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THE DOMESTIC POLITICAL ECONOMY OF 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. Yet they can also serve domestic political ends. This paper studies how Russia's escalations against Ukraine reshaped support for the regime and redistributed the burdens of war across the population. Combining ethnic Russian shares with election and independent polling data, we exploit two sharp geopolitical shocks, the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the 2022 full-scale invasion, in a difference-in-differences event-study design. We find that provinces with larger ethnic Russian populations exhibit sharp increases in support for President Putin following both episodes. At the same time, battlefield casualties fall disproportionately on regions with lower ethnic Russian shares, and attitudes toward the US and EU deteriorate sharply. On the Ukrainian side, Russian attacks are concentrated in areas with higher ethnic Russian shares rather than in resource-rich provinces. Explanations based on material extraction, Soviet symbolism, or differential exposure to external threats do not account for these patterns. Instead, the evidence is more consistent with ethnic identity playing a central role in the domestic political economy of the war. Our conclusions remain similar in fraud-adjusted electoral outcomes, with alternative ethnicity measures, under bounded departures from parallel trends, and after accounting for several baseline regional differences.

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1 Introduction

How does external military escalation reshape domestic politics inside an authoritarian multinational state? If war generates political returns among core constituencies, the regime may seek not only to mobilize core groups politically, but also to preserve those gains by redistributing wartime costs away from favored groups. Under this logic, support, mobilization, and casualties need not move uniformly across space. Instead, the cross-regional pattern of who supports, who bears costs, and where violence falls becomes informative about the domestic political economy of war. Against this backdrop, Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 provide an unusual opportunity to study how external conflict is used to reinforce internal political support through identity mobilization.

More concretely, we view war as helping solve a domestic political coordination problem. When support for the regime is weakening, individuals may be uncertain about how others view the government and whether expressing support is socially or politically advantageous. External conflict provides a focal event through which the regime can realign expectations. This operates through three complementary channels. First, conflict activates ethnic identity, increasing the salience of belonging to the national in-group. Second, state media coordinates beliefs by supplying a common narrative that frames the conflict as morally justified and broadly supported. Third, the resulting alignment between identity and state messaging generates observable political behavior, including higher turnout and stronger support for the incumbent. Under this account, war generates political returns not only by changing individual beliefs, but by synchronizing them across supporters.

We contrast this ethnic consolidation account with a more conventional territorial or material one. Classic accounts emphasize external motives such as security, territorial expansion, and material extraction ([Machiavelli, 1532](#); [Hirschman, 1945](#)). Yet, we argue that leaders may initiate or escalate foreign conflict to consolidate support at home, rally the public, and redirect attention away from internal challenges. Under an empire-building or extraction logic, military activity should concentrate in economically valuable or strategically important places, and domestic political responses should not vary systematically with ethnic composition. Under an ethnic nation-building logic, by contrast, political gains should be strongest in regions populated more heavily by the ethnic core, wartime costs may be shifted toward peripheral regions, and violence in Ukraine should align more closely with the geography of Russian identity than with resource endowments alone. This effect should be strongest where identity-based narratives (such as the protection of ethnic Russians) are most salient and credible, amplifying the political returns to conflict in those

regions. These accounts need not be mutually exclusive in principle, but they generate distinct cross-regional predictions that we bring to the data.¹

Russia is a natural setting in which to study these questions. The country is formally multinational, but ethnic Russians occupy a privileged place in state ideology, language policy, and constitutional discourse. Since the early 2000s, the Kremlin has increasingly emphasized ethnic Russians as the “state-forming people,” while simultaneously curtailing regional autonomy and centralizing political control. The 2020 constitutional amendment defining Russian as the language of the “state-forming people” (*государствообразующий народ*) made this hierarchy explicit. This political environment creates scope for external war to differentially mobilize regions depending on their ethnic composition.

Against this backdrop, during a June 2014 press conference in Vienna, Vladimir Putin emphasized that “*We will always protect ethnic Russians in Ukraine,*” as a justification for annexing Crimea. The Ukraine war emerged as a conflict over identity, rooted in longstanding Russian claims that Ukrainians are part of a single “Russian” people (Arel and Driscoll, 2023, p. 47-57). In February 2022, Putin made an hour-long address on national television in which he claimed that Kyiv was perpetrating genocide against ethnic Russians and announced that Russia would invade Donbas to ‘protect’ them (Arel and Driscoll, 2023, p. 196). The Russian state media amplified this propaganda narrative, portraying the invasion as a defense of ethnic Russians in Ukraine from genocide, even as scholars documented that no such genocide was occurring (Popova and Shevel, 2024; Kuzio and Wawrzonek, 2025). We argue that this state media-propagated narrative was more persuasive in parts of Russia that had larger ethnic Russian populations. This mechanism generates a sharp cross-regional prediction: regions with larger ethnic Russian populations should exhibit stronger political responses to escalation, particularly where exposure to state media is higher.

Our analysis combines several sources of regional and cross-border variation. We assemble region-level panel data on voter turnout, incumbent vote share, war casualties, survey attitudes, media penetration, monuments, and a broad set of pre-war regional characteristics. Electoral outcomes come from Russia’s Central Election Commission. Russian war losses since 2022 come from Mediazona (2026). Attitudinal outcomes come from nationally representative survey data. Cultural heritage sites come from Russia’s Ministry of Culture. We combine these with regional ethnic composition from the 2020 Russian Census, Ukrainian ethnic composition from the 2001 Ukrainian Census, and geocoded data on

¹In this sense, our framework sits alongside two prominent interpretations of the conflict: one emphasizing Russian imperial ideology and the personalistic structure of Putin’s regime (Sonin, 2024), and another emphasizing geopolitical threat, especially NATO expansion and Western integration of Ukraine (Posen, 2025). We focus instead on the war’s domestic political logic within Russia.

Russian attacks inside Ukraine. We also draw on additional regional covariates to discipline the identification strategy, including income, urbanization, human development, road density, demographic structure, and measures of geographic and military exposure. At a bird’s-eye level, these data allow us to study domestic political returns, wartime burden-sharing, and the geography of external violence within a single empirical framework, while also addressing the most obvious regional confounds.

Figure 1, Panel A, provides a first indication that military escalation coincides with sharp shifts in political sentiment. Using nationally representative survey data, the figure shows that declining approval of President Putin reverses abruptly after both the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the 2022 full-scale invasion. Similar discontinuities appear for approval of the government, the state legislature, and perceptions of the general state of affairs (Figure 1, Panels B–D). These breaks are immediate, persistent, and tightly aligned with the escalation episodes, rather than with slower-moving economic or institutional trends. While these aggregate patterns are informative, they mask substantial within-country heterogeneity. If war functions as a tool of ethnic nation-building, the resulting political mobilization should be disproportionately concentrated in regions with larger shares of ethnic Russians. This prediction motivates our core empirical analysis.

We document six 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, support for President Putin rose significantly more in regions with higher ethnic Russian shares. At the aggregate level, both escalations follow periods of declining approval and generate sharp reversals in these trends, consistent with large and immediate domestic political returns to external conflict.

Second, wartime costs are selectively redistributed. Battlefield casualties are disproportionately borne by regions with lower ethnic Russian shares, consistent with strategic cost management in which political gains are concentrated among core constituencies while the human costs of war are shifted toward more peripheral regions.

