; Wood 2016).

In sum, the selection and staging of citizens' questions is an important element of the *Pryamaya Liniya* broadcasts. It allows for the demonstration of both consensus and taboos, while also displaying the state's ability to control when, how, and whether controversial issues are raised on the program.

The answers: performances of power

Among the key tasks of the answers on the *Pryamaya Liniya* broadcasts is the performance of a particular scenario of power. We emphasize two aspects of these performances, the first related to style, the second to content. First, Putin's answers are on the whole highly technocratic performances that consistently display detached, professional competence in all areas of governance as well as local specificities, epitomized most clearly in the extremely detailed knowledge of relevant statistics and his calm and confident demeanor. At the same time, he is also at times emphatic and personally involved in solving a problem. In this way, Putin demonstrates his indispensability, as someone who understands and seeks to solve the problems of a highly diverse viewing public in a vast state in all ways possible. Secondly, we show that the content of his answers refers largely to institutional elements of authority. The majority of Putin's answers seek to teach citizens that Russian institutions are useful, legitimate, and – at least potentially – effective (the four categories of answers on the right in Figure 5). At the same time, we still see Putin as the undisputed protagonist at the apex of power. This dual image of power evokes the impression that institutional and personal elements of authority are mutually reinforcing, rather than contradictory.

Explanations that symbolically create order through technocratic, competent, and engaged leadership

Though Vladimir Putin's answers to citizen queries are versatile, efforts to acknowledge, clarify, and explain a problem predominate. In his answers to citizen queries, the President very frequently refers to existing laws and ongoing reforms, explains the causes and intricacies of a particular, evolving situation, and clarifies why a particular problem has occurred. Putin also often explicitly acknowledges that a particular concern is indeed a problem, before proceeding to explain its causes. The most frequent answer type is the *clarification*, or *explanation* of social, legal, or economic dynamics that cause a particular problem, and of attempts to address them (see Figure 5). Putin's answers are very often wide-ranging and extremely well informed explanations of why a particular social problem occurs. The cumulative impression produced by these kinds of explanatory replies is that the president's knowledge of scientific, legal, and economics facts, and even the specific local situation about which the viewer is calling, is nearly inexhaustible. Though he frequently refers to detailed statistical information that has clearly been prepared for him by others, the authors of that material are never named.

We could think of these detailed explanations as *efforts to create order*, where there is uncertainty and frustration in citizens' lives. Putin's clarifications offer audiences an account of *why* they are experiencing a particular problem, and are often presented as the first step toward addressing them. Blueprints for how order is to be created usually come from either references to institutional and legal reforms under way, or from explanations of how foreign countries have solved such problems. The consistency of references to foreign countries' institutions and experiences with similar problems suggest that audiences should think of Russia as a "normal country" (see Figure 6). Answers also frequently entail a promise by Putin to personally look into a particular problem.

