

Putin, Performance and the *likhie* 1990s Re-Examined*

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〈Abstract〉

The Putin regime has used comparisons with the 1990s to create political support and legitimacy for Vladimir Putin, by suggesting that life in Russia has become better since then because of Putin. Comparisons with the 1990s in absolute terms, however, fail to take account of the much more favourable structural conditions that have pertained since Putin came to power. This article avoids this problem by looking at Russia's performance in the 1990s and thereafter in relative terms(i.e. in comparison with the other 14 states of the Former Soviet Union) rather than absolute terms. The analysis shows that Russia, in relative terms, has performed no better under Putin than in the 1990s, a finding that constitutes an indictment of Putin's leadership rather than a legitimation of it.

*Keywords: Putin, Yeltsin, leadership, performance, 1990s

I . Introduction

Vladimir Putin's regime has long cast the 1990s in an unfavourable light(Belmonte & Rochlitz 2019; Malinova 2021, 2022; Pyle 2021; Sharafutdinova 2019, 2020). The regime, indeed, has sought to frame the 1990s as a 'collective trauma' for the Russian people, portraying the period

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as one of economic, political and social collapse(Sharafutdinova 2019, 2020). This notion of a decade characterized by poverty, violent crime, corruption, instability, state weakness and loss of international influence or prestige is captured in the Russian expression *likhie devianostye*, meaning ‘hard’ or ‘evil’ 1990s.¹⁾ The Putin era, by contrast, is portrayed by the regime as one of revival: economic growth, newfound wealth, order, stability, and renewed international influence(Hutcheson & Petersson 2016; Sharafutdinova 2020; Wilson 2021). This comparison is intended to create political support for Putin, thereby legitimising his rule, by suggesting that things are better in Russia now than in the 1990s *because of* Putin(Belmonte & Rochlitz 2019; Wilson 2021). Putin, thus, is presented as a great leader who saved Russia from the chaos of the 1990s and whose continued rule is a guarantee that there will be no return to the undesirable conditions of that decade(Hutcheson & Petersson 2016; Malinova 2021; Petersson 2021; Sharafutdinova 2019, 2020).²⁾ Implicit here, also, is the idea that Putin is a better or more successful leader than Yeltsin was. There is, furthermore, substantial agreement with this narrative in Russian society, as Russians (as we shall see) tend to view the 1990s (and Yeltsin) negatively due to the unfavourable socio-economic conditions that pertained in that decade, while Putin has been highly popular in large part because of improvements in those same conditions.³⁾ There has, thus, been some useful analysis of both the negative framing of the 1990s that the regime

1) Such ideas have also regularly been a theme of Putin’s speeches throughout his time in office(Sharafutdinova 2020, 124-5). A memorable example is his address to the Federal Assembly in 2005, when he spoke of the collapse of the Soviet Union as ‘the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century’ and a ‘real drama’ for the Russian people(Putin 2016, 147).

2) For Petersson(2021), the notion that Putin has delivered Russia from the *smuta*, or ‘time of troubles’ of the 1990s is one of the key political myths underpinning Putin’s legitimacy. Likewise this ‘legitimation frame’, as Sharafutdinova(2019) calls it, has become an important ideological pillar of Putinism and is ‘systematically reinforced and disseminated through state-controlled media’.

3) Studies of public opinion have repeatedly found that Putin’s approval ratings are high because of his role in improving the economy, restoring order and strengthening Russia’s international position(Hutcheson & Petersson 2016; White & McAllister 2008).

has encouraged and the political uses that have been made of it. It has also been pointed out that this is a selective presentation of the 1990s, which overlooks the positives of that decade.⁴⁾ Surprisingly, however, no attempt has yet been made to examine whether the Kremlin's central claim, that life has been better since 2000 than it was in the *likhie* 1990s *because of* Putin's leadership, is empirically valid. It is this question that the current article seeks to address.

There is no doubt that life in Russia has been much better, in a variety of ways, in the Putin years than it was in the 1990s. This is evidenced, as we shall see below, by improvements across many key socio-economic indicators. It is also clear, however, that Yeltsin (and Russia) faced greater challenges, and in worse circumstances, in the 1990s than Putin has.⁵⁾ Yeltsin was elected president of Russia (the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic) in June 1991 when it was still part of the Soviet Union. He became its pre-eminent leader following the failed August Coup of the same year. At that time, the state was highly uncertain: the Soviet Union was clearly untenable - it was already breaking up - but Russia was not independent. The matter of statehood, therefore, had to be decided (i.e. whether there should be a new union of some kind or an independent Russia) and then brought into being. Additionally, there was no national (Russian) economy and the Soviet economy (still largely planned) was in steep decline. Yeltsin also inherited a *perestroika*-era political system that was ill-suited to governing an independent state. Yeltsin, then, had to establish Russia as a state, create a new economy, and build a new political system.⁶⁾ He

4) As Sharafutdinova (2020, 113) points out, for many Russians 'the 1990s were also a decade of political pluralism, economic opportunity, open borders, cultural creativity, and freedom of ... expression.' These freedoms have deteriorated significantly since then.

5) This is certainly true of the period that is under review here, namely the first two decades of Putin's time in power (the years 2000-2019).

6) Some of these problems were, in no small degree, of Yeltsin's own making. The decision to break up the Soviet Union (in its 9 + 1 format), for instance, greatly complicated economic reform. Likewise, Yeltsin had encouraged separatism, famously calling on the regions to take as much sovereignty as they could swallow.

also had to contend with pronounced centripetal forces within Russia(Colton 2008, 271-272). Additionally, world oil prices were low throughout Yeltsin's term in office.⁷⁾ By the time Putin became president most of these fundamental matters had been addressed. The Russian Federation was a recognised independent state. A market economy (albeit of sorts) had been established and was growing rapidly. Russia had a new Constitution and a functioning, if flawed, political system. Russia, of course, still faced numerous problems but these were of an altogether lesser order of difficulty than those Yeltsin had confronted. Putin also had the benefit of oil prices that were, on average, more than three times higher than those that pertained during Yeltsin's presidency.⁸⁾ And while Putin also faced (as had Yeltsin) a separatist challenge in Chechnia that escalated into military conflict, he had the advantage of being able to learn from the experience and the mistakes of the first Chechen war. This is not to say that Yeltsin did not make mistakes or that Russia could not have been better governed in the 1990s, or that Putin has not had problems to deal with.⁹⁾ It has to be recognized, though, that being President of Russia was a much harder job in the 1990s than it was in the subsequent two decades.