Third, external attitudes shift in tandem with escalation. Survey evidence shows abrupt declines in favorability toward Ukraine, the United States, and the European Union following both episodes. These changes are large and discontinuous, consistent with the active construction of an “us versus them” boundary that turns foreign conflict into a domestically salient political divide.

Fourth, state media amplifies these political returns. Using variation in pre-war television penetration, we show that regions more exposed to state-controlled television exhibit significantly larger post-escalation increases in incumbent support. This pattern is consistent with state media disseminating narratives centered on the protection of ethnic

Russians (including claims of persecution or genocide in Ukraine), which makes the conflict more salient and persuasive in regions where co-ethnic ties are stronger.

Fifth, these patterns lead to a consolidation of ethnic identity toward a Russian ethnostate. Between the 2010 and 2020 Censuses, we document a shift in self-identification: more individuals identify as Russian, while fewer identify as Ukrainian. In contrast, we find limited evidence in favor of a purely imperial or Soviet-symbolic account (as opposed to Russian ethnic identity). When we measure local Soviet or imperial symbolism using the prevalence of World War II monuments and related heritage markers, these variables 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.

Sixth, on the Ukrainian side, military targeting aligns more closely with ethnic geography than with extractive resources. Russian attacks are concentrated in provinces with higher ethnic Russian shares, while oil, gas, and other resource measures do not explain the spatial pattern of violence. This evidence is more consistent with identity-linked territorial objectives than with a purely resource-driven logic.

Our empirical analysis exploits two sharp geopolitical shocks: the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. We estimate difference-in-differences event-study specifications comparing regions with higher and lower ethnic Russian population shares before and after these escalations. The identifying variation comes from cross-regional differences in ethnic composition that long predate the wars and are highly persistent over time. Our identifying assumption is that, absent escalation, regions with higher and lower ethnic Russian shares would have followed similar political trends.

Interpreting these estimates requires further insight on what ethnic Russian population share further correlates with. For instance, ethnic Russian shares may be correlated with other regional characteristics (like geography), be richer, more urban, more politically central, demographically different, or differently exposed to the war. The post-shock variation helps address this concern by shifting attention from cross-sectional differences in levels to differential changes around the escalation episodes. Even so, if these regional characteristics themselves shape post-escalation political responses, then differences in turnout, incumbent support, or casualties could still reflect those underlying factors rather than ethnic composition itself. To better isolate the role of ethnicity, our specifications include granular fixed effects together with increasingly rich controls for regional characteristics that may evolve over time. These include baseline income per capita interacted with election-year fixed effects, as well as time-varying measures of urbanization, human development, road density, age structure, and dependency ratios. We also allow for region-specific linear

trends, account for military and geographic exposure using distance to Ukraine, distance to Moscow, and distance to the front line interacted with time, and include broader electoral controls, including opposition vote share. Across these specifications, our estimates remain similar and stable.

We further examine several empirical concerns. Parallel trends may hold only approximately, comparison regions may be imperfect matches, and electoral outcomes may reflect manipulation. To address these issues, we use Synthetic Difference-in-Differences (Arkhangelsky et al., 2021) to rebalance the control group based on pre-treatment outcomes, apply the bounded-trend sensitivity analysis of Rambachan and Roth (2023), and re-estimate the main results using fraud-adjusted electoral outcomes following Shpilkin (2009). The resulting estimates remain close to the baseline.

Finally, we investigate the role of harking back to the Soviet empire (as opposed to ethnic Russians), and ask whether symbolic markers of Soviet or imperial identity move together with the political mobilization we document. Using geocoded data on cultural heritage monuments from Russia’s Ministry of Culture, we find no differential post-2014 or post-2022 change in the salience or maintenance of these sites in regions with higher ethnic Russian shares. These symbolic markers correlate strongly with Communist Party vote share in pre-war elections, confirming that they capture Soviet nostalgia, but they do not predict the post-escalation political shifts we study. The political response we document is therefore not accompanied by a parallel intensification of Soviet symbolic investment.

The evidence points to ethnic nation consolidation as an important domestic political logic of war. Material extraction, Soviet symbolism, and simple measures of geographic exposure do not account for the patterns we document. External conflict appears to strengthen the ethnic core, redistribute wartime costs toward the periphery, and shape violence in ways that align more closely with identity than with resources alone. These patterns are consistent with a mechanism in which state media amplifies identity-based narratives (particularly claims about protecting ethnic Russians abroad) thereby generating stronger political responses in regions where such appeals are more salient.

We contribute 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 (Alesina and Reich, 2015; Yanagizawa-Drott, 2014; Adena et al., 2015; Rohner and Zhuravskaya, 2025). A closely related strand examines how cross-border media exposure shapes nationalist attitudes and ethnic hostility (DellaVigna et al., 2014; Rohner et al., 2013). We provide evidence that interstate war itself can function as a nation-building instrument within a multinational state. Indeed, Kuzio and Wawrzonek (2025) posit that Russia’s

invasion of Ukraine is rooted in a nationalistic ideology that denies Ukraine’s legitimacy as a separate nation, and the war reflects long-run features of Russian identity and nation-building (rather than short-run strategic or security considerations). Following Russia’s escalation against Ukraine, political participation and support for the incumbent increase disproportionately in regions with higher shares of ethnic Russians, while 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, particularly when state-controlled media disseminates narratives linking the conflict to the protection of co-ethnics abroad.

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; Rozenas and Zhukov (2019) show that mass repression can generate lasting political loyalty when the threat of retribution is credible, highlighting how coercive instruments reshape the political opportunity structure for opposition. Popova and Shevel (2024) argue that as Ukraine consolidated an independent, pluralistic (pro-EU) national identity, Russia came to view it as an illegitimate ‘anti-Russia’ project. 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 as internal coalition management, consistent with evidence that coercive capacity itself may be structured along ethnic lines in this context (Driscoll et al., 2025).

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). Recent work also emphasizes broader political and historical motivations for the Russia–Ukraine conflict (Sonin, 2024). 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.² By showing that political gains are concentrated in identity-aligned regions and that territorial targeting aligns with ethnic geography rather than resource

²A logic that resonates with recent work emphasizing the strategic and political underpinnings of the Russia–Ukraine conflict (Driscoll and Arel, 2025).

endowments, we provide micro-level evidence on how identity-based incentives can sustain costly escalation even between economically intertwined partners.

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).³ 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 in-

³See also, (Korovkin and Makarin, 2023).

cludes 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. Mean-

while, 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.

Moreover, 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. The Russian government capitalized on the Maidan events, promoted a narrative of ‘civil war,’ and quickly annexed Crimea ([Arel and Driscoll, 2023](#)). 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. This framing was reinforced by state-controlled media, which repeatedly advanced claims that ethnic Russians and Russian speakers in Ukraine faced persecution or even genocide—claims that have been widely discredited but were central to the Kremlin’s justificatory narrative ([Kuzio and Wawrzonek, 2025](#); [Popova and Shevel, 2024](#)).

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.

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 2010 and then 2020 Population Censuses (Rosstat, 2022). Although the 2020 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, whereas the 2010 census provides a measure before the Crimean annexation.

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 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 9 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 ([Zhukov and Ayers, 2023](#)). 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.

