Nation-Building by War: Evidence from Russia*

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Abstract

Wars are often framed as responses to external threats or shifts in the regional balance of power. However, they can also be instruments of domestic political consolidation. This paper examines Russia's escalation against Ukraine, proposing that the motivation lies primarily in a nation-building logic, mobilizing the ethnic core domestically, rather than an empire-building project focused on territorial expansion and extraction abroad. We test this hypothesis by combining province-level ethnic Russian share data with presidential election outcomes and using two sharp geopolitical events – the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the 2022 full-scale invasion. Employing a difference-in-differences event-study design, we find that provinces with larger ethnic Russian populations experience significant increases in political participation and support for President Putin, following the escalation. These shifts are meaningful relative to pre-war baselines and align with the timing of the two escalation episodes. At the same time, battlefield casualties are disproportionately borne by regions with lower ethnic Russian shares, and attitudes toward the US and EU deteriorate markedly. On the Ukrainian side, Russian attacks are concentrated in areas with higher ethnic Russian shares rather than in resource-rich provinces. We suggest that alternative explanations – empire-building, economic extraction, or NATO expansion – fail to completely explain the political patterns we observe. Ultimately, the evidence supports an ethnic nation-building mechanism layered with strategic domestic political incentives, rather than a purely resource-driven or imperial expansion.

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We will always protect ethnic Russians in Ukraine.

— Vladimir Putin, *Vienna Press Conference* (June 24, 2014)

1 Introduction

Why do leaders go to war? External motives – security, territorial expansion, and material extraction – feature prominently in classic accounts of interstate conflict (Machiavelli, 1532; Hirschman, 1945). At the same time, domestic political incentives may shape foreign policy choices: war can strengthen incumbents by mobilizing supporters, hardening identity boundaries, and shifting political loyalties. This domestic channel sits alongside geoeconomic perspectives that emphasize how interdependence raises the opportunity cost of conflict (Montesquieu, 1748). Yet recent quantitative work suggests that even large potential trade losses may fail to deter escalation even between economically intertwined partners (Thoenig, 2024), indicating that material interdependence alone cannot explain the timing, geography, or persistence of modern conflict.[1]

Against this backdrop, Russia's invasion of Ukraine – and the earlier annexation of Crimea – poses a sharp question: is escalation driven primarily by external empire-building objectives, or by internal incentives to consolidate the nation around the regime? A domestic consolidation account carries an additional implication: if war generates political returns among core constituencies, the regime may seek to preserve those returns by redistributing wartime costs away from politically central groups. Under this logic, mobilization, casualties, and political support need not move uniformly across regions.

We study these linked predictions by examining political mobilization and support within Russia, the domestic incidence of war costs, and the geographic targeting of violence in Ukraine. In particular, we ask what the spatial pattern of Russian attacks inside Ukraine reveals about the underlying objective of the war. If escalation reflects economic expropriation or classical imperial expansion, military activity should concentrate in resource-rich or strategically valuable areas. If, instead, the war serves an ethnic nation-building function, attacks should align more closely with the geography of Russian identity. We also examine whether escalation reshapes attitudes toward external actors. A nation-building logic predicts not only increased incumbent support, but also a sharpening of "us versus them" boundaries – manifested in declining opinions toward the US and EU.

[1] Mohr and Trebesch (2025) surveys this emerging literature and documents renewed interest in how geopolitical shocks may influence interstate wars and how these shocks transmit through markets and policy.

More broadly, we ask whether modern interstate war can function as a tool of ethnic nation consolidation within a multinational state, strengthening the core while strategically managing the domestic costs of conflict.

Figure 1 provides a first indication that Russia's military escalation coincides with sharp shifts in political sentiment. Using nationally representative survey data, the figure shows pronounced increases in approval of President Putin following both the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the 2022 full-scale invasion. The same patterns we see for the approval of the government, and the overall state of affairs (Figure A1). These breaks are abrupt, persistent, and temporally aligned with the escalation episodes, rather than with slower-moving economic trends or institutional reforms.

While these aggregate patterns are informative, they mask substantial within-country heterogeneity. If war functions as ethnic nation-building, political mobilization should be disproportionately concentrated in regions with larger shares of ethnic Russians. In contrast, an empire-building account does not predict systematic heterogeneity in domestic political responses by ethnic composition. These contrasting predictions motivate our initial empirical analysis.

We distinguish between two conceptually distinct logics. Under an empire-building view, war is motivated by territorial expansion, economic extraction, or geopolitical dominance, with political support driven by material redistribution or coercion. Under a nation-building view, war functions as a unifying project that mobilizes the ethnic core, strengthens national identity, and reinforces incumbent authority. These competing views generate sharply different predictions for both domestic and cross-border outcomes. An empire-building logic predicts targeting of economically valuable or strategically central territories and political mobilization driven by redistribution or coercion. A nation-building logic predicts identity-aligned territorial selection, concentrated political returns among the ethnic core, and the construction of an external adversary that sharpens internal cohesion.

A nation-building mechanism further implies strategic management of wartime costs. If the regime seeks to maximize political consolidation among the ethnic core, it may mobilize broadly while disproportionately exposing peripheral or minority regions to battlefield risk. War then becomes a two-sided political instrument: it strengthens the core while redistributing its costs.

Russia offers a natural setting to evaluate these competing mechanisms. The country is formally multinational, but ethnic Russians occupy a privileged position in state ideology, language policy, and law. Since the early 2000s, the Kremlin has increasingly emphasized the role of ethnic Russians as the "state-forming people", while simultaneously curtailing regional autonomy and centralizing political control. The 2020 constitutional amendment

defines Russian "as the language of the state-forming people" (*государствообразующий народ*). This environment creates scope for war to differentially mobilize regions depending on their ethnic composition.

We document five main findings. First, domestic political returns are concentrated in the ethnic core. Following both the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the 2022 full-scale invasion, voter turnout and support for President Putin increase significantly more in regions with higher shares of ethnic Russians.

Second, wartime costs are selectively redistributed. Although mobilization rises broadly, battlefield casualties are disproportionately borne by regions with lower shares of ethnic Russians. This divergence between participation and deaths is consistent with strategic cost management that preserves political returns in core constituencies.

Third, attitudes toward the West deteriorate sharply after escalation. Opinion surveys suggest substantial declines in favorability toward the United States and the European Union, consistent with the construction of an "us versus them" national narrative that accompanies domestic consolidation.

Fourth, we find limited evidence consistent with a pure empire-building mechanism. When we proxy imperial or Soviet symbolism using the local prevalence of Lenin statues and other world war 2 monuments, these measures do not systematically account for post-escalation political mobilization. At the same time, the relationship between ethnic Russian population share and post-escalation political outcomes remains strong and stable across specifications.

Fifth, on the Ukrainian side, military targeting aligns more closely with ethnic geography than with resource endowments. Russian attacks are concentrated in provinces with higher shares of ethnic Russians, while measures of oil, gas, and other extractive assets do not account for the spatial pattern of violence. This evidence is consistent with identity-linked territorial objectives rather than a purely resource-driven logic. Overall, the results point to ethnic nation consolidation alongside domestic political incentives, rather than symbolic imperial expansion or economic expropriation alone.

We test these mechanisms using a region-level panel that combines political outcomes, war escalation, and large list of pre-war regional characteristics. We measure voter turnout and votes for Putin from Russia's Central Election Commission, alongside data on air attacks targeting Ukraine to measure external escalation. We merge these data with regional ethnic composition and socioeconomic characteristics from the 2020 Russian Census, Ukrainian ethnic composition from the 2001 Ukrainian Census, Russian war losses since 2022 from Mediazona, and cultural heritage monuments and sites from Russia's Ministry of Culture. This structure allows us to test whether political mobilization following es-

calation is concentrated in regions with larger ethnic Russian populations, rather than in regions distinguished primarily by war losses, geography, or empire-building narratives.

The empirical analysis on voting behavior exploits two sharp geopolitical ruptures: the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. These events provide plausibly exogenous shocks to the political environment that allow us to trace how domestic political behavior evolves in response to external conflict. Comparing regions with different baseline ethnic compositions, we study how war reshapes political participation, support for the incumbent, and the allocation of wartime costs within Russia.

Our identification relies on cross-regional differences in pre-determined ethnic composition. We estimate difference-in-differences event-study models comparing provinces with higher and lower shares of ethnic Russians before and after the 2014 and 2022 shocks. The identifying assumption is that, absent escalation, these regions would have followed parallel political trends. Event-study estimates show no differential pre-trends prior to either rupture. We further assess robustness using the Synthetic Difference-in-Differences estimator (Arkhangelsky et al., 2021), which reweights control regions to improve pre-treatment balance, and the bounded-violation approach of Rambachan and Roth (2023a), which allows for flexible departures from parallel trends. Results remain similar under both approaches. To address measurement and manipulation concerns, we replace the continuous ethnic share with a historically predetermined indicator for non-Russian republics and obtain similar estimates. We also apply the fraud-detection method of Shpilkin (2009) to adjust turnout and vote shares; the heterogeneous post-escalation effects by ethnic composition persist in fraud-adjusted outcomes.

We do not find evidence consistent with an empire-building channel in which escalation triggers a broader expansion of Russian historical symbolism or a reactivation of Soviet imperial narratives at the local level. In particular, when we proxy "imperial nostalgia" and symbolic consolidation using the presence and maintenance of Lenin statues and other Soviet-era monuments, we do not observe a systematic post-2014 or post-2022 differential change in regions with higher ethnic Russian shares. Put differently, the political response we document is not accompanied by a parallel shift in local public symbolism that would indicate an intensification of Soviet oriented identity investments. This null matters because it helps separate short-run mass mobilization around the incumbent regime from a slower-moving program of symbolic territorial imagination.

Taken together, the evidence suggests that escalation operates primarily as an ethnic nation-consolidation shock. Political returns are concentrated among ethnic Russians; wartime costs are disproportionately borne by peripheral regions; attitudes toward Western actors deteriorate sharply; and military targeting inside Ukraine aligns more closely with

ethnic geography than with material resource endowments. These patterns are difficult to reconcile with a purely economic or symbolic empire-building account and instead point to a strategy in which external conflict reinforces internal ethnic cohesion while redistributing its domestic costs.

This paper contributes to four strands of literature. First, we contribute to the literature on nation-building and identity formation. A large body of work studies how states construct national identity through education, propaganda, and conflict-induced belief shifts (Yanagizawa-Drott, 2014; Rohner et al., 2013; Alesina and Reich, 2015; Rohner and Zhuravskaya, 2025). We provide evidence that interstate war itself can function as a nation-building instrument within a multinational state. Following Russia's escalation against Ukraine, political participation and support for the incumbent increase disproportionately in regions with higher shares of ethnic Russians. At the same time, attitudes toward the United States and the European Union deteriorate sharply, consistent with the construction of an "us versus them" national narrative. By linking identity structure to both electoral mobilization and attitudinal polarization, we document how external conflict can reinforce internal ethnic cohesion.

Second, we contribute to the literature on authoritarian politics and strategic behavior by autocrats (Guriev and Treisman, 2020; Egorov et al., 2009; Besley and Persson, 2011; Gehlbach et al., 2026). Existing work emphasizes repression, media control, and institutional engineering as tools of regime survival. We show that interstate war can serve as an additional strategic instrument. External escalation generates concentrated political returns among the ethnic core, while wartime costs are disproportionately borne by peripheral regions. The divergence between mobilization and battlefield casualties highlights how autocrats may simultaneously cultivate political support and manage domestic risk within heterogeneous societies. War thus operates not only as foreign policy, but also as internal coalition management.

Third, we contribute to the economics literature on geoeconomics and interstate conflict. Much of this work examines how economic interdependence shapes the opportunity cost of war (Martin et al., 2008; Thoenig, 2024; Caldara and Iacoviello, 2022). We complement this perspective by documenting a distinct mechanism: war may persist not because its external costs are low, but because its internal political returns are high. By showing that political gains are concentrated in identity-aligned regions and that territorial targeting aligns with ethnic geography rather than resource endowments, we provide micro-level evidence on how identity-based incentives can sustain costly escalation.

Finally, our analysis bridges the literature on ethnic conflict and interstate war. Prior research shows that identity distance shapes trade, trust, and cooperation across borders

(Rohner et al., 2013; Korovkin and Makarin, 2023). We extend this logic by demonstrating that identity structure predicts not only domestic political responses, but also where violence occurs across borders. Russian attacks in Ukraine are concentrated in provinces with higher shares of ethnic Russians and not primarily in resource-rich areas. This integration of domestic ethnic consolidation and cross-border identity-based territorial targeting provides a unified framework for understanding how interstate war can reinforce nation-building objectives.

2 Background and Institutional Context

Domestic Political Context. Modern Russia is a multiethnic state whose demographic composition and institutional architecture are rooted in the imperial and Soviet periods. According to the 2020 Russian Census, which was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and conducted in 2021, ethnic Russians constitute a clear majority: 71.7 percent of the population (105.6 out of 147.2 million residents) identify as ethnic Russians. The largest minority groups are Tatars (3.2 percent, 4.7 million), followed by Chechens (1.1 percent, 1.7 million), Bashkirs (1.1 percent, 1.6 million), and Chuvash (0.7 percent, 1.1 million). Ukrainians account for 0.6 percent of the population (0.9 million). These figures, however, should be interpreted with caution given substantial non-response on ethnicity (11.3 %, 16.6 million), which mechanically depresses reported group shares (Rosstat, 2022).