It is hardly surprising, given these very different circumstances, that socio-economic outcomes have been better since 2000 than they were in the 1990s. Such a pattern, moreover, is evident right across the post-Soviet space: all of the states of the Former Soviet Union(FSU) experienced pronounced declines in the 1990s and they have all recorded significantly better outcomes (in various areas) since 2000(Wilson 2021). This suggests - strongly - that structural factors have been very

7) The price of oil was below \$20 a barrel for most of the 1990s(Colton 2008, 231).

8) The average oil price in the period 1992-1999 was \$17.54 per barrel; from 2000-2016 it was \$65.04(Taylor 2018, 113).

9) Assessments of Yeltsin and the reforms of the 1990s vary. A particularly forceful critique is Reddaway & Glinski(2001). More sympathetic accounts are offered by Aron(2000) and Colton(2008). Balanced assessments can be found in Brown(2001). Whatever one's view, there is no doubt, as Tikhomirov(2019) shows, that the 1990s were an extraordinarily turbulent decade.

significant and probably more important than the influence - or agency - of Putin (or any other leader) in many policy areas. Comparisons with the 1990s, then, in absolute terms, while convenient for the Kremlin, are largely facile as they fail to take account of these very different structural conditions. The approach taken here, which will be explained and justified below, is to consider Russia's performance relative to the other states of the FSU, under Yeltsin and Putin respectively.

This article is not an attempt to argue that the 1990s were not *likhie* - rather it will confirm that in most respects they were - nor is it intended as a defence of Yeltsin's presidency. Neither do we deny that life in Russia has improved since the year 2000 (again, indeed, the analysis will confirm that it has). Rather, we seek to ascertain whether the comparison with the 1990s actually works to legitimise Putin's leadership and his regime when we take account of different structural conditions by considering performance in relative terms (that is in comparison with the rest of the FSU), instead of absolute terms. The article proceeds, next, with a further discussion of the problem of structure and agency, and proposes a way to overcome this concern. It then examines Russians' assessments of the 1990s before proceeding, drawing on these views, to examine performance in Russia according to various key measures.

II. Structure and Agency

The debate over the relative roles of individuals (agency) and structural forces in shaping outcomes is old and unresolved. Positions have ranged, historically, from those who think that individuals have little influence to others who think that they are decisive.¹⁰ The Kremlin's presentation of Putin clearly belongs to the latter. He is presented as a classic great

10) Examples of the former include Tolstoy and Marx, of the latter, Carlyle. For an interesting overview of these positions see Jones & Olken (2005, 837-840).

man of history, whereby positive outcomes in Russia are attributed to his leadership (and his regime). Structural forces are rarely mentioned and typically invoked only to explain failures, such as the economic recession following the financial crash in 2008, which was blamed on the United States. This view is obviously fanciful. There is, as already mentioned above, a great deal of evidence that the improvements that have been recorded across the FSU since 2000 are principally the result of structural factors, such as recovery from the dislocation that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, and higher prices for commodities, especially oil.¹¹⁾

Moreover, the difference between the 1990s (economic decline) and the period since then (growth) likewise cannot be explained by agency, unless we are to believe that all 15 of these states had bad leaders in the 1990s and good leaders from 2000 onwards. Evidence that this is not the case, aside from common sense, is that these socio-economic improvements also occurred in states such as Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, where there was no change of leader in the late 1990s or early 2000s. The idea that the same leaders were somehow responsible, irrespective of structural factors, for both steep decline in the 1990s and rapid improvements thereafter is implausible.¹²⁾ It is clear, then, that socio-economic developments since the 1990s have mainly been the result of structural factors and, concomitantly, that all of the countries of the FSU have been subject to

11) This is not to say that all of these countries are the same, for we can identify many variations in terms of both historical experience and the structure of their economies. Some of these countries, for instance, had civil conflicts, while most did not. Some embraced market reforms, while others didn't. Some are major exporters of oil and gas, while many are not. Additionally, some became democracies, some remain highly authoritarian, and yet others are somewhere in between. The fact, however, that all of these states experienced pronounced declines in the 1990s followed by striking recoveries thereafter, in spite of all these variations and complexities, actually strengthens the claim that socio-economic developments across the FSU have principally been driven by structural factors.

12) To put it another way, if those leaders were able to generate rapid growth after 2000, why were they unable to avert such serious declines in the 1990s?

broadly similar structural forces.

The question, then, is how to assess the claim that life is better in Russia than it was in the 1990s because of Putin, while taking account of the far more positive structural conditions that pertained from 2000 onwards. The approach here is to consider Russia's performance relative to the other states of the FSU, under Yeltsin and Putin respectively. This allows us to see how Russia fared in relation to the other states of the FSU in the 1990s (a period of universal regional decline) and after 2000 (a time of universal regional recovery), thereby taking account of structural change. This approach obviously is not perfect, as structural factors, while broadly the same (negative in the 1990s, positive thereafter) have not been identical for all 15 states of the FSU. The approach, however, is a significant advance on the Kremlin narrative, which ignores structural factors altogether. Moreover, and more to the point, if there is any truth in the regime's claim that life is better in Russia now than it was in the 1990s *because of* Putin's superior leadership we would expect Russia's performance to be better relative to the rest of the FSU after 2000 than it was in the 1990s.¹³⁾ Indeed, given the narrative that Putin is a national saviour who has transformed Russia's fortunes, we would expect relative performance to be *significantly* better than it was during the *likhie* 1990s. This analysis advances the debate concerning Putin and the *likhie* 1990s, because existing studies in this area do not seek to examine the empirical basis of the regime narrative that Putin's leadership is the difference between the bad 1990s and the good years that followed.¹⁴⁾

13) Unless, that is, we are to believe that all of the states of the FSU had much more effective leaders after 2000, or that Putin was operating in Russia in conditions that were somehow less favourable than in the rest of the FSU. The first of these, as we have already seen, is implausible. There is no evidence that the second is true and this has nowhere been suggested.

