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JUSTIFYING WAR: RUSSIAN FEDERAL SUBJECTS AS AN INTERMEDIARY, 2022-2024

MA thesis

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Authorship declaration

I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

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Abstract:

How do the heads of Russian federal subjects justify the invasion of Ukraine and its consequences to their constituents? This thesis studies how the regional governments of the Russian Federation justify the consequences of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine to their constituents in the period of February 2022 to February 2024. In the advent of the decision of the Russian federal government to commit to a full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24 2022, and the then subsequent partial mobilization on September 21 2022, the regional governments have found themselves in increasingly difficult circumstances when balancing the demands of the federal center with those of the general populace. In a system of authoritarian federalism where almost all of the governors owe their positions to President Vladimir Putin, yet are also obliged to sufficiently meet the needs of their constituents lest they be removed or lose in the next election, Russia's governors must placate the demands of the federal government for material assistance, soldiers, and political support while continuing to provide essential services to a majority of the general population who are either disinterested in contributing to the war effort, or are opposed to the war. To understand how Russia's governors navigate these opposing interests, I conducted a post-structuralist discourse analysis of the Telegram channels of the governors of five Russian regions spanning the first two years of the full-scale invasion, as well as the three key speeches of Vladimir Putin announcing the full-scale invasion and the partial mobilization. My analysis found that while the governors stay within the bounds of Putin's discourse, they selectively employ and omit key legitimization strategies used by Putin, such as historical rationalizations and hostile portrayals of Ukraine and the collective West. The results suggest that further research is needed to determine the extent of these irregularities and theorize causal explanations for them.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In the ongoing wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine launched in February 2022, the international system, as well as the domestic political systems of a number of countries, have come under new, substantial pressures and their corresponding changes. Within Russia, the economic impacts of sanctions and casualties have burdened (to varying degrees) the country's population since the start of the invasion. In particular, the large exodus and widespread protests in response to the September 2022 partial mobilization of reservists indicate that there is a significant portion of Russians who, while not necessarily being in opposition to the war, do not want to become participants in it.

As the result of President Vladimir Putin's September 21 2022 decree, a significant portion of the cost and effort of recruiting and equipping the mobilized soldiers is now the responsibility of the federal subjects of the Russian Federation. These regional governments currently find themselves having to balance between the opposing interests of two groups: the federal government and their constituents. While the federal government needs material and human resources to fuel the war that it launched, the already beleaguered regional government budgets and disinterest of the majority of the Russian population in making personal sacrifices for the war effort make for substantial obstacles for the regional governments to surmount.

Given that their careers hinge on both the support of the federal center (Hale 2015), as well as the compliance of their constituents (Gel'man 2022, 124), the Governors of Russia's regions must successfully satisfy Putin's demands by making a convincing appeal to their constituents to go along with the federal center's war. As an essential intermediary between the general population and the federal government, regional governments are vital for domestic political stability and the population's compliance with federal government decisions (Ferris 2020). The top-down (federal government) and bottom-up (their constituents) pressures faced by the regional governments (Klimovich 2023) locate them in a position where they can discern the discursive trends at the top and the bottom of Russian society, and in turn respond accordingly.

The body of pre-February 2022 literature examining Russia's post-1991 domestic politics is substantial, and seeks to explain the complexities produced by the hybridity of authoritarian and democratic tendencies in a federal system of governance, as well as their eventual authoritarian

turn. This body received new impetus from the Russian government response to Covid-19, where scholars investigated how the federal government's diffusion of decision making to the regional governments seemed paradoxical after nearly two decades of Putin's push to centralize political power. Post-February 2022, scholars have again begun to research how the consequences of the full-scale invasion are shaping Russia's political system.

The conclusion of the literature thus far is that while Russia's domestic politics are now more fraught than before, the basic patterns of governance remain the same. With Putin's decision to order the regional governors to shoulder responsibility for the September 2022 mobilization, there are clear parallels between this and the government's Covid-19 response, where the regional governments must bear the publicity and responsibility of an unpopular government decision.

While the majority of academic literature on Russia's domestic politics has sought to answer the "whys" of either authoritarianism in a federal system, or the (de)centralization of power, there remains a gap as to "how" these processes occur (especially in the context of a large-scale military conflict). Answering the "how" questions is essential for understanding the conditions of possibility for the "whys" in such a political milieu.

To understand these conditions in Russia today, this thesis poses the following research question: **How do the heads of federal subjects justify the invasion and its consequences to their constituents?** In addition, while this thesis cannot provide any causal explanations, it examines how regional differences in discourse are reflected in the pluralism of these justifications relative to one another, as well as relative to official federal government discourse.

This thesis uses a post-structuralist discourse analysis to examine the official discourses at the federal and regional levels which seek to justify the war, as a viable and effective way to approximate how these justifications have unfolded in the period of February 2022-February 2024. The data analyzed in this discourse analysis is drawn from Putin's most relevant speeches (representing the federal center's discourse) and the Telegram channels of five governors (representing the discourse of the regional governments). Since the start of the full-scale invasion, the digital messaging application Telegram has rapidly become a primary source of news and communication for Russian citizens (Warzel 2023), and an important channel for governors to directly communicate with their constituents. Analyzing official federal and regional government

discourses adds depth to the research community's understanding of identity in Russian domestic politics as a product of an international event (i.e. the full-scale invasion).

After my initial survey of Telegram channels and relevant literature, **my research expectations are that the governors publicly support the war instigated by the federal center to varying degrees, but use different combinations of legitimizing strategies than the federal center to appeal to their constituents in order to justify the consequences of the war endured by the general populace. As opposed to the ideological legitimization offered by the federal center, regional governments will make stronger appeals to notions of self-defense, solidarity, and humanitarian purposes.**

This thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 2 examines the relevant literature to my research question, and parses out the concepts which set my research expectations. Chapter 3 outlines the theoretical foundation of the post-structuralist approach to identity and discourse in politics, and explains my methodology and data sources. Chapter 4 provides a summary and discussion of the results of my discourse analysis of Putin's speeches and the Telegram channels of the governors. Chapter 5 concludes by comparing the results with my research expectations, as well as avenues to build upon this thesis.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Literature Review Preface

This literature review covers the theories which seek to explain the Russian federal government's relationship with its federal subjects. The review examines the complementary concepts of "authoritarian federalism," "(de)centralization," "center-periphery," "power vertical," and "bad governance," as well as recent sociological surveys. These concepts originate from the literature most pertinent to my research question, and are pivotal for substantiating my research expectations.

Since 1991, the initially weak federal government of the Russian Federation has gradually come to exert more control over regional governments, where regional governments now find themselves dependent on the federal center for material and immaterial resources. In this authoritarian version of federalism, a (sometimes ambiguous) political hierarchy functions with the president of the federation (Putin) at the top. The vast majority of Russia's governors owe their positions to Putin and his administration, at the same time, they must sufficiently meet the needs of their constituents to prevent public unrest.

While Article 71 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation stipulates that matters of war and peace are solely within the remit of the federal government, regional governments find themselves enmeshed in the war as the federal government has made them responsible for the equipping and recruitment of soldiers. Russia's governors now find themselves increasingly strained between the demands of a federal center bent on conquest and a largely depoliticized general population. The current literature suggests that Russia's governors will have to rationalize the consequences of the war in a manner that is deemed appropriate by the federal center, but sufficiently addresses regional issues and ideological disinterest in making sacrifices for Russia's invasion.

Section one deals with fundamental theoretical understandings of federalism, as well as the development of federalism in Russia. Section two explains how federal-regional relations work in contemporary Russia. Section three examines how decentralization works in an authoritarian federalism such as Russia's. The fourth section covers how these relations, as well as the reactions

of the Russian populace, have evolved since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The interpretivist approach used in this thesis provides empirical evidence for further theorization on center-periphery relations in federalism and Russian government studies.

2.1 Theoretical Foundations and Historical Development of Federalism in Russia

Theoretical Foundations of Studying Russia's Federalism

The inception of Russia's federalism finds its roots in the political changes of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Beginning in the USSR as Mikhail Gorbachev's policies of perestroika and glasnost, liberalization and democratization continued into the 1990s and early 2000s in the decentralization of power and resources from a centralized state apparatus.

Liberalization at a broad theoretical level is best summarized as the following:

“the transfer of many sectors of economic activity out of state ownership, the dismantling of direct forms of state control, and the removal of barriers to market access both within and between states, greatly facilitating the potential for the flow of goods and capital.” (Picciotto 2000, 159)

In the case of Russia, liberalization meant the privatization of property (including state enterprises), lifting price controls, allowing great imports/exports, and other measures designed to decentralize the economic power of the state (Gill 2023). The prevailing (yet contested) notion at the time of the breakup of the USSR was that economic growth via liberalization would enable the democratization of a state, which is reflected in the substantial body of literature which argues for this causal relationship (e.g. Lipset 1959; Przeworski et al. 2000; Boix 2003; Boix and Stokes 2003; Inglehart and Welzel 2005)

Democratization as a concept began to coalesce into a body of scholarly literature in Western academia as a result of the political changes in Southern Europe and Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s (Evans, 2011). By the time the USSR collapsed and the newly emerged Russian Federation began to define its own system of governance, democratization was defined by the “transition paradigm” as succinctly surmised by Thomas Carothers (2002). Carothers (2002, 6-8) defines this transition paradigm by the following five distinctions:

- A country moving away from dictatorial rule can be considered transitioning to democracy
- This transition to democracy takes place in a series of stages which are: opening, breakthrough, and consolidation.
- That elections provide democratic legitimacy, broaden political participation and accountability with continuing reforms.
- Underlying structural (economic, sociopolitical, demographic, and historical) factors were not deterministic (playing minor roles at best) for the transition to democracy.
- That the transition can be undertaken only by coherent, functioning states.

During the 1990s and early 2000s, Russia fit all of the above criteria for democratization and was on track to consolidate into a democratic system of governance. The 1993 December elections and new constitution (which cemented a federal system of governance in Russia) were crucial steps for the Yeltsin administration’s democratization of Russia and decentralization of power from the former unitary state model of the USSR (Gill 2023, 12). As discussed later in this section, the process of democratization began to come undone at the start of Putin’s tenure in the early 2000s, leading to Russia being labeled as a hybrid regime of competing authoritarian and democratic tendencies, before eventually fully shifting to authoritarianism while maintaining a federal system of governance (Evans 2001).

Federalism, and its manifestation as the federation, emerged as a form of division of the state with creation of the 1789 United States Constitution, the theoretical genesis of which was defined by liberal democratic thought (Broschek 2016). Since then, a number of states whose (at the least initial) organization as liberal democratic constitutional federations have emerged, which was the case for the newly independent Russia in the 1990s (Burgess 2006). As defined in its Constitution,

Russia is divided into the federal government and the federal subjects which together form a federation. Ronald Watts lucidly defined the functioning of the federation as such:

“a particular species in which neither the federal nor the constituent units of government are constitutionally subordinate to the other, i.e. each has sovereign powers derived from the constitution rather than from another level of government, each is empowered to deal directly with its citizens in the exercise of legislative, executive and taxing powers, and each is directly elected by its citizens” (Watts 2008, 9)

Historical Development of Federalism in Russia

In the wake of the collapse of the USSR, the 1993 Russian Constitution remains the current basis for Russia’s political organization as a federation (Ross, 2023). As delineated in the 1993 Constitution, the Russian Federation comprised of 89 federal subjects. This number was reduced to 83 after a period of mergers in the mid-2000s (Libman 2023, 173). Prior to 2014, these 83 sub-federal units consisted of 46 oblasts, 21 republics, 9 krais, 4 autonomous okrugs, 2 federal cities, and one autonomous oblast. For the purposes of analysis, this thesis will not consider the internationally recognized territories of Ukraine which have been annexed into Russia’s federal system due to their contested nature and atypical position in Russia’s governance.

The 1993 Russian Constitution was imposed on regions by the center as a result of the Fall 1993 constitutional crisis, and in turn has heavily favored the supremacy of federal laws and authority as opposed to those of regional governments (Ross 2023). Despite this imbalance, the federalism of 1990s in the Russian Federation featured regional governments with a high degree of independence from the federal center, even to the point of actively defying Moscow’s policies, while also using their own resources to block Duma and Kremlin initiatives (Ross 2010; Solnick 1998). This democratization of power in center-regional relations was a departure from the Soviet, top-down practice of employing governors as representatives of the center to ensure regional compliance with Moscow’s directives. This period has been described as “contractual” federalism, where a significant portion of politics between the regions and the center were characterized by informal and clientelistic relations (Ross 2002).

However, this decade of decentralization proved to be short-lived. In Vladimir Putin's first term as president, Russian regional governments were co-opted by the federal center by depriving governors of their right to serve as deputies in the Federation Council (which enabled regional governments to veto Kremlin and Duma legislative initiatives) (Busygina 2016, 82). The federal center attached additional presidential envoys to regional governments, and centralized state incomes to enable Moscow to play fiscal patron to the regional governments (Klimovich and Kropp 2022).

Cameron Ross succinctly summarizes the number of steps Putin took to consolidate Moscow's authority over the federal subjects:

“In order to bring an end to the legal anarchy of the Yeltsin era, Putin adopted a number of radical reforms that have seriously undermined the development of federalism in Russia: (1) the creation of federal super- districts, (2) reforms of the Federation Council and the State Council and creation of the Council of Legislators, (3) enhanced presidential control over the Constitutional Court, (4) promotion of a program to bring regional constitutions and laws into line with the Federal Constitution, (5) changes to the method of selecting/ electing governors, (6) centralization of the powers and competencies of the federal subjects, and (7) the merger of federal subjects.” (Ross 2023, 153)

The primary justification by the federal center for Putin's drive for centralization was the need for legal standardizations in order to combat Chechen separatists and acts of terrorism (Obydenkova 2015, 32). The centralization drive was capitalized with the elimination of direct gubernational elections in 2004, and their replacement with direct appointments by the presidential administration. In response to the nation-wide parliamentary protests in 2011-2013 (initially protesting election fraud in the 2011 Duma elections), direct gubernational elections were reintroduced in 2012 (with the exception of a few regions where governors continue to be appointed by the president), but still remained de facto filtered and controlled by Moscow (Goode 2014). Despite the ebb and flow of centralization and decentralization, the informal and clientelistic relations between the regional governments and the federal center remained, with now Moscow primarily dictating the terms.