Beyond their demographic predominance, ethnic Russians occupy a privileged symbolic position in the state's official nation-building narrative. Constitutional amendments adopted in 2020 explicitly define ethnic Russians as the "state-forming people" (*государствообразующий народ*), framing them as the core nation around which the state is organized (Russian Federation, 1993). Although the Russian Federation formally recognizes its multinational character and grants republics the right to establish their own state languages alongside Russian, the public sphere remains overwhelmingly Russified. For instance, Russian is the only mandatory language of instruction nationwide, while the teaching of minority languages has become increasingly restricted and is often treated as optional.

At the same time, this Russified nation-building narrative coexists with a federal structure that formally encodes ethnic diversity. Russia's multi-tiered federal system includes ethnically designated "republic" regions alongside other federal subjects, structuring center–periphery relations in governance. Since the early 2000s, the federal center has systematically curtailed regional autonomy by strengthening gubernatorial accountability to Moscow, expanding oversight over regional elites, and abolishing direct gubernatorial

elections in the mid-2000s. Regional governments thus operate as administrative intermediaries responsible for implementing federal directives and managing local political control. Fiscal federalism further reinforces this hierarchy: intergovernmental transfers redistribute resources from wealthier regions to fiscally dependent ones, and in several republics – including Ingushetia, Chechnya, Tuva, and Dagestan – federal transfers constitute the majority of consolidated budget revenues; these same regions have also traditionally reported some of the highest levels of electoral support for Putin in presidential elections. This dependence increases the leverage of the center over regional policy and political behavior by tying fiscal capacity to federal allocations rather than local revenue generation. These institutional features are particularly visible during national elections, which serve as a central mechanism through which the regime coordinates elite loyalty and mass political mobilization.

Elections in Russia therefore provide an informative lens into political mobilization under electoral authoritarianism. Vladimir Putin won the presidential elections in 2000 and 2004 but, constrained by the constitutional limit of two consecutive terms, did not run in 2008; instead, Dmitry Medvedev served as the Kremlin-backed candidate and widely perceived political proxy. During Medvedev's presidency, the presidential term was extended from four to six years, lengthening electoral cycles and reinforcing incumbency advantages. Putin returned to the presidency in 2012 and was reelected in 2018. Constitutional amendments adopted in 2020 effectively reset presidential term limits, enabling Putin to run again in 2024 and secure a fifth presidential victory. If he completes his current term, Putin will have held Russia's top executive office for more than two decades, including four years as prime minister. Yet these elections unfold in a tightly managed institutional environment in which formal competition is systematically restricted through legal and administrative barriers.

The electoral environment in Russia is tightly constrained by institutional mechanisms of pre-electoral authoritarian control that limit meaningful competition. Candidates who are not nominated by registered political parties must collect a large number of voter signatures within a short timeframe, a requirement that functions as a major entry barrier for independent challengers. In the 2024 presidential election, two figures who could plausibly have attracted strategic anti-Putin votes – Ekaterina Duntsova and Boris Nadezhdin – were denied registration after failing to pass the signature verification process. Meanwhile, candidates nominated by the "systemic" opposition parties rarely pose a credible threat: they are typically politically marginal figures with minimal name recognition and limited popularity prior to the campaign. Legal restrictions further narrow the pool of viable opponents. The exclusion of Alexey Navalny from the 2018 presidential race on

the basis of a criminal conviction – which the European Court of Human Rights had already found to be unlawful and for which Russia was formally obligated to provide redress – illustrates how legal and administrative instruments are used to preemptively remove prominent challengers from the ballot. A similar function is served by the "foreign agent" legislation, which effectively bars designated individuals from electoral participation.

Morever, the procedural environment of Russian elections has continued to evolve in ways that expand administrative discretion and constrain independent oversight. The 2024 presidential election was conducted over three days rather than a single election day, increasing opportunities for pressure and manipulation while complicating monitoring. The election also marked the first large-scale use of remote electronic voting (DEG) in a presidential contest: e-voting was implemented in 29 federal subjects, including annexed territories such as Crimea and Sevastopol. While framed as a modernization measure, e-voting was actively promoted by local authorities through mobilization campaigns and material incentives, including lotteries and prize draws, raising concerns about coerced participation and the opacity of electronic tabulation. At the same time, institutional safeguards for independent monitoring were weakened. In 2024, the long-standing status of *member of an election commission with an advisory vote* (*член избирательной комиссии с правом совещательного голоса*) – widely used by independent observers due to its broad access rights to commission documents and procedures without subordination to the commission chair – was abolished. Public access to polling station video surveillance was also restricted compared to earlier elections, when citizens could freely watch livestreams online throughout election day. Together, these procedural changes further reduced transparency and strengthened the state's capacity to manage electoral outcomes.

Beyond formal entry barriers, Russian elections are characterized by extensive administrative mobilization and recurrent allegations of fraud. A common mechanism is the use of public-sector workplaces as channels of electoral pressure: teachers, doctors, municipal employees, and state enterprise workers are frequently urged to demonstrate turnout by providing photographic "proof" of participation, such as selfies at polling stations or screenshots confirming remote electronic voting. Public employees also constitute a major share of precinct-level election commission staff, embedding the electoral process within hierarchical workplace structures and facilitating informal compliance. These mobilization practices operate alongside documented forms of manipulation, including ballot stuffing, protocol falsification, and irregularities in vote tabulation, as noted by observers and prior research. The institutional design of election administration reinforces these dynamics, as local commissions are often chaired by individuals affiliated with, or nominated by, the ruling United Russia party, strengthening the regime's leverage over reported outcomes.

Opposition-minded voters have also experimented with distinct electoral strategies under constrained competition. In the 2018 presidential election, Alexey Navalny – who was denied registration despite the European Court of Human Rights' ruling that his conviction was unlawful – advocated an electoral boycott and urged supporters to focus instead on independent monitoring and turnout verification as a way to estimate the regime's true level of popular support. In the 2024 presidential election, held shortly after Navalny's death in custody following three years of imprisonment, a different strategy articulated in his prison writings was implemented by opposition networks: the coordinated action known as "Midday Against Putin" (*Полдень против Путина*), which encouraged voters to arrive at polling stations at 12:00 on the final voting day and cast a ballot for any candidate other than Putin. Parallel initiatives promoted strategic voting for the most viable non-incumbent option, often framed as support for the "least unfavorable" candidate, such as Vladislav Davankov. Together, these efforts illustrate how opposition constituencies seek to transform elections from instruments of regime legitimation into occasions for coordination, signaling, and protest.

Foreign Policy Context. Russia's post–Cold War foreign-policy discourse has been shaped by a persistent confrontation over the European security order and NATO enlargement. From the Kremlin's perspective, successive waves of NATO expansion progressively moved the alliance's military infrastructure closer to Russia's borders, heightening perceptions of encirclement and strategic vulnerability. These concerns were articulated particularly forcefully in Vladimir Putin's 2007 Munich Security Conference speech, which openly rejected the post–Cold War trajectory of NATO expansion and criticized U.S.-led unipolarity as destabilizing.

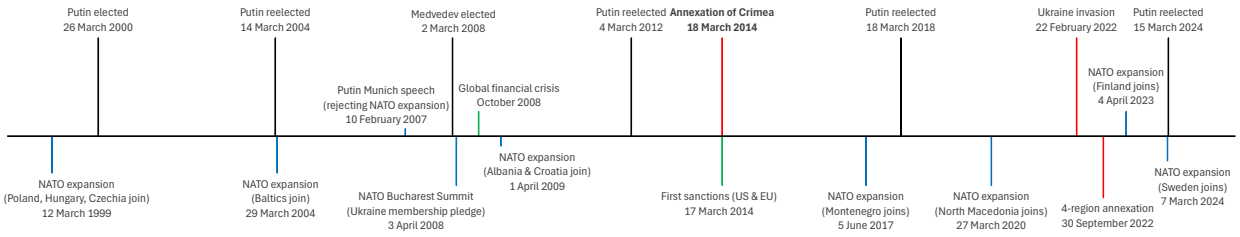
Tensions intensified in 2008, when NATO's Bucharest Summit declared that Ukraine and Georgia "will become members of NATO," even as it did not specify a timeline or grant a Membership Action Plan. In Russian official narratives, the Bucharest pledge became a focal symbol of a security threat on Russia's immediate periphery and a justification for increasingly assertive measures to prevent further westward realignment by neighboring states. The first major escalation toward Ukraine occurred in 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea following the Euromaidan revolution and the collapse of the Yanukovych government. Relative to later events, the annexation was rapid and involved limited overt conventional combat in Crimea itself, relying instead on covert deployment, seizure of key facilities, and a contested referendum. Western states responded with sanctions targeting Russian officials, firms, and sectors, initiating a sanctions regime that has since expanded substantially. In Russian state messaging, the annexation was framed as the "return" of historically Russian territory, protection of Russian speakers, and a defensive response to

an alleged Western-backed coup in Kyiv.

Importantly, the 2014 annexation did not mark the end of hostilities. Instead, it was followed by a protracted armed conflict in eastern Ukraine. Beginning in 2014, Russia-backed separatist forces established de facto control over parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, leading to a sustained war in the Donbas. Although the intensity of fighting fluctuated over time and was periodically reduced through ceasefire agreements (notably the Minsk I and Minsk II accords), the conflict remained unresolved and continued to produce casualties and displacement. Over time, this persistent low-intensity war became central to the Kremlin's justificatory framing of subsequent escalation.

Against this backdrop, a qualitatively different phase of the conflict began in February 2022 with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Unlike the swift territorial seizure of Crimea, the 2022 war has been prolonged, large-scale, and highly destructive, producing extensive battlefield casualties, mass displacement, and sustained international involvement. Later in 2022, Russia declared the annexation of four additional Ukrainian regions – Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia – following referendums widely rejected internationally and conducted amid wartime conditions. The Kremlin's justificatory narratives also shifted in emphasis: while NATO expansion and Western "threats" remained central, official propaganda increasingly foregrounded claims of "denazification," the protection of populations in the Donbas, and the defense of Russia's sovereignty against alleged Western attempts to weaken or dismantle the Russian state. These episodes suggest both continuity and escalation. Across 2014 and 2022, Russian official rhetoric consistently situates aggression toward Ukraine within a broader confrontation with NATO and the West and frames coercion as defensive. Yet the two episodes differ sharply in scope and intensity: the 2014 Crimea annexation was comparatively brief and relied heavily on rapid seizure and symbolic legitimation, whereas the 2022 invasion has entailed a long, high-intensity war accompanied by far-reaching territorial claims and an expanded repertoire of mobilizational and ideological narratives.

Figure 1: Timeline of Main Events



Note: The figure presents key events relevant to the study context, including the Russian presidential elections analyzed in this paper (shown in black). Events related to NATO conflict are shown in blue; episodes of Russian military aggression in red; and major economic shocks in green. Several additional contextually important events are not shown due to space constraints, including the onset of the Maidan protests (21 November 2013), the beginning of the war in Donbas (12 April 2014), the signing of the Minsk II agreement (12 February 2015), the election of Volodymyr Zelensky (21 April 2019), the start of mass protests in Belarus (9 August 2020), President Putin's "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians" essay (12 July 2021), Russia's presentation of security ultimatums to NATO (17 December 2021), and NATO's formal rejection of these demands (26 January 2022)

3 Data

To analyze the effects of Crimea Annexations and the Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine on support for Putin we assemble a province-level dataset. In this section, we describe these data and how we use them in our analysis. Appendix Tables A2 and A3 provide definitions of all variables used in the analysis, while Appendices A1 and A2 provide more detail on their construction and sources. Appendix Tables A4 and A5 report summary statistics for these variables.

Ethnic Composition of Russia. We measure province-level ethnic composition using the share of ethnic Russians reported in Russia's 2020 Population Census (Rosstat, 2022). Although the census was originally scheduled for 2020, data collection was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and conducted in 2021, with respondents reporting demographic characteristics as of October 1, 2021. The 2020 census therefore provides the closest available pre-treatment population benchmark prior to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

We download the relevant Rosstat census tables and construct province-level ethnic composition measures for all Russian provinces. The census enumerated a total population of 149.5 million (excluding Crimea and Sevastopol, annexed in 2014). Moscow city accounted for the largest share of the population, followed by Moscow Oblast and Krasnodar Krai, while the Nenets Autonomous Okrug was the least populated province.

The census reports population counts by self-identified ethnicity, which we use to compute province-level ethnic shares, defined as the number of provincial residents identifying as ethnically Russian divided by the total provincial population. Overall, 88.73% of respondents reported an ethnicity. Among those who answered, the five largest ethnic groups were Russians (80.85%), Tatars (3.61%), Chechens (1.28%), Bashkirs (1.20%), and Chuvash (0.82%).

Figure 2 illustrates the spatial distribution of ethnic Russians across provinces. Russian-majority provinces cluster in the European part of the country and extend across much of the south and central belt, including most of the Volga region, the Urals, and Siberia. In contrast, provinces with lower shares of ethnic Russians are concentrated in the North Caucasus republics and in several ethnically defined regions of southern Siberia, while the Far East and Arctic regions remain predominantly Russian despite their geographic remoteness. The map reports province-level ethnic Russian shares and highlights the cross-sectional variation used in the first part of the analysis.