14) There have, of course, been studies of performance in post-Soviet Russia. None, however, has compared relative performance under Yeltsin and Putin to examine the empirical basis of the regime narrative concerning the 1990s and Putin's leadership.

III. Russians' Views of the 1990s

Russians' assessments of the 1990s have persistently been negative. Polls conducted by the Levada Center since 2000 <Table 1> have always found clear majorities of Russians believing that the Yeltsin era brought more bad than good.¹⁵⁾ A more recent survey (conducted by the Levada Center in March 2020) asked, similarly, whether the 1990s brought the country 'more good' or 'more bad'. Some 62% of respondents answered 'more bad'; just 19% chose 'more good'(Greben' & Agapeeva 2020). Russians' evaluations of Yeltsin are correspondingly unfavourable, with few Russians assessing him positively <Table 2>. Putin by contrast, as is well known, has always been more popular. Putin's approval rating (as measured by the Levada Center) has averaged around 75% since 2000, with several peaks in the high 80s.¹⁶⁾

<Table 1> Did the Yeltsin epoch bring Russia more good or more bad?

Year	2000	2001	2002	2004	2005	2006	2007	2009	2010	2011	2013	2015
More good	15	15	14	16	13	15	19	17	20	18	14	18
More bad	75	67	69	69	70	64	58	63	59	63	66	56

Source: "Epokha El'tsina i raspad SSSR." Levada Center, 1 February 2016, <https://www.levada.ru/2016/02/01epoha-eltsina-i-raspad-sssr/> (accessed 27 July 2020).

All polls were conducted in December of the relevant year, except for 2013, which was conducted in April.

15) "Epokha El'tsina i raspad SSSR." Levada Center, 1 February 2016, <https://www.levada.ru/2016/02/01epoha-eltsina-i-raspad-sssr/> (accessed 27 July 2020).

16) Putin's average approval rating for the period January 2000 - March 2021, for instance, was 74.7%. The rating has never fallen below 59%, which was recorded in April and May of 2021. The rating is available at <https://www.levada.ru/indikatory/>.

(Table 2) How would you assess your attitude towards Boris Yeltsin?

Year	2000	2001	2002	2004	2005	2006	2007	2009	2010	2011	2013	2015
Positive	9	9	10	10	10	8	13	17	17	12	11	14
Neutral	32	31	34	32	33	39	42	42	42	38	37	37
Negative	56	56	54	56	55	48	40	34	35	43	47	36

Sources: “Otnoshenie k lideram proshlogo: Gorbachev, El’tsin, Verkhovnyi sovet.” Levada Center, 8 May 2013, <https://www.levada.ru/2013/05/08/otnoshenie-k-lideram-proshlogo-gorbachev-eltsin-verhovnyj-sovet/> (accessed 24 July 2020); “Epokha El’tsina i raspad SSSR.” (accessed 27 July 2020).

All polls were conducted in December, except for 2013 which was conducted in April.

Russians’ specific recollections of the 1990s are also negative. A survey in 2020 asked, ‘What good things, above all, do you remember or know about the 1990s?’ The highest result was just 6% for the category ‘more possibilities to earn, to open a business, increase income’. Five per cent responded ‘youth’ and 4% ‘childhood’. Another 4% answered ‘free education, medical care, trips to sanatoria and accommodation’. Three per cent answered ‘freedom’. All other positive responses were at 2% or less. Fully 42% of respondents were unable to name anything positive about the 1990s (Greben’ & Agapeeva 2020). The same poll asked Russians what bad things they remember or know about the 1990s. The respondents proffered a wide variety of answers (see Table 3) but the replies overwhelmingly relate to the economy and issues concerning law, order and stability. The most common responses, for instance, raised by 24% of respondents, concerned law and order i.e. ‘gangsters, crime, lawlessness, criminality, illegality’. The next highest grouping related to economic conditions: ‘poverty, lack of money, low incomes, delays and non-payment of salaries and pensions, hunger’. None of the respondents, interestingly, mentioned a decline in Russia’s national standing or international influence (or anything similar).

〈Table 3〉 What bad things, above all, do you remember or know about 1990s?
(% of those asked)

Gangsters, crime, lawlessness, criminality, illegality.	24
Poverty, lack of money, low incomes, delays and non-payment of salaries and pensions, hunger.	20
Empty shelves, shortages, queues, rationing coupons.	14
Collapse, chaos, disintegration of the country, stealing, corruption, anarchy.	12
Unemployment, layoffs.	7
Default, collapse of the rouble, crisis, loss of savings, inflation.	7

Source: Greben' & Agapeeva(2020).