State Media Penetration. To approximate regional variation in exposure to federal television broadcasting, we use the share of each region’s population covered by terrestrial digital television broadcasting in the first quarter of 2014. The measure is based on official regional coverage statistics published by the Federal State Unitary Enterprise Research Institute of Radio (FGUP NIIR, *ФГУП НИИР*), which combine population data with information on commissioned digital transmission stations to estimate the share of residents with technical access to digital television signals. Average national coverage in the first quarter of 2014 was 85.03%, with substantial regional variation across regions (Figure A2) ([FGUP NIIR, 2014](#)).

In the context of the Russia–Ukraine conflict, this media environment was used to disseminate narratives emphasizing the protection of ethnic Russians abroad, including claims of persecution and genocide in Ukraine. Variation in media penetration therefore captures not only exposure to state control, but also exposure to these specific identity-based narratives.

Regional Newspapers Content. To trace how regional media narratives evolved around the annexation of Crimea, we construct a monthly panel of narrative scores from regional state media texts. For each month spanning one year before and one year after March 2014, we draw a random sample of regional news articles from the Interfax archive, stratifying the sample across terciles of regional ethnic Russian population share to ensure balanced coverage of regions with different ethnic composition. We then score each article using GPT-4, which assigns separate nation-building and empire-building scores on a 0–100 scale based on sentence-level coding; the full prompt is reproduced in Appendix A6. Nation-building captures references to shared national identity, collective belonging, historical unity, and the protection of compatriots. Empire-building captures references to territorial power, geopolitical dominance, imperial continuity, and state hierarchy. Scores are first assigned at the sentence level and then aggregated to the article level as the mean sentence score. This yields monthly regional averages that allow us to trace shifts in narrative emphasis around the annexation. In practice, the nation-building dimension captures precisely the types of narratives emphasized during the conflict, including references to protecting ethnic Russians and claims of external or internal threats to co-ethnics.

Russian Cultural Heritage Monuments and Sites. To proxy a province’s historical exposure to imperial and Soviet symbolism, we use counts of registered cultural heritage monuments from the Unified State Register of Cultural Heritage Sites of the Peoples of the Russian Federation ([Russian Ministry of Culture, 2025](#)). We construct two measures: the total number of registered monuments and monuments dedicated to World War II, each normalized by provincial population and expressed per 100 residents. These monument counts are intended to capture variation in the symbolic landscape of imperial and Soviet identity across provinces, rather than any direct channel of political influence. To assess face validity, Appendix Table A13 reports correlations between our monument measures and the Communist Party vote share in the 2012 presidential election. Provinces with a higher density of empire-linked monuments, such as statues dedicated to the fallen soldiers of the Red Army in the WWII, Heroes of the Soviet Union, collective Soviet sacrifice, exhibit higher Communist vote shares (correlation coefficient = 0.001, p-value of = 0.045), consistent with the interpretation that monument density reflects a deeper reservoir of imperial nostalgia and Soviet attachment. This association is illustrative rather than causal, but it does suggest that the measures capture meaningful variation in the symbolic and political identity of a province.⁴

⁴Later, when we interact post-escalation indicators with monument density, a null result is informative: it indicates that the political mobilization we document is not concentrated in provinces where this pre-existing symbolic infrastructure is strongest, and therefore cannot be attributed to a reactivation of imperial or Soviet identity narratives.

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 Results

4.1 Opinions on the War

A central point of our analysis is that major escalations in Ukraine occurred at moments when domestic political support for the regime was weakening. In this sense, war is not only a response to external developments but also a tool for managing internal political disillusionment. The timing of both the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the 2022 full-scale invasion is consistent with a pattern in which declining approval is followed by a sharp reversal coinciding with external conflict.

Figure 1 presents time series from nationally representative opinion polls. Panel (a) shows approval of President Putin, Panel (b) tracks perceptions of the country’s direction, Panel (c) reports approval of the federal government, and Panel (d) focuses on the State Duma. Despite measuring distinct aspects of political sentiment, all four series display a remarkably similar structure. From the late 2000s through 2013, approval steadily erodes across the board. This decline is not abrupt but persistent, suggesting a gradual weakening of the regime’s standing rather than a short-lived shock.

This downward trend is sharply interrupted in 2014. The annexation of Crimea coincides with a discrete and immediate increase in approval across all measures. The magnitude of this shift is striking: approval of Putin rises by more than 25 percentage points within a short window, and similar jumps are observed for the government and broader perceptions of national conditions. This is not merely a stabilization of support, but a reversal of a multi-year decline. Following this surge, approval remains elevated for several years before beginning to drift downward again in the late 2010s.

A similar pattern emerges around the 2022 invasion. Once again, approval metrics are on a declining trajectory in the years leading up to the escalation. And once again, the onset of war coincides with a sharp increase in support. The recurrence of this pattern across two distinct geopolitical episodes suggests that these are not isolated coincidences, but part of a broader political dynamic in which external conflict generates substantial short-run domestic political returns.

The size and consistency of these swings are important. They indicate that war, and the narratives surrounding it, are capable of producing large shifts in mass political sentiment, even in a setting where media is heavily controlled and political competition is limited. From the perspective of the regime, the experience of 2014 likely provided a clear signal: external confrontation, framed appropriately, can consolidate support and re-anchor political legitimacy. The 2022 escalation can be understood, at least in part, as occurring in the shadow of this earlier experience.

The timing of these escalations further reinforces this interpretation. Figure [A1](#) juxtaposes domestic approval trends with key external developments, including NATO expansion and other geopolitical events. While these external factors are often emphasized in discussions of the conflict, the alignment with domestic approval cycles is more immediate and pronounced. Both invasions occur at points of declining domestic support, rather than at moments of discrete external shocks. This does not imply that external factors are irrelevant, but it does suggest that domestic political considerations play a central role in shaping the timing of escalation.

4.2 Messaging By the State Media

State media appears to be a key mechanism through which these political returns are generated, and beliefs are coordinated across the nation. Around both episodes, official narratives shift in ways that emphasize national unity, shared identity, and the moral framing of conflict. To quantify this, we digitize the corpus of regional state media coverage surrounding the annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and construct measures of narrative content over time.

Our approach, detailed in Appendix [A6](#), classifies text along two dimensions. Nation-building scores capture the extent to which media content emphasizes shared identity, collective belonging, the protection of compatriots, and the integration of the nation across ethnic and regional lines. These narratives invoke themes of cultural continuity, historical justice, and the moral obligation to defend co-ethnics. In contrast, empire-building scores reflect messaging centered on territorial power, geopolitical dominance, and the

restoration of great-power status, including references to hierarchy, strategic control, and center-periphery relations.

Figure A3 shows the evolution of these narratives over time. Two features are particularly noteworthy. First, nation-building content plays a prominent role in state messaging around the annexation, often exceeding the intensity of explicitly imperial or geopolitical framing. This suggests that the regime’s communication strategy is not primarily oriented around abstract notions of power or territorial expansion, but rather around constructing a shared national project. Second, there is a clear temporal pattern: nation-building narratives rise sharply in the months leading up to the annexation and remain elevated in its immediate aftermath. This timing is consistent with an effort to prepare and then reinforce domestic support, rather than merely to justify actions *ex post*.

This pattern is consistent with state-controlled media disseminating specific identity-based narratives and coordinating beliefs. These claims are most prominently about protecting ethnic Russians in Ukraine and allegations of persecution or genocide, which make the conflict more salient and politically persuasive in regions with stronger co-ethnic ties.