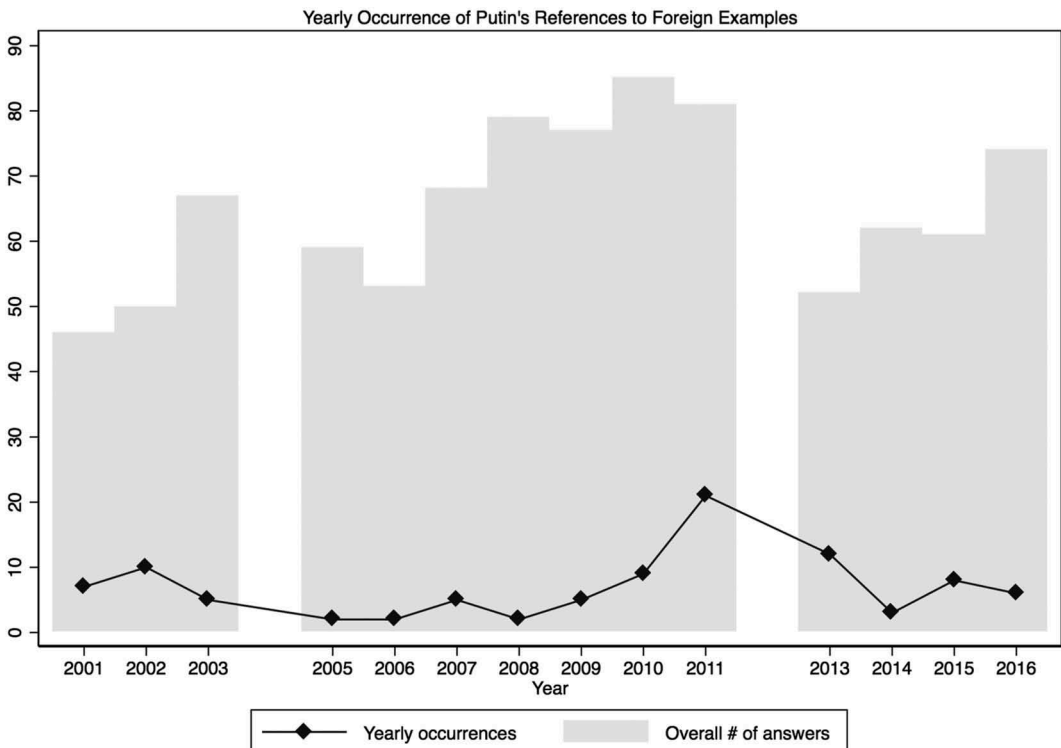


Figure 6. References to foreign examples.

Though notably this is not the main type of answer – he tends to refer to other branches of government or public officials who are in charge of addressing a particular issue. Some answers seek to demonstrate that problems raised previously have already been addressed effectively. For example, in the 2016 broadcast, a group of businessmen who complained about overzealous tax inspectors were assured that such inspections were already greatly reduced relative to the previous year. Later broadcasts include a number of positive narratives from studio audience members, who reported that various initiatives and institutional reforms were paying off. Finally, at times answers are also acknowledgements that problems cannot be easily fixed. Answers then seek to explain why this is the case – they are part of a much bigger, international problem for example, or that they would require significant budget allocations, which are not available.

Personal and institutional power

If we think of the President’s elaborate explanations as attempts to create order, we can question further what kind of order they convey. In other words, what is the image and the expectations of authority that Putin’s answers are meant to teach? On the one hand, responses are clearly designed to emphasize the essential role of Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin as a person who plans, oversees, and ensures implementation of various reforms. Putin’s promises to use his personal power as a check on local officials are clear manifestations of authority that emanates from him personally, as are his pledges to ensure that institutional reforms and legislative projects are pushed forward (see Figures 5 and 7). The effectiveness of this kind of personal intervention was demonstrated in the 2016 show, for example: in the latter part of the broadcast, it was reported that road repair crews

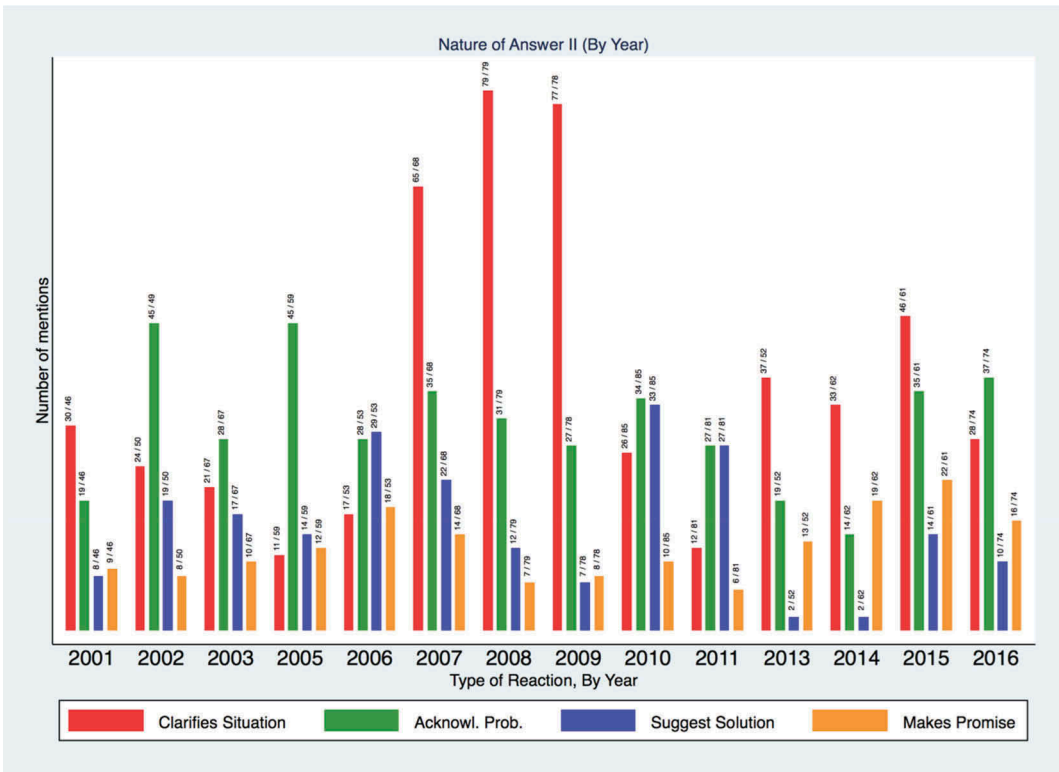


Figure 7. Nature of answer by year.

had swooped into Omsk to repair damage that had been the subject of a citizen complaint early in the show.