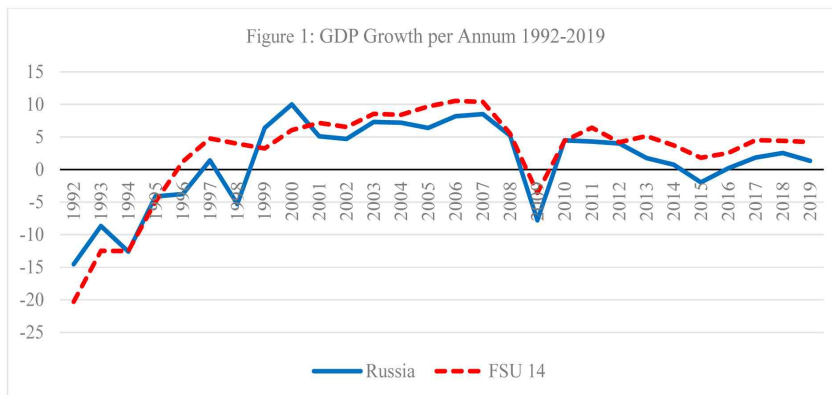
These polls confirm that Russians, in the main, view the 1990s, and Yeltsin, unfavourably. Their responses also tell us what in particular Russians disliked about the 1990s - i.e. problems concerning the economy, order, and stability. Russians' views of the 1990s, thus, broadly match the negative framing of those years that has been propagated by the regime.¹⁷⁾ We seek, therefore, to employ measures that match, or closely accord with, these areas of concern in making our comparison of performance under Yeltsin and Putin (relative to the rest of the FSU).¹⁸⁾ To this end, our analysis will draw extensively on quantitative data provided by the World Bank, which facilitate comparative analysis over time. We aim to cover the first two decades of the Putin era, that is the years 2000-2019. The data are not always perfect - they do not, for instance, always cover the whole time period for all states - but they constitute the best evidence available. The article, next, examines performance in the area of the economy, followed by order and stability.

17) For evidence that this is not coincidental and that Russians' views of the 1990s have been affected by a regime-orchestrated media campaign see Belmonte & Rochlitz(2019).

18) Foreign policy, for this reason, is not considered here. An additional reason for excluding foreign policy is that few useful quantitative measures exist that are relevant to this area (a study of foreign policy, therefore, would require a different methodology). Moreover, in practical terms, an analysis of foreign policy would demand an article of its own.

IV. The Economy

Poor economic performance, as we have already seen (Table 3), is one of the negative aspects of the 1990s mentioned most frequently by Russians. There is no doubt that the Russian economy has performed better since 2000 than it did in the 1990s. As Figure 1 shows, while Russia spent most of the 1990s in recession, it has spent most of the 2000s in growth (although there have been two recessions, one of them - in 2009 - significant). It is also clear from Figure 1, however, that growth has been higher throughout the FSU(Former Soviet Union) since 2000 and that growth in Russia has been below average for most of that time. Indeed, when we consider average GDP growth, it is evident that Russia has performed badly in comparative terms in both periods (Table 4). The -5.15% average GDP growth recorded under Yeltsin put Russia in 11th place in the FSU for the period 1992-99. The average of 3.7% achieved under Putin, however, is the *second lowest* in the FSU for 2000-19, with only Ukraine faring worse. Growth, then, under Putin has been much higher in absolute terms than in the 1990s. In comparative terms, however, Russia’s performance since 2000 has been very poor and worse even than it was under Yeltsin.



Source: Data from World Bank Open Data.

〈Table 4〉 Average GDP Growth(%)

Country	1992-99	2000-19
Armenia	-2.31	6.58
Azerbaijan	-6.59	8.68
Belarus	-1.66	4.53
Estonia	4.14	4.07
Georgia	-6.79	5.41
Kazakhstan	-4.04	6.53
Kyrgyzstan	-4.00	4.46
Latvia	5.17	3.82
Lithuania	4.94	4.15
Moldova	-3.54	4.50
Russia	-5.15	3.70
Tajikistan	-10.64	7.68
Turkmenistan	-2.38	8.16
Ukraine	-9.27	2.60
Uzbekistan	-0.51	6.56

Source: Data from World Bank Open Data.

It is also true that Russians are now wealthier than they were in the 1990s. GDP per capita(PPP) when measured using current international US dollars <Table 5> decreased by 13.8% from 1992 to 1999. This was the 11th best (or 5th worst) outcome recorded by the 15 states of the FSU. GDP per capita(PPP), however, increased by 327.6% from 2000 to 2019, which was the 6th best result in the FSU. While these figures indicate a dramatic increase in GDP per capita under Putin, they are largely meaningless as they fail to take account of inflation. When GDP per capita(PPP) is calculated using constant 2017 international dollars, which takes account of changes in price, a somewhat different picture emerges <Table 6>. According to this more meaningful measure,

performance under Yeltsin gets worse in absolute terms, with a decline of 24.1% recorded. This leaves Russia in 11th place for the period 1992-99. Under Putin, Russia enjoyed an increase in GDP per capita(PPP) of 85% when adjusted for inflation. This is still significant in absolute terms but is the third worst result in the FSU for the period 2000-19 (Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine were the bottom two). Once again, GDP per capita(PPP) was clearly higher under Putin than in the 1990s but very poor - and worse relative to the Yeltsin years - in comparative terms.

(Table 5) GDP per capita, PPP(current international \$)

Country	1992	1999	% increase	2000	2019	% increase
Armenia	1,549	2,440	57.5%	2,658	14,220	435.0%
Azerbaijan	4,224	3,056	-27.7%	3,443	15,001	335.7%
Belarus	4,928	5,345	8.5%	5,808	19,943	243.4%
Estonia	6,460	8,420	30.3%	9,437	38,811	311.3%
Georgia	2,596	2,924	12.6%	3,105	15,637	403.6%
Kazakhstan	7,330	6,869	-6.3%	7,734	27,444	254.8%
Kyrgyzstan	2,077	1,750	-15.7%	1,864	5,471	193.5%
Latvia	5,490	7,390	34.6%	8,018	32,204	301.6%
Lithuania	5,922	7,822	32.1%	8,460	38,214	351.7%
Moldova	3,186	2,948	-7.5%	3,084	13,574	340.1%
Russia	6,862	5,914	-13.8%	6,825	29,181	327.6%
Tajikistan	1,769	962	-45.6%	1,048	3,520	235.9%
Turkmenistan	4,405	4,009	-9.0%	4,275	15,196	255.5%
Ukraine	6,357	3,755	-40.9%	4,107	13,341	224.8%
Uzbekistan	2,228	2,382	6.9%	2,494	7,289	192.3%

Source: World Bank Open Data.