In order to parse through the ebb and flow of political change in a federal system, we must consider how (de)centralization manifests between the center and its peripheries. In a federal system of governance, (de)centralization of power and obligation is procedural and multidimensional (Montero and Samuels 2004, 8). On a broad theoretical plan, Tulia Falleti categorizes decentralization as political, financial, and administrative (Falleti 2005, 329):

- Political decentralization “is the set of constitutional amendments and electoral reforms designed to open new—or activate existing but dormant or ineffective—spaces for the representation of subnational polities.”
- Administrative decentralization entails a “set of policies that transfer the administration and delivery of social services such as education, health, social welfare, or housing to subnational governments. Administrative decentralization may entail the devolution of decision-making authority over these policies, but this is not a necessary condition.”
- Fiscal decentralization includes a “set of policies designed to increase the revenues or fiscal autonomy of subnational governments. Fiscal decentralization policies can assume different institutional forms such as an increase of transfers from the central government, the creation of new subnational taxes, or the delegation of tax authority that was previously national.”

Using Paul Hutchcroft’s criteria for centralization (Hutchcroft 2002, 37), centralization can be defined as the reversal of the aforementioned processes. Thus, using Falleti and Hutchcroft’s theoretical premises on (de)centralization, we can map an uneven pattern of (de)centralization in Russia between the federal center and regional governments. The 1990s was characterized as a total decentralization as part of the Yeltsin administration’s push for liberalization and democratization, while the 2000s was defined by the Putin’s recentralization of state resources. The 2012 return of direct gubernatorial elections was a limited political decentralization (nonetheless the conditions of elections were designed to ensure political power remained predominantly with the center).

However, the effects of centralization are not entirely uniform due to the breadth of diversity of Russian regional governments. While in principle all equal, there are immense differences in

territory, population, economic development, and status among Russia's sub-federal entities. As summarized by Cameron Ross:

The Russian Federation is also constitutionally asymmetrical. Whilst Article 5.4 of the Constitution declares that all subjects of the federation are equal, some are clearly more equal than others. In fact, there are three distinct classifications of "federal subject" in the Constitution. First, the ethnically based republics, which are classified as national- state formations; second, krais and oblasts, which are classified as administrative- territorial formations; and third, autonomous oblasts and autonomous okrugs defined as national- territorial formations (Karapetyan 1999). Only the republics are defined as "states" (Article 5.2) with the right to their own constitutions, languages, flags, hymns and other trappings of statehood. (Ross 2023, 151)

The following section will explore how authoritarian federalist centralization has manifested itself across Russia's federal subjects, as well as where this model meets discrepancies.

2.2 How Regional Governments Function in Russian Authoritarian Federalism

Authoritarian Federalism and Center-Periphery Relations

The scholar Ferran Requejo provides a succinct description of how the functions of the state are divided in a federal government:

"1) The existence of a two- tier government, both of which have legislative, executive and judicial powers with respect to their own competences, and ... fiscal autonomy; 2) mechanisms that channel the participation of the federated units in decision- making processes at the federal level ... usually a second chamber whose representatives are elected according to territorial criteria; 3) an institutional arbiter, usually a supreme court or a constitutional court; 4) the agreement on which the

federation is based cannot be reformed unilaterally; 5) the existence of mechanisms that facilitate and promote communication and co-operation.” (Requejo 2001, 306–7)

While these criteria for federalism accurately describe the formal institutions of Russian federalism, their de facto functions depart from what is typical of most federal governments (Ross 2005). A number of scholars argue that federalism cannot function in a non-democratic system (Elazar 1987; Watts 2015; Kempton 2002). However, there is a body of literature that examines “authoritarian federalism” (Schedler 2010; Kropp and Keil 2022). Authoritarian federalism may be described as “a consolidated nondemocratic institutional system, (where) the formal federal constitutional structure helps the autocratic regime in Russia distribute power (both vertically and horizontally), control information, avoid accountability and complicate coordination among political opponents.” (Busygina and Filippov 2023a). As opposed to democratic federalism, Russia’s authoritarian federalism “can more accurately be described as an authoritarian adaptation of democratic institutions to support the country’s non-democratic governance.” (Busygina and Klimovich 2024b).

In an authoritarian federalism such as Russia’s, the federal government and its subjects are best defined in a center-periphery relationship. In such a relationship, the center (in Russia’s case the federal government located in Moscow) is the primary political decision maker in the country’s affairs and sets cultural and societal standards (Rokkan and Urwin 1982). The periphery, as theorized by John Friedmann, are underdeveloped territories whose resources are extracted while being governed and modernized by the center (Friedmann 1966). This pattern of center-periphery relations defined Russian governance during the Czarist and Soviet periods (Etkind 2013), and has reemerged with the centralization of Russian federal relations over the last two decades (Busygina and Filippov 2023a).

In authoritarian federalism, the federal center (i.e. the President and his administration in the case of Russia) can employ an array of coercive means to limit the agency of governors and their regional governments to ensure their compliance with the preferred decisions of the center (Schedler 2010, 75–76). Where in democratic federalism, regional governments serve as a counter balance to the centralized federal government, authoritarian federal governments instrumentalize

regional governments to perpetuate the power hierarchy of the autocracy (Kropp and Keil 2022). Foreign policy, in particular military action, is the domain of the federal center in both systems.

While the reinstatement of direct elections in 2012 by the federal center was a concession to public discontent expressed after the 2011 parliamentary elections, direct elections further enmeshed governors into the political machine of United Russia (Vladimir Putin's political party) by making them a part of the party's vote raising efforts (Golosov 2012). In this era of regional governors' dependance on the presidential administration and on their voters, the federal center has shifted the focus from purely subordinating regional elites to incentivizing their loyalty to the regime, where governors can act as a medium for securing privileges from the center (Golosov and Tkacheva 2018). This trend of patronage continues at the sub-regional level, with many important municipal positions (e.g. mayors) being appointed by governors (Turovsky 2015).

In contemporary Russian authoritarian federalism, regional governors (and by extension their administrations) must balance the demands of two principles: their local constituents, and the President of Russia (as essentially the federal center), in what is termed as a multiple principal problem (Sharafutdinova 2010). Despite being filtered by the center's criteria and dependent on Putin's blessing to hold office, Russia's governors have had to secure their office by popular elections, thus also making them accountable to their regional constituents (Klimovich 2023; Blakkisrud 2015). A governor's career viability now rests in part on how well they can both/either satisfy (e.g. with job creation of infrastructure projects) or sufficiently repress (e.g. prevent widespread protests and avert public scandals) the demands of their constituents, holding them accountable to the presidential administration via local actors.

In order to limit the influence of local constituents as a foundation to resist the control of the federal center, Moscow (as the federal center is commonly referred to) restricts the selection of candidates to that of an outsider-governor with little connection to the region they are elected to govern (Klimovich 2023). Often, the outsider status of governors is further reinforced by the fact that their senior aides frequently accompany them from their prior posts (Kynev 2020).

Moscow frequently relies on a "presidential reserve" of gubernatorial candidates who are trained and supported by various federal institutions in order to be deployed to run in regional elections (Busygina, and Filippov 2021). In this arrangement, the relationships between governors are

inhibited by the atomization of their positions vis-à-vis Moscow; there is minimal chance for substantial horizontal cooperation/communication between governors, and instead each governor must politically engage primarily with the center (Busygina and Filippov 2023b).

The instillation of outside governors can be a source of tension between the center and local elites. A large-scale reshuffling of governors which took place from 2017-2019 further displaced locally-connected governors and reinforced the center's control of regional governments (Kynev 2019). These effects were felt further downstream where other parts of the executive branches of regional governments became filled with staff from outside of the region, leading to tension with members of local political cliques. Outsider governors are more historically inclined to engage in *reyderstvo*¹ as opposed to those with stronger ties to local elites with an interest in the long-term development of local business (Rochlitz 2014). Businesses also prefer locally-embedded governors for the stability and preferential access that they provide to centralized resources (Sharafutdinova and Steinbuks 2017).

While the utilization of outside-governors enables Moscow to curb the influence of the local population, the balance formed nonetheless places governors in a precarious position of needing to fulfil the President's demands of them, the demands of their local constituents, while having shallow personal connections to local sources of power. However, this feature center-selected outsider-governors in not an entirely one-way street, as in some cases Moscow must negotiate appointments with strongly entrenched local elites e.g. in Tatarstan (Obydenkova and Swenden 2013).

The Power Vertical in Russian Authoritarian Federalism

The center-selected governors and lack of horizontal communication are features of the “power vertical” that has developed across the levels of Russian government under authoritarian federalism. According to Vladimir Gel'man, this distribution of power is governed by the following rules:

¹ A common act in Russia where state officials engage in ambiguous, quasi-legal seizures of private property (often from local businesses)

- “The mechanism of governing the state tends toward a hierarchy (the “power vertical”) with only one major center of decision-making, which claims a monopoly on political power (the “single power pyramid”).
- The autonomy of domestic political and economic actors vis-à-vis this center is conditional; it can be reduced and/or abolished at any given moment.
- The formal institutions that define the framework of power and governance are arranged as by-products of the distribution of resources within the power vertical: they matter as rules of the game only to the degree to which they contribute to rent-seeking (or at least do not prevent it).
- The power apparatus within the power vertical is divided into several organized groups and/or informal cliques, which compete with one another for access to rents.” (Gel’man 2022, 12)

On the federal and regional level, these competing hierarchies produce parallel hierarchies at different levels of the power vertical, where multiple federal entities will compete with one another for control for overlapping jurisdictions and functions (Gel’man 2022, 36). As asserted by Ross, a confluence of material and immaterial factors results in a diversity of how these regional governments act within the power vertical. As described by Gel’man and Ryzehnkov:

They (**local regimes-author’s note**) perform under the hierarchically structured influence of three major factors: (1) exogenous structural characteristics of local regimes (geographical locations, natural resources, socioeconomic profiles, and more broadly, in a national and international developmental context); (2) political opportunities, which set up the political and institutional environment of local regimes and the incentives for their actors; and (3) patterns of governance at higher levels of authority implemented at the local level by conducting certain policies. Concurrently, outcomes of local regimes emerge as a result of the interactions of their actors within the framework of political institutions. (Gel’man and Ryzhenkov 2011).

In Russia’s power vertical, there is a clear hierarchy between the federal center and regional governments, but resources remain contested at the regional and sub-regional levels between

heterogeneous actors. The competing hierarchies and atomization of governors ensures an implicit need for regional governors to compete with one another. In a financially centralized system of governance such as Russia's, regional governments must compete with one another to secure funding from the federal center (Sharafutdinova and Turovsky 2017). This dependence is further exacerbated in many regions by their lack of economic viability in a globalized economic system that stems from weak institutions and poor governance (Busygina and Filippov 2018). Their economic incapacity is severe enough to the point that a number of regions depend on redistributed funds from the federal budget to prevent economic collapse, reflecting their total inability to develop fiscal independence (and consequently any chance of political independence) from Moscow (Zubarevich 2017, 50). Financial centralization leaves the economic success of a region as a secondary priority (outside of an especially lucrative few regions), and in turn the center then prioritizes political loyalty when evaluating the performance of governors (Reuter and Robertson 2012).

Despite the verticality of center-regional power relations in Russia's federalism, regional governments do have autonomy in deciding a number of economic and social issues. While the governors must have enough appeal to win their elections, incumbent governors have the means and often the responsibility of producing enough votes for United Russia through falsifications or other dubious means (Bader and van Ham 2015). Moreover, as Max Bader and Carolien van Ham, as well as Gulnaz Sharafutdinova (Sharafutdinova 2015) point out, rates of falsification range across demographic and personalistic factors (such as the perceived need by regional authorities to signal loyalty to the center by "delivering" desired election results, or the vulnerability of citizens to political pressure and manipulation). While the political regime types of the regional governments follow the same authoritarian pattern of the federal government, there is still variation in what ways this authoritarianism manifests itself (Ross and Panov 2019).

Personalistic Politics in the Russian Federation

Personalistic politics, often in the form of an authoritarian regime, may be briefly summed up as a system where one individual possesses an exceptionally large role in a government's decision making, and whose public image reflects this fact (Frantz and Kendall-Taylor 2016). In Russia's personalistic politics, the public image of the institution of the President is vital as a pillar of political stability, which explains the high value placed on public approval ratings of Putin by him and his administration (Treisman 2011). This phenomenon extends from the office of the president down to regional government positions (Baturu and Elkink 2014).

By kneecapping governors' ability to formulate substantial local political support as a means of legitimacy, and ensuring their dependence on the federal center for a viable political career and financial resources to govern, regional governors become an extension of Putin's personalistic politics (Busygina and Filippov 2023b). Consequently, regional concerns/demands are addressed only to the degree that they prevent significant unrest or public dissatisfaction, as governors rarely face formidable competition from opposition candidates in direct elections. In such an incentive structure, governors are strongly inclined to encourage loyalty to the central government among their constituents in order to ensure regime stability, and are hesitant to disobey Moscow's wishes. Even in the advent of the full-scale invasion, in a political system that values loyalty over efficiency, the center and the regional governments will go to great lengths to preserve the status quo.

Over time, the political structure of regional governments has come to reflect the model of authoritarianism at the federal level. The capture of regional legislative assemblies by the ruling party (United Russia) guarantees that there will be minimal legislative resistance to a governor's decisions (Golosov 2018). With executive power playing a disproportionate role in Russian politics relative to the legislative and judicial branches (Golosov and Konstantinova 2016), governors (as well as the president at the federal level) consequently are more likely to have policy successes or failures attributed directly to them.

A key pillar of Putin's popularity is the conception of him as a strong leader who can rescue Russia in times of crisis, as was demonstrated in the Second Chechen War (when he went from an unknown outsider to capable leader) and the Annexation of Crimea (when he reinvigorated his

image after the 2008 financial crisis and 2011-2013 Duma protests) (Matovski 2020). Given that Putin has been the principal face of the federal government to the Russian populace, the outcome of the war is also tied to his public approval rating.

In Russia's autocratic federalism, Putin's popularity is an essential pillar of the system's stability (Yakovlev 2021). Putin's exceptionally high public ratings over such a long period of time provide even regional government policymakers a basis of legitimacy when governing, as well as a source of stability when making future plans (Matovski 2020, 220). The personalist linkages between officials and the public help elected officials (including both the President and the governors) inoculate their successful candidacies from backlash for unfair voting practices and falsifications (Smyth 2014), in turn perpetuating the status quo of the regime.

2.3 Decentralization within Authoritarian Federalism

Within the literature concerning decentralization in autocratic systems, the broad incentives for authoritarian states to decentralize despite the supposed dispersal of power (and subsequent bolster of competitors/oppositional forces) may be summed up by Busygina, Filippov, and Taukebaeva (2018) as the following:

- In order to improve the political-economic efficiency by better allocating public goods to meet geographically-determined needs
- In response to a crisis, either as a distressed bid to maintain power by making limited concessions to other parties, or to diffuse popular discontent with government performance or unpopular decisions.
- In response to external pressure/incentives from IGOs, foreign lenders, corporations etc. to remain globally economically competitive

The three major cases of decentralization since the recentralization of power and resources by the federal center in the early 2000s (return of direct gubernational elections in 2012, the government response to Covid-19, and 2022-present mobilization of reservists) clearly fit the second rationale

for decentralization. Neither good governance nor the incentives of globalization have successfully prompted the Russian federal center to decentralize, as it has only done as a reaction to crisis in order to diffuse public dissent. While there is an established body literature concerning the first two cases, the study of the consequences of the 2022-present mobilization of Russian soldiers by regional governments is a very nascent and still developing body of literature. For an authoritarian federalism such as Russia's, decentralization is a means for political survival of the regime.