Russian Election Data. We use voter turnout in presidential elections as a key measure of political participation, capturing the share of eligible citizens who engage in the electoral process. Turnout is defined as the proportion of registered voters who received a ballot in a given province–election year.

We measure support for Putin using his vote share in presidential elections. Putin's vote share is defined as the proportion of valid ballots cast for Putin among all valid ballots in a given province–election year. In the 2008 election, when Putin did not run, we proxy this measure with Medvedev's vote share, as he was the Kremlin-backed candidate and was widely perceived as Putin's political successor and proxy.

We construct a province-by-election-year panel using official presidential election results digitized and harmonized by the CEDAR Elections Dataset (CEDAR, 2024). The data cover presidential elections held in 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012, 2018, and 2024. Because administrative boundaries have changed over time, we harmonize the data to a consistent set of province definitions, using provinces as of October 2021 as the baseline spatial unit to ensure comparability across elections. In 2024, twenty-seven provinces implemented e-voting. We obtain province-level e-voting data from CEC Russia (2025) and incorporate these figures when constructing total election results for the affected provinces.

Russian Cultural Heritage Monuments and Sites. We proxy a province's exposure to imperial symbolism using the number of registered cultural heritage monuments located within each province. Specifically, we use data from the Unified State Register of Cultural Heritage Sites of the Peoples of the Russian Federation (Russian Ministry of Culture, 2025) to construct counts of (i) all registered monuments, (ii) monuments dedi-

cated to World War II, and (iii) Lenin statues. We normalize these counts by provincial population and express them per 10,000 residents.

Russian Casualties. We construct another measure of support for Putin using province-level data on confirmed Russian military deaths. Individual-level information on Russian casualties is obtained from Mediazona's casualty database (Mediazona, 2026), which records confirmed deaths based on publicly available reports and identifies each deceased soldier's place of residence. We aggregate these data to the province–month level.

Our main outcome measure is normalized provincial casualties, defined as the number of confirmed Russian military deaths attributed to a province in a given month, normalized per 10,000 residents. This measure captures the intensity of wartime losses across provinces, adjusting for differences in population size.

In addition, we calculate the share of ethnic Russians among the provincial casualties, defined as the share of confirmed military deaths in a given province–month that are predicted to be ethnically Russian. This measure is constructed in two steps. First, we predict each individual's ethnicity from their first and last name using the machine-learning classifier developed by Bessudnov et al. (2023). Second, for each province–month, we compute the fraction of casualties predicted to be ethnic Russian by dividing the number of individuals classified as Russian by the total number of confirmed casualties attributed to that province. Together, these measures allow us to examine both the overall burden of wartime losses and its ethnic composition across Russian provinces.

Ethnic Composition of Ukraine. We measure province-level ethnic composition in Ukraine using the share of residents who self-identify as ethnically Russian, based on the 2001 All-Ukrainian Population Census (Ukrstat, 2001). This census provides the most recent comprehensive and nationally representative benchmark of Ukraine's ethnic structure prior to the onset of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict in 2014 and the subsequent full-scale invasion in 2022.

The census reports population counts by self-identified nationality at the provincial level. Using these data, we calculate the provincial share of ethnic Russians, defined as the number of provincial residents identifying as ethnically Russian divided by the total provincial population.

Figure 10 illustrates the spatial distribution of ethnic Russians across Ukrainian provinces. Russian-majority provinces cluster in the south and east of the country, particularly in Crimea and in several provinces along the Black Sea coast and the eastern border with Russia. In contrast, western and northern provinces exhibit consistently low shares of ethnic Russians, while central Ukraine is characterized by intermediate values. Overall, the map highlights a pronounced east–west gradient in ethnic composition, with the highest

concentration of ethnic Russians located in territories that were later annexed by Russia in 2014 and 2022.

Russian Air Attacks on Ukraine. We measure the extent to which a Ukrainian province was directly targeted during the war using the cumulative number of Russian air attacks recorded in the province since the onset of the full-scale invasion. We construct this measure using the attack-level VIINA 2.0 dataset (VIINA 2.0, 2026). We aggregate the attack-level observations to the province level by summing the total number of recorded attacks within each province over the study period.

Other Data. Time-varying, province-level socio-economic controls are drawn from To Be Precise (2025), a harmonized panel dataset that consolidates all editions of *Regions of Russia: Socio-Economic Indicators* published by Rosstat. We measure provincial economic well-being using real income per capita, defined as the average monthly wage of employees expressed in constant 2000 rubles. This series is constructed by deflating nominal wages using Rosstat's annual real income indices. Additional controls include the urban population share, the old-age dependency ratio, and paved road density. Distance to Ukraine is defined as the minimum geodesic distance between a province's polygon and the de jure Russia–Ukraine international border. The share of "Against All" votes in 2000 is calculated as the number of ballots cast for the "Against All" option in the 2000 presidential election divided by the total number of valid ballots.

4 Empirical Strategy

Our unit of observation is a province by election year. Let p index provinces and t index election years. The main outcomes are (i) political participation, measured as voter turnout, and (ii) support for the incumbent, measured as the vote share for Vladimir Putin. The key explanatory variable is ShareRussian_p, the share of residents who self-identify as ethnically Russian in the 2020 population census.

We organize the empirical analysis around two escalation episodes: the annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and the full-scale invasion in February 2022. The baseline period is pre-2014. In the election-year data, the relevant comparison years are pre-2014 elections (for example 2004, 2008, 2012), the post-2014 but pre-2022 election (2018), and the post-2022 election (2024).

All specifications include province fixed effects and election-year fixed effects. Standard errors are clustered at the province level.

We begin with a difference-in-differences event-study specification that allows the association between baseline ethnic composition and political outcomes to vary flexibly across

election years:

$$y_{pt} = \sum_{\tau \in \mathcal{T} \setminus \{2012\}} \beta_\tau \Big(\text{Share Russian}_p \times \mathbb{1}\{t = \tau\} \Big) + \alpha_p + \gamma_t + \mathbf{X}'_{pt}\theta + \varepsilon_{pt}, \tag{1}$$

where p indexes provinces and t indexes election years. The outcome y_{pt} is either turnout or the incumbent vote share. We normalize $\beta_{2012} = 0$, so each β_τ measures the change in the slope relating ShareRussian_p to the outcome in election year τ relative to 2012, the last pre-2014 election, before the Russian annexation of Crimea. Province fixed effects α_p absorb time-invariant differences across provinces, election-year fixed effects γ_t absorb shocks common to all provinces in a given election year, and $\mathbf{X}_{pt}$ denotes time-varying province controls included in some specifications. Standard errors are clustered at the province level. The coefficients for pre-2014 elections provide a direct diagnostic for differential pre-trends by ethnic composition. The 2018 coefficient captures the differential shift in the post-2014, pre-2022 period, while the 2024 coefficient captures the differential shift after the 2022 invasion. This parameterization is intentionally nonparametric in election time: it does not impose that the 2014 and 2022 episodes have the same effect, nor that responses evolve smoothly between elections.

Identification requires that, absent the escalation episodes, outcomes in provinces with different ShareRussian_p would have evolved in parallel, conditional on fixed effects and controls. Given the small number of election years, we treat the event study primarily as a transparent description of timing and pre-trend behavior rather than as a high-frequency dynamic model.

We then summarize the event-study evidence in a static specification that explicitly separates the post-2014 but pre-2022 period from the post-2022 period. Define $\mathbb{1}\{t \in [2014, 2021]\}$ as an indicator for elections after March 2014 and before February 2022, and $\mathbb{1}\{t \geq 2022\}$ as an indicator for elections after February 2022. In the election data, these correspond to 2018 and 2024 respectively. We estimate:

$$y_{pt} = \beta_1 \left(\text{Share Russian}_p \times 1\{t \in [2014, 2021]\} \right) + \beta_2 \left(\text{Share Russian}_p \times 1\{t \geq 2022\} \right) + \alpha_p + \gamma_t + \mathbf{X}'_{pt}\theta + \varepsilon_{pt}. \tag{2}$$

The nation-building hypothesis predicts that escalation should disproportionately mobilize and align the ethnic core within Russia, which operationally corresponds to larger post-2014 and post-2022 increases in turnout and incumbent support in provinces with higher ShareRussian_p. Our empirical tests therefore focus on whether the political behavior with respect to ethnic Russian share steepens after 2014 and again after 2022, relative to pre-conflict period prior to 2014.

Before turning to the regression framework, we provide visual evidence on the evolution of political outcomes across regions with different ethnic compositions. Figure 3 plots average voter turnout and incumbent vote share separately for provinces above and below the median share of ethnic Russians. The figure serves two purposes. First, prior to the 2014 annexation of Crimea, electoral outcomes evolve similarly across the two groups, with no systematic divergence in either turnout or support for Putin across pre-treatment elections. These parallel trends provide preliminary support for the identifying assumption underlying our difference-in-differences design, namely that regions with different ethnic compositions followed comparable political trajectories in the absence of wartime escalation. Second, the figure illustrates a pronounced divergence emerging only after the major geopolitical shocks of 2014 and, more strongly, after the 2022 invasion. This timing motivates our empirical strategy, which exploits these escalation episodes as shocks and estimates heterogeneous political responses across provinces differing in predetermined ethnic Russian share.

5 Results

A central empirical question is whether Russia's escalation against Ukraine in 2014 strengthened political support disproportionately in regions historically closer to the regime's nation-forming core. If conflict consolidates support among the ethnic Russian majority, turnout and incumbent support should rise more in regions with higher ethnic Russian shares. If instead escalation generates a broadly uniform response or reflects nationwide administrative shifts, the relationship with ethnic composition should be weaker. Figure 4 evaluates this hypothesis using a difference-in-differences event-study design. Prior to 2014, coefficients on the interaction between ethnic Russian share and election timing are small and statistically indistinguishable from zero relative to the 2012 baseline, indicating no evidence of differential pre-trends. Following the annexation of Crimea, the coefficients turn positive and increase further after the full-scale invasion in 2022. The magnitude and timing of these effects indicate that wartime escalation steepens the relationship between ethnic composition and political mobilization, rather than generating a uniform nationwide shift. Regions with larger ethnic Russian populations experience larger post-escalation increases in turnout and incumbent support.

Table 1 supports these patterns using a more saturated specification that includes province fixed effects, year fixed effects, and time-varying province controls. Focusing on the fully controlled specification (column (2) in each panel), the post-invasion interaction between the ethnic Russian share and the 2022 period is positive and statistically signifi-

cant across outcomes. In Panel A, the coefficient on Share Russians × Post Invasion 2022 is 0.083. Relative to the mean level of political participation (0.696), this implies an increase of approximately 12 percent of the mean in regions with higher ethnic Russian shares following the full-scale invasion. In contrast, the post-annexation effect prior to 2022 is small and statistically insignificant, indicating that the stronger mobilization response is concentrated in the post-2022 period. Panel B shows a similar pattern for incumbent support. The coefficient on Share Russians × Post Invasion 2022 equals 0.187 and is statistically significant. Given a mean vote share of 0.711, this corresponds to an increase of roughly 26 percent of the mean. In contrast, the difference between post-annexation and post-invasion effects is not statistically significant, suggesting that while support rises after 2014, the magnitude becomes economically larger after 2022.

These findings are robust across alternative identification strategies. Re-estimating the dynamic effects using Synthetic Difference-in-Differences produces closely similar results, with no pre-treatment divergence and comparable post-2014 and post-2022 amplification (Figure 5). Allowing for bounded deviations from parallel trends using the approach of Rambachan and Roth (2023b) leaves the post-treatment effects intact, with confidence sets excluding zero under a wide range of permissible violations (Figure 6). Adjusting outcomes using the fraud-correction procedure of Shpilkin (2009) likewise preserves the substantive patterns (Figure 8), suggesting that the post-conflict increases are unlikely to be driven solely by administrative manipulation.

We next examine whether historical or symbolic proxies associated with imperial or Soviet legacy account for the observed results. Table 2 interacts wartime exposure with measures such as the density of cultural heritage monuments, World War II memorials, and Lenin statues. These proxies do not systematically explain post-escalation increases in turnout or incumbent support once ethnic composition is included. Across specifications, the interaction between ethnic Russian share and post-war periods remains stable and statistically significant, while indicators of imperial or ideological presence display weak and inconsistent associations.

The internal distribution of wartime costs exhibits a related pattern. Figure 9 shows confirmed military casualties by terciles of ethnic Russian population share. Following the 2022 invasion, casualty rates increase more sharply in regions with lower shares of ethnic Russians, while regions with higher shares experience comparatively smaller losses relative to population size. This divergence persists throughout the post-invasion period and does not appear confined to early mobilization dynamics.

Military activity abroad also aligns with ethnic geography. Figure 10 maps Russian air attacks alongside pre-war ethnic composition and reveals a strong spatial correspondence

between attack intensity and the share of ethnic Russians. Table 3 confirms that ethnic Russian population share strongly predicts attack intensity, while controls for geographic proximity, occupation status, and hydrocarbon assets do not account for the observed pattern. The absence of robust associations with resource endowments provides limited support for a purely extractive explanation of targeting behavior.

The domestic political response, the internal distribution of wartime casualties, and the geographic allocation of violence abroad follow a common structure. Political mobilization increases disproportionately in regions with larger ethnic Russian populations; wartime costs are more heavily borne by regions with smaller such shares; and external military activity concentrates in ethnically aligned territories. These patterns are more consistent with conflict reinforcing alignment along ethnic lines than with explanations centered solely on imperial symbolism or material extraction.