Taken together, these patterns point to a political logic in which external conflict is used to reshape domestic opinion. War provides a focal point around which the regime can coordinate beliefs, reframe grievances, and strengthen identification with the state. The combination of declining pre-war approval, sharp post-escalation increases, and synchronized shifts in media narratives is difficult to reconcile with purely external explanations for the conflict. Instead, it suggests that improving domestic support and stabilizing the regime’s political base are central components of the decision to escalate.

In the next section, we examine whether these opinion shifts are uniform across the country or whether they are concentrated in specific regions. In particular, we test whether the response to wartime messaging is stronger in areas with higher shares of ethnic Russians, where nation-building narratives may resonate more strongly and generate larger political returns.

4.3 Domestic Political Mobilization: Trends

A central empirical question is whether Russia’s escalation against Ukraine strengthened political support disproportionately in regions with higher ethnic Russian shares. We measure political mobilization using voter turnout from Russia’s Central Election Commission, and incumbent support using Putin’s vote share in presidential elections. In an authoritarian setting, turnout captures a combination of genuine participation and administrative pressure, and vote shares may reflect centrally coordinated mobilization alongside sincere

preferences; to the extent these forces operate uniformly across regions, they would attenuate rather than amplify the cross-regional gradient we estimate. If conflict consolidates support among the ethnic Russian majority, turnout and incumbent support should rise more in regions with higher shares of ethnic Russians. If, instead, escalation generates a broadly uniform response or reflects nationwide administrative shifts, the relationship with ethnic composition should be weaker.

We present visual evidence on how political outcomes evolve across regions with different ethnic compositions around the 2014 and 2022 shocks. 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 evolved 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 escalation episodes as shocks and estimates heterogeneous political responses across provinces that differ in their predetermined ethnic Russian share.

4.4 Domestic Political Mobilization: Difference-in-Differences

We examine these trends in a difference-in-differences design. 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. Our specification allows the association between

baseline ethnic composition and political outcomes to vary flexibly across election years:

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

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 Share Russian_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 Share Russian_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.

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 Share Russian_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.

Figure 4 evaluates this 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 Crimean annexation, the coefficients turn positive and increase further after the full-scale 2022 invasion. The magnitude and timing of these effects indicate that wartime escalation steepens the relationship between ethnic composition and political mobilization, rather than uniform nationwide shifts.

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:

$$y_{pt} = \beta_1 (\text{Share Russian } 2010_p \times \mathbb{1}\{t \in [2014, 2021]\}) + \beta_2 (\text{Share Russian } 2010_p \times \mathbb{1}\{t \geq 2022\}) + \alpha_p + \gamma_t + \mathbf{X}'_{pt}\boldsymbol{\theta} + \varepsilon_{pt}. \quad (2)$$

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 significant across outcomes. In Panel A, the coefficient on $\text{Share Russians} \times \text{Post Invasion } 2022$ 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. The post-annexation effect prior to 2022 is smaller and less precisely estimated, 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 $\text{Share Russians} \times \text{Post Invasion } 2022$ 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. The ethnic composition gradient becomes substantially larger after 2022, consistent with the full-scale invasion generating a more pronounced mobilizational response among the ethnic core than the comparatively swift annexation of Crimea.

Interpreting these estimates requires understanding what variation in ethnic Russian population share is capturing. Regions with higher ethnic Russian shares may differ systematically along a range of dimensions (geography, income, urbanization, political centrality, demographic structure, or exposure to the war) that could independently shape political responses. Our empirical design addresses part of this concern by focusing on differential changes around discrete escalation events, rather than cross-sectional differences in levels. However, if these underlying characteristics also influence how regions respond to shocks, they could still confound the interpretation.

To address this, we augment our baseline specifications with increasingly rich controls and flexible fixed effects. In Table 1, we allow for differential responses by baseline income through interactions with election-year fixed effects, and incorporate time-varying measures of urbanization, human development, infrastructure, and demographic composition. We

further account for geographic and military exposure using distances to Ukraine, Moscow, and the evolving front line, interacted with time, and include controls for local political conditions, including opposition vote share. In addition, we allow for region-specific linear trends to absorb differential underlying trajectories.

Across all of these specifications, the estimates remain stable in both magnitude and statistical significance. This robustness suggests that the patterns we document are unlikely to be driven by observable regional characteristics correlated with ethnic composition, but are instead more likely to reflect a distinct role for ethnic identity in shaping political responses to conflict. The greater impacts in high ethnic Russian regions is consistent with these regions being more responsive to state-media propagated narratives emphasizing the protection of co-ethnics abroad.

4.5 The Role of State Media in Mobilizing Support

We now turn to examining whether exposure to state media amplifies the political response to conflict. If the rally effects we document operate through messaging that emphasizes national unity and external threat, then regions with greater access to state media should exhibit larger increases in political support following the invasions.

Conceptually, state media may operate less by changing deeply held beliefs and more by coordinating expectations. In an environment where individuals face uncertainty about others' views, a uniform salient narrative can align perceptions about what constitutes the “appropriate” political response. By repeatedly emphasizing national unity and external threat, state media provides a common signal that facilitates collective shifts in behavior, making it easier for individuals to express support for the regime in a coordinated way.

Indeed, state media does not simply increase exposure to the war; it transmits a specific narrative framing the conflict as a defense of ethnic Russians, including claims that co-ethnics in Ukraine face persecution or genocide. If this narrative is persuasive, its effects should be strongest in regions where ethnic identity is most salient—namely, regions with larger ethnic Russian populations.

As shown in Appendix Figure [A3](#), the annexation of Crimea coincided with a sharp increase in nation-building rhetoric in state-controlled media. Importantly, this shift is not subtle. It reflects a potentially broad and coordinated change in how the conflict is framed: from a geopolitical event to a collective national project, centered on shared identity, protection of compatriots, and historical continuity. This type of messaging may help transform an external conflict into a domestically salient political event, particularly in a setting where alternative sources of information are limited.

To assess the role of exposure to such messaging, we exploit cross-regional variation in baseline state media penetration. Figure A2 documents substantial heterogeneity in digital television coverage across Russia’s 83 provinces prior to the 2014 annexation. Some regions had near-universal access to state television, while others remained only partially covered. This variation is not random (it reflects historical infrastructure investments, geography, and administrative priorities) but it provides a meaningful proxy for differences in the intensity of exposure to centralized narratives.

This heterogeneity allows us to ask a simple question: do regions that are more exposed to state media exhibit stronger political responses to war? Figure 8 provides evidence that they do. Following the annexation of Crimea, support for President Putin increases more sharply in provinces with higher baseline media penetration. The same pattern emerges, albeit with some attenuation, around the 2022 invasion. These effects are economically large and mirror the timing of the aggregate shifts documented earlier.

This pattern is consistent with state media amplifying identity-based narratives rather than simply increasing general information exposure. The content of wartime messaging (centered on protecting ethnic Russians) makes the conflict more personally relevant in regions with stronger co-ethnic ties.

The interpretation of these patterns is not mechanical. Higher media penetration does not simply mean that individuals receive more information; rather, it changes the composition and framing of that information. In Russia, state media is not just a passive broadcaster but an active instrument of narrative construction. Regions with greater exposure are more likely to receive a consistent and coordinated message that emphasizes national unity, external threat, and the moral legitimacy of state actions. In contrast, regions with lower penetration may be relatively more exposed to alternative narratives, informal information channels, or simply weaker saturation of the official message.