The aforementioned immense importance of Putin's popularity explains why, when having to make an unpopular policy decision, the federal center chooses to unilaterally decentralize authority as a means to defuse negative public reaction to the President/center (as in the case of Covid-19 restrictions and responses, which were controversial among the Russian population) (Busygina and Klimovich 2024a). The Kremlin anticipated a similar negative public reaction to the Fall 2022 (and still ongoing) mobilization of reservists, which in turn partially informed the center's decision to make the recruitment/equipping of those mobilized the responsibility of regional governments. The Kremlin's assumptions proved correct, with widespread protests, and exodus of Russian from Russia, and other displays of discontent regarding the mobilization (AP September 2022). In turn, complaints and scandals regarding the mobilization and outfitting of those mobilized have frequently targeted the corresponding regional authorities (Poligon Media 2023). By privatizing political gains and socializing political losses, Putin maintains his high public ratings.

However, insofar as governors have the autonomy to decide as they see fit in response to these decentralizations within their local context, they are at risk of being scapegoated by the center as a means of preserving the ratings the President (and to a lesser extent the Duma and federal agencies) (Sirotkina and Zavadskaya 2020). A prominent example of this is the 2012 "unfunded mandates" where governors and their regional budgets became obliged to fulfill Putin's welfare policy decrees without additional funding from Moscow (Zhavoronkov 2018). In an effort to skirt its own budget limitations, Moscow scapegoated the regional governments to avoid damage to its political standing (Matveev and Novkunskeya. 2020). However, the omnipresence of authoritarian-induced "bad governance" as termed by Vladimir Gel'man makes for "a lack and/or perversion of the rule of law, near-universal rent-seeking, ubiquitous corruption, poor quality of state regulation, widespread abuse of public funds, and overall ineffectiveness of government" (Gel'man 2022, 1) which provides for ample opportunities for scandal at all levels of government,

and multiple opportunities for scapegoating. In the discrepancies of policy execution in Russia, it is in bad governance that one can find some rationale for the divide between what the center commands, and what the regional governments do.

However, the effectiveness of this scapegoating is doubtful as the general populace often made no great distinction between regional and federal governments in terms of approval or disapproval in the Covid-19 response measures (Blackburn and et al. 2023). This may be a reflection of local views of governors as the extension of Moscow's power and Putin's personal political legitimacy. Paradoxically, it is the same bad governance which "is a functional mechanism that maintains a delicate balance among elites, thus preserving the political status quo if domestic pressure from political and economic actors and society at large is sporadic and can generally be kept under control by the ruling groups." (Gel'man 2022, 18). Barring any significant pressure, the center can maintain an equilibrium with those regional actors who it has co-opted.

Nonetheless, a common reaction to this blame is for regional governments to shirk their responsibilities, which may entail spreading misinformation and providing ambiguous excuses to ensure confusion and abdication from responsibility. This was demonstrated by significant under reporting of Covid-19 deaths by region in an effort to minimize public backlash for regional governments failure to effectively reduce the spread of the disease (Busygina and Klimovich 2024a). Now once again faced with an unfunded mandate to mobilize, equip, and provide welfare to the families of Russian soldier while still providing economic and social stability, governors may resort to these tactics as a means to save political face.

The Russian government's Covid-19 response and the ongoing mobilization of soldiers have significant administrative decentralizations. It is in these administrative decentralizations that regional governors gain a degree of agency in policy making and public discourse. However, the authoritarian nature of the federal center allows this crisis-induced decentralization to occur only as a means of dispersing its burdens, and thus may be inclined to recentralize power once said crisis has passed (Busygina and Klimovich 2024a, 2). Yet with the full-scale invasion having entered its third year, with no discernable end in sight, regional governments (as well as the center) may begin reconsidering this temporary administrative decentralization as a more permanent fixture in the foreseeable future.

Nonetheless, the war has now created new tensions between the federal center and regional governments. Unlike before, when the regional governors were primarily expected to ensure support for the regime (e.g. producing votes for United Russia candidates) and maintaining social stability (ensuring adequate social support, infrastructure, employment etc.) (Klimovich and Kropp 2022), Russia's regional governments now must deal with yet another significant burden induced by the center. The most acute new responsibility of the regional governments has been the recruiting and equipping of mobilized and conscripted military personnel in collaboration with the military authorities (Busygina and Klimovich 2024b). In addition to recruitment and supply, the regional governments are likewise obliged to provide social welfare services and benefits to the families of those serving in the war (Vedomosti 2023).

Now, the governors are being demanded by Moscow to materially support the war by mobilizing reservists and ensuring economic stability, and contributing to other government activities in occupied Ukrainian territory (e.g. humanitarian aid, etc.). These additional demands place a substantial strain on regional governments' ability to maintain social stability, as their financial and institutional resources are worn thin while their constituents are wounded or killed on the front. Despite additional funds redirected from the federal budget to help alleviate these additional burdens, sanctions and the withdrawal of foreign investment make for less and less financial maneuverability for the center and the regions to satisfy all of their costs (Toth-Czifra 2023a).

Ultimately, despite Putin's decades long centralization drive, the aggregate academic literature concerning Russia's regional politics concludes that the immense differences of economic, geographic, demographic, and history factors ensure heterogeneous responses to Moscow's policy directives (Libman 2023). Despite having mechanisms to install and influence regional governors, there is documented push back to the federal center's policy preferences from local actors (ethnic republics and large urban areas being two common areas of resistance) (Pertsev 2018), which suggests that the federal-regional power vertical is not absolute, and may be resisted from below in the right conditions. The informal, internal regional political relationships have in some cases subverted federal mandates, creating some room for regional governments to tacitly disobey directives from the center (Libman 2016). It is therefore of great value to pursue further research as to how this heterogeneity reflects in regional responses to the ongoing war.

By investigating the discursive differences between the federal center, and the regional governments, this thesis will contribute to research on Russian federalism by investigating how the relevant theoretical frameworks function in an acute and increasingly difficult environment for regional governments. A discursive analysis examining how the federal center and the regional governments talk about the consequences of the war will discern the variety and frequency of justifications as to why Russia continues to wage its war in Ukraine, and how leadership of the regional governments of Russia influence the dissemination of these justifications.

2.4 Russian Regional and General Populace Responses to the Full-Scale Invasion

As of this writing, the war has not fundamentally changed the relationship between the federal center and regional governments. However, new pressures brought by the war have progressively strained relations between the federal center, regional governments, and the general populace. Increasingly overburdened regional budgets, an unpopular mobilization of reservists in Fall 2022 and a disinterest of the majority of Russians having to become personally involved in the war make difficult obstacles for the governors to navigate while appeasing both the demands of their constituents and those of the federal center. This section explores how these trends have manifested since the start of the war and how they may predict public discourse produced by Russia's governors.

The federal center, with Putin as its primary spokesperson, has employed a host of arguments to justify the full-scale invasion of Ukraine (Dickinson 2022). The arguments span the gauntlet of historical grievances, anticipatory self-defense, to humanitarian intervention, among other justifications. Recent research has concluded that the war has been universally supported by all regional governments/governors, but with variability as to the degree which this support has been publicly expressed (Busygina and Filippov 2023b).

However, others have also argued that while Russian governors have uniformly complied in supporting the regime since February 2022, the full-scale invasion and subsequent mobilization have made the governors increasingly accountable to their constituents in order to mobilize public

support for the war (Busygina and Klimovich 2024b). In turn, governors find themselves obliged to justify to their citizens the mobilization, including injury or death of soldiers from their regions, as well as cuts made from regional budgets in order to finance the war effort.

An emerging point of conflict between the federal center and regional governments is budget allotment in the face of increasing costs related to the war (Toth-Czifra 2023c). With changes to the tax system, and different war-related costs being piled on regional budgets by the center, regional governments find their budgets increasingly strained. Regional and municipal governments have been able to keep afloat most due to budget cuts for programs designed for their constituents, and through sporadic federal loans and grants. The demands of the center give increasingly few means for governors to prevent public dissatisfaction with their tenure, stretching them between the two principles who enable them to hold office. With the slower rotation of governors since the start of the full-scale invasion, and legislation designed to remove municipal leaders who are independent of the governor, regional governments are in a position to possess greater agency at the regional level due to more sub-regional political power and less fluidity in their tenure as governors (Toth-Czifra 2024).

Effectively understanding federal-regional budget allotment is exaggerated by the “bad governance” that defines the power vertical of Russian authoritarian federalism. The informal practices, personal patronage networks, and opaque dealmaking that is characteristic of authoritarian regimes (Hale 2015; Shirikov 2010) poses an empirical challenge in discerning the exact nature of the centralization and redistribution of government funds, often leaving researchers and investigators with only the ability to produce a rough approximation of sums and connections. This pattern was especially apparent during Covid-19, where federal financial assistance to shore up budget holes caused by the pandemic was provided to regional governments, but the allocation of said funds remained opaque (Busygina and Filippov 2023a).

When dealing with intra-regional elites and economic players, governors have had to increasingly depend on local businesses and constituents (be it through coercion or cooperation) in order to make up for the financial and resource gaps incurred by the center’s demands to support the war (Busygina and Klimovich 2024b, 4). This indicates that in order to remain in office and prevent

public dissent, Russian governors must successfully articulate justify to their local constituents that makes digestible the individual and collective burdens posed on them by Moscow.

While the message and demands from Kremlin to the regional governments are clear, discerning the demands of a governor's constituents is a more challenging affair. While this thesis considers public opinion surveys a valuable tool for understanding the Russian public in the context of the war, their ability and use in measuring objective reality in the current context of Russian state repression remains understandably contested (Gorsky 2024). The high rate of rejections for questions regarding the war among those Russians reflect a high degree of wariness when approached by public opinion surveys (Russian Field 2024). Nonetheless, across the different organizations conducting public opinion surveys in Russia, a number of revelations have emerged regarding the Russian public's relationship to the war.

Despite an initial widespread enthusiastic support for the war, polling in Russia indicates that an increasing number of Russians are growing tired of the war, and are more inclined to a negotiated peace to halt the conflict (Kommersant 2023; Koneva and Rogov 2024). However, regional differences for support for the war have emerged within polling. A number of regions along the Ukrainian border (Belgorod, Kursk, Bryansk) are recorded as having strong support for the continuation of the war relative to other regions (Gusev 2023). Yet, in the cases where Russian territory has been attacked by Ukraine-allied Russian volunteer units or the Ukrainian Armed Forces (Belgorod Oblast and Moscow as the two primary targets), the silence from federal authorities has made room for regional officials to step as a source of stability and assurance for the local population (Vinogradov 2023).

Not only are there regional differences in support for the war, but seemingly paradoxical trends have evolved in Russian polling since February 2022. A curious trend to emerge from public opinion polls is that the majority of respondents supported continuing to attack or at least hold the current ground gained by the Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine, but also supported the signing of a peace agreement and were very strongly against a second wave of mobilizing Russian reservists (Russian Field 2024). In Extreme Scan's highly nuanced polling, the second year of the war saw a slight dip in those who support the war, but a more dramatic dip in those who strongly support Russia's action in Ukraine to a more moderate stance of support (Koneva and Rogov 2024). In

these surveys, support for the war among those Russians surveyed ebbed and flowed, but has seen a gradual decline since February 2022.

According to Extreme Scan, those surveyed can be divided in two “big groups” (those who either actively or nominally support the war, and those who choose not to answer) and one “small group” (those who do not support the war) (Koneva and Rogov 2024). By October 2023, those who actively support the war consisted of 27% of respondents, with 48% nominatively supporting the war or refusing to answer, and 26% not inclined to support or are against the war. While the war was met initially with enthusiasm among the Russian population, this enthusiasm as gradually lessened over time, creating problems for governors who need to mobilize soldiers and resources, and demonstrate to the federal center that they are capable to producing the support that the Kremlin needs to achieve victory while maintaining regime security.

These contrasts and evolutions in public opinions regarding the war reflect some of the varying attitudes that governors must address amongst their constituents: the desire for some sense of achievement or victory (or at least avoiding loss), but not at the cost of their own lives and accustomed standards of living. The extreme atomization of Russian society is a partial explanation for disinterest in the war and strong opposition to widespread mobilization and conscription, as many Russians are interested in minimizing the impacts of the war in their personal life (Koneva 2024). This in part is also reflected in the consistent attacks on enlistment offices (The Guardian 2024).

Knowing that another mobilization like the one conducted in Fall 2022 would visibly exacerbate public discontent, the federal center has opted to allay such a reaction by setting regional quotas for recruiting contract soldiers (Vinogradov 2023). Based on available data, those mobilized since the start of the full-scale invasion disproportionately come from poorer and geographically-distant regions (with comparatively few recruits from Moscow and St. Petersburg) (Bessudnov 2023).

Regardless of polling, regional politicians have taken note of the gulf between the desires of the center and those of their constituents. The 2023 governor and regional legislative elections were notable for the majority of candidates having rather subdued messaging concerning support for the war (often focusing on tangential issues such as funding social services, attracting business, etc.), indicating a sense that bellicose rhetoric has minimal appeal to the majority of voters (Toth-Czifra

2023b). In some cases, (in particular with attacks on internationally-recognized Russian territories in 2023) the silence of the federal center has given space for governors to differentiate themselves as capable leaders with distinct public images (Pertsev 2023). At the same time, there are governors whose district who have been attacked yet prefer to disassociate their public images and policy decisions from the war (Vinogradov 2023).

Support for the war among the Russian population is partially ideological (more often than not as a form of patriotic nationalism), yet a far greater cause of this support is the deep depoliticization of Russian society, which induces many of those depoliticized Russians to adopt the “nominal” position forwarded by the government (i.e. that as a citizen of Russia you should approve of the government’s decision to invade) (Ishchenko and Zhuravlev 2023).

This disinterest in the war, but willingness to express dissatisfaction with the status quo, is why protests (directly) unrelated to the war continue to manifest. Since February 2022, Russian regional and municipal political leaders have continued to deal with various protests throughout the country unrelated to the war, and concerned with more routine affairs (low salaries, intrusive business infrastructure, communal maintenance) (Shablinsky 2024). These events of public dissent reflect that there still is room for public protest in Russia, which reflects the continued obligation of Russian governors to satisfactorily fulfill the demands of their constituents in spite of the domestic conditions and challenges induced by the war. Governors understand this, and also understand that preemptively diffusing these protests is essential to them keeping their positions.