6 Conclusion

This paper studies how external conflict reshapes domestic political behavior in a multi-ethnic federation. Using variation in regional ethnic composition and two sharp escalation episodes in Russia's war against Ukraine, we document a clear and economically meaningful pattern: political participation and incumbent support rise disproportionately in regions with larger ethnic Russian populations. These effects emerge after the 2014 annexation of Crimea and intensify sharply after the 2022 full-scale invasion. The event-study estimates show no evidence of differential pre-trends, and the results remain stable across alternative estimators, robustness to bounded departures from parallel trends, and adjustments for potential electoral manipulation.

The substantive magnitudes are large. Relative to pre-escalation baselines, provinces with higher ethnic Russian shares experience double-digit increases in turnout and substantial increases in pro-Putin vote share. The timing is tight, with breaks aligned to escalation rather than to gradual economic change. This pattern is difficult to reconcile with accounts in which war is primarily an external project whose domestic political consequences are incidental. Instead, the evidence supports a domestic nation-building logic in which escalation activates identity and coordinates political behavior among the ethnic core that state discourse explicitly claims to represent.

A central contribution of the paper is that conflict is a nation-building exercise. The domestic political response is mirrored by two complementary patterns that help interpret the political returns to war. First, wartime costs are unevenly distributed across the federation. Regions with lower ethnic Russian shares bear disproportionately higher per-capita

casualties after 2022, while the ethnic core experiences relatively smaller losses. Second, the geography of violence abroad aligns closely with ethnic geography in Ukraine. Russian air attacks concentrate more heavily in areas with larger ethnic Russian populations, and this targeting is not explained by resource endowments once we account for basic covariates. Taken together, these findings suggest a coherent political economy of escalation: conflict mobilizes the ethnic core domestically, while the costs of sustaining the war are shifted toward peripheral constituencies and the intensity of violence abroad correlates with ethnically framed territorial claims.

These results speak to a broader literature on the domestic origins of interstate conflict and the political uses of war. Our evidence highlights how external conflict can function as an instrument for internal coalition management. When the state defines itself around a "state-forming" ethnic group, escalation can increase political participation and incumbent support precisely where identity is most aligned with official narratives. In such contexts, war can relax domestic political constraints by hardening identity boundaries, coordinating expectations, and reducing the salience of performance-based evaluation. The same logic implies an incentive to allocate wartime burdens away from the politically central group, which is consistent with our casualty patterns.

The paper also clarifies what the findings do not imply. The results do not require that all voters update beliefs in favor of war, nor that the regime relies exclusively on persuasion rather than coercion. Nor do they claim that imperial motives are absent from Russia's foreign policy. The point is sharper: the domestic political patterns generated by escalation are systematically structured by ethnic composition in ways that are hard to explain with empire-building symbolism or economic extraction alone. The war may deliver multiple objectives, but the internal political returns appear concentrated in the ethnic core, consistent with a nation-building mechanism.

Several implications follow. First, research that treats authoritarian public support as homogeneous may miss the key distributional dimension of political mobilization. Second, models of conflict that focus solely on interstate strategic incentives should be complemented with within-country demographic structure and coalition considerations. Third, the interaction between identity and cost allocation suggests a political constraint on de-escalation: if the regime's political gains are concentrated in core regions while peripheral regions absorb a larger share of the costs, the coalition that sustains war can remain stable even as aggregate welfare declines. This may help rationalize the persistence of conflict despite high macroeconomic and human costs.

Future work can extend these results in two directions. One direction is micro-evidence on mechanisms, including the role of state media, local elites, and mobilization institu-

tions in translating escalation into turnout and incumbent support. Another direction is comparative. The same framework can be applied to other multi-ethnic states engaged in external conflict to test when war consolidates the ethnic core versus when it destabilizes regimes through backlash among peripheral groups. More broadly, our findings underscore that the domestic politics of war are not only about whether conflict raises support on average, but about which groups are mobilized, which groups bear the costs, and how identity structures the political returns to violence.

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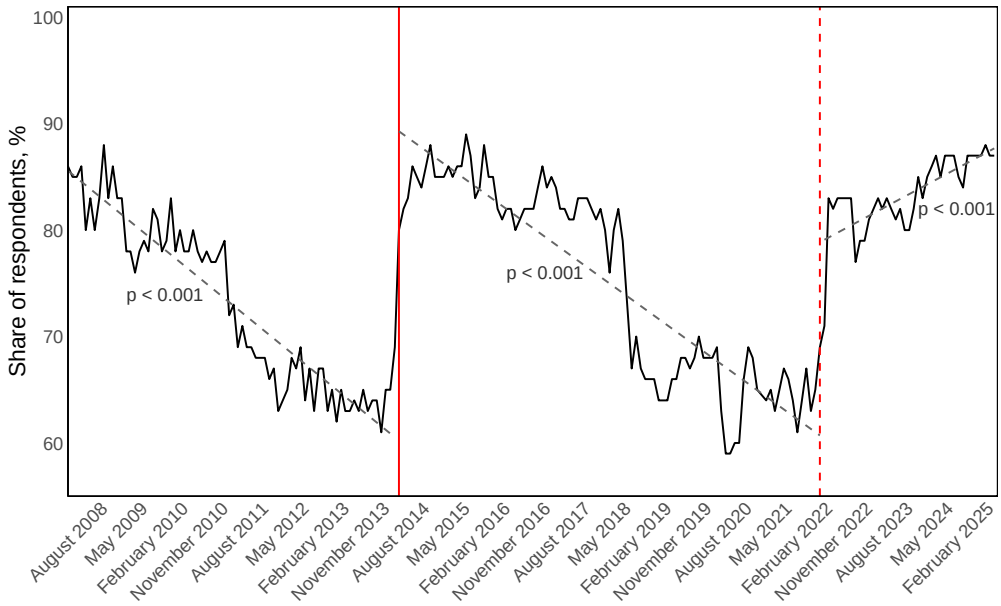
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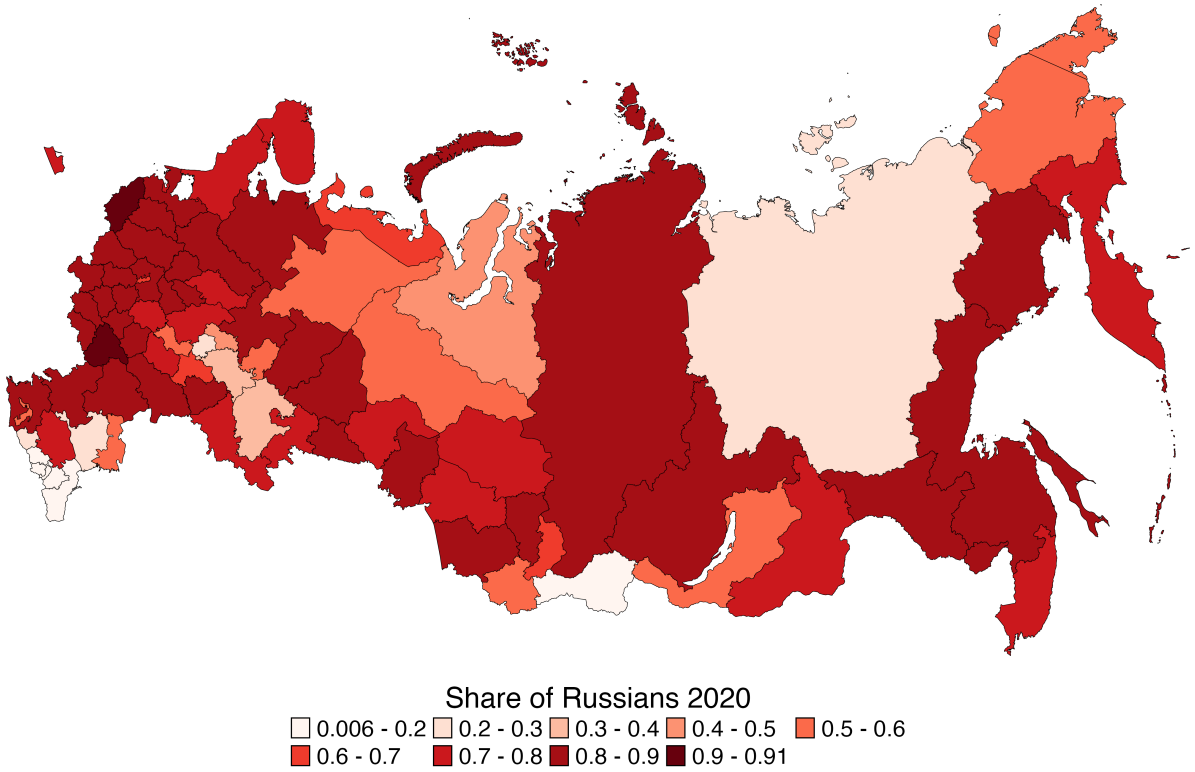
Figures and Tables

Figure 1: Public Approval of Vladimir Putin's Leadership Over Time



Note: The figure shows the share of respondents answering "yes" to the question, "Do you approve of the activities of V. Putin as President (or Prime Minister) of Russia?", using monthly opinion polls from Levada Center (2025). The solid red vertical line marks the annexation of Crimea in March 2014, and the dashed red vertical line marks the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Dashed grey lines indicate ordinary least squares (OLS) regression fits for the corresponding periods. Reported p-values refer to tests of the slope coefficients from these regressions.

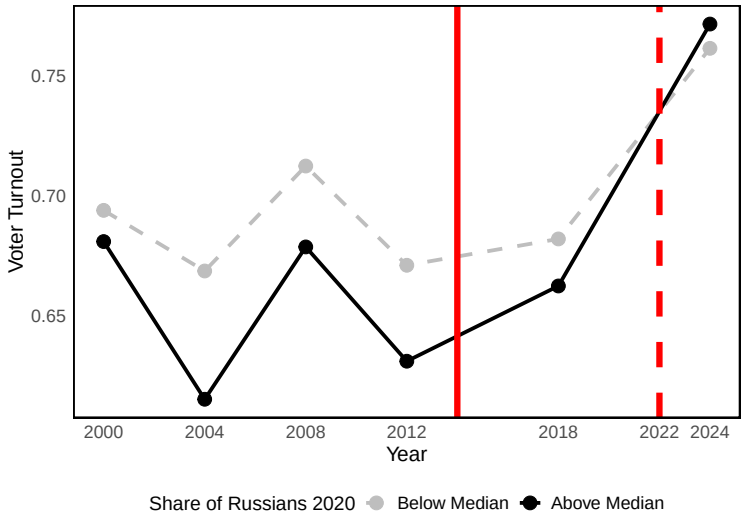
Figure 2: Share of Ethnic Russians 2020, By Province



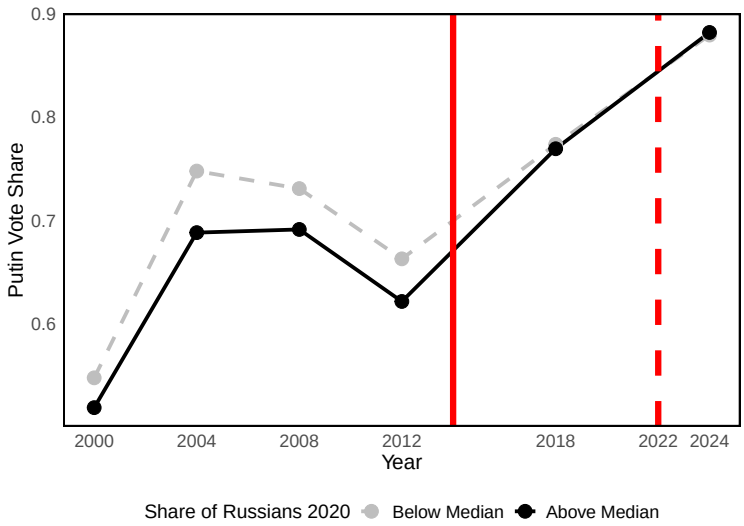
Note: The figure maps the provincial share of individuals identifying as ethnic Russians across 83 Russian provinces using data from the 2020 Russian Census (Rosstat, 2022). Ethnicity information is available for 88.73% of census respondents. Among those reporting ethnicity, the largest groups are Russians (80.85%), Tatars (3.61%), Chechens (1.28%), Bashkirs (1.20%), and Chuvash (0.82%).