Of course, media penetration is not randomly assigned, and regions with higher coverage may differ along other dimensions that also affect political support. However, two features of the data mitigate this concern. First, the key variation we exploit is predetermined with respect to the timing of the invasions, reflecting infrastructure in place prior to the shocks. Second, the differential response emerges sharply at the moment of escalation, rather than reflecting pre-existing trends. This temporal alignment strengthens the interpretation that media exposure amplifies the impact of wartime events on political attitudes.

Taken together, these findings point to a complementary mechanism underlying the rally effects documented above. External conflict creates an opportunity for the regime to reshape public opinion, but the magnitude of this response depends on the reach of state-controlled narratives. Where media penetration is higher, the same geopolitical event

translates into a larger increase in political support. In this sense, state media does not merely transmit information about the war; it helps produce the political returns to war by aligning individual beliefs with the regime’s preferred framing.

4.6 Constructed External Enemies and Domestic Cohesion

A key component of nation-building during periods of conflict can be the construction of a clear external adversary. In addition to promoting narratives of internal unity, the state can reinforce cohesion by delineating a sharp boundary between “us” and “them.” This framing transforms an external conflict into a morally charged confrontation, in which support for the state becomes intertwined with loyalty to the nation itself. Importantly, such narratives can generate a rally-around-the-flag effect even in the absence of a direct threat to the homeland.

Figure 7 illustrates how public attitudes toward foreign actors evolve around the two major escalations. Prior to the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russian attitudes toward Ukraine are overwhelmingly positive and rising. More than three-quarters of respondents report favorable views. Ukraine is not perceived as an adversary, but as a closely linked country with shared historical, cultural, and social ties.

This perception changes abruptly at the moment of annexation. Favorable views of Ukraine collapse within a short period, falling to below one-quarter of respondents. The speed and magnitude of this shift are striking. Such a rapid reversal is unlikely to reflect a gradual updating of beliefs based on new information alone. Instead, it is consistent with a coordinated reframing of Ukraine from a fraternal or neighboring state into an external adversary. The pattern repeats around the 2022 invasion, where already-low favorability declines even further, leaving only a small fraction of respondents expressing positive views.

Attitudes toward the United States and the European Union follow a similar, though slightly more nuanced, trajectory. Favorability toward both actors declines sharply during the 2014 annexation, suggesting that the conflict is framed not only as a bilateral dispute with Ukraine, but as part of a broader nation-building exercise against the West. In the intervening years, these attitudes gradually recover, indicating that the intensity of adversarial framing is not constant but varies with the geopolitical environment and the salience of conflict. However, this recovery is reversed in 2022, when favorability toward both the United States and the European Union once again drops precipitously.

Taken together, these patterns point to a systematic reshaping of external perceptions in tandem with military escalation. The timing suggests that negative attitudes toward foreign actors are not merely a byproduct of conflict, but an integral part of how the

conflict is presented domestically. By recasting Ukraine, and more broadly the West, as adversaries, the regime creates a focal point for public sentiment. This externalization of threat serves two purposes. First, it justifies the use of force by framing it as defensive or morally necessary. Second, it helps consolidate domestic support by aligning individual identities with the state’s geopolitical position.

This mechanism is particularly powerful in a setting where pre-existing ties complicate the narrative. The fact that attitudes toward Ukraine were initially so positive underscores the extent of the transformation. The shift from affinity to hostility is not gradual or organic; it is abrupt and closely synchronized with political events. This suggests that the construction of the external enemy is not simply reflecting underlying preferences, but actively reshaping them.

This reframing of external actors also has direct implications for domestic political behavior. By casting the conflict in moral and identity-based terms, the regime reduces the space for neutral or oppositional positions. Supporting the government becomes intertwined with affirming membership in the national community, while dissent risks being interpreted as alignment with the external adversary. In this way, the construction of an external enemy does not merely shift attitudes toward foreign actors; it also reshapes the incentives governing political expression at home, contributing to the increase in observed support for the incumbent.

4.7 Ethnic Self-Identification and Building an Ethnostate

We provide direct evidence that ethnic identity itself shifts in the direction consistent with the Kremlin’s nation-building narrative. Using the 2010 and 2020 Russian Censuses, we document a systematic increase in the share of individuals identifying as ethnically Russian, alongside a decline in those identifying as Ukrainian. As shown in Figure A4, these changes are not uniform across space: the declines in Ukrainian self-identification are largest in regions that initially had higher shares of Ukrainian-identifying populations. That is, precisely in the places where identity was more contested *ex ante*, we observe the largest movement away from Ukrainian self-identification over the subsequent decade. Yet, over this period, fewer respondents revealed any ethnic identity, perhaps as Ukrainian (and certain other non-Russian ethnicities) would rather not self-identify as non-Russian.

These patterns are consistent with a process of identity consolidation in which state narratives—emphasizing a unified “Russian people” and the protection of co-ethnics—reshape how individuals classify themselves. This reclassification helps close the loop in our mechanism, with an object of building a Russian ethnostate. By expanding the set

of individuals who identify as Russian, such narratives increase the share of the population for whom the conflict is framed as personally relevant, thereby amplifying political support for the war. More broadly, the results suggest that nation-building operates not only through mobilizing pre-existing identities, but also through actively redefining them, with important implications for how external conflict translates into domestic political alignment.

4.8 The Imperial Soviet Legacy and Regime Loyalty

The cross-regional pattern documented above is consistent with ethnic identity shaping political responses to escalation. We next examine the roles played by the activation of Soviet or imperial symbolism, and longstanding differences in regime loyalty that correlate with regional ethnic composition.

We investigate 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 and World War II memorials. 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. War memorials correlate strongly with Communist Party support in pre-war elections, suggesting they capture Soviet nostalgia rather than the ethnic mobilization we document.

4.9 Who Bears the Costs: Ethnic-Specific Casualties

Beyond political mobilization, a distinct question is how the domestic costs of war are distributed across regions. This is of independent interest: the incidence of casualties across regions reveals how the regime manages the human costs of conflict within a heterogeneous population, regardless of the precise mechanism driving the political results above.

Figure 6 plots confirmed military casualties per 10,000 residents by terciles of the ethnic Russian population share. Casualty rates are consistently higher in regions with lower ethnic Russian shares, and the gap widens as the war progresses. The divergence is particularly visible after mid-2023, around the period of the Prigozhin mutiny and his subsequent death, when the casualty series for low-ethnic-Russian regions rises sharply relative to the middle and high terciles. The casualty data are drawn from ([Mediazona, 2026](#)), an independent Russian outlet that cross-references public records, obituaries, and social media. This source likely provides a lower bound on true losses ([Driscoll et al., 2025](#)),

particularly in regions with weaker civil society and media infrastructure, which suggests the estimated gap is conservative rather than inflated.

The pattern is consistent with wartime costs falling disproportionately on regions with smaller ethnic Russian shares, while core regions are comparatively insulated. Peripheral regions may also face structurally higher exposure to recruitment through the sectors and mechanisms through which mobilization operates, and both forces may contribute to the observed gap. Either way, the divergence between political mobilization and casualty incidence is a notable feature of the data.