〈Table 6〉 GDP per capita, PPP(constant 2017 international \$)

Country	1992	1999	% increase	2000	2019	% increase
Armenia	2,736	3,799	38.9%	4,048	13,654	237.3%
Azerbaijan	5,783	3,688	-36.2%	4,063	14,404	254.5%
Belarus	7,924	7,576	-4.4%	8,053	19,150	137.8%
Estonia	11,933	16,253	36.2%	17,809	36,710	106.1%
Georgia	4,770	4,737	-0.7%	4,919	15,014	205.2%
Kazakhstan	11,295	9,331	-17.4%	10,276	26,351	156.4%
Kyrgyzstan	3,979	2,955	-25.7%	3,079	5,253	70.6%
Latvia	9,492	12,057	27.0%	12,855	30,830	139.8%
Lithuania	10,671	13,295	24.6%	13,902	36,975	166.0%
Moldova	5,696	4,960	-12.9%	5,074	13,034	156.9%
Russia	17,421	13,230	-24.1%	14,615	27,044	85.0%
Tajikistan	2,451	1,174	-52.1%	1,252	3,380	170.0%
Turkmenistan	5,523	4,431	-19.8%	4,622	14,845	221.2%
Ukraine	12,963	6,751	-47.9%	7,221	12,810	77.4%
Uzbekistan	2,887	2,721	-5.7%	2,786	6,999	151.2%

Source: World Bank Open Data.

What, then, of other economic problems, such as unemployment and inflation, that are also associated with the 1990s? The unemployment rate in Russia, as <table 7> shows, increased from 5.18% in 1992 to 13.04% in 1999. The average for that period was 9.55%, which put Russia in 10th place in the FSU. Thereafter, unemployment declined significantly from 10.58% in 2000 to 4.59% in 2019. Russia's average rate for those years was 6.69%, which is the 5th best in the FSU. Results here have certainly been better under Putin, in absolute and relative terms, with the unemployment rate of 4.59% one of the best in the post-Soviet space in 2019. Unsurprisingly, inflation was very high in the 1990s <Table 8>. The average of 222.19% recorded by Russia, however, was only the 6th highest for the years 1993-99.

<Table 7> Unemployment, % of total labour force(modeled ILO estimates)

Country	1992	1999	average 1992-99	2000	2019	average 2000-19
Armenia	1.8	11.2	7.64	11.1	16.99	14.65
Azerbaijan	1.8	10.9	7.24	11.8	5.51	6.68
Belarus	3.1	12.8	13.80	12	4.6	7.29
Estonia	3.68	11.57	8.60	13.36	5.12	8.99
Georgia	5.4	13.8	9.77	10.82	14.4	15.48
Kazakhstan	1	13.46	9.15	12.75	4.59	6.85
Kyrgyzstan	1.1	8.4	5.86	7.54	6.33	8.17
Latvia	6.6	13.79	15.64	14.21	6.52	11.48
Lithuania	1.2	13.39	13.00	15.93	6.35	10.65
Moldova	3.7	11.14	6.93	8.46	5.47	5.89
Russia	5.18	13.04	9.55	10.58	4.59	6.69
Tajikistan	2.1	15.4	10.83	14.96	11.02	12.28
Turkmenistan	1.5	12.7	7.78	11.67	3.91	5.88
Ukraine	1.9	11.86	6.41	11.71	8.88	8.59
Uzbekistan	2.9	13.3	8.89	12.07	5.92	6.52

Source: World Bank Open Data.

Moreover, Russia recorded a very considerable improvement in that period, with inflation declining from 874.25% in 1993 to 85.75% in 1999. The rate of inflation continued to decrease, falling from 20.8% in 2000 to 4.47% in 2019. This is a significant drop, but in comparative terms the average for those years of 10.41% was high, with just two countries (of the 11 for which complete data are available) having higher average rates of inflation for the years 2000-19.¹⁹⁾ Even the inflation of 4.47% recorded in 2019 is only the 7th lowest rate of the 11 states for which data are presented in <table 8>. We see again the

19) No data are available for Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan; those available for Kazakhstan and Tajikistan are insufficient.

pattern repeating whereby (absolute) outcomes in Russia under Putin are significantly better than in the 1990s but are actually worse (on average) in relative terms than in the Yeltsin years.

(Table 8) Inflation, consumer prices(annual %)

Country	1993	1999	average 1993-99	2000	2019	average 2000-19
Armenia	3,373.76	0.65	598.61	-0.79	1.44	3.49
Azerbaijan	1128	-8.53	459.45	1.81	2.61	6.24
Belarus	1190.23	293.68	657.69	168.62	5.6	28.54
Estonia	89.81	3.3	30.20	4.02	2.28	3.32
Georgia	162.72	19.19	46.39	4.06	4.85	4.81
Kyrgyzstan	31.95	37.03	25.72	18.7	1.13	7.03
Latvia	108.99	2.37	29.00	2.65	2.81	3.66
Lithuania	410.45	0.73	80.24	0.98	2.34	2.43
Moldova	1613.6	39.26	316.02	31.3	4.84	9.02
Russia	874.25	85.75	222.19	20.8	4.47	10.41
Ukraine	4734.91	22.68	876.05	28.2	7.89	12.87

Source: World Bank Open Data.