Putin navigates his role as the personal guarantor of authority flexibly in response to different kinds of questions and question-askers. While he is addressed most often with a respectful “Vladimir Vladimirovich,” and is referred to as the President of the Russian Federation, citizens also use a range of other titles that reflect the multiple roles he plays. Alongside titles that refer to official status, such as Mr. President (*gospodin prezident*) and Comrade Supreme Commander (*tovarishch verkhovnyi glavno-komanduyushchii*), participants sometimes use titles that allude more generally to the cultural significance of Putin as a leader or model personality, such as Main Hero (*glavnyi geroi*) and Top Leader (*pervoe litso*). Other addresses suggest Putin’s intimacy with members of society, such as the egalitarian title comrade (*tovarishch*), or for children who participate in the show, Uncle Volodya (*Dyadya Volodya*). The frequency of questions about Putin’s family and personal life (his love life, his opinions, his wishes for the future, etc.) reinforces the centrality of Putin’s personality to Russian political life. Finally, Putin likewise alters his own language and tone to suit these various roles. In response to foreign policy questions, he appears as an assertive statesman. To senior citizens and children, he responds with empathy, prefacing his response with the statement “I understand [your concern]” (*ya ponimayu*).

At the same time, the President’s responses are also clearly meant to buttress the importance of *nonpersonal*, that is, institutional authority, legal proceduralism, and devolution of political power from the center to the local level. In fact, invocations of legal structures and local administrative organs in the Russian system are the most common form of explanations that Putin gives. Terms related to institutional functioning of the state are very frequently mentioned in all broadcasts (nearly 100 mentions on average per broadcast, which is roughly a mention every 2.5 min).³⁰ From the earliest broadcasts, the President’s answers have emphasized how the Russian government *ought* to operate at the local level. They often sound like civics lessons, teaching viewers about the division of powers and responsibilities. Interestingly, these types of explanations conjure a world in which Putin’s personal intervention in local and regional problems should not be necessary, while, at the same time, appearing alongside promises to exercise personal power in response to viewer complaints. Rather than discounting this as contradictory incoherence, this juxtaposition of personal and institutional authority is a continuous feature of the show and highly intentional, we argue. In one example, a fifth-grader – Pasha from Primorskii Krai – called in to report that his school was closed, because it has been without heat for three weeks. Putin responded by first saying that this problem had been covered already in regional media and went on to explain the roles of city and regional government structures, vs. federal ones. Putin’s answer in this case did not focus on his personal role in addressing this problem, but rather on explaining which parts of the government are responsible for ensuring Russian schools have heat in winter. At the same time, the question and his answer were very likely meant to spur local and regional authorities to action.

In some cases, Putin’s responses indicate not only which lower-level government structures should address particular problems, but also the constitutional-legal thinking behind that distribution of powers, based, ultimately, in the idea of democratic accountability before voters. When asked about rising utility fees (*kommunal’nye uslugi*, a perennial theme on the broadcasts) in 2016, Putin began by saying that regional authorities were limited by a federal cap on the percentage by which they could raise the fees any given year (implying that perhaps this region’s governor was in violation). He then explained, however, that governors could raise fees beyond the cap only if they got permission from municipal authorities, who, Putin stressed, were elected, and thus subject to the local population’s will. Without directly addressing the broader question of why fees were rising, even as oil prices continued to drop, Putin offered an explanation of how the system was *designed* to provide democratic checks and balances and prevent precisely this situation. On the one hand, Putin’s comments direct blame toward local officials, and display his personal power to

intervene. On the other hand, however, his answer also sought to portray Russian institutions as genuinely democratic in design and intention, legitimizing and strengthening them. Most answers in fact teach citizens about how institutions function (or at least are supposed to function) and direct their attention to institutional solutions to their grievances. Rather than reflecting a stark dichotomy between personalism and institutions, Putin's responses demonstrate that his personal authority and legitimacy are intertwined with (and strengthened by) the state's formal institutions, which he, in turn, helps to develop and maintain.

The media as an institution and journalists as respected mediators

One striking example of an institution in Putin's "scenario of power" is the prominent and authoritative role of journalists on the *Pryamaya Liniya* broadcasts. The media is precisely one of the institutions that are legitimized and strengthened through the broadcasts, without, however, detracting from the centrality of Putin.³¹ All journalists, whether in the studio or in far-flung locations, appear as authorities in their own right. We interpret this as a reflection of media and political elites' desire to demonstrate the professional authority of journalists and their central role as mediators in contemporary Russia. At the same time, rather than challenging Putin, the journalists on the show defer to and assist him throughout the broadcast, signaling that their central role is predicated on loyalty and subordination, not on their independence. Such prominent, but loyal, roles for media professionals follow the Soviet model established after World War II, when the media was understood not as an independent "fourth estate," but as collaborators of political elites, and as mediators between the public and authorities (Wolfe 2005; Roudakova 2017). The *Pryamaya Liniya* broadcasts similarly cast journalists as essential members of the governing elite.