Figure 3: Political Participation and Support for Putin Over Time: Raw Data

Panel A: Political Participation



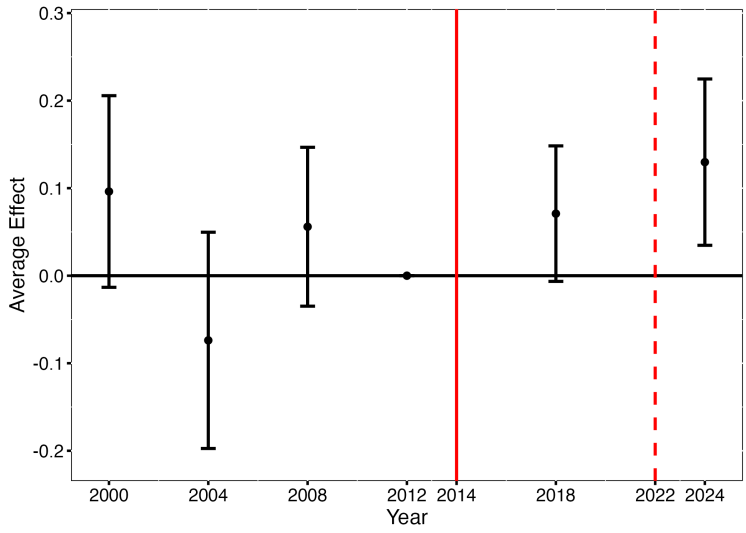
Panel B: Support for Putin



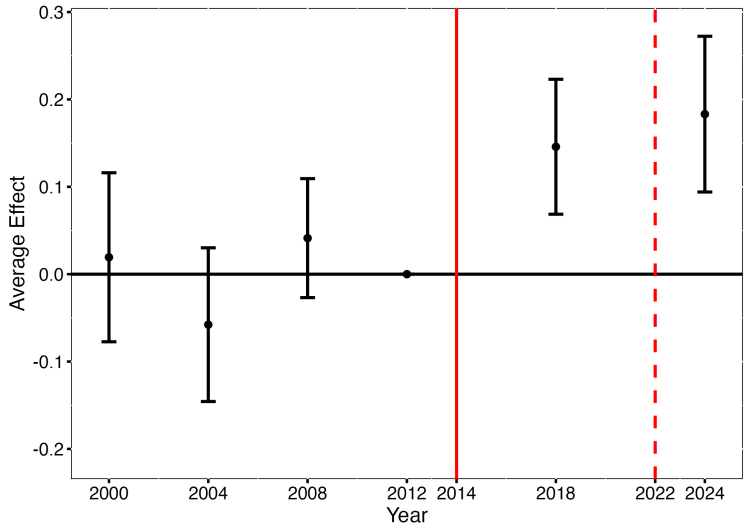
Note: Panels A and B show average turnout and Putin's vote share across the six most recent presidential elections, separately for provinces with ethnic Russian population shares above and below the median (79.43%). Election results are from CEC Russia (2025), and ethnic composition data are from Rosstat (2022). The unit of observation is a province–year, and outcomes include electronic voting in 2024 where applicable. Solid and dashed red vertical lines mark the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Figure 4: Political Participation and Support for Putin Over Time: Standard Diff-in-Diff Event Study

Panel A: Political Participation



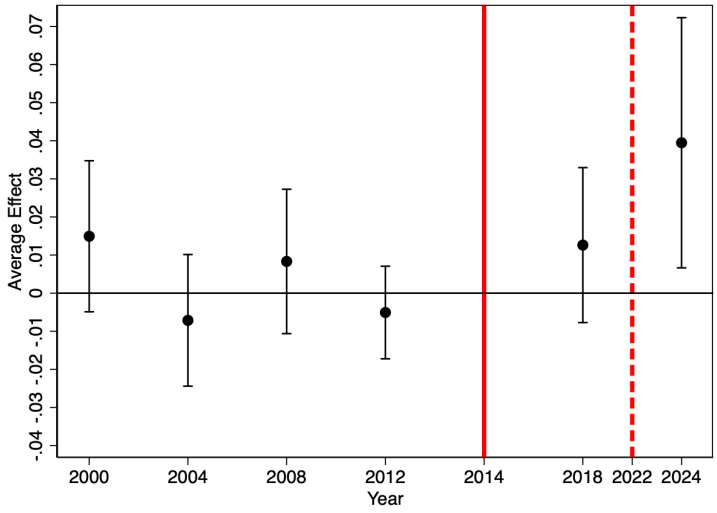
Panel B: Support for Putin



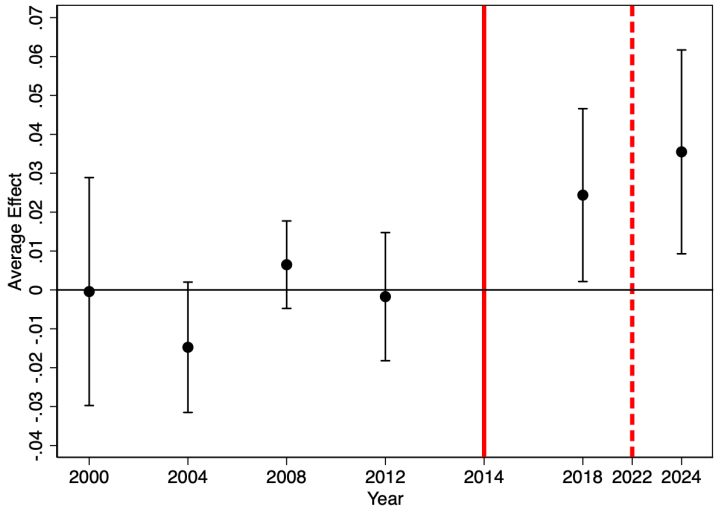
Note: Panels A and B report difference-in-differences event-study estimates of the effect of the ethnic Russian population share (2020) on provincial voter turnout and Putin's vote share. Controls include urban population share, the old-age dependency ratio, and paved road density. Additional baseline covariates – real income per capita (2000), urban population share (2000), distance to Ukraine (km, 2000), the Against All vote share (2000), and an indicator for electronic voting in 2024 – are interacted with year indicators. All specifications include province and year fixed effects as well as subregion-by-year fixed effects. Standard errors are clustered at the province level (83 clusters; annexed Crimea and Sevastopol are excluded). The unit of observation is a province–year, and outcomes include electronic voting in 2024 where applicable. Solid and dashed red vertical lines mark the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Election results are from CEC Russia (2025), ethnic composition data from Rosstat (2022), and provincial controls from CEDAR (2024).

Figure 5: Political Participation and Support for Putin Over Time: Synthetic Diff-in-Diff Event Study

Panel A: Political Participation



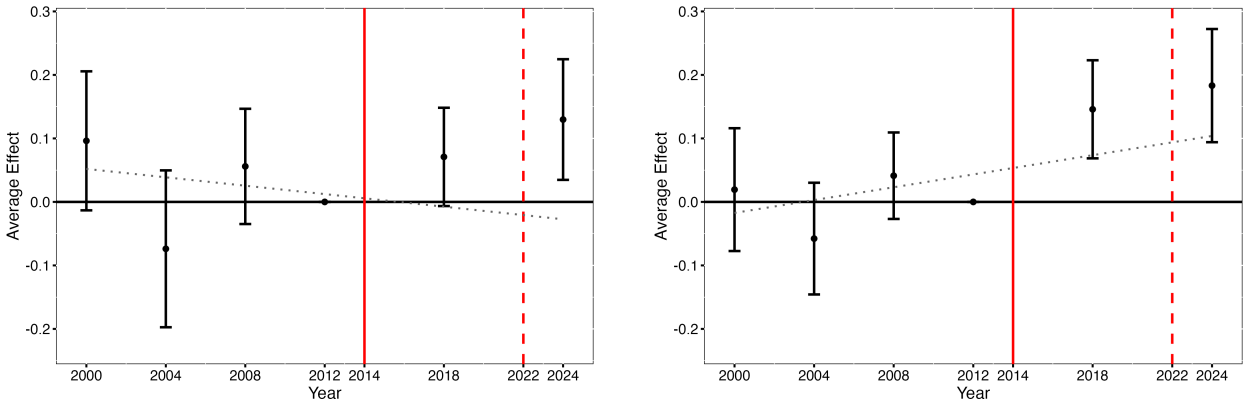
Panel B: Support for Putin



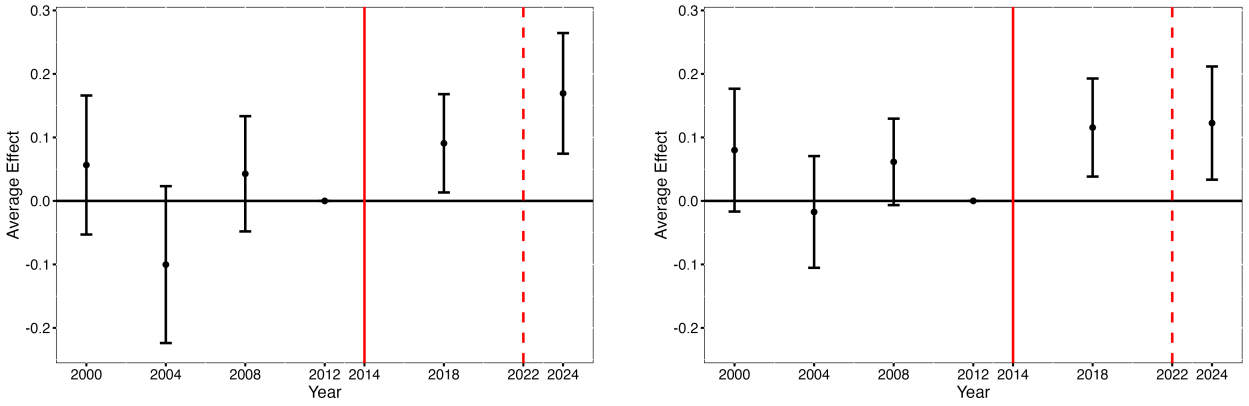
Note: Panels A and B report synthetic difference-in-differences (Arkhangelsky et al., 2021) event-study estimates of the effect of the ethnic Russian population share (2020) on provincial voter turnout and Putin's vote share. Baseline covariates – urban population share (2000) and real income per capita (2000) – are interacted with year indicators. All specifications include province and year fixed effects. Standard errors are computed using 1,000 bootstrap replications. The unit of observation is a province–year, and outcomes include electronic voting in 2024 where applicable. The sample consists of 83 Russian provinces; annexed Crimea and Sevastopol are excluded. Solid and dashed red vertical lines denote the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Election results are from CEC Russia (2025), ethnic composition data from Rosstat (2022), and provincial controls from CEDAR (2024).

Figure 6: Impact of Crimea Annexation and Full-Scale Invasion on Political Mobilization and Support for Putin Over Time: (Rambachan and Roth, 2023)'s Credible Approach to Parallel Trends

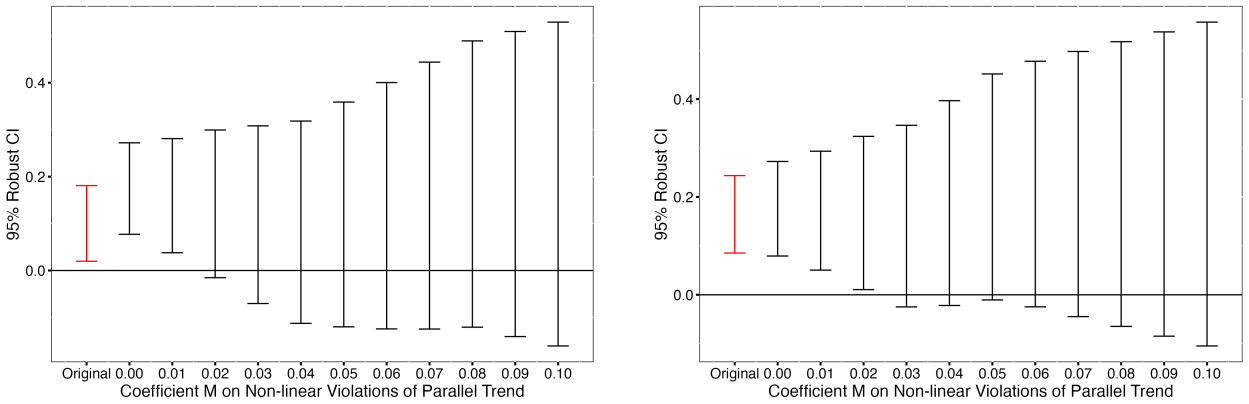
Panel A: Estimated Linear Trend



Panel B: Rotated Event Study



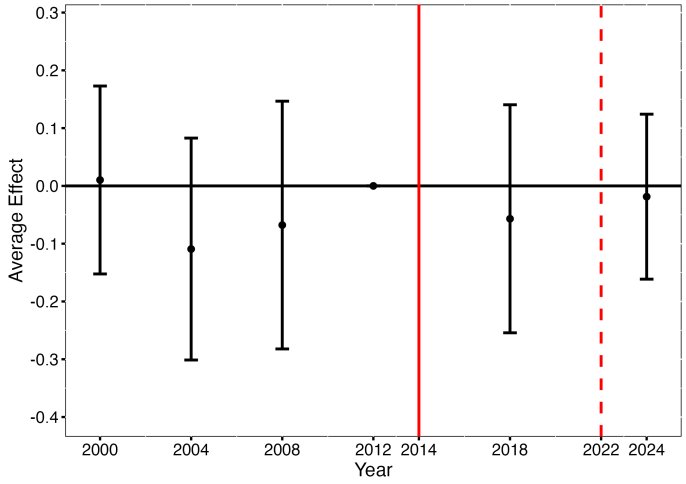
Panel C: Sensitivity to Potential Violations of Parallel Trends



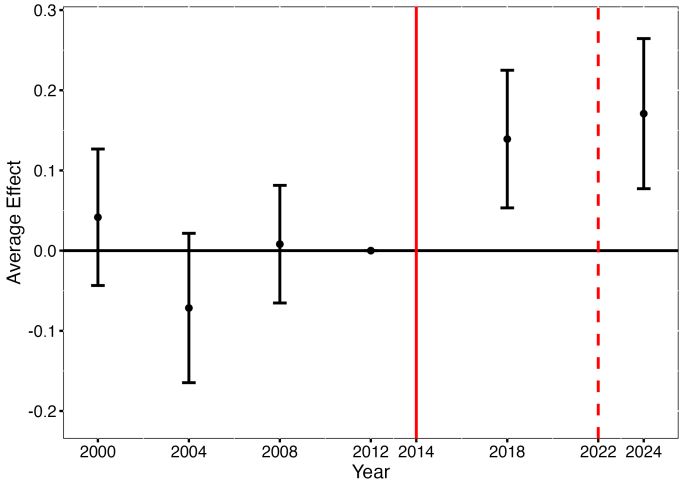
Note: This figure analyzes potential violations of the parallel trends assumption. Panel A overlays a linear trend – estimated using pre-treatment data – onto the event-study coefficients and extrapolates it into the post-treatment period. Panel B presents the event-study estimates adjusted for this estimated trend. Panel C reports the sensitivity of these results to the linear extrapolation of the pre-treatment coefficients, using the "honest approach to parallel trends" proposed by Rambachan and Roth (2023b). In this panel, we report confidence sets for the average of all post-treatment coefficients, computed under the constraint that the slope of the pre-trend coefficients vary by no more than M across consecutive periods.