The preceding analysis confirms that the economic situation in Russia, according to several key indicators, was indeed bad in the 1990s. The economy contracted, GDP per capita(PPP) plummeted, unemployment increased and inflation was very high. The figures show, moreover, that there were significant or dramatic improvements in all of these areas after Putin became president. It is also clear from the data, however, that this was not only the case in Russia: on the contrary, the pattern of pronounced economic decline in the 1990s followed by significant improvements thereafter is evident right across the FSU. What stands out, in fact, is not that there was a recovery under Putin (in comparative terms this was unremarkable) but that the Russian economy performed poorly in relative terms in both the 1990s *and the 2000s*.

Economic performance in 2000-19 was so weak, in fact, that in most cases Russia's comparative position was worse, relative to the rest of the FSU, under Putin than it was in the nineties.

V. Stability and Order

The other aspects of life in the 1990s that are most commonly viewed negatively by Russians mainly concern law, order and stability, or rather the lack thereof <Table 3>. The World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators(WGI) provide longitudinal data that are relevant to these areas of interest <Table 9>. Unfortunately, 1996 is the first year for which these data are available and the scores were only calculated for every second year until 2000 (and annually thereafter). This means that results for the 1990s are only available for 1996 and 1998. As such, there are no data for the early 1990s, a period when we might reasonably expect performance in these areas to be poor or even at their worst. Nonetheless, the scores give us a benchmark - presented as the average for 1996 and 1998 - for the late 1990s to which we can compare subsequent performance under Putin. We employ here the WGI for 'political stability and the absence of terrorism/violence' and the 'rule of law' as general measures of political stability and law and order. We look also at measures of two specific areas of law and order that were of particular concern in the 1990s, namely corruption (again a WGI) and the most serious form of violent crime - intentional homicide.

Russia's score for the WGI 'political stability and absence of violence/terrorism' for 1996/98 was -1.13 <Table 9>. This is a very low score on a scale that runs from +2.5 to -2.5 (where higher values correspond to better governance) and was the third lowest in the FSU for those years, with only Georgia and Tajikistan doing worse. The data show improvements in this area under Putin: the score of -0.54 for 2019 constitutes a significant advance, the average figure for 2000-19 of -0.93 a more modest one. These results, however, remain poor in

comparative terms. Russia recorded the second worst average score for 2000-19 in the FSU and even the score for 2019 left Russia in 12th place for that year. Similar changes are evident in the scores for the other WGI's considered here.

(Table 9) World Bank Governance Indicators(WBGI).
(Scale from -2.5 to +2.5; higher values correspond to better governance.)

Country	Political Stability & Absence of Violence/ Terrorism			Rule of Law			Control of Corruption		
	Average 1996/98	2019	Average 2000-19	Average 1996/98	2019	Average 2000-19	Average 1996/98	2019	Average 2000-19
Armenia	-0.51	-0.51	-0.17	-0.42	-0.13	-0.36	-0.67	-0.18	-0.59
Azerbaijan	-0.77	-0.68	-0.72	-1.17	-0.58	-0.79	-1.38	-0.87	-1.06
Belarus	0.10	0.29	0.21	-0.87	-0.79	-1.03	-0.41	-0.06	-0.50
Estonia	0.72	0.64	0.69	0.62	1.28	1.12	0.55	1.54	1.11
Georgia	-1.61	-0.45	-0.77	-1.25	0.31	-0.21	-1.25	0.67	0.07
Kazakhstan	-0.09	-0.08	0.14	-1.13	-0.43	-0.73	-1.08	-0.32	-0.91
Kyrgyzstan	-0.17	-0.41	-0.82	-0.72	-0.89	-1.05	-0.92	-0.95	-1.13
Latvia	0.30	0.45	0.55	0.21	1.01	0.74	-0.02	0.48	0.30
Lithuania	0.48	0.84	0.78	0.52	1.02	0.77	0.37	0.68	0.40
Moldova	0.20	-0.38	-0.26	-0.08	-0.37	-0.41	-0.43	-0.62	-0.75
Russia	-1.13	-0.54	-0.93	-0.84	-0.72	-0.84	-1.02	-0.83	-0.94
Tajikistan	-1.98	-0.58	-1.01	-1.60	-1.23	-1.20	-1.27	-1.32	-1.21
Turkmenistan	0.33	-0.09	0.10	-1.46	-1.41	-1.47	-1.06	-1.51	-1.42
Ukraine	-0.14	-1.52	-0.74	-0.91	-0.7	-0.79	-1.19	-0.71	-0.93
Uzbekistan	-0.62	-0.27	-0.87	-1.26	-1.05	-1.26	-1.15	-1.05	-1.16

Source: Data from World Bank Worldwide Governance Indicators.

(Table 10) Intentional Homicides(Per 100,000 People)

Country	1992	1999	Average 1992-99	2000	2018	Average 2000-18
Armenia	8.86	2.91	4.74	2.97	1.69	2.54
Azerbaijan	7.55	3.01	5.15	2.78	2.2	2.32
Belarus	5.85	9.81	8.89	10.26	2.39	5.93
Estonia	14.27	11.18	15.50	10.22	2.12	5.99
Georgia	14.52	5.48	9.12	5.48	2.22	5.69
Kazakhstan	11.53	15.81	15.61	15.58	5.06 (2017)	-
Kyrgyzstan	10.51	8.91	10.61	8.74	2.19	7.48
Latvia	9.89	9.51	11.47	9.98	4.36	5.33
Lithuania	7.21	8.76	10.60	10.57	4.57	7.78
Moldova	11.4	9.25	9.46	10.3	4.1	6.18
Russia	22.87	26.02	26.87	28.07	8.21	17.27
Tajikistan	11	5.83	10.46	4.55	-	-
Turkmenistan	7.59	7.19	7.60	5.91	-	-
Ukraine	6.55	8.62	8.23	9.05	6.18 (2017)	-
Uzbekistan	5.36	4.15	4.89	4.31	1.14 (2017)	-

Source: World Bank Open Data.