Given that journalists on *Pryamaya Liniya* are not positioned in opposition to Putin on the broadcasts, how do these broadcasts convey their authority? First, the broadcasts feature two journalist hosts, typically well-known television news anchors or commentators who mediate between the president, the studio audience, and incoming calls and questions. While the format and set are adjusted each year, these two journalists, most often a male-female pair, are almost always seated with Putin around a central table (Figure 8).

These two highest status journalists are positioned essentially as Putin's peers and collaborators, discussing issues of the day with him. They alert him to trends in the information they are receiving and analyzing, refer knowledgeably to current reform projects, past *Pryamaya Liniya* broadcasts, and the evolution of various political issues over time. They deliver and interpret data that is prepared in collaboration between media elites and other branches of government. Putin, in turn, treats them respectfully, with the exception of occasional moments where he interrupts their MC-ing of the program in order to emphasize his strong interest in a particular question (see Figure 8). This interaction between the journalists and the president models the relationship between the media and political authority as collaborative and nonconfrontational.

Second, the presence and visibility of other journalists convey the lesson that the media as an institution can grant citizens access to the president via elaborate, technologically sophisticated media infrastructures created for the show. The overall number of media workers on screen increased dramatically over time: since 2008, live broadcasts show a studio filled with a small army of silent, mostly young and female staff who are either taking calls live via computer terminals or moving around the studio, gathering questions from callers and the studio audience. Still more journalists appear with groups of citizens in remote locales during the show's live link-ups in villages and cities around the country. These journalists speak confidently and sometimes at length, without a script, provide relevant information, comment on topics of local interest, and introduce questioners. They convey the role of the media and journalists as mediators between citizens and the president. Journalists also occasionally mention that the infrastructural network that makes the broadcast possible is truly impressive, and highlight the live-ness of the broadcasts, using references to the weather, time of day, or local landscape to reinforce the ability of the

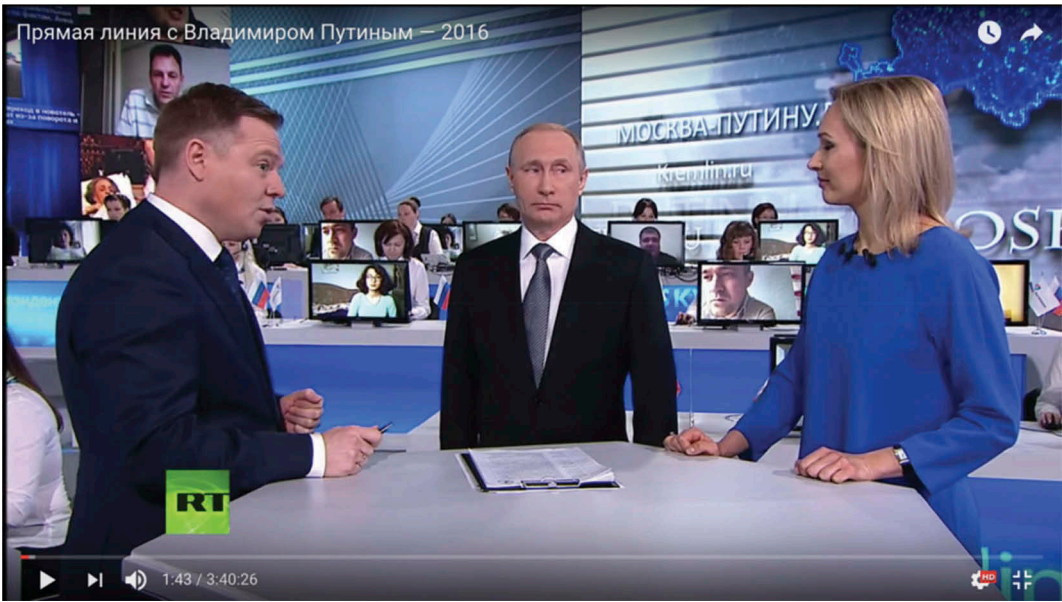


Figure 8. Screenshot from the 2016 PL broadcast.