As of this writing, no discursive analyses have been performed on how regional governments in Russia communicate to their constituents in times of crisis. My thesis will expand the body of literature of how the federal and regional levels of Russian governance understand one another as well as the general populace in the context of the current war.

Given the above theoretical literature, sociological surveys, and policy summaries, **my expectations are that governors will publicly support the war instigated by the federal center to varying degrees, but will use different combinations of legitimizing strategies than the federal center to appeal to their constituents to justify the consequences of the war endured by the general populace.** As opposed to the ideological legitimization offered by the federal

center, regional governments will make stronger appeals to notions of self-defense, solidarity, and humanitarian purposes.

Chapter 3: The Theoretical Foundation of the Research Design

3.1 Theoretical Foundation of the Research Design: Post-structuralist Approach to Identity

With a few minor exceptions, the overwhelming majority of academic literature concerning federalism in Russia (as covered in the literature review) is positivist in origin. The research question posed cannot be answered in causal epistemological terms. In politics, identity and discourse are not causal as they “establish preconditions and parameters for the possibility of action, rather than explaining why certain choices are made” (Dunn 2008, 84). Thus, a post-structuralist approach enables me to answer the “how” of the research question.

In order to understand how Russian regional governments justify the consequences of the current war to their constituents, it is essential that we examine the collective identities involved and how they interact with one another in the discourse of public officials at the federal and regional levels. As described by Kevin Dunn and Iver Neumann (2016), the post-structuralist approach (of the interpretivist research paradigm) to discourse analysis focuses on the role of language as a means of producing social relations and identities. This thesis will explore the collective identities of the Russian federal center (through the speeches of Vladimir Putin), and the Russian periphery/regional governments (through regional government/governor Telegram channels) in the context of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine during the period of February 2022-February 2024. This thesis will also pay special attention to how these two collective identities discursively construct the Ukraine, the collective West, and the general Russian population.

Identity

Despite not having a universal definition, identity, whether as an individual or a collective, can be most effectively summed up on the most basic level as a Self that is shaped by sameness and difference through interaction with the Other (Brubaker and Cooper 2000).

A crucial aspect of the post-structuralist approach to identity is to note that identity is an inherently social phenomenon:

“To conceptualize identity as social is to understand it as established through a set of collectively articulated codes, not as a private property of the individual or a psychological condition—not that individuals do not understand themselves as having identities, instead individual identity is constituted within and through a collective terrain.” (Hansen 2006, 6)

Language is the medium through which the social construction of identities takes place, as a reality-producing social practice that produces Selves and Others² (which can also be described as subjects and their relations), and creates “grids of intelligibility” through which the Selves and Others discursively define one another (Doty 1993, 305-306). Language (in verbal and written form) is inherently social (as something collectively shared across individuals) and political (as a space where subjectivities can be contested) when constructing reality (Hansen 2006, 18).

As theorized by Ted Hopf, identity, whether collective or individual, is relational and cannot form and function without any social influence: “one’s identity is relevant only in relationship to other individuals and groups, and is re/produced only in interaction with them” (Hopf 2009, 281). One can have several identities but they exist only if distinguished from Others while interacting with different Others and/or within various structures (Hopf and Allan 2016). However, Self and Others don’t necessarily have to be in conflict, and can simply co-exist (Hopf 2002, 7).

Connecting identity to collective government, Lene Hansen provides a particularly comprehensive concept of identity broad enough to be applied to foreign policy vis-à-vis domestic discourses as “Identity, in short, is not only at work in the constitution of inter-state relations, but in any significant political decision—and the constitution of what is different or foreign is not confined to Foreign Policy as conventionally understood.” (Hansen 2006, XIV).

The post-structuralist approach argues that identities are intersubjective, and co-constitutive, which manifest in international relations as such:

² Also referred to as subjects elsewhere in post-structuralist literature

Policies require identities, but identities do not exist as objective accounts of what people and places ‘really are,’ but as continuously restated, negotiated, and reshaped subjects and objects. To theorize foreign policy as discourse is to argue that identity and policy are constituted through a process of narrative adjustment, that they stand, in social science terminology, in a constitutive, rather than causal, relationship. (Hansen 2006, XIV)

Even in authoritarian conditions, the political subjectivity of non-hegemonic subjects remains relevant, and there is room for new subjectivities to form during political crisis (Bekus and Gabowitsch 2023). In the case of Russia, the full-scale invasion as a foreign policy decision determined by the federal center that has produced, intensified, and expanded a number of narratives at the levels of the federal center, regional governments, and general populace. These narratives consequently influence the reproduction of identities as the “relational conception of identity implies that identity is always given through reference to something it is not.” (Hansen 2006, 6). The significance of war as a political event is constructed through discourse, allowing for multiple narratives to emerge (Doty 1993, 303). The full-scale invasion of Ukraine has compelled regional governments to publicly partake in the relevant narratives which come from a realm of policy discourse (war and peace) typically reserved for the federal center. The regional governments and the general populace now find themselves increasingly involved in the federal center’s decision to invade Ukraine, while the federal center has unambiguously transformed into a state mobilizing its military capabilities to subjugate another state (as opposed to prior obfuscations and proxies fighting the Ukrainian state in Crimea and the Donbas).

With the full-scale invasion impacting the social and political spheres of life in Russia, Russian politicians, and the collective identities which define them, must now adjust to one another in a different set of conditions than before February 2022 (e.g. regional governments must now respond to the federal center’s demands of support, while also negotiating what the Kremlin can reasonably expect from them). Ted Hopf and Bently Allan’s (2016, 2) definition of identities furthers the idea that different patterns of societal discourses define the identity of a group or individual. In their positions as executive heads of the federal and regional government, Putin and Russia’s governors understand themselves not just as the product of their appointment/election, but as also as the product of a particular social and political milieu that is a daily experience for them as a process

of exchange with Others (through public announcements or private conversations, be they with their constituents, political peers, etc.). The demands that Putin makes of the governors are informed by the heads of a variety of federal agencies as well as the armed forces, while governors inform their decisions based on communications with federal representatives and their own regional agency heads and other elected officials.

Nonetheless, the interpretivist approach of post-structuralist discourse analysis complements positivist body of literature by examining how regional governments understand themselves in relation to their constituents and the federal center, which in turn will provide material for further theorizing on center-periphery relations in authoritarian federalism. The full-scale invasion and its consequences are very suitable phenomena to analyze in that they create unavoidable antagonisms between the respective subjects (as collective identities) most pertinent to scholarship on federalism. While there is a significant body of post-structuralist literature on Russia's identity in international affairs as expressed in its foreign policy (Hopf 2005; Neumann 2008, 2016), there exists a gap in the literature that explores Russia's identity on the international level (as the foreign policy of the federal center) in relation to its federal subjects. One of the aims of this thesis is to being to bridge this gap.

Discourse

Discourse analysis is a way to effectively approximate the intersubjective perceptions and interpretations of an individual or group (Hopf and Allan, 2016), where intersubjectivity "is the reality generated within a community, society, or group, of shared understandings of the world out there" (Hopf 2009, 279). Intersubjective meanings may be internalized by individuals (Wendt 1999, 163). Identity and discourse can change in response to an event that produces a shock or sudden change relevant to a group's identity (Wendt 1999). With the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent partial mobilization causing significant intersubjective changes at the federal and regional levels of government (a federal center increasingly antagonistic to external Others, and regional governments playing a greater role in sustaining the military decisions of the federal center), this discourse analysis will determine where the intersubjectivity of the governors/regional governments converges and diverges with Putin discourse when justifying the consequences of the war to the Russian general populace. The value of using an interpretivist approach when studying

identity as opposed to quantitative methods lies in the room left for inter-subjectivity, where identities are established through the discourses themselves, and are not limited by pre-theorization by those conducting the research (Hopf and Allan, 2016).

Drawing on post-structuralist scholarship, this thesis analysis multiple identities (the Selves [as public self-images] of multiple regional governments, a Russian federal government Self [as a public self-image], the Self of the Russian general population as constituents of the regional and federal governments, and the Others of Ukraine and the collective West). These identities are explored via a discourse analysis of a singular event (Russia's ongoing invasion in Ukraine), and a single temporal period (from February 2022 to February 2024). Unlike its well-known alternative critical discourse analysis, post-structuralism rejects structuralist notions of society as a power structure with clearly defined social positions originating from the top down. Post-structuralism asserts that the social/linguistic structures through which we communicate, and the discursive practices that form them (as well as how social/linguistic structures shape discourses, are never fully controlled by a single strategic actor and thus not defined by a unidirectional hierarchy (Angermuller 2020, 242). In a similar vein, the loosely-defined alternative that is known as political discourse analysis is ill-suited to answer the research question of this thesis, as it mostly focuses on the use of language to create political effect (Wilson 2015, 787) While the authoritarian federalism of Russia privileges the power of the federal government Self, the federal center must (to a certain degree) negotiate with the other Russian Selves of the regional government and Russian general population.

However, identity between the Self and the Other also exists on a spectrum in that "Constructions of identity can take on different degrees of 'Otherness,' ranging from fundamental difference between Self and Other to constructions of less than radical difference" (Hansen 2006, 6). In discourses concerning the war and other issues of governance, regional governments must appeal to and navigate several collective Selves positioned among different Others, namely "we as the regional government," "we as the government" (the regional government and federal center acting in coordination), and "we as the people of X region." In this thesis, the Selves of the federal center and regional governments are extracted from the federal and regional governments' own discourses, while the identities of Ukraine and the general populace as portrayed by the federal and regional governments are also analyzed in these discourses. The federal subjects are further

categorized by regional characteristics (e.g. periphery or central, economically successful or depressed) to investigate discursive trends across similar regions.

Discourse analysis enables researchers to determine how, through the analysis of text and language, Others and Selves differentiate one another, and to what degree. In determining the “reference to something it is not,” identity is conceptualized into the Self and the Other as “The conceptualization of identity as discursive, political, relational, and social implies that foreign policy discourse always articulates a Self and a series of Others.” (Hansen 2006, 6). Within the Russian federal system, multiple internal Selves and external Others (the federal center, regional governments, general populace, Ukraine, the West, etc.) are mutually constituted through multiple levels of discourse. The identities studied in this thesis at times overlap, as “identity construction involves not a single Self-Other dichotomy but a series of related yet slightly different juxtapositions that can be theorized as constituting processes of linking and differentiation.” (Hansen 2006, 33).

At the domestic level in Russia, regional governments must balance preexisting antagonisms such as the people vs. the government, the center vs. the periphery, etc. which are now shaped (and vice versa) by the federal center’s foreign policy discourse concerning its invasion of Ukraine. As foreign policy is a means to articulate a state’s identity (Campbell 1998), discourse analysis at the domestic level is invaluable for understanding where foreign policy decisions coincide and oppose the overlapping and diverging interests and identities of the general population, regional governments, and federal center. While the regional governments have not openly resisted/challenged the federal center’s decisions due to their inability within Russia’s authoritarian federalism, the (in)frequency and selective/limited employment of the federal centers’ discourses by regional governments may provide an indication of how (il)legitimate the regional governments and their constituents find the federal center’s justifications for the war.

Discourse analysis is valuable in accounting to the temporal change of the representation of identity. The two years covered by this discourse analysis bear witness to the changing social conditions in Russia in that those who find themselves in the collective Russian identity now must make choices regarding their support, opposition, or indifference to the war. The discourse explores how these changes have manifested within Russian identities and discourses. In seeking

to find meaning in the identity and discourses studied in this thesis, it is important to note that the inherent instability of identity as something that is reproduced and renegotiated (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 111) ensures that the discourses and identities studied here are capable of change over the temporal period covered in this research. Identities, and the discourses where they are mutually constituted, reflect the social realities relevant to their continued reproduction (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 108). Moreover, this instability of the order of discourses/identities ensures that a plurality of meaning produced across the various levels of discourse (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 113), creating room for the evolution of identities through new meanings (the role of regional governments in military affairs, increased antagonism with Ukraine and the collective West) to emerge in the wake of the start of the full-scale invasion.

The discourses of Russia's regional governments are formed on the basis of shared understandings that have been acquired via social interactions with their constituents, local elites, and the representatives of the federal center. In order to maintain their positions, governors must successfully position themselves to fulfill the demands of the federal center and their constituents who compose the Russian general populace. In an authoritarian hierarchy, the discourse produced by the federal center is primarily dominated by the interests of the senior political leadership, and to a lesser degree includes the interests of the regional governments and general populace. When justifying the consequences of the war, regional governments must produce meaning that satisfies the narratives and rationale established by the federal center, while also articulating why the general populace should comply with the hegemonic rationalizations of the invasion. Governors are affected by social discourses and settings they live in. Thus, the discourse that the regional governments produce is the product of the interpretations of the desires of the federal center and their constituents and should be analyzed in conjunction with the rationale given by the federal center.

3.2 Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis as Method

This discourse analysis will analyze the official war-related justification discourse produced by Russian federal subjects and will compare it to an analysis of war-related justification discourse produced by the federal center. Through discourse analysis, I will determine where justifications of war from the regional governments and from the federal government converge and diverge.

The discourse analysis used in this thesis is a combination of an interpretivist approach with quantitative methods for coding texts pioneered by Ted Hopf and Bently Allan (2016) in their Making Identity Count (MIC) project. Through coding the basic discourses found in the public texts produced by the federal center and regional governments, I trace the changes in Russian regional government discourse to observe how the regional governments justify the consequences of the war vis-à-vis the federal center.

The suddenness of the full-scale invasion launched in February 2022 injected a largely unexpected and contentious point of inflection across many international and domestic collective identities. The intensification of the invasion of Ukraine on the part of the federal center, and subsequent Fall 2022 partial mobilization, forced regional governments and the Russian general populace to navigate the topic of the war. As the principal initiator of the full-scale invasion, the federal center produced a rationale for the invasion, which is primarily and originally outlined in the speeches of Vladimir Putin.

The federal center of Russian Federation, as a Self that started the war, is extrapolated from the speeches of Vladimir Putin (as the personalistic authoritarian leader) concerning the start of the full-scale invasion in February 2022, and the announcement of the partial mobilization of Russian reservists on 21 September 2022. Putin's speeches are official articulations of the federal government's justifications and rationalizations for the war. These speeches are a fundamental component in constituting the subsequent domestic discourses in Russia, as such drastic policy decisions "need an account, or a story, of the problems and issues they are trying to address: there can be no intervention without a description of the locale in which intervention takes place or of the peoples involved in the conflict." (Hansen 2006, XIV).

The Selves of the regional governments will be examined through the official Telegram channels of the regional governments and as well as the governors of the regions. Since the start of the full-scale invasion, the digital messaging application Telegram has rapidly become a primary source of news and communication for Russian citizens (Warzel 2023). Russian state institutions and politicians have been quick to utilize Telegram for making announcements and sharing information, turning the platform into cornerstone of the public discourse produced in Russia since February 2022.