4.10 Targets in Ukraine

We next examine whether the spatial pattern of Russian military activity inside Ukraine reflects ethnic composition, resource endowments, or strategic military considerations. We measure attack intensity using data on Russian air strikes and ground operations and examine their correlation with pre-war regional characteristics of Ukrainian provinces.

Figure 9 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 geography of attacks reflects a combination of military, logistical, and political considerations; our analysis documents the correlation between attack intensity and ethnic composition rather than isolating any single objective. This targeting is also consistent with the same narrative logic: areas with larger ethnic Russian populations are both more central to the Kremlin’s stated justification for the war and more salient in state media messaging. The absence of robust associations with resource endowments, however, provides limited support for a purely extractive explanation of targeting behavior.

4.11 Discussion

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. Across all three sets of outcomes, ethnic composition is the most robust cross-regional correlate of where political returns concentrate, where wartime costs fall, and where violence is directed. These patterns are

consistent with ethnic identity playing a central role in the domestic political economy of the conflict, and are not accounted for by alternative explanations based on propaganda penetration, Soviet symbolism, or resource extraction. The evidence points to a mechanism in which state-controlled media amplifies Putin’s identity-based narratives (particularly claims about protecting ethnic Russians), which in turn generate geographically concentrated political support in regions where these appeals are most salient.

5 Robustness

This section assesses the robustness of our findings across several dimensions. We examine the validity of the parallel trends assumption, the role of electoral manipulation, the sensitivity of results to how ethnic composition is measured, and the influence of individual regions. Throughout, we discuss both what the checks establish and where residual uncertainty remains.

5.1 Parallel Trends

Our baseline design relies on the parallel trends assumption: absent escalation, regions with higher and lower ethnic Russian shares would have followed similar trajectories in turnout and incumbent support. We provide three complementary pieces of evidence in support of this assumption.

Event-study pre-trends. The event-study estimates show no systematic pre-treatment divergence. Coefficients on the interaction between ethnic Russian share and election timing are small and statistically indistinguishable from zero prior to 2014, indicating that differential trends do not precede the annexation of Crimea. This is informative because it suggests the post-2014 changes are not a continuation of pre-existing dynamics correlated with ethnic composition. The absence of pre-trends is also consistent with the 2014 and 2022 escalation episodes operating as genuine shocks to the political environment rather than accelerating a trend already underway.

Synthetic difference-in-differences. We re-estimate the dynamic effects using Synthetic Difference-in-Differences (SDiD) ([Arkhangelsky et al., 2021](#)). To implement the standard SDiD framework, we dichotomize treatment status using the median provincial share of ethnic Russians in 2020 (79.4%): provinces with an ethnic Russian share above the median are classified as treated, while those below the median serve as controls. This threshold provides a transparent way to separate provinces with relatively high and low exposure to ethnic Russian population concentration while preserving balanced

group sizes required for stable synthetic weighting. The standard difference-in-differences estimator assigns equal weight to all control regions, which may be problematic if the pre-treatment trajectory of high-ethnic-Russian regions is poorly approximated by the average control unit. SDiD addresses this by selecting weights that rebalance the control group to match the pre-treatment outcome path of the treated regions, constructing a more credible counterfactual. The SDiD estimates closely mirror the baseline event-study results: pre-treatment coefficients remain near zero, while post-2014 effects emerge and amplify further after 2022 (Figure 5). The similarity of estimates across weighting schemes indicates that the baseline results are not sensitive to the composition of the control group and are not driven by a small number of poorly matched units.

Bounded departures from parallel trends. We further assess robustness to limited violations of parallel trends using the sensitivity analysis of [Rambachan and Roth \(2023\)](#). This approach relaxes the assumption of exact parallel trends by allowing the post-treatment counterfactual trend for high-ethnic-Russian regions to drift relative to low-ethnic-Russian regions within a user-specified bound, and reports confidence sets for treatment effects under these permissible violations. The motivation is that some degree of differential trend is plausible even in well-designed difference-in-differences studies, and the relevant question is how large a violation would be required to overturn the results. Across a wide range of bounds, the post-treatment effects remain positive and the associated confidence sets continue to exclude zero (Figure A8). The main conclusions therefore do not hinge on exact parallel trends but persist under quantitatively meaningful departures from the identifying assumption.

5.2 Electoral Manipulation

A separate concern is that changes in turnout or incumbent vote share could reflect administrative manipulation rather than genuine political mobilization. Differential manipulation across regions with different ethnic compositions could in principle generate the cross-regional pattern we document, even in the absence of authentic heterogeneity in political responses.

To assess this, we implement the correction procedure of [Shpilkin \(2009\)](#), which uses anomalies in the joint distribution of turnout and vote shares to flag and adjust suspicious precinct-level results. The procedure identifies mass rounding, implausible digit distributions, and suspicious vote-share concentrations that deviate from the expected statistical distribution of genuine results. Re-estimating the main specifications on these fraud-adjusted outcomes yields closely similar dynamics (Figure A9): the post-escalation

amplification in turnout and incumbent support in higher-ethnic-Russian regions remains visible and economically meaningful. The results suggest that the cross-regional heterogeneity we document is not primarily an artifact of differential manipulation across regions, though no correction procedure can fully eliminate this concern.

5.3 Ethnic Composition

A further concern is that ethnic composition based on census self-identification may be measured with error. Self-reported ethnic shares could be noisy or systematically distorted in settings where identity reporting is politically salient, potentially biasing estimates toward or away from zero depending on the direction of misreporting. We use the 2010 Russian Census to measure ethnicity, to account for any changes that may occur as a result of the conflict.

To assess whether results depend on fine variation in self-reported shares, we construct a coarser, historically predetermined proxy based on administrative status. We classify Russia’s ethnic republics — including Dagestan, Chechnya, and Tatarstan — as non-Russian republics and define a binary indicator for whether a region holds this status. This classification is rooted in the federal administrative structure established well before our period of analysis and is therefore less sensitive to contemporaneous reporting incentives or post-escalation identity shifts. Re-estimating the main specifications with this binary indicator in place of the continuous ethnic Russian share yields results that are similar in sign and magnitude to the baseline (Appendix Table A6). The core pattern of stronger post-escalation mobilization in more Russian regions is not an artifact of measurement error in self-reported ethnic shares.

5.4 Socioeconomic Correlates of Ethnic Composition

A further concern is that the ethnic Russian population share may capture broader regional characteristics rather than ethnic composition itself. Regions with larger ethnic Russian populations may also differ systematically in income, urbanization, transport infrastructure, demographic structure, or geography. In that case, the post-escalation patterns we document could reflect these underlying differences rather than heterogeneous political responses by ethnic composition.

To examine this, we progressively enrich the baseline specification with a wide set of controls. These include contemporaneous urban population share, the old-age dependency ratio, and paved road density, along with baseline real income per capita, baseline urbanization, distance to Ukraine, the 2000 “Against All” vote share, and e-voting exposure,

each interacted with year fixed effects. We also add subregion-specific linear trends in the most saturated specification. As [Table 1](#) shows, the main coefficients remain stable across these increasingly demanding specifications. In Panel A, the coefficient on *Share Russians 2010* $\times$ *Post Invasion 2022* stays positive and economically meaningful in every column, while the post-annexation coefficient remains much smaller. Panel B shows the same broad pattern for Putin’s support. The stability of these estimates indicates that the main results are not an artifact of observable socioeconomic or spatial differences across regions. Although such controls cannot rule out every source of omitted-variable bias, they suggest that the cross-regional heterogeneity we document is not simply a reflection of richer, more urban, or differently located ethnic-Russian regions.