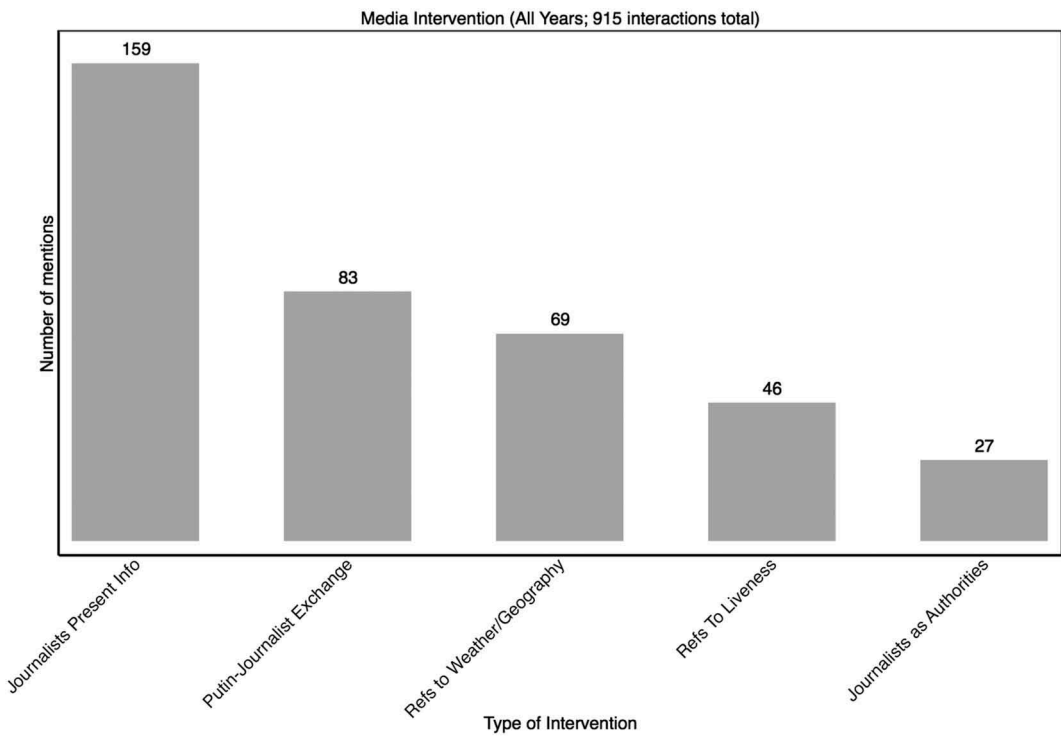


Figure 9. Media interventions.

infrastructure to transcend vast distances and unify viewers (third and fourth columns, Figure 9). These comments convey the power and scope of the media acting as mediators between citizens and the president.

Televised theater of power in other contexts

While our analysis of symbolic state-building has focused on Russia here, it is remarkable how common shows like *Pryamaya Liniya* are across the world. Since the interwar period, political elites in many countries have used broadcast technology to connect directly with citizens (Hayes 2000; Loviglio 2005; Lovell 2015).³² Although new media now compete for the attention of younger audiences, in many countries, TV remains the most broadly accessible medium and hence the main circuit of information, norms, and visual images between the state and society. As the Russian broadcasts are only one important case within a much broader corpus of related shows in other types of polities, our analysis can serve as a model for further research into symbolic state-building strategies beyond Russia. And though we focus on examining the role of mediated, staged performances in a nondemocratic polity, there is no a priori reason why symbolic state-building does not also merit attention in democracies – the symbolic or performative aspect of politics is present in all polities. The lens of televised, staged interactions between the state and citizens can reveal whether and how elites combine personalistic and institutional authority in symbolic performances.

There are similar formats currently being used the United States, Britain, as well as a number of Latin American countries (Colombia, Ecuador, Cuba, Venezuela) and the Philippines. Prior to 1989, political elites in East Germany, Hungary, Romania, and Yugoslavia (Gumbert 2014; 144–149; Imre 2016; 63; Mihelj and Huxtable 2018; 138–139) also relied on this TV format. Some elements of these shows are shared by most such broadcasts, but do not neatly align with regime type. In all of these broadcasts, ordinary citizens appear as actors in live performances and are in a direct dialogue with political leaders. This suggests that the inclusion of ordinary citizens is extremely important for the authentication of elites' state-building efforts in all these polities. Interestingly, in terms of frequency and status, the *Pryamaya Liniya* broadcasts in many ways strongly resemble the televised town hall meetings held by presidential candidates in the United States, which feature prominent roles for journalist mediators and studio audiences of "regular" citizens who pose direct and pointed questions to political elites. Both are infrequent, high-profile, and high-stakes media events. US presidential town hall broadcasts are clearly linked to the electoral process; sitting US presidents have generally not participated in this kind of performance, though US politicians have held live call-in shows and meetings with foreign audiences (Kendall 1995; 13; Chinese Embassy 1998; Robb 2017). Interactive call-in events, known as "tele-town halls" have also begun to be used by members of US Congress, as a way of connecting with and gathering data about voters in large districts while avoiding the spontaneity of face-to-face meetings with constituents (Evans and Hayden 2018).