For this thesis, I consider both the Telegram channels of the regional governments, as well as the Telegram channels of the governors themselves. My preliminary research determined that either a governor's Telegram channel or a regional government's Telegram channel often serves as the most consistent and reliable source of information from a regional government (as opposed to their own websites, or social media platforms such as Instagram, Vkontakte, etc. based on my initial survey of all social media platforms of numerous regional governments). Frequently, either the governor's or a regional government's channel serves as the primary source of information (e.g. sometimes a regional government's channel mostly reposts the governor's Telegram posts). The messages sent on the governors' channel are often covered by local media sources.

Like the speeches of Vladimir Putin, the Telegram channels of governors and regional governments are official discourse representing the periphery in relation to the federal center. Given the personalistic nature of Russian politics (e.g. even when a governor doesn't have their own Telegram channel, very frequently the content of the regional government's channel primarily focuses on the governor's activities), I consider the channels of regional governments and governors to be more or less interchangeable, and prioritize analyzing the channel with the widest reach (in terms of subscribers) and consistency (regular posting over the designated period of time of February 2022 to February 2024). Of the Telegram channels covered in the analysis, all of them belong to the respective regional governors, as they all proved to be the more frequent posters with larger amounts of followers than the other government channels for their respective regions.

While analyzing the Putin's speeches and the governors' Telegram channels, I focus on how both sources answer as to 1. Why Russia is fighting in Ukraine and 2. Why should Russian citizens support the "Special Military Operation" (which I refer to with the Russian abbreviation "SVO").

The post-structuralist framework of “legitimation strategies” provides a useful tool to find the answers to both questions. Legitimacy as a process in discourse is succinctly described by Antonio Reyes as the following:

“Legitimization refers to the process by which speakers accredit or license a type of social behavior. In this respect, legitimization is a justification of a behavior (mental or physical). The process of legitimization is enacted by argumentation, that is, by providing arguments that explain our social actions, ideas, thoughts, declarations, etc. In addition, the act of legitimizing or justifying is related to a goal, which, in most cases, seeks our interlocutor’s support and approval.” (Reyes 2011, 782)

Theo Van Leeuwen’s (2007) framework provides a comprehensive approach to legitimation strategies (i.e. the means to achieve legitimacy), which categorizes them into the following:

“1) ‘authorization’, legitimation by reference to the authority of tradition, custom and law, and of persons in whom institutional authority is vested; 2) ‘moral evaluation’, legitimation by reference to discourses of value; 3) rationalization, legitimation by reference to the goals and uses of institutionalized social action, and to the social knowledges that endow them with cognitive validity; and 4) mythopoesis, legitimation conveyed through narratives whose outcomes reward legitimate actions and punish non-legitimate actions.” (Van Leeuwen, 2007)

In his 2011 article examining how US Presidents George Bush and Barack Obama legitimize the US-Iraq and US-Afghanistan conflicts, Reyes adopts and expands Van Leeuwen’s framework into the following five categories:

“The strategies of legitimization can be used individually or in combination with others, and justify social practices through: (1) emotions (particularly fear), (2) a hypothetical future, (3) rationality, (4) voices of expertise and (5) altruism. This article explains how these strategies are linguistically constructed and shaped.” (Reyes 2011, 781)

While Reyes' categorizations are well adapted to analyzing official discourse legitimating war, different strategies may be used by the Russian federal and regional governments when legitimizing the SVO. For this thesis, I employ both Van Leeuwen's and Reyes' frameworks to address as many legitimation strategies as possible, while keeping in mind that some strategies found in this discourse analysis may not be fully encapsulated by their frameworks.

3.3 Data Collection, Analysis, and Research Limitations

In addition to the aforementioned speeches of Putin, I have selected a number of Telegram channels from regional government/governors to analyze. Given the sheer volume of information available across all of the regional government telegram channels that spans the two-year period of February 2022-2024, I cannot cover all 83 internationally-recognized federal subjects of Russia. I have chosen the 5 regions listed below to investigate certain trends across regions that existed before the war (composition of the government, economic development) and have emerged since its start (being located near combat, having a high number of soldiers recruited/mobilized). I have picked a variety of regions which fall into several categories in order to ensure a plurality and to reduce the chance of selecting an outlier which would deviate the general discourse analysis

- A region which has been attacked: Belgorod Oblast
 - Belgorod Oblast has been attacked by Ukrainian ordinance and Ukraine-aligned Russian military units (e.g. Freedom of Russia Legion).
- A region which has produced a large number of recruits: Republic of Buryatia
 - The Republic of Buryatia has had a proportionally large number of recruits (and subsequently many deaths) fight in the full-scale invasion (Bessudnov 2023).
- An ethnically-defined region: Republic of Tatarstan
 - The Republic of Tatarstan has a high number of ethnically non-Russian citizens, and firmly entrenched political elites which the federal center must negotiate with when choosing governors for each region.
- A region which has had recent opposition to the federal center at the level of governor: Khakassia Krai

- In 2018, Khakassia Krai's governor Valentin Konovalov defeated the federal center-backed candidate in a popular election as a protest vote against the center (Libman 2023, 175), suggesting that he has an even more intense task of balancing the demands of their constituents and the federal center.
- A region which has suffered economically as a result of the full-scale invasion: Kaluga Oblast
 - Kaluga Oblast has economically suffered since the start of the full-scale invasion as their primary industries (transportation equipment and car production) are export/import dependent (Zubarevich 2022).

By developing a database using the discourse analysis approach developed in the MIC project, I enhance the reliability of this thesis in that the qualitatively analyzed discourse (as intersubjective data) is then coded and quantified (for comparison between the various Self/Others). In the MIC approach, the discourses and inductively extracted from the text which ensures their validity, while the reliability of the approach lies in the public availability of the discourse (Hopf and Allan 2016, 20). However, the discourses present in the public statements of Putin and the regional governors don't reflect every discourse at the federal and regional levels of government, as well as only partially capture discourses within the general populace.

All text from the sources considered in this thesis are discursively analyzed and coded and entered into an Excel spreadsheet. The text may include any written material images, audio, and video (Hopf and Allan, 2016) publicly produced during the selected speeches of Putin and on the Telegram channels of the regional governments/governors so as to fully encapsulate every related articulation from the source. In coding the sources, I determine the code by summarizing the meaning of the given articulation (e.g. a sentence about the need for Russia to defend itself from Ukraine/the West would be coded as "self-defense," among other codes). Multiple codes can be distilled from a single articulation/sentence. While this process of coding is influenced by my own subjective bias, in my analysis I provide examples of text (mostly through references to the exact cell in the Excel sheet) for the reader to get a sense of how this bias may manifest so that they may judge for themselves accordingly. Nonetheless, there is a minimal likelihood that my interpretation of the text will vary widely relative to another coder as my supervisors have provided feedback on the coding, and as the meaning of texts often contain their own inherent consistency.

Each sheet in the Excel file represents a single source of code (be it Putin's speeches or the Telegram channel(s) for a specific region). The coding table (in the accompanying Excel file) is made up of 7 columns: code, quote, comments, author, source title, source day/month/year, and the URL. The code column is where the inductively determined code from the original text is assigned, with the quote column containing the original written text (or a description in case of a video or image). Others are delineated by the codes External Other (EXO, e.g. the West), Internal Other (INO, e.g. other regions), and Historical Other (HO e.g. the USSR). The comments column is for any pertinent observations made on my part. The remaining columns (author, source title, etc.) are for anyone seeking a reference back to the original source. The coded data is then measured by frequency of codes in each source of discourse, and then comparatively analyzed between the sources and situated within common discursive trends.

The links to all primary sources used, the original texts, and codes may be found in the accompanying Excel file.

Chapter 4: Analysis

General Summary

The total number of codes I extracted from the three Putin speeches and five governors' Telegram channels amounted to a total of 1414 codes. Putin's speeches provided a consistent body of legitimation strategies which include emotional appeals, historical rationalizations, mythopoesis, portrayals of a hypothetical future, and calls for altruism. Likewise, his speeches produced consistent portrayals of identities which include Russia, the Donbas, the Ukrainian people, the Ukrainian government, and the US/West/NATO.

In their Telegram posts, the governors drew on both the identities and legitimation strategies used by Putin. A plurality emerged with some governors using some strategies and ignoring others, while also more frequently mentioning certain identities and ignoring others. Some governors borrowed heavily from Putin's discourse, while others either modestly or barely borrowed from Putin's legitimization strategies. As expected, the governors did not challenge Putin's discourse, but showed a diversity as to what degree they chose to place their own discourses within it. The results thus confirm my research expectations the despite the conditions of hierarchy in Russia's authoritarian federalism, governors exercise a degree of lateral agency when justifying the war and its consequences to their constituents. While this thesis cannot make a causal argument for why this plurality of discourses exist at the regional level, I do venture possible explanations for each region which may partially explain a governor's particular choices when talking about the war.

The subsequent sections discuss the general analysis of the discourse and the federal and regional level, as well as each specific speech and Telegram channel.

4.1 Federal Center Discourses

Legitimation Strategies

From Putin's speeches, I extracted 377 codes (the exact number of codes from each speech is included in their respective sections). The three speeches made by Putin over the course of 2022 remained consistent in their legitimation strategies for justifying the SVO, as well as formation of Selves and Others. With an increasingly antagonist attitude in each subsequent speech, Putin lays out a series of justifications which is best surmised as the following:

Despite Russia's best efforts to be a reliable partner, the collective West/NATO, commanded by the hegemonic and power-seeking United States, has been attempting to undermine and eventually dismantle the Russian state/civilization. Having taken control of Ukraine in 2014 with an illegitimate coup, the USA/West/NATO use the Ukrainian nationalist/neo-Nazi/fascist-led regime in Kyiv to terrorize Russians/Russian speakers in Ukraine (in particular in the Donbas) while positioning NATO forces to attempt to negate Russia's defensive capabilities, in turn violating its sovereignty and leaving Russia vulnerable to coercion. Ukraine, as an artificially-manufactured state which covers a significant portion of territory which is historically Russian, will continue to grow as a threat to Russia's security. The USA/West/NATO will exploit this situation to either totally enfeeble Russia or territorially disintegrate it. In order to retain its self-defense capabilities and fulfill its moral obligation to protect peaceful citizens in the Donbas, Russia must preemptively strike to prevent further threats, instability, and terror. Until Ukraine is no longer a threat to Russia/Russian civilization, the SVO must continue.

There are a number of legitimations worth taking note of. Putin makes ample use of emotions, placing a particular emphasis on fear and anger. The fear that people in the Donbas (who, depending on the particular section of text, are either Russian or are peers/brothers to Russians) can be terrorized for what makes them like "us" (i.e. Russians), and therefore interpolates "us" as acceptable targets for this terror. The fear that the USA/West/NATO will use Ukrainian territory

to render Russia incapable of defending “us.” The anger that all of this is happening on territory which he claims is historically Russian, and therefore should not be happening if prior injustices had not occurred.

There is also a clear altruistic legitimization of the SVO. Putin frequently centers the Donbas as a point of crisis. He constructs the people of the Donbas as victims who have endured numerous crimes perpetuated by Ukrainian nationalists/neo-Nazis/fascists on the basis of their ethnic and linguistic characteristics. Therefore, Russia has a moral duty to help the oppressed people of the Donbas to live without fear of persecution.

Putin likewise uses what may be described as a historical rationalization to naturalize the SVO as the product of structural events outside of his control. He frequently cites prior events that occurred in the Russian Empire and the USSR to explain how parts of Ukrainian territory and identity are in fact Russian, giving the Russian state legitimate claim over them in the face of recent distortions which formed an “artificial” and mis-bordered Ukraine. He also claims that the origins of the Donbas crisis in 2014-present are the result of US/West/NATO’s ruthless geopolitical ambitions and disinterest in accepting Russia as a peer deserving of equal and fair treatment despite Russia reciprocating the same to them. The current conflict is likened to the eve of Nazi Germany’s attack on the USSR, when strong external power was gathering its strength before launching an enormous, unjustified assault on a unassuming target. Putin thus asserts that through these historical truths and (in)justices, Russia has always reacted rationally and soundly, and is doing so today with the SVO.

The historical rationalization presented by Putin also feeds into a mythopoesis. In this narrative, Russia, an imperfect, but earnest and fair state, is besieged by power-hungry and hostile foreign entities who have perverted lands and peoples once a rightful part of the Russian civilization (before they were lost in a series of catastrophes). In violating historical truths, well as international norms and rules, the US/West/NATO in their quest for power have installed a criminal regime in Ukraine which now commits atrocities against the people of the Donbas. Russia, now having found itself backed in a corner, must fulfill its moral obligation to defend both the Donbas and itself by initiating the SVO. In this narrative, there are clearly defined “bad” (the US/West/NATO/Kyiv

regime) and “good” sides (Russia, the Donbas) where righteous decisions (exercising the right to self-defense and engaging in a humanitarian intervention) are morally valid and acceptable.

The emotional, altruistic, and historical legitimizations are intertwined with the hypothetical future that Putin presents, and the rationality of the steps necessary to prevent this future. On the current trajectory, the Russian state will no longer be able to protect the Russian people and their peers, leaving them at the mercy of foreign powers who perpetrate crimes against Russians, which will rob Russians of their collective freedom and agency to act in international affairs. In order to prevent this future from materializing, Russia must commit to military action against the Kyiv regime to neutralize Ukraine as a threat to Russian security, to impede the West’s aspirations to dominate Russia/the world.

Identity Construction in Federal Discourses

From Putin’s discursive formation on the SVO, we can distill a number of Selves and Others. Putin identifies the federal government as the collective representation of the Russian Federation and Russian civilization (referred to within Russian discourses as the “Russian World”) in interstate relations. The US/West/NATO are frequently used interchangeably to refer to an antagonistic external Other (with the USA frequently being positioned as the ultimate decision maker of this identity).

Ukraine as an external Other is frequently segmented into multiple identities, with Putin referring to sub-identities such as the “Kyiv regime” (frequently associated with “neo-Nazis” and “nationalists”) as a hostile entity, while making agonistic/sympathetic references to “the Ukrainian people” (often as an unfortunate victim), “the Donbas” (also as a victim seeking self-determination), and “Crimea/the Crimeans” (who chose to join Russia). There is also a blurring of the Ukrainian Other and Russian Self, with frequent references to “historically Russian territory,” identical cultural similarities (e.g. Orthodoxy, Russian language usage in Ukraine, former states which controlled both territories i.e. the Russian Empire and USSR). This blurring of Ukrainian identity places the Ukrainian state and people in a position of liminality, as Putin’s discourse thus begs the question of whether or not the Ukrainian Self has any legitimate ground to exist.

In regards to the regional governments, Putin makes scant references, only mentioning them in his 21 September 2022 speech by ordering them to aid regional recruitment offices with equipping the newly mobilized forces (Putin, 21 September 2022; coded in line 65A in the Excel sheet “PutinSpeech21Sep2022”), as well as damage sustained in Kursk Oblast and Belgorod Oblast (Putin, 21 September 2022; coded in line 70A in the Excel sheet “PutinSpeech21Sep2022”).