Figure 8: Robustness to Fraud Adjustment (Shpilkin, 2009)

Panel A: Political Participation

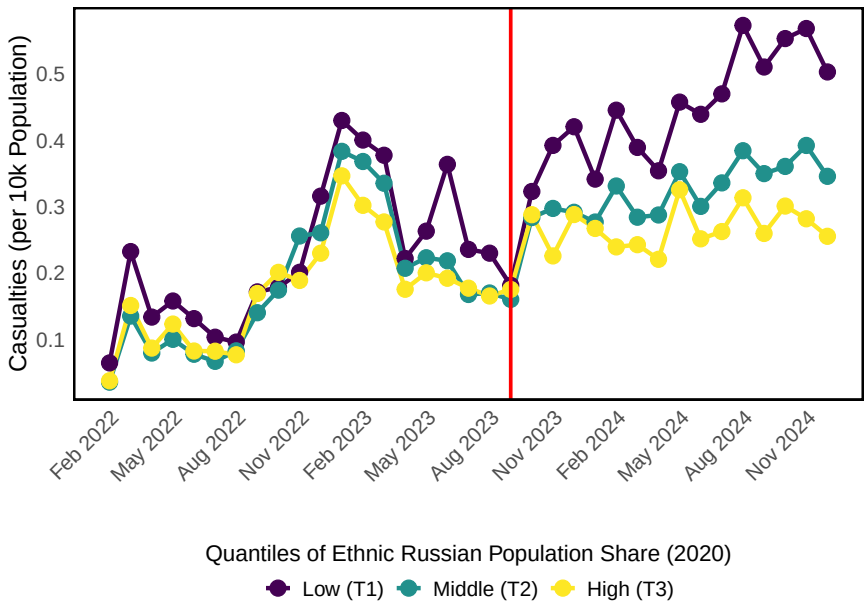


Panel B: Support for Putin



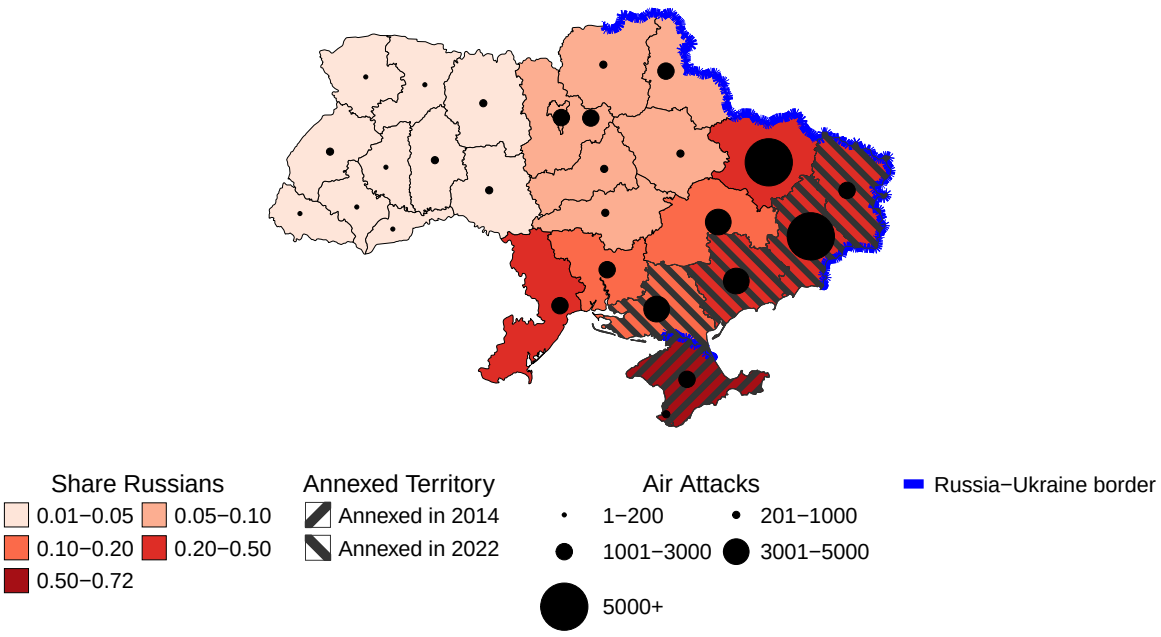
Note: Panels A and B report difference-in-differences event-study estimates of the effect of the ethnic Russian population share (2020) on provincial voter turnout and Putin's vote share, adjusted for electoral irregularities using the method proposed by Shpilkin (2009). The Shpilkin method infers excess incumbent votes from deviations relative to the distribution of votes for other candidates. Controls include urban population share, the old-age dependency ratio, and paved road density. Additional baseline covariates – real income per capita (2000), urban population share (2000), distance to Ukraine (km, 2000), the Against All vote share (2000), and an indicator for electronic voting in 2024 – are interacted with year indicators. All specifications include province and year fixed effects as well as subregion-by-year fixed effects. Standard errors are clustered at the province level (83 clusters; annexed Crimea and Sevastopol are excluded). The unit of observation is a province–year, and outcomes include electronic voting in 2024 where applicable. Solid and dashed red vertical lines mark the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Election results are from CEC Russia (2025), ethnic composition data from Rosstat (2022), and provincial controls from CEDAR (2024).

Figure 9: Russian Casualties Over Time by Terciles of Ethnic Russians



Note: The figure plots average monthly provincial casualties per 10,000 population since February 2022, separately for provinces in the bottom, middle, and top terciles of the ethnic Russian population share (measured in 2020), using data from Mediazona (2026). Annexed Ukrainian provinces are excluded from the sample. The red vertical line marks the death of Yevgeny Prigozhin in August 2023, which preceded a shift in Russia's recruitment strategy from prison-based enlistment toward broader civilian mobilization, particularly in regions with lower shares of ethnic Russians.

Figure 10: Russian Targets in Ukraine, By Province



Note: The map shows the provincial share of ethnic Russians based on the 2001 Ukrainian Population Census (27 provinces), together with the total number of air attacks recorded since 2022. Air attack data are from VIINA 2.0 (2026) and ethnic composition data from Ukrstat (2001). The blue line indicates the de facto Russia–Ukraine border as of January 2022. Territories annexed by Russia in 2014 and 2022 are indicated by striped shading.

Table 1: Ethnic Russians, Political Participation and Support for Putin: Post-Annexation and Post-Invasion

	(1)	(2)
Panel A		
Dependent variable:	Political Participation	
Share Russians 2020 × Post Annexation 2014 × Pre Invasion 2022	0.040	0.055
	(0.044)	(0.043)
Share Russians 2020 × Post Invasion 2022	0.146***	0.117**
	(0.054)	(0.052)
H0: Post Annexation Effect = Post Invasion Effect	$p < 0.01$	$p < 0.1$
Province FE	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes
Subregion × Year FE	Yes	Yes
Province Controls (Time-Varying)	No	Yes
Baseline Controls (Time-Invariant)	No	Yes
Mean Dep Var	0.696	0.696
R^2	0.776	0.824
Observations	498	498
Panel B		
Dependent variable:	Support for Putin	
Share Russians 2020 × Post Annexation 2014 × Pre Invasion 2022	0.145***	0.143***
	(0.029)	(0.036)
Share Russians 2020 × Post Invasion 2022	0.225***	0.180***
	(0.036)	(0.039)
H0: Post Annexation Effect = Post Invasion Effect	$p < 0.01$	p = 0.18
Province FE	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes
Subregion × Year FE	Yes	Yes
Province Controls (Time-Varying)	No	Yes
Baseline Controls (Time-Invariant)	No	Yes
Mean Dep Var	0.711	0.711
R^2	0.886	0.913
Observations	498	498

Note: Difference-in-differences estimates using Russian presidential elections in 2000–2024. The unit of observation is a province–year. Panel A reports turnout; Panel B reports Putin's vote share (Medvedev's vote share in 2008). Outcomes include electronic voting where applicable (available only in 2024). Post Annexation 2014 equals 1 for elections after March 2014; Pre Invasion 2022 and Post Invasion 2022 indicate elections before and after February 2022, respectively. Controls include urban population share, the old-age dependency ratio, and paved road density. Baseline covariates measured in 2000 – real income per capita, urban population share, distance to Ukraine, and the Against All vote share – as well as an indicator for electronic voting in 2024 are interacted with year indicators. All specifications include province, year, and subregion-by-year fixed effects. Standard errors are clustered at the province level (83 clusters; Crimea and Sevastopol excluded). Election results are from CEC Russia (2025), ethnic composition data from Rosstat (2022), and provincial controls from CEDAR (2024). $p < 0.01$, $p < 0.05$, $p < 0.1$.

Table 2: Nation Building vs Empire Building

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Panel A. Impact on Political Participation	Voter Turnout			
Share Russians 2020 × Post 2014 × Pre 2022	0.055	0.056	0.058	0.049
	(0.043)	(0.044)	(0.044)	(0.045)
Share Russians 2020 × Post 2022	0.117**	0.125**	0.121**	0.099*
	(0.052)	(0.054)	(0.053)	(0.055)
Share Russians 2020 × Post 2014 × Pre 2022 × Monuments (per 100)		-0.009		
		(0.036)		
Share Russians 2020 × Post 2022 × Monuments (per 100)		-0.044		
		(0.033)		
Share Russians 2020 × Post 2014 × Pre 2022 × WWII Monuments (per 100)			-0.128	
			(0.261)	
Share Russians 2020 × Post 2022 × WWII Monuments (per 100)			-0.182	
			(0.297)	
Share Russians 2020 × Post 2014 × Pre 2022 × Lenin Monuments (per 100)				2.071
				(4.914)
Share Russians 2020 × Post 2022 × Lenin Monuments (per 100)				9.034
				(6.447)
Province FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Subregion × Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Provincial Controls (Time-Varying)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Baseline Controls (Time-Invariant)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mean Dep Var	0.696	0.696	0.696	0.696
R^2	0.824	0.824	0.824	0.825
Observations	498	498	498	498
Panel B. Impact on Support for Putin	Putin Vote Share			
Share Russians 2020 × Post 2014 × Pre 2022	0.143***	0.151***	0.150***	0.147***
	(0.036)	(0.036)	(0.037)	(0.039)
Share Russians 2020 × Post 2022	0.180***	0.178***	0.177***	0.185***
	(0.039)	(0.040)	(0.041)	(0.045)
Share Russians 2020 × Post 2014 × Pre 2022 × Monuments (per 100)		-0.038		
		(0.026)		
Share Russians 2020 × Post 2022 × Monuments (per 100)		0.008		
		(0.031)		
Share Russians 2020 × Post 2014 × Pre 2022 × WWII Monuments (per 100)			-0.303	
			(0.250)	
Share Russians 2020 × Post 2022 × WWII Monuments (per 100)			0.168	
			(0.274)	
Share Russians 2020 × Post 2014 × Pre 2022 × Lenin Monuments (per 100)				-1.509
				(4.645)
Share Russians 2020 × Post 2022 × Lenin Monuments (per 100)				-2.112
				(6.046)
Province FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Subregion × Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Provincial Controls (Time-Varying)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Baseline Controls (Time-Invariant)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mean Dep Var	0.711	0.711	0.711	0.711
R^2	0.913	0.913	0.913	0.913
Observations	498	498	498	498

Note: Difference-in-differences estimates using province–year observations from six Russian presidential elections. Panel A reports turnout; Panel B reports Putin's vote share (including electronic voting). Monument variables measure registered cultural heritage sites per 100 residents, including WWII and Lenin monuments. Post 2014 and Post 2022 indicate elections after 2014 and 2022, respectively. Controls include urban population share, the old-age dependency ratio, and paved road density. Baseline covariates measured in 2000 – real income per capita, urban population share, distance to Ukraine, and the Against All vote share – as well as an indicator for electronic voting in 2024 are interacted with year indicators. All specifications include province, year, and subregion-by-year fixed effects. Standard errors are clustered by province (83 clusters); annexed and Russian-occupied provinces are excluded. Data sources are CEC Russia (2025), Rosstat (2022), Russian Ministry of Culture (2025), and CEDAR (2024). $p < 0.01$, $p < 0.05$, $p < 0.1$.