Other features of these broadcasts do differ significantly across several variables, which could suggest that symbolic state-building efforts look different across polities. Such features include:

- the frequency, routinization, status, and timing of these broadcasts, including their relationship to elections
- types of participation, extent of interaction, and relative prominence by citizens and elites
- representations of power: personal versus institutional; shared versus undivided, etc.
- the role of journalists.

Unlike US town halls, the *Pryamaya Liniya* broadcasts are explicitly set apart from electoral politics – they are meant to be part of efforts to teach citizens how government works.³³ Broadcasts that are part of everyday, routine governance occur in a number of other countries. For example, the BBC's *Question Time*, a call-in show that began as a radio program and moved to television at the end of the 1970s, is also broadcast regularly, addressing a changing array of topics and featuring a variety of political and media elites. Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's weekly call-in broadcast *Aló Presidente* was also a routine part of governance: it was broadcast weekly, rather than annually

(Kozloff 2009; 194; Spanakos 2011; Frajman 2014). A further difference between the Russian *Pryamaya Liniya* and *Aló Presidente* is that the latter was a highly personalistic, populist media performance, which puts Chávez's personality at the center, linking him to the masses directly as a messianic figure of unification and redemption. Like the *Pryamaya Liniya* broadcasts, *Aló Presidente* was in fact produced by journalists and is carefully adjusted and calibrated over time to ensure that key messages are delivered. However, after a coup attempt against Chávez in 2002, the program de-emphasized the mediating role of journalists (Frajman 2014, 504). Journalists on the *Pryamaya Liniya* broadcasts, by contrast, have remained important actors on the show. In socialist East Germany and Hungary from the 1960s, journalists also were important actors on TV shows (Gumbert 2014; 144–149; Imre 2016; 63), though these broadcasts featured various socialist Party leaders, never the General Secretary himself.

Broadcasts thus vary across contexts with regard to the features listed above. We should not be surprised that the *Pryamaya Liniya* broadcasts have many historical and contemporary counterparts, but no exact equivalent in other national television systems, past or present. Media studies scholarship on the emerging global market for television formats has demonstrated that the process of format adaptation is an enormously complex process of cultural negotiation (Oren 2012; Mihelj 2013; Keinonen 2016). This is relevant for our theoretical interest in symbolic state-building: the process of adaptation and negotiation of local political needs and cultural expectations means that direct call-in broadcasts are valuable mirrors, or lenses for research on symbolic state-building strategies across polities. In the Russia case, performances of power address key governance dilemmas in hybrid/electoral authoritarian regimes, such as the balance between control and responsiveness, personalism and institutionalism. In other contexts, the dilemma and problems of governance will be different – what they are can be seen on display in televised interactions between political elites and citizens.

Conclusion

In sum, our analysis of the *Pryamaya Liniya* broadcasts suggests that state-building under Putin seeks to acknowledge societal grievances and respond to them, while also delimiting the range of legitimate concerns. Intricate interactions between concerned citizens and a responsive state serve to gather authentic images about a range of “real” grievances, in order to project them back to citizens, communicating their legitimacy and the state's responsiveness. In versatile performances of power, Putin displays mastery of technocratic detail, command of both historical and global comparative perspectives, as well as empathy and personal concern. Together, the performances by citizens and Putin serve to address elements of the control–responsiveness dilemma: they allow the state to collect information about real-life concerns, while simultaneously sending signals that some concerns are more valid than others and that the state is resilient to a degree of criticism. The broadcasts show that the state manages difficult social problems via responsive, science-based, autonomous institutions and, simultaneously, assert Putin's personal involvement and irreplaceability at the center of the institutional infrastructure.

The suggestion that this kind of symbolic state-building serves as a tool to address the control–responsiveness dilemma begs the question – what are its effects on governance in the long run? Petrov, Lipman, and Hale (2014) argue that the kind of ad hoc deals they observe end up weakening formal institutions and risk systemic breakdown. Although we argue that symbolic state-building under Putin has eased and mitigated tensions between personalism and institutionalism – by creating expectations that these forms of authority can exist side by side – in the end, these tensions will likely remain salient in the minds and experiences of some citizens. Whether Putin's state-building strategy is thus ultimately vulnerable and premised on the presence of Vladimir Vladimirovich at the center, we cannot say – as we have no way of knowing whether expectations will prevail. What we can say confidently is that the elaborate staging and the enormous resources devoted to promoting this dual image of

authority suggests that Russian political elites value symbolic state-building as a governance tool and are likely to continue using it in the future. Shows like *Pryamaya Liniya* shed light on the image of authority and the range of legitimate everyday grievances that elites want to convey; they are thus valuable, untapped archives that deserve more attention, in Russia and elsewhere.