In sum, Putin’s discourses produce consistent legitimation strategies and identities. Regional governments may copy and use this discursive formation when justifying the consequences of the war (be they related to mobilization, economic losses, etc.) to the general populace. The following subsections examine each of Putin’s speeches to expand on the array of discourses produced by the federal center, which may be reproduced at the regional level.

Putin’s Speech on 21 February 2022 (164 total codes)

Putin’s 21 February focuses on legitimizing the current state of affairs and Russia’s recognition of the separatist Donbas republics’ claims to independence through historical rationalizations and mythopoesis, as well as emotional and altruistic appeals.

This speech can be divided into two parts. The first part provides a historical prologue to the current tensions between Russia, Ukraine, and the West while geographically centering it in the Donbas. It is this part of the three speeches analyzed where Putin blurs the distinction between Ukrainian and Russian identity, arguing much of the territory and peoples of the modern Ukrainian state were historically Russian (Putin, 21 February 2022; coded in lines 3A, 5A, 8A, 12A in the Excel sheet “PutinSpeech21Feb2022”). Putin then argues that these historically Russian lands ended up as a part of the modern Ukrainian state as the result of concessions made during the USSR to Ukrainian nationalists in order to maintain power (Putin, 21 February 2022; coded in lines 6A, 8A, 9A, 13A, 14A, 16A in the Excel sheet “PutinSpeech21Feb2022”).

The historical prologue then pivots to the aftermath of the collapse of the USSR. Despite Russia being robbed of its historical lands (Putin, 21 February 2022; coded in lines 29A, 31A, 32A, in the Excel sheet “PutinSpeech21Feb2022”), and being a reliable partner with other countries and even

helping other former republics (Putin, 21 February 2022; coded in lines 33A, 34A, 36A in the Excel sheet “PutinSpeech21Feb2022”). Russian aid and earnest attempts to be a reliable, equal partner were constantly abused and disregarded (Putin, 21 February 2022; coded in lines 35A, 38A, 39A, 41A in the Excel sheet “PutinSpeech21Feb2022”). During this period of state weakness caused by Ukraine’s artificiality, as well as widespread corruption, Ukrainian nationalist and neo-Nazis began to vie for political power (Putin, 21 February 2022; coded in lines 43A, 47A, 48A, 49A, 56A, in the Excel sheet “PutinSpeech21Feb2022”).

The leads to the second part where Putin recounts the events of 2014 to the present state of affairs. Here, Putin argues that the 2014 Maidan Revolution co-opted into an illegal takeover of the government by nationalists and neo-Nazis who were aided by the US government (Putin, 21 February 2022; coded in lines 59A, 62A, 67A, in the Excel sheet “PutinSpeech21Feb2022”). This takeover subsequently led to a civil war within Ukraine, with the nationalist/neo-Nazi government (frequently termed the “Kyiv Regime”) engaging in various forms of criminal and terroristic acts (Putin, 21 February 2022; coded in lines 64A, 69A, 71A, 74A in the Excel sheet “PutinSpeech21Feb2022”). Meanwhile, the collective West/NATO, under the aegis of the USA control the Ukrainian government to advance their international influence and continually weaken Russia’s ability to defend itself while suppressing Russian culture/civilization (Putin, 21 February 2022; coded in lines 77A, 79A, 81A, 83A, 86A in the Excel sheet “PutinSpeech21Feb2022”). The inevitable conclusion to this, as Putin claims, is for Ukraine with the West/NATO/USA to attack Russia (or at the very least force Russia to capitulate to the West’s preferences) (Putin, 21 February 2022; coded in lines 95A, 97A, 100A, 105A, 118A in the Excel sheet “PutinSpeech21Feb2022”). Putin continues his speech with explanations as to why these external Others threaten Russia (increasing the accent on NATO/USA: Putin, 21 February 2022; coded in lines 135A, 137A, 139A, 143A in the Excel sheet “PutinSpeech21Feb2022”). Putin finishes by arguing that despite Russia’s efforts to negotiate with the West, they are left with no other choice but to accept the independence of the Donetsk and Lugansk Peoples’ Republics (respectfully the DNR and LNR) (Putin, 21 February 2022; coded in lines 149A, 150A, 164A, in the Excel sheet “PutinSpeech21Feb2022”).

While as of this speech Russia has yet to launch its full-scale invasion, it lays out the fundamental arguments for subsequently launching the invasion on February 24. The historical background that Putin develops explains the conditions that premeditated the current crisis while giving Russia

plausible claims to parts of the peoples and territories which make up modern day Ukraine. This point then leads to the legitimation of Russia's actions in the current crisis, namely, that crimes are committed against members of the broader Russian culture/civilization, and that the USA/NATO/the West/Ukraine pose an immediate security threat to Russia as part of a larger effort to subdue Russia's ability to act freely on the international stage.

Putin's Speech on 24 February 2022 (80 total codes)

As the speech announcing the start of the full-scale invasion, Putin's both repeats and expands the arguments first laid out in his 21 February speech, and with a notably sharper tone. While repeating the historical rationalizations, mythopoesis, and altruistic appeals made in the first speech, Putin heightens the emotional appeals of the SVO while introducing a clear hypothetical future should Russia not invade.

The speech once again begins with the crisis in the Donbas, and then reiterates Russia's need to exercise self-defense in the face to increasing Western/NATO/USA expansion (Putin, 24 February 2022; coded in lines 3A, 5A, 18A in the Excel sheet "PutinSpeech24Feb2022"). Putin highlights what he considers the West's/NATO's/USA's hypocritical use of force and subversion to expand their global influence, while also accusing them of renegeing on past promises to the USSR/Russia not to expand NATO into Eastern/Central Europe (Putin, 24 February 2022; coded in lines 16A, 17A, 21A, 24A in the Excel sheet "PutinSpeech24Feb2022"). Subsequently, Putin makes an analogy between the expanding NATO partnership with Ukraine and the premeditated attack by Nazi Germany against the USSR during WWII, stating that Russia will not be caught off guard again (Putin, 24 February 2022; coded in lines 27A, 28A, 29A, 33A, 25A in the Excel sheet "PutinSpeech24Feb2022"). The speech then goes on to highlight Russia's obligation to defend the people of the Donbas from the terror and repression of the Kyiv regime (Putin, 24 February 2022; coded in lines 43A, 45A, 48A, 56A in the Excel sheet "PutinSpeech24Feb2022").

The speech closes with the express goals of the SVO which are to 1. ensure the safety of those civilians who have suffered under Kyiv's rule, 2. demilitarize and denazify the Ukrainian state, and try those who have committed crimes again civilians, with the clarification that the goal is no

to occupy Ukrainian territory (Putin, 24 February 2022; coded in lines 56A, 57A, 58A, 61A in the Excel sheet “PutinSpeech24Feb2022”). There is also an element of fatalism to the decision, as Putin argues that conflict is inevitable, and the SVO is lesser of two evils in that it prevents the escalation of a larger conflict (Putin, 24 February 2022; coded in lines 51A, 71A, 80A, in the Excel sheet “PutinSpeech24Feb2022”).

With the SVO now underway, Putin’s February 24 speech doubles down on and expands legitimizations found in his February 21 speech into damning accusations and urgent justifications. While the discourse of his February 21 speech was clearly antagonistic, this antagonism was diminished by the attempt to recall an objective history with only abstract warnings of violence, which don’t suggest an operation of the scale of the SVO. In the February 24 speech, Putin highlights the inevitability of violence, and why Russia must launch the SVO to decisively halt the current conflict in Ukraine and prevent a conflict of an even greater magnitude. Putin argues that without the SVO, Russia’s capability to defend itself from a host of hostile external Others (the West/NATO/USA and the current Ukrainian government) will continue to erode until it can no longer effectively defend itself or those who Russia considers to be a part of its civilization (e.g. the people of the Donbas).

Putin’s Speech on 21 September 2022 (83 total codes)

Following the trend of the last two speeches, Putin continues to heighten the urgency and direness of Russia’s current situation in his third speech announcing the partial mobilization. All the same legitimization strategies used in his prior speeches are employed in this speech, with added rationalization for the mobilization in the face of a greater threat (Western military aid to Ukraine). Similar to how he speaks about the Donbas, Putin uses emotional appeals of anger and fear based on the claim that the West is increasing its manipulation to prevent peace while spreading hate for Russians (where the Russian people are being persecuted on the basis of their identity like the people of the Donbas).

In the initial part of the speech, Putin highlights how the SVO has successfully liberated territories in eastern Ukraine from the neo-Nazi Kyiv regime as a guarantee of the sovereignty, safety, and

territorial integrity (a trio of concepts repeated at the end of the speech) of Russia (Putin, 21 September 2022; coded in lines 3A, 6A, 7A, in the Excel sheet “PutinSpeech21Sep2022”). The West/NATO/USA is again introduced as an even fiercer antagonist than before, now openly seeking to dismantle Russia and actively encouraging hate of all things Russian (often termed as “Russophobia”) (Putin, 21 September 2022; coded in lines 12A, 15A, 17A, in the Excel sheet “PutinSpeech21Sep2022”).

Putin then returns to the more immediate subject at hand, and reiterates that the primary goal of the SVO is the liberation of all territories of the Donbas (Putin, 21 September 2022; coded in lines 25A, 28A, 33A, in the Excel sheet “PutinSpeech21Sep2022”). Putin laments that despite the progress made during negotiations in Istanbul, the West/NATO/USA continues to interfere with peace and has expanded the Kyiv regime’s military capabilities which enable their criminal acts against civilians (Putin, 21 September 2022; coded in lines 36A, 37A, 38A, 44A, 48A in the Excel sheet “PutinSpeech21Sep2022”). Citing Russia’s moral duty to protect civilians from the Kyiv regime, and the West’s aid and consequent expansion of the Ukrainian military’s capabilities, Putin announces the partial mobilization as a necessary and proportional measure in the current circumstances (Putin, 21 September 2022; coded in lines 53A, 57A, 58A in the Excel sheet “PutinSpeech21Sep2022”). After giving a few brief details of how the partial mobilization will be conducted (including specifically instructing regional governments to facilitate the mobilization), Putin concludes the speech by emphasizing the colossal consequences at stake for Russia in what he describes as a Western proxy war using the Ukrainian puppet state to dismantle the Russian state (Putin, 21 September 2022; coded in lines 65A, 68A, 72A, 75A, 82A in the Excel sheet “PutinSpeech21Sep2022”).

Of the three speeches analyzed, this 21 September speech uses the most urgent language to rationalize the SVO and the mobilization. Putin states that the scale of the conflict, and the increased military capabilities of Ukraine due to Western aid, now necessitate the mobilization to provide Russia with the means to liberate all of the Donbas (as well as other eastern and southern Ukrainian oblasts) and ensure its sovereignty, safety, and territorial integrity.

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In conclusion, all three speeches provide a number of antagonists (the West/NATO/USA, a Ukrainian puppet state controlled by neo-Nazis and nationalists), protagonists (the Donbas, Russia), discursive events (conflict in the Donbas, NATO expansion, Western aid), and legitimizations for the SVO and mobilization (emotional appeals, historical rationalizations, a call for altruism, mythopoesis, and a frightening hypothetical future) which regional government can draw upon to legitimize the ongoing conflict, the mobilization of reservists, and their consequences. The following section covers each of the regional government Telegram channels that were analyzed and examines where their discourses converge and diverge in relation to the discourse of the federal center.

4.2 Regional Government Discourses

In total, the five telegram channels of the regional governors produced 1087 codes (the number of which from each channel is designated below). I coded whatever text I thought could be relevant to the legitimization produced by the governors. As a result, a number of codes are not used in the final analysis as I determined them to be of limited relevance to my research question. Of the total number of messages reviewed on each of these Telegram channels in the two-year span of this study, the vast majority were not coded, as they were irrelevant to my research question. Examples of these irrelevant codes include posts concerning holidays/cultural events, economic/investment information irrelevant to the SVO, and administrative functions and changes in government personnel.

There did indeed prove to be a plurality in the frequency and variety of legitimation strategies used by each governor. The spectrum of similarity with Putin's discourse ranged from those governors who closely copied Putin (Alexey Tsydenov of Buryatia, and Valentin Konovalov of Khakassia), to one governor who partially employed Putin's legitimation strategies before more fully embracing them after the September 2022 mobilization (Vladislav Shapsha of Kaluga), to those heads who consistently made limited use of Putin's discourse (Viacheslav Gladkov of Belgorod, and Rustam Minnikhanov of Tatarstan). As expected, despite the plurality, the governors did not

challenge the federal center about the SVO, and their discourses all existed within an acceptable range of what the Kremlin deems permissible when discussing the SVO.

The subsequent sections provide more substantial and specific analysis of each region. While this thesis cannot provide a causal explanation for this plurality of legitimation strategies across the governors, I provide relevant evidence when possible to examine plausible explanations for how each governor chooses to communicate.

Belgorod Oblast: Governor Viacheslav Gladkov's Telegram Channel (313 total codes)

Belgorod Oblast has found itself repeatedly involved in the combat of the SVO as the region has been regularly target by shelling, drones, and even the incursions of Kyiv-aligned Russian partisan groups. As a region bordering eastern Ukraine, mere kilometers away from Ukraine's second largest city of Kharkiv, Belgorod has served as a staging point for the Russian Armed Forces as well as a point of entry for refugees coming from Ukraine. Having to respond to the physical destruction of the oblast, deaths of civilians, and refugees enter and exiting Belgorod Oblast, Governor Viacheslav Gladkov has had to deal with the SVO for far longer and far more intensely than many of his peers. At 400,000 followers on Telegram as of June 6 2023 (Gusev, 2023), Gladkov remains one of the most followed of any of Russia's regional heads.

Despite the proximity of Belgorod to the SVO and having borne the brunt of a number of its consequences, Gladkov's messages on his Telegram channel make limited usage of the discourses found in Putin's speeches. A frequent poster, Gladkov's technocratic approach to the outcomes of the war provides a comparatively vague and superficial explanation as to why Russia is conducting the SVO and why the citizens of Belgorod must suffer, but provides ample solutions, management, and displays of care for his constituents.