5.5 Sensitivity to Individual Regions

A natural concern is that the estimated heterogeneity is disproportionately influenced by a small number of large or politically salient regions. Moscow and Saint Petersburg, for instance, are outliers in size, media exposure, and political salience, and their inclusion or exclusion could in principle drive the aggregate estimates.

To assess this, we implement a leave-one-region-out exercise, re-estimating the main specification repeatedly with each region excluded in turn and recording the post-2014 and post-2022 coefficients. Across these replications, the estimates remain stable in sign and similar in magnitude. The qualitative pattern of stronger post-escalation mobilization in more Russian regions is unchanged regardless of which region is excluded. [Appendix Figure A10](#) reports the distribution of coefficients across exclusions alongside the baseline estimate, confirming that no single region drives the results.

5.6 Standard Errors

As an additional check on inference, we implement the wild cluster bootstrap of [Cameron et al. \(2008\)](#). The motivation is straightforward. When the number of clusters is only moderate, conventional cluster-robust standard errors can place nontrivial weight on asymptotic approximations, which may lead to over-rejection in finite samples. Our setting does not feature a critically small number of clusters, so this is not the main inferential challenge. Still, it is important to verify that the results do not hinge on that asymptotic approximation. The wild cluster bootstrap addresses this issue by imposing the resampling scheme at the cluster level and constructing p-values that are better behaved in finite samples. We therefore use it as a robustness check to complement our baseline clustered standard errors. [Appendix Figure A11](#) shows that the resulting inference is broadly similar to the

baseline one: the main coefficients remain statistically significant at conventional levels for almost all coefficients.

5.7 Randomized Inference

We also assess whether the estimated effects could be generated by chance under arbitrary reassignment of treatment intensity across regions. To do so, we implement a randomization-inference exercise in Stata in which we repeatedly permute ethnic Russian population shares across regions while holding the underlying panel structure, timing, and estimating equation fixed. For each permutation, we re-estimate the baseline specification and record the post-2014 and post-2022 interaction coefficients. This procedure generates the exact distribution of placebo estimates implied by our research design under the null that the spatial distribution of ethnic Russian shares is unrelated to the outcomes. The logic of this exercise differs from conventional standard-error corrections. Rather than relying on asymptotic approximations, randomization inference asks whether the coefficients of the magnitude we observe would commonly arise if the treatment variable were randomly reassigned across regions. It is therefore a direct design-based check on whether our findings are unusually large relative to the counterfactual distribution generated by chance alone. Appendix [Figure A12](#), plots these placebo distributions alongside the corresponding baseline estimates. In both cases, the observed coefficients lie in the tails of the permutation distribution and remain far from the bulk of placebo estimates. The implication is straightforward: the estimated post-2014 and post-2022 effects are unlikely to be driven by random variation in regional ethnic composition. This provides an additional robustness check for the results.

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 institutions 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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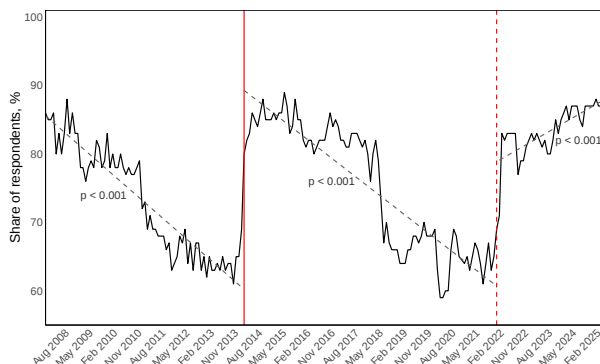
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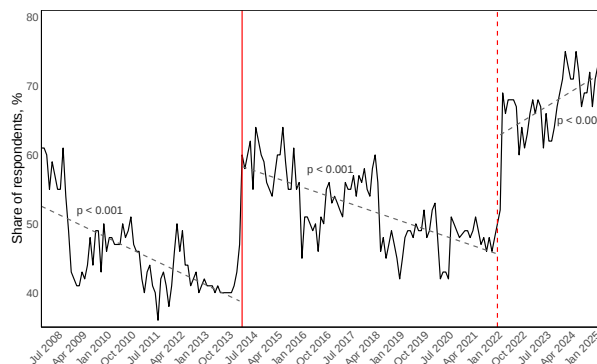
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Figures and Tables

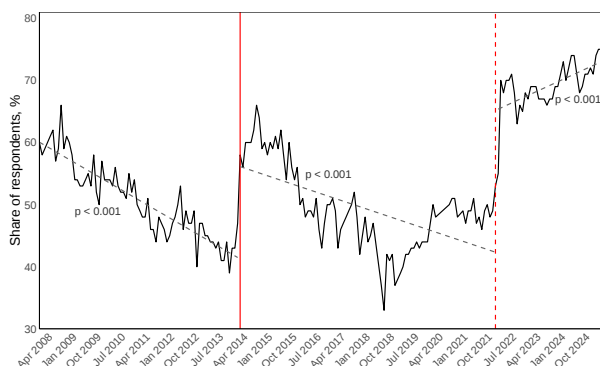
Figure 1: Public Approval of Government Authorities Over Time



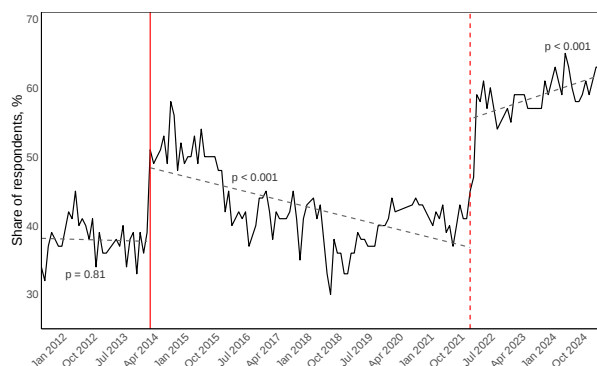
(a) Public Approval of Vladimir Putin



(b) Public Approval of the State of Affairs in Russia Over Time



(c) Public Approval of the Government



(d) Public Approval of the State Legislature (Duma)