Notes

1. Lucan Way rates state-capacity under Putin as high, whereas Brian Taylor argues that Putin's state-building efforts have not resulted in higher capacity. These efforts to assess the outcome of state-building largely model the Russian state against an ideal-type that deems Western liberal democracies as the most (perhaps only) functional and capacious state.
2. This turn to a processual account follows Anna Grzymala-Busse and Pauline Jones-Luong (2002), who have argued that state-building in post-socialist countries is an ongoing, dynamic and multisited project.
3. See a more detailed definition by Ed Schatz (2003) below.
4. Grzymala-Busse and Jones-Luong (2002) called for a distinction between personalistic and impersonal/institutional modalities of state-building in the post-Soviet region. In 2002, they characterized Russia's state-building as autocratic and institutional, rather than personalistic. Since the publication of their typology, however, many observers have argued that Russia has shifted toward personalism and informal rule, as many formal institutions were weakened under Putin (Ledeneva 2013; Dawisha 2014; Hale 2014).
5. In this literature, however, the focus is on regime strength, and governance, the state, and state-building have received far less attention (noted by Petrov, Lipman, and Hale 2014).
6. They are widely viewed, with around 3 million viewers each year in recent years, and extensively publicized ahead of the airing and publically commented on and analyzed thereafter. Viewership and other information about the show, including transcripts, are available on its dedicated website: www.moskvaputinu.ru.
7. See the Appendices 1 and 2 for coding categories and the terms used in the word frequency analysis.
8. This finding contradicts arguments that state-building under Putin has shifted away from performance (i.e., economic) legitimacy (see Petrov, Lipman, and Hale 2014).
9. On this particular role of the media, see Roudakova (2017) and Wolfe (2005).
10. The field of communication studies has wrestled with the difficulty of measuring "media effects" directly over many decades. For an overview of those debates and an explanation of why "the search for immediate, measurable effects on the individual has led to a neglect of the role of the media in developing political and social cultures," see Philo (1990, 1–7).
11. We follow Hill and Gaddy (2013) in applying Wortman to the Putin era.
12. On the impacts and intentions behind live media events such as *Direct Line*, the foundational work is Dayan and Katz (1994), particularly "Appendix: Five Frames for Assessing the Effects of Media Events" (1994, 221–234). See also Feuer (1983). For a review of the extensive literature that Dayan and Katz's book generated, see Hepp and Couldry (2010).
13. Note, interestingly, that this applies to a growing range of states, across all polity types.
14. Green has pointed to the reciprocal nature of elite media performances, arguing that awareness of the citizen-spectator's gaze limits the scope of actions for a democratic politician who makes him or herself available for public scrutiny. Indeed, Green finds that democracies could be strengthened if we were to take the power of seemingly passive public spectatorship and surveillance of officials in spontaneous situations more seriously (2009, 9–10). Clearly, the power of passive spectatorship is not limited to democracies, as we find in Russia an electoral authoritarian regime that wants to benefit from engaging in performances that allow mass media spectators to assess the personalities and abilities of its leaders. Indeed, the enormous institutional collaboration and resources required to effectively stage a media performance that *appears* spontaneous and reciprocal (even when it is clearly staged) represents a meaningful symbolic display of administrative and discursive power in its own right.
15. See also Danielle Lussier on forms of "elite-enabling participation"; she argues that this form of participation "increases [...] the informal or formal authority of incumbents, thereby giving them greater resources for monopolizing and wielding political power" (2016, 8), and is consistently preferred in Russia.
16. Ella George argues that this is the case in Kemalist and Erdoğan's Turkey: "Like Kemal [Ataturk], Erdoğan seeks to boost the power of the state while simultaneously transforming its institutions" (2018, 22). See also Schatz (2003) on symbolic state-building in Kazakhstan.
17. Scholars of socialist and post-socialist authoritarian systems in Eastern Europe have similarly argued that these regimes perceived an urgent need to learn about and respond to popular grievances in order to prevent the outbreak of public protests (Lussier 2011, 2016; Henry 2012; Dimitrov 2014; Petrov, Lipman, and Hale 2014).