When discussing the attacks and resulting damage that occurs within Belgorod Oblast, he uses terse, matter of fact language. Sometimes he attributes the damage to the Armed Forces of Ukraine

(AFU), other times he describes shelling in a passive voice without attributing it to any one organization (though the AFU are implied):

“Today, the village of Grafovka in Krasnoyaruszha district came under AFU shelling.” (Gladkov, 27 March 2023; coded in lines 213A in the Excel sheet “Belgorod Oblast”)

One of the main themes of Gladkov’s channel is what the regional government is doing to help citizens impacted by the war. He regularly posts updates as to where shelling is occurring, what emergency services are doing to stabilize the situation, and other relevant public safety announcements (e.g. school closings). His posts often discuss the repair to homes damaged by artillery, and providing temporary shelter and even new housing to oblast residents. Gladkov frequently includes pictures of him meeting with impacted citizens, inspecting damage and repairs, and providing regular updates on what the regional government is doing. Below are a few illustrative examples of Gladkov’s posts:

1. “Today, the contracting companies will take all the necessary measurements and start restoration work. I will remove my oversight from the restoration work of the residential buildings only when I receive confirmation from the residents that everything has been restored and there are no complaints about the quality.” (Gladkov, 3 July 2022; coded in lines 56A in the Excel sheet “Belgorod Oblast”)

2. “I met with residents of the villages of Timonovo, Basovo, Khmelevets and Dronovo, whom we temporarily accommodated in the Krasnaya Polyana sanatorium.” (Gladkov, 20 August 2022; coded in lines 78A in the Excel sheet “Belgorod Oblast”)

3. “We drove with Gennady Ivanovich Bondarev through three villages: Gora-Podol, Glotovo and Kozinka. Most of the residents have been evacuated. Those who remained categorically refuse to leave. I talked with them. Most of them, of course, are elderly. I offered to take them to the hospital, but they said that their crops, apartments, and everything else is fine. They didn't agree to go to the

hospital. They survived such a terrible event, but have decided not to leave their homes.

Today rations have already been delivered to them. Tomorrow morning the head of the district will bring foodstuffs. Restoration of electricity has begun. Tomorrow after 15:00 electricity should be restored, along with cellular communication and water supply. All specialists are on site now - we are working.” (Gladkov, 23 May 2022; coded in lines 243A in the Excel sheet “Belgorod Oblast”)

Gladkov’s rationalization of the SVO and mobilization are simplistic and superficial at most, and seem to rarely borrow any of Putin’s discourse when he does so. Gladkov very rarely and without great emphasis draws on the historical rationalizations or mythopoesis used by Putin to legitimize the SVO and mobilization. The hypothetical future that Putin paints of the US/West/NATO destroying Russia is absent from Gladkov’s posts.

The West is mentioned exactly once in the context of information warfare (Gladkov, 13 April 2022; coded in lines 20A in the Excel sheet “Belgorod Oblast”), while the Russian World/civilization is also mentioned just once (Gladkov, 21 February 2023; coded in lines 313A in the Excel sheet “Belgorod Oblast”). Gladkov frequently cites the need to defend Russia (Gladkov, various dates; coded in lines 126A, 129A, 274A, 286A, 300A in the Excel sheet “Belgorod Oblast”), but often is not explicit as from whom to defend Russia from (though the assumed aggressor is Ukraine). Only a handful of times does Gladkov venture to use more antagonistic terms to describe the AFU in the context of attacks/alleged crimes (e.g. terrorists, nationalists, mercenaries) (Gladkov, various dates; coded in lines 277A, 278A, 290A, 303A, 307A, 308A in the Excel sheet “Belgorod Oblast”). Thus, there is a level of emotional legitimization in Gladkov’s posts when he invokes moral anger at the actions of the AFU. However, the emotional appeals he makes to be angry at the AFU are minimal, and dwarfed by the number of posts expressing his condolences for those harmed by the fighting and calling for unity and solidarity between Russians in difficult times.

Besides addressing the confrontational aspects of the SVO, Gladkov does address sanctions several times (Gladkov, various dates; coded in lines 8A, 10A, 70A, 288A, in the Excel sheet “Belgorod Oblast”), mentioning that despite the problems posed by disruptions to the supply chain, Belgorod

has handled them. Gladkov does utilize altruistic legitimization, making appeals to provide civilian aid to the Donbas (Gladkov, various dates; coded in lines 5A, 58A in the Excel sheet “Belgorod Oblast”) and towards Ukrainian refugees (Gladkov, various dates; coded in lines 9A, 23A, 89A, and 257A in the Excel sheet “Belgorod Oblast”).

Gladkov does frequently invoke Putin’s position as president to legitimate via authority both federal and regional government decisions (Gladkov, various dates; coded in lines 164A, 181A, 200A, in the Excel sheet “Belgorod Oblast”). He posts about his explicit support for the partial mobilization on the grounds that it is his duty and the duty of Russians to follow the orders of the President to ensure the continued safety and development of Belgorod Oblast (Gladkov, various dates; coded in lines 105A, 114A in the Excel sheet “Belgorod Oblast”). Gladkov frequently posts about the benefits provided to veterans of the SVO, as well as his visits to those mobilized from Belgorod to ensure adequate support for them. The Z and V symbolism frequently used to express support for the Armed Forces of Russia are infrequently and sporadically used by Gladkov on his channel.

Comparing Gladkov’s Telegram posts to Putin’s speeches demonstrates a clear gap between the two discourses. Gladkov almost hesitantly takes a polemical tone against the Ukrainian government, and practically wholly ignores the West/NATO/USA or the various historical grievances listed by Putin. Appeals to emotion and altruism are present in Gladkov’s posting, but pale in comparison to the amount of attention he places towards safety and compensation for the citizens of Belgorod.

Gladkov regularly cites self-defense as the legitimate reason for the SVO and for the mobilization, but never seeks to answer “why” Russia now must defend itself (besides invoking and supporting legitimacy of Putin’s decisions by virtue of his position as president). Instead, Gladkov’s discourse of the consequences of the war is more along the lines of “these are difficult times, but we (the regional government) will do all we can to help those who find themselves in a tough spot.” While this thesis cannot provide a causal claim as to why there is a gulf between Putin and Gladkov’s discourses, it’s reasonable to speculate that one probable reason is that Gladkov understands that the residents of Belgorod aren’t as concerned about Ukraine’s “artificiality” or the US’/West’s/NATO’s geopolitical calculations when they are trying to live their lives in a combat

zone. While Gladkov may be disposed to leaving geopolitics and history lectures to Putin, this seems unlikely given that his peers analyzed in this thesis do make statements on the geopolitics (and the accompanying historical rationalizations and mythopoesis) of the war, and that it is difficult to justify an international armed conflict without discussing geopolitics.

The Republic of Buryatia: Governor Alexey Tsydenov's Telegram Channel (273 total codes)

Governor Alexey Tsydenov's discourse remains fairly consistent with Putin's in terms of legitimation strategies. Tsydenov frequently use a blend of historical rationalization, mythopoesis, and emotional appeals. To a lesser degree, he invokes altruism and hypothetical future scenarios.

Tsydenov's emotional legitimization of the SVO focus both on fear and anger. He regularly evokes fear by mentioning the existential threat that the US/West/NATO pose to Russia (Tsydenov, various dates; coded in lines 14A, 15A, 152A, 155A, 156A, 179A, 205A, 240A in the Excel sheet "Republic of Buryatia"). Likewise, he frequently invokes anger by making reference to alleged crimes committed in the Donbas by Ukrainian forces (Tsydenov, various dates; coded in lines 8A, 73A, 103A, 119A, 173A, 201A in the Excel sheet "Republic of Buryatia"), and the hypocrisy and self-serving ambitions of the US/West/NATO (Tsydenov, various dates; coded in lines 15A, 16A, 172A, 197A, 209A, 267A in the Excel sheet "Republic of Buryatia").

The emotional legitimization used by Tsydenov frequently cites that Russia's freedom and sovereignty (Tsydenov, various dates; coded in lines 41A, 42A, 66A, 84A, 115A, 131A, 251A in the Excel sheet "Republic of Buryatia") are at stake. The assertion that Russia's freedom and sovereignty are at risk is an appeal to fear, the fear that the collective Russian Self will not have the agency that it does now. He also mentions the need to fight for Russia's future (Tsydenov, various dates; coded in lines 76A, 90A, 107A, 183A, 213A in the Excel sheet "Republic of Buryatia"), but doesn't provide any details about what this hypothetical future would look like.

The naturalization of the conflict as an outcome of objective history remains the same between Tsydenov's and Putin's discourse. Tsydenov makes reference to Ukraine (in particular Crimea and

the Donbas) as historically Russian (Tsydenov, various dates; coded in lines 67A, 68A, in the Excel sheet “Republic of Buryatia”) and frequent analogies between the SVO and the USSR in WWII (Tsydenov, various dates; coded in lines 59A, 87A, 91A, 124A, the Excel sheet “Republic of Buryatia”). Tsydenov describes the SVO as “unavoidable” Tsydenov, 2/3/2022; coded in line 23A, in the Excel sheet “Republic of Buryatia”).

The mythopoesis present in Putin’s discourse is repeated in Tsydenov’s with little deviation. For Tsydenov the USA/West/NATO and the Ukrainian government are aggressive, violent, and expansionist (Tsydenov, various dates; coded in lines 5A, 6A, 14A, 57A, 69A, 98A, 101A, 125A, 143A, 153A, 180A, 196A, 206A, 240A, 253A, 266A in the Excel sheet “Republic of Buryatia”), while Russia remains heroic in defending itself and the Donbas (Tsydenov, various dates; coded in lines 20A, 40A, 53A, 54A, 63A, 74A, 88A, 106A, 117A, 136A, 139A, 147A, 166A, 185A, 202A, 212A, 229A, 236A, 260A, 272A in the Excel sheet “Republic of Buryatia”). He adds to the altruistic appeals to defend and liberate the Donbas by highlighting the need to provide civilian assistance to the region (Tsydenov, various dates; coded in lines 228A, 246A in the Excel sheet “Republic of Buryatia”).

Of the regional governments surveyed, Tsydenov’s legitimations of the SVO and mobilization hardly deviate from Putin’s. The fact the Tsydenov is a direct appointee of the president (with a long federal career and few if any local roots in Buryatia), and not elected, partially explains why he would stick more closely to the Kremlin’s reasoning. In addition, the fact that the SVO provides a huge source of income for individuals and families in impoverished regions such as Buryatia likely alleviates some of the pressure the Tsydenov may face from constituents who otherwise would not be willing to go to the front (Cole, 2023).

The Republic of Tatarstan: Head Rustam Minnikhanov’s Telegram Channel (57)

Despite being a regular and active user of Telegram, the Head of the Republic of Tatarstan Rustam Minnikhanov barely posts anything related to the SVO relative to his other peers analyzed in this thesis. At only 56 codes, the volume of his posts which deal with anything remotely relevant to the SVO pales in comparison to that of the other governors. While I did not code them, I suspect

that Minnikhanov may have more regularly posted about his dog and Kazan's hockey team than he posted about the SVO.

From what little he posts about the SVO, we do find some of Putin's legitimization strategies in Minnikhanov's discourse on Telegram. Minnikhanov mentioned Ukraine exactly once, where he refers to it as a Nazi regime (Minnikhanov, 15/4/2022; coded in line 5A in the Excel sheet "Republic of Tatarstan"). His only mention of anything vaguely related to the West is a friendly meeting with the Pope on a trip to Bahrain, and two brief mentions of sanctions (without attributing them to anyone entity) (Minnikhanov, various dates; coded in lines 2A, 17A, 27A in the Excel sheet "Republic of Tatarstan").

Other messages sent by Minnikhanov concerning the SVO praise and congratulate the soldiers serving in it (which is common among the other governors), but which provide no additional legitimization as to why Russia must conduct the SVO or as to why Russian citizens should support it. He does however highlight Tatarstan's civilian aid sent to the Donbas, which aligns with Putin's altruistic legitimization of the conflict (Minnikhanov, various dates; coded in lines 31A, 32A, 34A, 36A, 37A, 39A, 40A, 41A, 42A, 51A in the Excel sheet "Republic of Tatarstan").

Minnikhanov's online presence outside of Telegram includes few references to the SVO, with them usually consist of him awarding combat veterans. Only two articles I found make any reference to him discussing the SVO (Chelninsky Izvestiya 2023; Morozova 2023), where he does copy the emotional and historical rationalizations made by Putin. Nonetheless, his digital public personae outside of Telegram pays at-best negligible attention to the SVO and mobilization outside of what is the bare minimum expected of him as a regional governor.

Minnikhanov's seeming disinterest in making the SVO and mobilization priorities in his public discourse may be explained by his unique position relative to the other regional heads. In 2010, Minnikhanov was appointed by then President Dimitri Medvedev as head of Tatarstan. Minnikhanov is noted for having extremely close ties to his predecessor and Tatarstan's only other head since independence, Mintimer Shaimiev (FBK 2020). Minnikhanov's appointment was hardly a unilateral decision by the Kremlin, and was likely the result of negotiations with Tatarstan's political elite even in spite of the federal center consolidating its power in the region since the 2000s (Dinç, 2021; Tsakhirmaa 2020).

A consolidated local political elite and Tatarstan's relatively prosperous economic trajectory likely give Minnikhanov the political flexibility to do what he understands as the minimum necessary expectations of him from Putin (some public support for the war, sending aid to the Donbas, equipping and recruiting soldiers), should he choose so. Given that the majority of Minnikhanov's postings focus on cultural events, encouraging investments, and other administrative issues in Tatarstan, it would appear that he is in no particular rush to make the SVO a priority on his public agenda.

Khakassia Krai: Head Valentin Konovalov's Telegram Channel (259 total codes)

Despite defeating Putin's preferred candidate in the 2018 election, Valentin Konovalov, the Head of Khakassia Krai, uses similar legitimization strategies as Putin when discussing the SVO. Konovalov employs a similar blend of emotional appeals, historical rationalizations, and altruism. The one legitimization absent from Konovalov's post is the speculation of a frightening hypothetical future.

Konovalov makes clear appeals to moral outrage and anger when highlighting Ukraine's alleged crimes and misdeeds in the Donbas (Konovalov, various dates; coded in lines 82A, 108A, 151A, 156A, 241A, 255A in the Excel sheet "Khakassia Krai"). Relative to the other governors, Konovalov frequently highlights the moral misdeeds of the US/West/NATO, distinguishing himself from his peers as well as Putin by frequently accusing them as "imperial" (Konovalov, various dates; coded in lines 88A, 97A, 115A, 128A, 138A, 154A, 187A, 201A, 203A, 222A in the Excel sheet "Khakassia Krai"). Additionally, Konovalov more frequently cites Russia's moral duty to defend itself/the Donbas/the civilized world (going so far as to argue that Russia must be a savior) than other governors (Konovalov, various dates; coded in lines 9A, 46A, 49A, 51A, 56A, 65A, 93A, 120A, 122A, 137A, 174A, the Excel sheet "Khakassia Krai"). The threat of the West and Ukrainian Nazism/fascism against Russia are both used to appeal to fear (Konovalov, various dates; coded in lines 5A, 16A, 23A, 42A, 57A, 83A, 114A, 250A the Excel sheet "Khakassia Krai").