Russia's average score for the rule of law for 1996/98 was -0.84, which was only the 7th best in the FSU. The average for 2000-19 was unchanged at -0.84 but this left Russia in 10th place. The figure for 2019 (-0.72) is somewhat better than in the 1990s but still only the 10th best score in comparative terms. Russia's benchmark score for corruption for the 1990s was -1.02, which was 8th place in the FSU. The average for 2000-19 was -0.94, the result for 2019 was -0.83. In both cases this was 10th place comparatively. Overall, the pattern that emerges, once again, is of modest improvement under Putin since the

late 1990s in absolute terms (although not on average for the rule of law) but usually *a deterioration* in relative terms.

Violent crime was one of the key elements of social dysfunction in Russia in the 1990s(Tiffen 2012; White 2011). The number of intentional homicides was undoubtedly high. In 1992 there were some 22.87 murders per 100,000 people in Russia <Table 10>. By 1999 this had risen to 26.02. Russia, indeed, had the highest murder rate in the FSU for every year of the 1990s (not just 1992 and 1999). The average number of intentional homicides in Russia was also - logically - the highest in the post-Soviet space in that decade. The number of murders in Russia at first increased under Putin but declined from 2005 onwards and had fallen significantly to 8.21 per 100,000 people by 2018. The average for the period 2000-18 was 17.27. It is not possible to make comprehensive comparative assessments for the years 2000-18 because complete data are not available for all states (in particular, sufficient data are not available to calculate meaningful averages for several countries). However, according to the data that are available, there were fewer homicides in all of the post-Soviet states in 2018 than in 2000. Likewise, the average number of homicides was lower in 2000-18 than in 1992-99 in every country for which data exist. Russia still had the highest homicide rate in the FSU (again according to available data) for every year of the period 2000-18 and, again, the highest average. Under Putin, then, the number of murders declined significantly as compared to the 1990s. Russia's relative position, however, remained unchanged, as Russia still had the worst homicide rate in the FSU by far.²⁰⁾

We also examine the demographic element of the crisis or collapse experienced by Russia in the 1990s. Key features of this were early deaths, a declining birth rate, and a pronounced drop in the population overall(Tiffen 2012; White 2011). Life expectancy <Table 11> in Russia in 1992 was just 66.87 years and by 1999 this had fallen to 65.98.

20) Even the rate of 8.21 homicides per 100,000 people in 2018 is very high. The rate in the United States, by way of comparison, was much lower at 4.96 in the same year.

These figures are strikingly low by western standards. They were also poor in comparison with the post-Soviet states, leaving Russia in 11th and 12th place respectively. Russia's average for the period 1992-99 was 65.82, the fourth lowest of the 15 post-Soviet states. Under Putin in 2000-18 life expectancy increased from 65.48 to 72.66. This significant improvement lifted Russian from 13th place in the FSU to ninth. Life expectancy, however, increased everywhere in the FSU in the 2000s and the Russian average for 2000-18 (68.46 years) was the third lowest in the region with only Tajikistan and Turkmenistan doing worse.

(Table 11) Life Expectancy

Country	Life Expectancy at Birth, Total(Years)					
	1992	1999	Average 1992-99	2000	2018	Average 2000-18
Armenia	67.99	70.94	69.30	71.41	74.95	73.28
Azerbaijan	64.73	66.49	65.50	66.76	72.86	70.19
Belarus	70.02	67.91	68.69	68.91	74.18	70.87
Estonia	68.86	70.06	68.71	70.42	78.24	74.48
Georgia	70.16	69.76	69.80	69.9	73.6	71.51
Kazakhstan	67.73	65.52	65.46	65.52	73.15	68.55
Kyrgyzstan	68.1	68.66	67.03	68.56	71.4	69.30
Latvia	68.4	69.74	68.01	70.32	74.78	72.71
Lithuania	70.23	71.57	70.06	72.02	75.68	72.98
Moldova	67.41	66.85	66.95	67.01	71.81	69.36
Russia	66.87	65.98	65.82	65.48	72.66	68.46
Tajikistan	58.21	61.16	59.15	61.97	70.88	67.55
Turkmenistan	62.76	63.41	62.98	63.61	68.07	66.12
Ukraine	68.77	67.98	67.77	67.68	71.58	69.59
Uzbekistan	66.37	66.96	66.54	67.16	71.57	69.40

Source: World Bank Open Data.

Russia's fertility rate in 1992 was, at 1.55, the lowest in the FSU <Table 12>. It fell further to just 1.16 by 1999; this, however, left Russia in joint 13th place comparatively due to declines elsewhere. Russia's average for the period was 1.32, the second lowest in the post-Soviet space. The fertility rate in Russia started to rise after the year 2000 (when it was 1.2, again the second lowest in the FSU) and peaked at 1.78 in 2015. It then declined, dropping to 1.57 by 2018, which was the third lowest fertility rate in the FSU for that year and scarcely higher than the 1.55 recorded in 1992. The average rate for 2000-18 was 1.50, which was somewhat higher than the average for the 1990s (and put Russia in 10th place comparatively), but still well short of the recognised replacement rate of 2.2. Overall, the period 1992-2018 was one of population decline <Table 12>. The population of Russia numbered 148.5 million in 1992. By 1999 this had dropped to 147.2 million, a decline of 0.9%. Population decrease has worsened since then (in spite of increasing from 2009-17), dropping 1.5% from 146.6 million in 2000 to 144.4 million in 2019. While population decline in Russia has been pronounced and problematic, in relative terms these results are actually slightly above average. In the post-Soviet era, populations have increased only in the Muslim-majority countries of the FSU; all of the other states have experienced population declines. Indeed, as <Table 12> shows, in the 1990s nine countries underwent bigger declines than Russia (in percentage terms), in the years 2000-19 eight did.

Performance under Putin, as recorded by these demographic measures, is mixed. Life expectancy has increased since the 1990s, but Russia's position has worsened relative to the rest of the FSU. Since 2000 the fertility rate has improved, as has Russia's relative position in this regard. Population decline was worse in the period 2000-19 in both absolute and relative terms.