18. Publicizing individual complaints and displaying the state's response was a function of the Soviet press as well (Lampert 1985; 134–145; Remington 1988; 123–127). Key differences relative to the *Pryamaya Liniya* broadcasts include scale, the role of the president himself in answering complaints, and the effort to display data about *total* complaints back to audiences.
19. Though flexible in the sense that new issues can be incorporated each year (e.g., the Crimea) and different weights can be given to political questions, or concerns about corruption, we were also surprised by how many elements of the show remained constant. See discussion in the sections on “The Questions” and “The Answers”.
20. See also Pisano (2014). Spontaneous (though likely screened) calls are sometimes included in the show, as in a 2010 incident Pisano describes, in which an Ivanovo doctor, Ivan Khrenov, called in to describe the deceptions carried out by hospital administrators during a visit by Putin in 2010. Dr. Khrenov told an acquaintance that he in fact called in spontaneously, without advance coordination with producers (interview with Ol'ga Kuz'mina, Ivanovo, May 2014).
21. This element of authenticity and relevance to everyday lives arguably explains why they are widely watched. The broadcasts also follow a Soviet tradition of periodically airing genuine popular grievances and examples of local corruption (Roudakova 2017, 25–30).
22. This is also confirmed by statistics presented on the official *Pryamaya Liniya* website, which describe the questions submitted for the year's broadcast (many hundreds of thousands more than the ones that are aired); see: <http://moskva-putinu.ru/#page/history>. Statistics seem to corroborate the producers' claim that audiences are able to ask any question they want, though categories on the site are also very broad.
23. There are minor exceptions to this strategy; for instance, in two years, 2009 and 2014, no question from the North Caucasus appeared on the show. Occasionally, Russian nationals residing in other CIS countries are also selected for participation in the show. We located questioners by Federal Okrug not because we expected Russian citizens to identify with their okrug, but to (a) capture the geographical dispersion of questions using an objective measure of “region” and (b) to assess how many questions referred to specifically regional (rather than local or national) questions, i.e., problems of residents of the Far North.
24. This finding aligns well with Hill and Gaddy's (2013) argument that the *Pryamaya Liniya* broadcasts seek to create national unity.
25. E.g., *Pryamaya Liniya* 2001, Question 34 about judicial reforms.
26. Note that the “economic” and “social” issues are difficult to disentangle, and we sometimes coded issues as both economic and social.
27. Interestingly, she stumbled over the terms of the question, leaving the impression that the question was crafted for her by a broadcaster who tried to combine the macroeconomic trend with an everyday concern.
28. This methodology likely overall underreports instances in which corruption is discussed, as corruption is frequently addressed through a description of a corrupt situation, not with the actual term. This makes it all the more surprising that the term corruption is used.
29. See *Pryamaya Liniya* 2003, Question 49.
30. Mentions were particularly high in the first two years, over 130 in 2001 and 2002; after that, mentions settled in at around 90 per year.
31. Existing scholarship and journalism on the *Pryamaya Liniya* broadcasts have largely focused on Putin himself, and to a lesser extent the citizens, focusing closely on Putin's choice of language in particular (Maslennikova 2009; Ryazanova-Clarke 2013; Pisano 2014).
32. Before TV, question-and-answer formats were a widespread strategy in the radio age.
33. Indeed, the two years in which Putin did not conduct the annual broadcast were both years in which he was seeking reelection.

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Appendix 1. Categories used in manual coding of 915 question–answer dyads

Questions

- Question origin
- Federal Okrug
- Urban/Rural
- Age
- Gender
- Profession
- Ethnicity, Russian/Non-Russian

Economic issues

- Pensions
- Salaries
- Jobs
- Corruption
- Property
- Privatization
- Other economic

Political and legal issues

- Local authorities
- Police/Secret Service
- Laws
- Courts
- Elections
- Protests
- Other political

Social issues

- Immigration
- Narcotics
- Education
- Health
- Orphans
- Housing
- Other social
- Vladimir Putin personal/family

Foreign relations

- Concerning US
- Concerning EU/EE

- Concerning China
- Concerning CIS
- Other countries

Scope of question

- Personal/Family
- Village
- Oblast/Krai
- Federal Okrug/Larger region
- Federal/All of RU

Type of answer

- Acknowledge problem
- Makes promise
- Suggests solution
- Clarifies situation
- Refers to existing RU law
- Refers to reforms
- Refers to foreign example
- Adjusts response to questioner

Journalist appearance

- Refers to live-ness
- Weather/Geography
- Vladimir Putin–Journalist chat
- Journalists as authorities
- Journalists and public
- Journalists stats/info
- Other remarks

Appendix 2. Word frequency analysis

Economic terms

*pensi**

*zarplat**

*zarabot**

*plat**

*l'got**

*Byudzhethnik**

*posobie**

*ekonomichesk**

*promyshlen**

Terms associated with institutional power of the state

*gosudarstv**

*reform**

*zakon**

*prav**

*vedomst**

*zaveden**

*organ**