Konovalov's historical rationalizations of the SVO make use of the blurring of Ukrainian and Russian identities with claims that part of Ukrainian identity and territory are in fact, Russian (Konovalov, various dates; coded in lines 4A, 109A, 126A, 136A, 207A in the Excel sheet "Khakassia Krai"), as well as analogies between the SVO and WWII (Konovalov, various dates; coded in lines 22A, 73A, 112A, 191A, 231A in the Excel sheet "Khakassia Krai"). There is however, a curious absence of any mention of NATO expansion, or even NATO at all (Konovalov's invokes the identity of "the West" more than any other as an external aggressor). When justifying the mobilization, Konovalov invokes the authority of the president's office as well as the need for a proportional response to Western aid to Ukraine (Konovalov, various dates; coded in lines 94A, 99A, in the Excel sheet "Khakassia Krai").

Konovalov's use of mythopoesis is in the same vein as Putin's. As both argue, Russia must defend itself and the Donbas from the aggression of the Ukrainian government and the US/West/NATO (Konovalov, various dates; coded in lines 7A, 8A, 48A, 55A, 63A, 95A, 153A, 159A, 164A, 193A, 199A in the Excel sheet "Khakassia Krai"). Legitimizing the SVO through altruism is also used by Konovalov when discussing civilian aid to the Donbas and refugees (Konovalov, various dates; coded in lines 13A, 19A, 20A, 25A, 47A, 74A, 76A, 194A, 211A in the Excel sheet "Khakassia Krai").

As a (perhaps one-time) protest candidate against Putin's United Russia party's dominance, it is somewhat surprising not to see greater deviation on Konovalov's part away from the Putin's legitimization strategies to justify the SVO. While the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (to whom Konovalov belongs) is not ideologically opposed to the SVO and has complied with Putin on the public stage, no available information I've come across suggests a possible explanation as to why Konovalov has not responded to the SVO and mobilization in with more reservation given his constituents earlier qualms with the federal center. However, like Buryatia, the financial compensation offered for service in the SVO may likewise abate some of the pressure that Konovalov may feel from his constituents given that there are limited economic opportunities in Khakassia. Coincidentally enough, Konovalov's legitimization patterns bear the closest resemblance to those of Buryatia's Tsydenov in their consistent reproduction of Putin's legitimization strategies.

Kaluga Oblast: Governor Vladislav Shapsha's Telegram Channel (185 total codes)

Kaluga Oblast's Governor Vladislav Shapsha's Telegram channel has the most notable temporal change of the five channels covered in this thesis. Prior to the announcement of the mobilization, Shapsha posted about the SVO, but these posts made up a low volume of his total number of posts, and they were often more restrained in rhetoric than Putin's speeches. However, after the mobilization, Shapsha began to more frequently post about the SVO and utilize Putin's legitimizations.

Prior to the mobilization, Shapsha's posting primarily focused on abating the economic fallout of sanctions and foreign company withdrawals (Shapsha, various dates; coded in lines 4A, 5A, 6A, 9A, 14A, 20A, 27A, 28A, 34A, 46A in the Excel sheet "Kaluga Oblast"), altruistic calls to provide civilians aid and protection in the Donbas (Shapsha, various dates; coded in lines 1A, 10A, 17A, 22A, 29A, 31A, 35A, 42A, 45A, 48A, 53A in the Excel sheet "Kaluga Oblast"), and some mythopoesis by indirectly alluding to the Ukraine government as a neo-Nazi entity (Shapsha, various dates; coded in lines 1A, 10A, 17A, 22A, 29A, 31A, 35A, 42A, 45A, 48A, 53A in the Excel sheet "Kaluga Oblast"). Besides these legitimations, Shapsha preferred to regularly post about cultural events, job creation, and technological advancements in Kaluga's research and development community. In this period Shapsha's legitimations are most similar to that of Viacheslav Gladkov's in that they both are focused on the immediate needs of their constituents, fielding altruistic calls to provide civilian aid to the Donbas, and make minimal emotional appeals of fear or hate, historical rationalizations, mythopoesis, or painting a grim future for Russia without the SVO.

While Shapsha continues to make altruistic appeals after the September 21 mobilization, these appeals diminish in comparison to the other legitimation strategies he employs which reflect more of the content found in Putin's speeches. Shapsha's emotional appeals to fear and hate increase, where he cites the alleged crimes committed by the Ukrainian government and frequently accusing them of being Nazis (Shapsha, various dates; coded in lines 58A, 69A, 73A, 79A, 84A, 101A, 141A, 145A, 156A, 158A, 164A, 170A, 174A, 179A, 184A in the Excel sheet "Kaluga Oblast").

After the mobilization, Shapsha starts to historically rationalize the SVO as Putin does with analogies to WWII, articulating the Russia is besieged by hostile foreign powers, and arguing for

“historical truths” while blurring Ukrainian and Russian identities (Shapsha, various dates; coded in lines 62A, 69A, 71A, 76A, 81A, 90A, 98A, 99A, 100A, 104A, 105A, 108A, 124A, 131A, 138A, 139A, 144A, 146A, 147A, 148A, 151A, 157A, 165A, 185A in the Excel sheet “Kaluga Oblast”). The mythopoesis remains largely the same, with Russia defending the Donbas and fighting for independence and sovereignty against hostile foreign enemies (Shapsha, various dates; coded in lines 65A, 75A, 88A, 96A, 97A, 103A, 106A, 107A, 120A, 121A, 125A, 159A, 181A, in the Excel sheet “Kaluga Oblast”). However, Shapsha’s mentions of the US/West/NATO are sparse, and lack the same degree of hostility towards them as found in Putin’s, Tsydenov’s, and Konovalov’s discourses (Shapsha, various dates; coded in lines 122A, 127A, 149A, 155A, 177A, 90A, 98A, 99A, 100A, 104A, 105A, 108A, 185A in the Excel sheet “Kaluga Oblast”).

As to why Shapsha began to more regularly espouse the more antagonistic aspects of Putin’s legitimizations of the SVO only after the September 21 2022 mobilization remains a mystery. One speculative answer is that the mobilization forced Shapsha to more firmly embrace Putin’s historical rationalizations and mythopoesis as he could no longer only infrequently address the SVO, and lacked his own discursive formation to rationalize the SVO. One plausible explanation for Shapsha’s lack of belligerence when addressing the US/West/NATO is that a number of West companies only recently left Kaluga. To the local employees of the numerous Western car and transportation firms in Kaluga, excessively portraying the states of their former-coworkers and employers as cabal seeking to subdue and destroy Russia may come across as absurd, especially when taking into account the Shapsha himself likely courted and encouraged these companies to invest in his region.

4.3 Discussion

When considering the legitimizations of Putin, it is quite likely that his appeals are the product of the federal center’s strategic culture which for several years has been perpetuated and reproduced in broader Russian discourses. In their article analyzing why Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Elias Götz and Jørgen Staun (2022, 482) define strategic culture as “a set of discursive expressions and narratives related to security-military affairs, which are shared by a country’s

political leaders and elites. These discursive expressions and narratives are rooted in socially constructed interpretations of history, geography, and domestic traditions.” In the case of Russia’s strategic culture, Götz and Staun identify its two most salient discursive patterns as a fundamental security vulnerability concerning the collective West, and the right to have great power status and a sphere of influence in states within its geographical proximity.

The first pivotal public expression of this strategic culture came with Putin’s infamous 2007 Munich Security Conference Speech, where Putin expressed concern and fear with the United States’ actions as a hegemonic state, as well as NATO’s acceptance of former Warsaw Pact members (Putin 2007). In Putin’s 2007 speech, the incipient legitimation strategies of emotional appeals, historical rationalizations, hypothetical futures, and mythopoesis (a belligerent US/NATO threatening Russia and the rest of the world) appear prior to other critical security junctures such as the 2008 Russo-Georgian War and the 2014 annexation of Crimea and war in the Donbas. This strategic culture and accompanying legitimation strategies precipitate the 2022 full-scale invasion by at least 15 years, and have entered the wider Russian political discourse through various media sources. The discursive formations of the federal center concerning Ukraine and the US/West/Russia preceded all of the careers of the governors in their current positions.

While there are many plausible reasons as to why these legitimation strategies are employed by Putin, the relevant literature points to certain aspects of the human condition. Reyes (2011, 782 and 804) suggests that legitimation strategies are intended to appeal to cognitive structures that exist within our socially and culturally conditioned psyche. In the Russian social, cultural, and media space, both members of the government and private citizens have been consistently exposed to the mythopoesis of the Donbas as a victim, Russia as threatened, and the US/West/NATO and Ukraine as threats for years before the 2022 full-scale invasion (Alyukov, 2022). These narratives have been accompanied by the emotional and rational legitimizations that make them (and vice-versa) plausible within the general Russian political discourse.

Among the governors, we find a plurality as to which and to what degree employ the legitimation strategies used by Putin. Some (Tsydenov of Buryatia, and Konovalov of Khakassia) fully utilize these strategies, while others (Gladkov of Belgorod, Minnikhanov of Tatarstan, and Shapsha of Kaluga [up to the September 2022 mobilization]). While the governors all stay within the bounds

of Putin's discourses, their range of utilization of these discourses suggests that there are limits in their effectiveness.

In the above-mentioned conditions, as well governing within an authoritarian federalist system, the governors of Russia find themselves with no means to challenge the demands of the federal center. Despite this lack, Gladkov, Minnikhanov, and pre-mobilization Shapsha made minimal use of the historical rationalizations, mythopoesis, and hypothetical futures used by Putin. While the altruistic appeals made by all three were concrete in both the recipients (the civilians of Ukraine, the Donbas), and the means (humanitarian aid measured in weight, categories, and monetary value), the emotional appeals made often were collapsed into vague notions of one's duty to defend Russia. The minimal use of some of Putin's legitimation strategies may reflect either some idiosyncratic hesitancy on the part of the governors, or an understanding that their constituents are disinterested in these justifications in the face of their more intermediate needs.

For those who do full embrace Putin's legitimation strategies, there are some commonalities which point to possible causal links. One of them being economic, as both Khakassia and Buryatia lack the development of Tatarstan, Kaluga, and Belgorod, which increases both regions dependence on the federal center for subsidies, while also making the financial gain of enlisting more appealing. The second being the fragile political position of both governors, with Tsydenov being an outsider directly appointed to the region by Putin, and Konovalov being voted in as a protest vote while the regional legislature is dominated by Putin's United Russia candidates.

In regards to the pre-existing literature, this discourse analysis confirms that despite the power vertical of authoritarian federalism, politics at regional level reflect the economic, social, and ethnic diversity of Russia as possible sources of entropy against the federal center's centralization efforts. In addition, the uneven usage of Putin's legitimation strategies by the governors indicates that they lack universal appeal among the political elite and general population of Russia. Scaling up this discourse analysis to include more (if not all) of the regions of Russia provides a promising research horizon for uncovering the extent to which the analyzed patterns of discourse hold true across the diversity of Russia's regions.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The objective of this thesis was to determine how the regional governments of Russia justify the consequences of the full-scale invasion to their constituents. Given the novelty of the full-scale invasion, and the lack of post-structuralist literature examining Russian regional politics, this thesis provides a more complete understanding of how regional politics function within Russia's authoritarian federalism. Using a post-structuralist discourse analysis to analyze the speeches of Vladimir Putin and the Telegram channels of five of Russia's governors, this thesis determined how both Putin and the governors justify the war, and where their discourses differ.

The results of the analysis show that Russia's governors stay within the bounds of rationale found within Putin's justifications of the war, but there is a noticeable plurality in both which justifications are used as well as how often they are mentioned by the governors. As detailed in the preceding discussion section, while the legitimation strategies of emotional appeals and calls for altruism were consistently used by all the governors, historical rationalizations, mythopoesis (of a persecuted and threatened Russia helping liberate the victims of the Donbass from the oppression of a neo-Nazi, Western installed and backed regime in Kyiv), and suggesting hypothetical futures were not evenly employed by all governors. This corresponds with my research expectations that the regional governments do not always use the justifications offered by the federal center, and that the ideological (historical rationalizations and mythopoesis) were employed less frequently than emotional and altruistic appeals.

While the federal center, and those heads of regional governments which utilize all of Putin's legitimation strategies (Buryatia, Khakassia, constructs the collective Russian Self as one facing an existential threat, those who do not use the strategies of historical rationalization and mythopoesis create and image of a Russian Self finding itself in tough times and in need of solidarity with one another and the Donbas. The Telegram channels of the heads of Belgorod, Tatarstan, and Kaluga (until the 2022 mobilization), while not challenging or denying Putin's discursive construction of the US/West/NATO and Ukraine as hostile (even evil) forces, apparently see no value in emphasizing and reproducing these discursive constructions.

While this thesis makes a contribution to filling the gap of the “how” regarding Russian domestic politics in times of war, there are a number of limits to this study. The first being that this thesis only covers official discourse from the federal and regional executive offices in the Russian government. While the literature review establishes that these sources are effective approximations of the discourses of the composite units of government, this still does not cover potentially relevant and/or marginalized discourses from other branches of government, think tanks/quasi-state bodies, and popular discourse in social and mass media. The second limitation is that given the (at times) opaque and informal nature of Russian politics, there may be certain idiosyncrasies in the governors’ relations with either the federal center or their own constituents (or both) that may influence their official discourse, as well as be difficult to empirically perceive. Third, while this thesis only covers the period following the full-scale invasion, an analysis of the governors’ discourses prior to the full-scale invasion (but after 2014) would help ascertain the degree to which Putin’s discourse regarding Ukraine and the US/West/NATO was relevant at the regional government level. A caveat to this is that most of the Telegram channels reviewed were created only after the start of the full-scale invasion.

There are several ways which this thesis may be built upon. The scalable nature of coding used in my methodology can be reproduced for all of the Russian regions, which would allow for the creation of a database dedicated to ascertaining the war-related discourse of the rest of the 78 regional governments. This larger sample size would provide an immense pool of data for future analyses to determine the patterns of legitimation strategy usage across the regional governments, as well as possible grounds to establish causal theories concerning federalism in Russia. One of these patterns that may be worth investigating is the consistency of whether the governments of poorer regions (such as Buryatia and Khakassia) continue to more readily embrace the historical rationalizations and mythopoesis of the federal center as opposed to wealthier regions (e.g. Kaluga, Belgorod, and Tatarstan). The application of this coding methodology can likewise be utilized to create such a database for the speeches of Putin and other federal officials concerning commonalties and deviations in their discourse when justifying the war over multiple years.

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Telegram Channels of Regional Leaders

Belgorod Oblast Governor Viachislav Gladkov: <https://t.me/vvgladkov>

Republic of Buryatia Governor Alexey Tsydenov: <https://t.me/alexeytsydenov>

Republic of Tatarstan Head Rustam Minnikhanov: <https://t.me/rustamminnikhanov>

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Kaluga Oblast Governor Vladislav Shapsha: https://t.me/Shapsha_VV

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