(Table 12) Fertility & Population Change

Country	Fertility Rate, Total(Births per Woman)						Population Change, %	
	1992	1999	Average 1992-99	2000	2018	Average 2000-18	1992-99	2000-19
Armenia	2.4	1.69	2.02	1.65	1.76	1.70	-10.3%	-3.6%
Azerbaijan	2.74	2.07	2.31	2	1.73	1.91	+8.1%	+24.5%
Belarus	1.76	1.31	1.44	1.32	1.45	1.46	-1.9%	-5.1%
Estonia	1.71	1.3	1.41	1.36	1.67	1.55	-9.3%	-5.0%
Georgia	2.08	1.64	1.85	1.61	2.06	1.84	-14.7%	-8.8%
Kazakhstan	2.5	1.7	2.12	1.8	2.84	2.45	-9.2%	+24.4%
Kyrgyzstan	3.52	2.6	2.93	2.4	3.3	2.85	+7.2%	+31.8%
Latvia	1.73	1.16	1.30	1.25	1.6	1.46	-8.6%	-19.2%
Lithuania	1.97	1.46	1.59	1.39	1.63	1.47	-4.8%	-20.4%
Moldova	2.2	1.53	1.86	1.44	1.26	1.27	-1.6%	-9.1%
Russia	1.55	1.16	1.32	1.2	1.57	1.50	-0.9%	-1.5%
Tajikistan	4.97	4.08	4.52	3.97	3.59	3.66	+11.2%	+49.9%
Turkmenistan	4.07	2.9	3.45	2.82	2.79	2.80	+14.5%	+31.6%
Ukraine	1.67	1.12	1.38	1.11	1.3	1.35	-4.7%	-9.7%
Uzbekistan	4	2.72	3.36	2.58	2.42	2.43	+13.3%	+36.2%

Source: Data from World Bank Open Data.

VI. Conclusion

The preceding analysis suggests that comparing performance in Russia since 2000 with the 1990s does not - contrary to the Kremlin's claims - cast Putin's leadership in a favourable light. The data certainly confirm that socio-economic conditions were bad in Russia in the 1990s and that

there have been significant improvements since then. The data also affirm, however, that such improvements were evident right across the FSU (even when there was no change of leader) and were obviously, therefore, principally due to structural factors - i.e. recovery from the socio-economic problems associated with the collapse of the FSU - not Putin.²¹⁾ The analysis of performance in *relative terms* further undermines the regime's claim that Putin saved Russia from the chaos of the 1990s. To reiterate an earlier point, if the difference between the collapse of the 1990s and the revival after 2000 is one of leadership - as the Kremlin would have it - then we would expect Russia to exhibit significantly better performance relative to the rest of the FSU under Putin than it did in the 1990s. The foregoing analysis, however, shows that this is not the case. In some areas, since 2000, Russia's relative performance has improved. More often, though, it has stayed much the same or has actually got worse. Overall, there has clearly been no significant improvement in, let alone transformation of, relative performance and thus there is no evidence of exceptional leadership.²²⁾ In fact, arguably the most striking finding here is not how well Russia has performed since 2000, but rather just how poorly Russia fared, relative to the rest of the FSU, both in the 1990s and from 2000 to 2019 under Putin. Indeed, the continuation since the 1990s of Russia's poor performance relative to the 14 other former Soviet states - not, it

21) This is not to say that Putin played no role in improving socio-economic conditions in Russia. For instance, achieving greater macroeconomic stability - by paying off debts, reducing inflation and establishing savings funds for budget surpluses - is generally considered one of Putin's achievements (Miller 2018, 59-78). At the same time it is not hard to identify obvious failures of leadership, such as neglecting to make any serious attempt to improve the rule of law and reduce corruption. Overall, it is clear that improvements were mainly due to improved structural conditions.

22) An alternative explanation for this underwhelming performance is that Putin did provide excellent leadership in the period under review but that Russia faced more difficult structural conditions than the other states of the FSU. This argument, however, has nowhere been made and we are not aware of any evidence to support it.

has to be said, the most demanding of comparisons - surely stands as an indictment of Putin's leadership rather than a legitimization of it.²³⁾

23) Recent developments, while beyond the scope of this article, tend to underscore this negative evaluation of Putin's leadership. While the data are uncertain, Russia appears to have had one of the world's poorer covid records with a high number of excess deaths and an ineffective vaccination programme. Putin's decision to launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, moreover, has weakened Russia militarily, diplomatically and economically. The final outcome of this war is still unclear, but it seems unlikely to be one that benefits Russia and its people. Russia's socio-economic performance relative to the rest of the FSU, thus, seems likely to deteriorate further.

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국문요약

푸틴의 성과와 고난의 1990년대 재조명

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푸틴 행정부는 푸틴 대통령의 정당성과 정치적 지지를 창출하기 위해 1990년대와의 비교를 통해 푸틴 대통령 집권 이후 삶이 나아졌음을 시사해왔다. 그러나 절대적 관점에서 1990년대와 비교한다면 이는 푸틴 집권 이후 훨씬 더 우호적인 구조적 조건들이 지속되었음을 충분히 고려한 것은 아니다. 이 글은 러시아의 1990년대 성과를 절대적 기준이 아니라 상대적 기준, 즉 14개의 다른 구소련 공화국들과 비교함으로써 이러한 문제를 피하고자 하였다. 다른 공화국들이 1990년대 이후 이룬 성과와 푸틴 행정부의 러시아가 거둔 성과를 비교할 때, 푸틴 행정부가 상대적으로 크게 성공적이었다고 말하기 어려우며, 단순히 1990년대보다 나아졌다는 것만으로 푸틴 행정부의 정당성을 강화하기 어려움을 시사하고 있다.

주제어: 푸틴, 엘친, 리더십, 성과, 1990년대