Table 3: Share Russians and Air Attacks on Ukraine

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Dependent variable:	Russian Bombings			
Share of Ethnic Russians 2001	12.499**	12.444**	12.447**	21.528***
	(3.430)	(3.384)	(3.437)	(2.813)
Dist to Russia		-0.002	-0.002	0.000
		(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.000)
Oil & Gas Assets Present			0.039	-0.157
			(0.465)	(0.347)
Occupied				7.001***
				(0.642)
Share of Ethnic Russians 2001 × Occupied				-26.029***
				(2.998)
Macro-Region FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mean Dep Var	1.641	1.641	1.641	1.641
R^2	0.600	0.605	0.605	0.687
Observations	25	25	25	25

Note: The table reports OLS estimates at the Ukrainian province (oblast) level. Aerial bombing data are aggregated over the period from February 24, 2022 to December 12, 2025. Macro-region fixed effects correspond to Western, Eastern, Central, and Southern Ukraine. Oil & Gas Assets Present is an indicator equal to 1 if the province contains major oil or natural gas facilities. Distance to Ukraine measures the shortest distance (in 1,000 km) from the provincial centroid to the de facto Russia–Ukraine border as of January 2022. Occupied is an indicator equal to 1 for the four provinces annexed by Russia in 2022. Air attack data are from VIINA 2.0 (2026) and ethnic composition data from Ukrstat (2001). $p < 0.01$, $p < 0.05$, $p < 0.1$.

A Appendix

A1 Variable Definitions and Description: Russian Side

Dependent Variables:

Political Participation = voter turnout in the presidential election, calculated as the total number of votes cast in polling stations located within a province divided by the total number of registered voters in polling stations located within that province. The measure includes e-voting in provinces where it was implemented in the 2024 election. Data are obtained from the CEDAR Elections Dataset (CEDAR, 2024).

Support for Putin = Vladimir Putin's vote share in the presidential election, calculated as the total number of votes cast for Putin in polling stations located within a province divided by the total number of votes cast in polling stations located within that province. The measure includes e-voting in provinces where it was implemented in the 2024 election. Data are obtained from the CEDAR Elections Dataset (CEDAR, 2024).

Independent Variables:

Share Russians 2020 = the share of provincial residents who self-identify as ethnically Russian, calculated as the number of residents identifying as ethnically Russian divided by the total provincial population. Data on ethnic composition in Russian provinces are taken from the 2020 All-Russian Population Census (Rosstat, 2022), with enumeration conducted in 2021 (respondents reporting information as of October 1, 2021) due to postponement related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Province Characteristics:

Real Income per capita = the average monthly wage of employees in a province expressed in constant 2000 rubles. The series is constructed using annual indices of real income. Data are obtained from To Be Precise (2025),a harmonized panel dataset that consolidates all editions of *Regions of Russia: Socio-Economic Indicators* published by Rosstat.

Urban Population Share = Share of the province's population residing in urban areas at the end of the year drawn from To Be Precise (2025), a harmonized panel dataset that consolidates all editions of *Regions of Russia: Socio-Economic Indicators* published by Rosstat.

Old-Age Dependency Ratio = Ratio of the population above working age to the

working-age population, measured at the end of the year drawn from To Be Precise (2025), a harmonized panel dataset that consolidates all editions of *Regions of Russia: Socio-Economic Indicators* published by Rosstat.

Paved Road Density = Total length of paved roads (in kilometers) per 1,000 square kilometers of territory drawn from To Be Precise (2025), a harmonized panel dataset that consolidates all editions of *Regions of Russia: Socio-Economic Indicators* published by Rosstat.

E-Voting 2024 = Indicator equal to 1 if the province participated in electronic voting in the 2024 presidential election. E-voting data was obtained from CEC Russia (2025).

Against All Vote Share 2000 = Share of "Against All" votes in the 2000 presidential election, calculated as the number of "Against All" votes divided by the total number of valid votes. Province-level election data was obtained from CEC Russia (2025).

Distance to Ukraine (km) = Shortest geodesic distance (in kilometers) between the Russian province polygon (ADM1) and the de jure Russia–Ukraine border (ADM0), using boundary shapefiles from the geoBoundaries database. Distances are computed in Python using `geopandas` for spatial handling and `geopy` for geodesic distance calculations.

Monuments (per 100) = Number of registered cultural heritage sites in the province per 100 residents as of 2025. Data obtained from the Unified State Register of Cultural Heritage Sites of the Peoples of the Russian Federation (Russian Ministry of Culture, 2025).

WWII Monuments (per 100) = Number of cultural heritage sites dedicated to World War II per 100 residents as of 2025. Data obtained from the Unified State Register of Cultural Heritage Sites of the Peoples of the Russian Federation (Russian Ministry of Culture, 2025).

Lenin Monuments (per 100) = Number of cultural heritage sites dedicated to Lenin per 100 residents as of 2025. Data obtained from the Unified State Register of Cultural Heritage Sites of the Peoples of the Russian Federation (Russian Ministry of Culture, 2025).

Casualties per 10k Population = the number of confirmed Russian military deaths attributed to a province based on the deceased's place of residence in a given month, normalized per 10,000 residents. Individual-level data on confirmed Russian military casualties in the war in Ukraine are obtained from Mediazona's casualty database (Mediazona, 2026).

Ethnic Russian Share of Casualties = the share of confirmed Russian military deaths attributed to a province based on the deceased's place of residence in a given month that are predicted to be ethnically Russian. Individual-level data on confirmed Russian military casualties in the war in Ukraine are obtained from Mediazona's casualty database (Mediazona, 2026). The measure is constructed in two steps. First, each individual's

ethnicity is predicted from their first and last name using the machine-learning classifier developed by Bessudnov et al. (2023). Second, for each province-month, we compute the fraction of casualties predicted to be ethnic Russian by dividing the number of individuals classified as Russian by the total number of confirmed casualties associated with that province.

A2 Variable Definitions and Description: Ukrainian Side

Dependent Variables:

Air Attacks = the intensity of air attacks in a Ukrainian province and is defined as the cumulative number of air attacks targeting the province between February 24, 2022 and December 19, 2025. Data on air attacks are obtained from the VIINA 2.0 dataset (VIINA 2.0, 2026).

Independent Variables:

Share Russians 2001 = the share of provincial residents who self-identify as ethnically Russian, calculated as the number of residents identifying as ethnically Russian divided by the total provincial population. Data on ethnic composition in Ukrainian provinces are taken from the 2001 All-Ukrainian Population Census (Ukrstat, 2001).

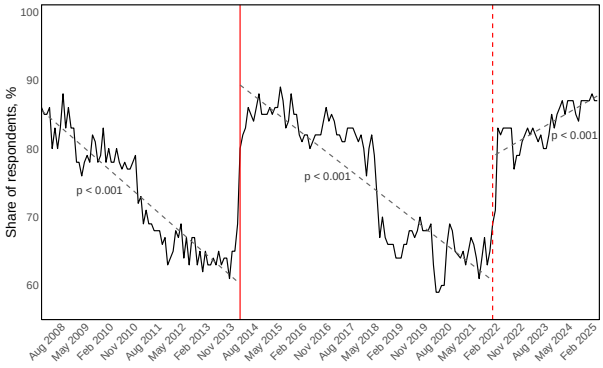
Province Characteristics:

Oil & Gas Assets Present = Indicator equal to 1 if the province contains oil or gas assets.

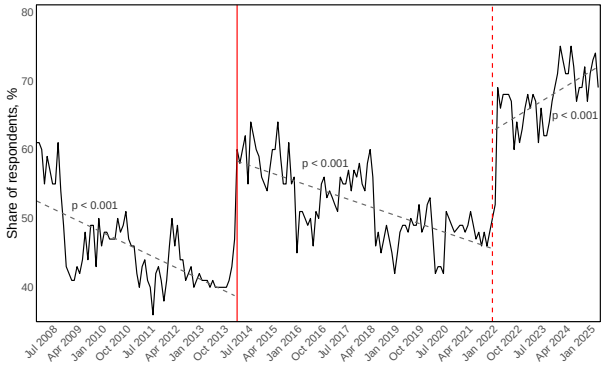
Distance to Russia (km) = Shortest geodesic distance (in kilometers) between the province polygon and the de facto Russia–Ukraine border as of January 2022. Country boundaries are obtained from the Natural Earth dataset (large scale), and the bilateral border is constructed as the intersection of the Russian and Ukrainian country boundaries. Distances are computed in R using the `sf` package for spatial operations.

Occupied = Indicator equal to 1 if the province has been under Russian occupation since 2022. These are Donetsk Oblast, Zaporizhzhia oblast, Luhansk Oblast, and Kherson oblast.

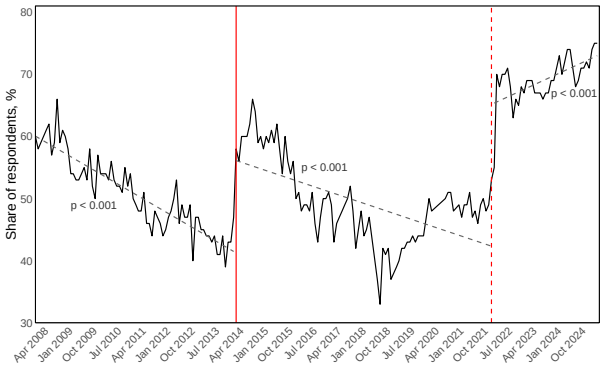
Figure A1: Public Approval of Government Authorities Over Time



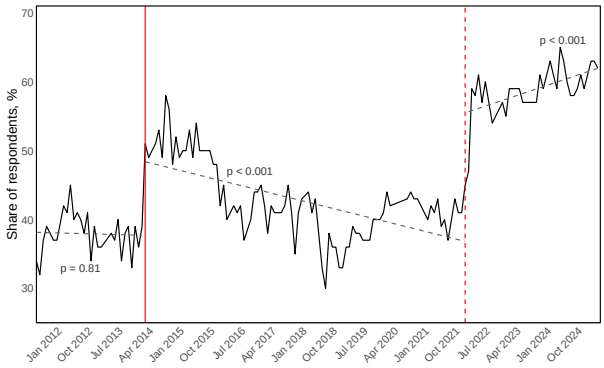
Public Approval of Vladimir Putin



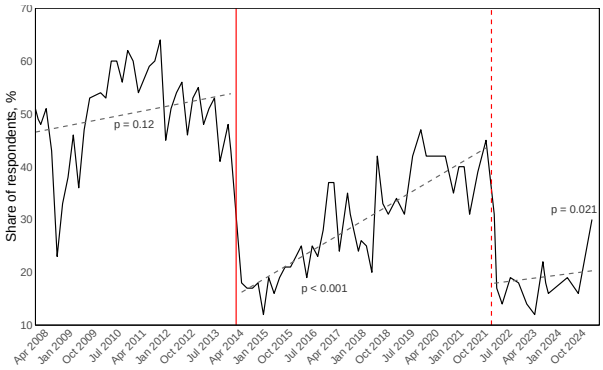
Public Approval of the State of Affairs in Russia Over Time



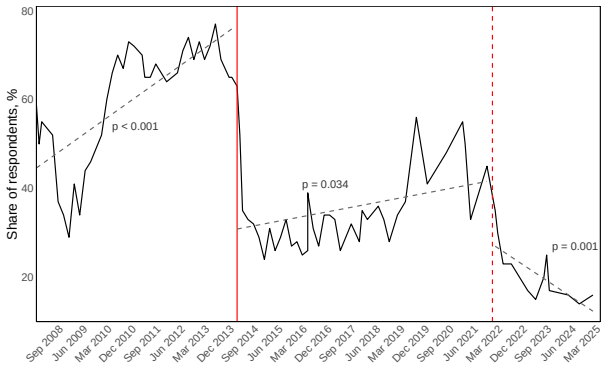
Public Approval of the Government



Public Approval of the State Legislature (Duma)



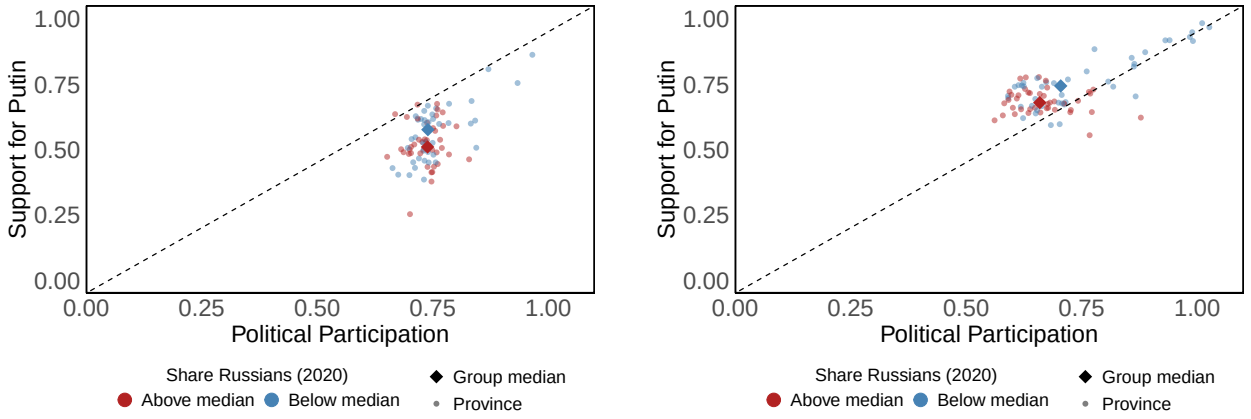
Attitude Towards the United States



Attitude Towards Ukraine

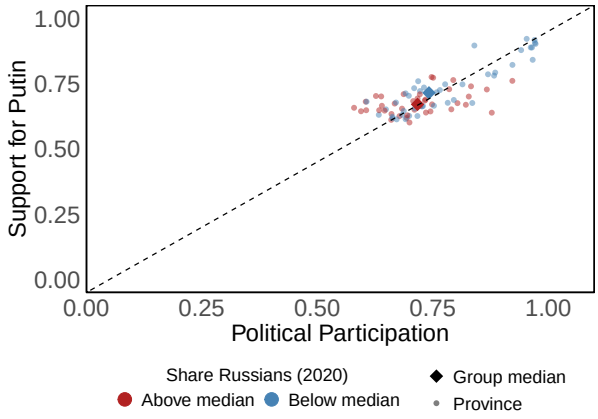
Note: The figure presents the share of respondents reporting "yes" in response to the questions: (a) "Do you approve of the activities of V. Putin as President (or Prime Minister) of Russia?"; (b) "Do you think things in the country today are generally going in the right direction?"; (c) "Do you approve of the activities of the Government of Russia?"; (d) "Do you approve of the activities of the State Duma of Russia?". (e) and (f) presents the share of respondents reporting "Good", in response to the question: "How do you generally feel about [foreign country] at the moment?" Data come from regular opinion polls by Levada Center (2025). The solid red vertical line marks the annexation of Crimea in March 2014, and the dashed red vertical line marks the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The dashed grey lines represent ordinary least squares (OLS) regression lines. The p-value refers to the slope of the partial regression.

Figure A3: Voter Turnout and Support for Putin: Above vs. Below Median Ethnic Russian Provinces

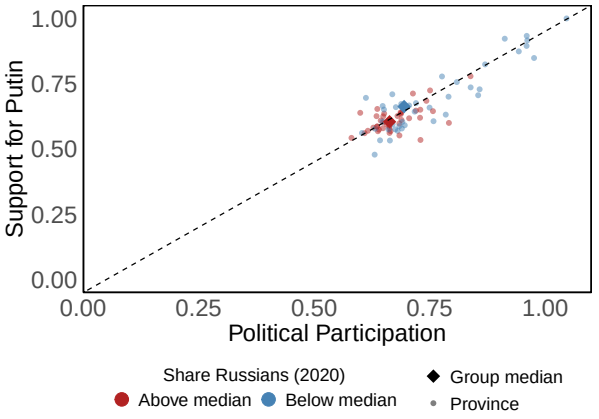


Election Year: 2000

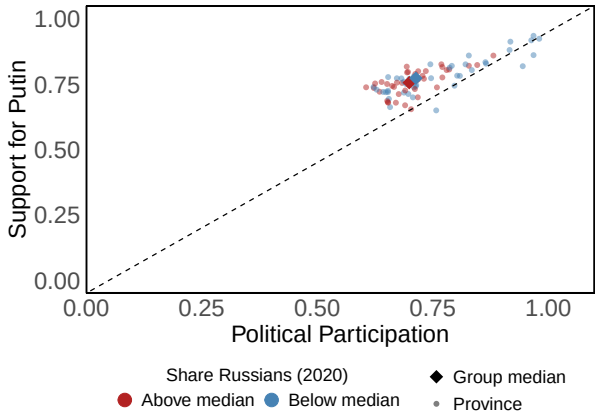
Election Year: 2004



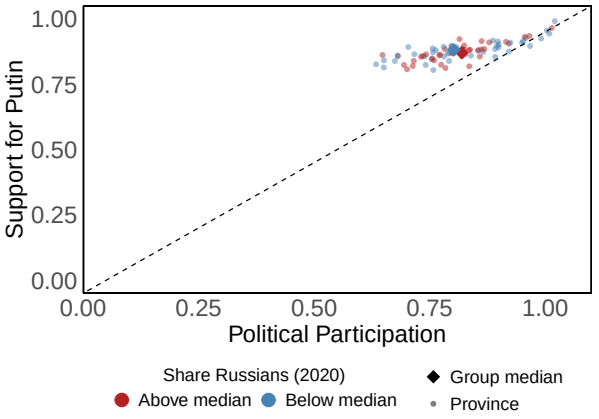
Election Year: 2008



Election Year: 2012



Election Year: 2018



Election Year: 2024

Note: Each panel presents the relationship between voter turnout and Putin's vote share in a given presidential election year. Points represent Russian provinces and are colored according to whether the province's share of Russians in 2020 is above or below the median (79.43%). Diamonds indicate the group median (turnout, vote share) within each year for provinces above and below the median ethnic Russian share. The dashed line denotes the 45-degree line. Axes are fixed to the unit interval to facilitate comparison across election years. Election results are from CEC Russia (2025) and ethnic composition data from Rosstat (2022).

A3 Figures and Tables

Table A1: Quotes of Putin on Discrimination of Russians in Ukraine

English Quote	**Russian Quote**
"They passed a law on indigenous peoples and declared Russians living in that territory – on their own historic land – as non-indigenous... **Russians** and the Russian-speaking population **are simply being pushed out of their historical lands**."	"Приняли закон о коренных народах, объявили русских, проживающих на этой территории, на их собственной территории, некоренным народом... **Просто выдавливают русских** и русскоязычное население **с их исторических территорий**".
Source: TASS. (2021, December 23). Putin says indigenous peoples law excludes Russians in Ukraine. https://tass.ru/politika/13281223	
"**They began suppressing Russian culture, the Russian language** ..."	"**Начали подавлять и русскую культуру, и русский язык** ..."
Source: TASS. (2022, December 22). Putin: Russian culture and language were suppressed in Ukraine, but no one noticed it. https://tass.ru/politika/16668285	
"**In Ukraine, hatred of everything Russian has become the official ideology** ..."	**"На Украине официальной идеологией стала ненависть ко всему русскому."** ...
Source: Putin, V. (2023, February 21). Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly [Speech transcript]. President of Russia. http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/74978	

Note: The table reports selected public statements by Vladimir Putin concerning the status of Russians and Russian speakers in Ukraine. The left column provides the English version of each quote; the right column presents the original Russian text. Boldface indicates key phrases referenced in the analysis. Sources are official transcripts and TASS reports, as cited.

Table A2: Description of variables: Russian Side

Variable	Description
Dependent Variables	
Political Participation	Voter turnout in the presidential election (total votes cast divided by the number of registered voters). Includes e-voting where available in 2024.
Support for Putin	Vote share for Putin in the presidential election (votes for Putin divided by total votes cast). Includes e-voting where available in 2024.
Independent Variables	
Share Russians 2020	Share of residents self-identifying as ethnically Russian in the 2020 All-Russian Census (ethnic Russian population divided by total population).
Province Characteristics	
Real Income per Capita	Average monthly wage in the province, measured in constant 2000 rubles.
Urban Population Share	Share of the province's population residing in urban areas at the end of the year.
Old-Age Dependency Ratio	Ratio of the population above working age to the working-age population, measured at the end of the year.
Paved Road Density	Total length of paved roads (in kilometers) per 1,000 square kilometers of territory.
E-Voting 2024	Indicator equal to 1 if the province participated in electronic voting in the 2024 presidential election.
Against All Vote Share 2000	Share of "Against All" votes in the 2000 presidential election, calculated as the number of "Against All" votes divided by the total number of valid votes.
Distance to Ukraine (km)	Shortest distance (in kilometers) between the province polygon and the de jure Russia–Ukraine border.
Monuments (per 100)	Number of registered cultural heritage sites in the province per 100 residents as of 2025.
WWII Monuments (per 100)	Number of cultural heritage sites dedicated to World War II per 100 residents as of 2025.
Lenin Monuments (per 100)	Number of cultural heritage sites dedicated to Lenin per 100 residents as of 2025.
Casualties per 10k Population	Number of confirmed Russian military deaths attributed to a province based on the deceased's place of residence in a given month, normalized per 10,000 residents.
Ethnic Russian Share of Casualties	Share of confirmed Russian military deaths attributed to a province based on the deceased's place of residence in a given month that are predicted to be ethnically Russian.

Note: This table reports variable definitions. All outcomes are measured at the province-year level unless otherwise indicated.

Table A3: Description of variables: Ukrainian Side

Variable	Description
Dependent Variables	
Air Attacks	Cumulative number of air attacks targeting a Ukrainian province between February 24, 2022 and December 19, 2025.
Independent Variables	
Share Russians 2001	Share of residents self-identifying as ethnically Russian in the 2001 All-Ukrainian Census (ethnic Russian population divided by total population).
Province Characteristics	
Oil & Gas Assets Present	Indicator equal to 1 if the province contains oil or gas assets.
Distance to Russia (km)	Shortest distance (in kilometers) to the de facto Russia–Ukraine border as of January 2022.
Occupied	Indicator equal to 1 if the province has been under Russian occupation since 2022.

Note: This table reports variable definitions. All outcomes are measured at the province level.

Table A4: Statistics Summary: Data on Russia

	Mean	SD	Min	Max	N
Panel A: Dependent Variables (varies by province-year)					
Voter Turnout	0.696	0.100	0.511	0.996	498
Putin Vote Share	0.711	0.131	0.252	0.999	498
Adjusted Voter Turnout	0.622	0.097	0.010	0.918	498
Adjusted Putin Vote Share	0.681	0.137	0.000	0.982	498
Panel B: Ethnic Shares (varies by province)					
Share Russians (2020)	0.688	0.234	0.006	0.910	498
Panel C: Control Variables (varies by province-year)					
Real Income per capita	4412.162	2895.055	587.000	22840.094	498
Urban Pop Share	69.653	13.069	26.000	100.000	498
Old Dep Ratio	360.817	103.122	64.000	601.000	498
Paved Road Density	197.250	292.971	0.800	2542.406	498
Panel D: Baseline District Characteristics (varies by province)					
E-voting (2024)	0.325	0.469	0.000	1.000	498
Against All Votes Share (2000)	0.016	0.007	0.002	0.060	498
Real Income per capita (2000)	2047.524	1318.875	587.000	7998.000	498
Urban Pop Share (2000)	68.759	13.474	26.100	100.000	498
Distance to Ukraine (km)	2710.567	3329.179	0.000	13646.481	498
Monuments (per 100)	0.133	0.143	0.012	0.721	498
WWII Monuments (per 100)	0.011	0.020	0.000	0.114	498
Lenin Monuments (per 100)	0.001	0.002	0.000	0.011	498

Note: This table reports summary statistics for the main variables used in the analysis of Russian side of Russia-Ukraine war. Panel A presents province-year electoral outcomes, including voter turnout and Putin's vote share (both official and adjusted measures). Panel B reports baseline ethnic composition, measured as the share of Russians in 2020. Panel C presents time-varying province-level control variables, including real income per capita, urban population share, the old-age dependency ratio, and paved road density. Panel D reports baseline provincial characteristics, including the presence of electronic voting in 2024, the share of "Against All" votes in 2000, baseline real income and urbanization levels (measured in 2000), distance to the de jure Russia–Ukraine border, and measures of exposure to imperial symbolism (monuments per 100 residents). For each variable, the table reports the mean, minimum, maximum, and standard deviation. The final column reports the number of observations in the estimation sample. The sample includes 83 Russian provinces observed over six presidential election years (2000, 2004, 2008, 2012, 2018, and 2024). The sample excludes Crimea and Sevastopol, which have been occupied since 2014, as well as the four Ukrainian provinces occupied by Russia since 2022.

Table A5: Statistics Summary: Data on Ukraine

	Mean	SD	Min	Max	N
Panel A: Dependent Variables (varies by province-year)					
Air Attacks since 2022 (×1,000)	1.641	2.196	0.022	9.505	25
Panel B: Ethnic Shares (varies by province)					
Share Russians 2001	0.111	0.109	0.012	0.390	25
Panel C: Control Variables (varies by province-year)					
Oil & Gas Assets Present	0.200	0.408	0.000	1.000	25
Distance to Russia (km)	216.118	203.022	0.000	672.302	25
Occupied	0.160	0.374	0.000	1.000	25

Note: This table reports summary statistics for the main variables used in the analysis. Panel A presents province-level air attack outcomes, measured as the total number of air attacks on each Ukrainian province since 2022 (in thousands). Panel B reports baseline ethnic composition, measured as the share of Russians in 2001. Panel C reports baseline provincial characteristics, including the presence of oil and gas assets, distance to the de facto Russia–Ukraine border as of January 2022, and an indicator equal to one if a province has been occupied by Russia since 2022. For each variable, the table reports the mean, minimum, maximum, and standard deviation. The final column reports the number of observations in the estimation sample. Crimea and Sevastopol are not included in the sample.

A4 Sample Construction

This subsection aims to document the construction process of our central Russian province-year panel. Polling stations located outside the Russian Federation, as well as those located in annexed territories, are excluded from the sample. Annexed territories include Crimea and Sevastopol (where elections were held in 2018 and 2024) and Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson (where elections were held in 2024). Thus, the sample consists of 83 provinces observed in 6 presidential elections between 2000 and 2024.