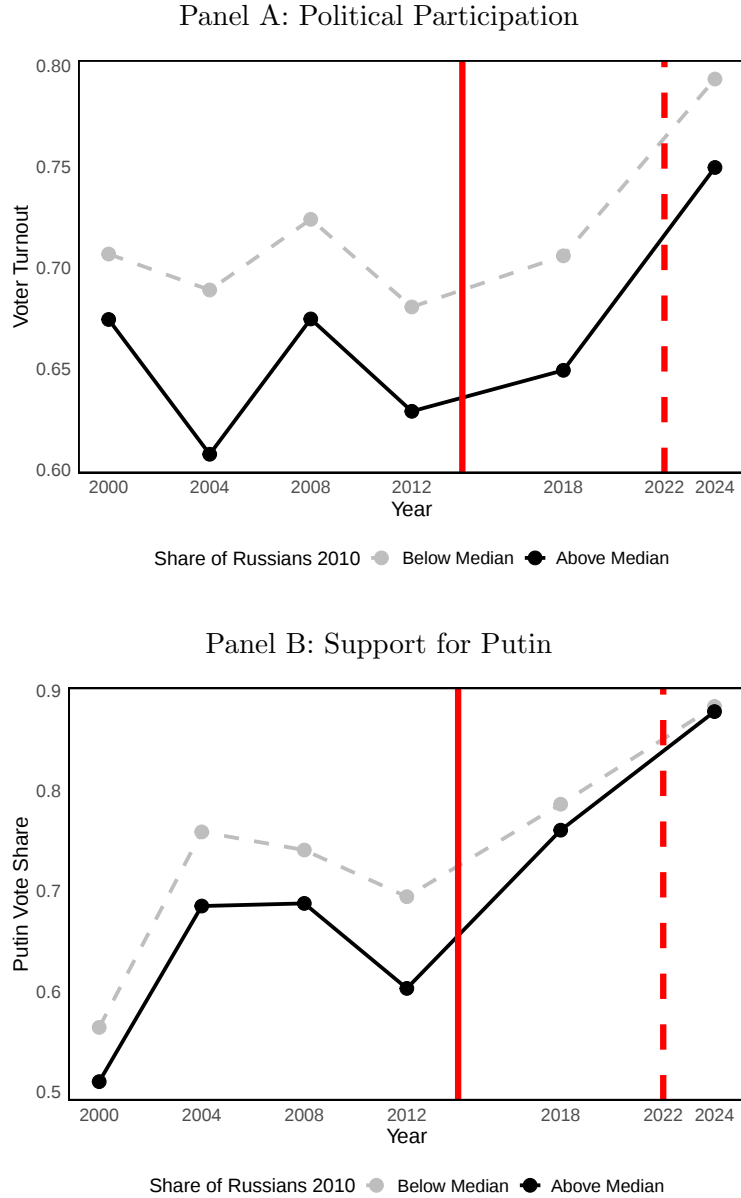
Note: The figure presents the share of respondents reporting “yes” in response to the questions: (a) “Do you approve of the activities of V. Putin as President (or Prime Minister) of Russia?”; (b) “Do you think things in the country today are generally going in the right direction?”; (c) “Do you approve of the activities of the Government of Russia?”; (d) “Do you approve of the activities of the State Duma of Russia?”. 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 2: Share of Ethnic Russians 2010, By Province



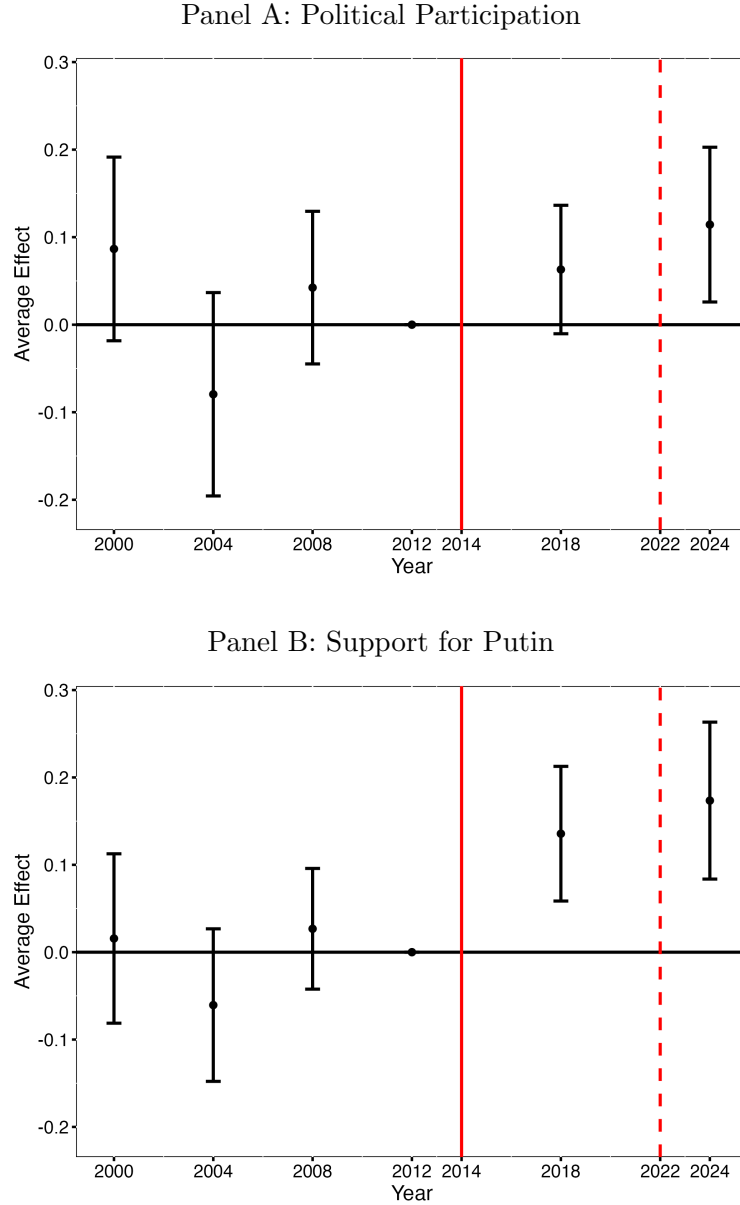
Note: The figure maps the provincial share of individuals identifying as ethnic Russians across 83 Russian provinces using data from the 2010 Russian Census ([Rosstat, 2010](#)). Ethnicity information is available for 96.06% of census respondents. Among those reporting ethnicity, the largest groups are Russians (80.90%), Tatars (3.87%), Ukrainians (1.40%), Bashkirs (1.15%), and Chuvash (1.05%).

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



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 (85.3%). Putin’s vote share in 2008 is proxied by Medvedev’s vote share. The unit of observation is a province–year, and outcomes include electronic voting in 2024 where applicable. The sample consists of 83 provinces; occupied Ukrainian territories are excluded. 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. Election results are from [CEC Russia \(2025\)](#), and ethnic composition data are from [Rosstat \(2010\)](#).

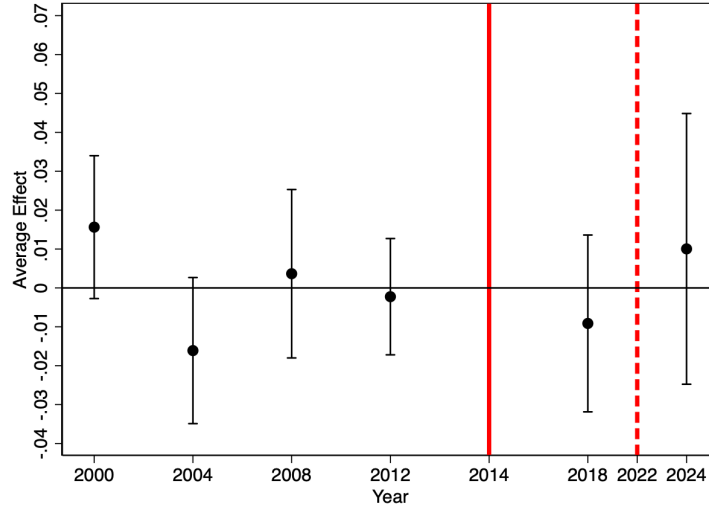
Figure 4: Political Participation and Support for Putin Over Time: Standard Diff-in-Diff Event Study



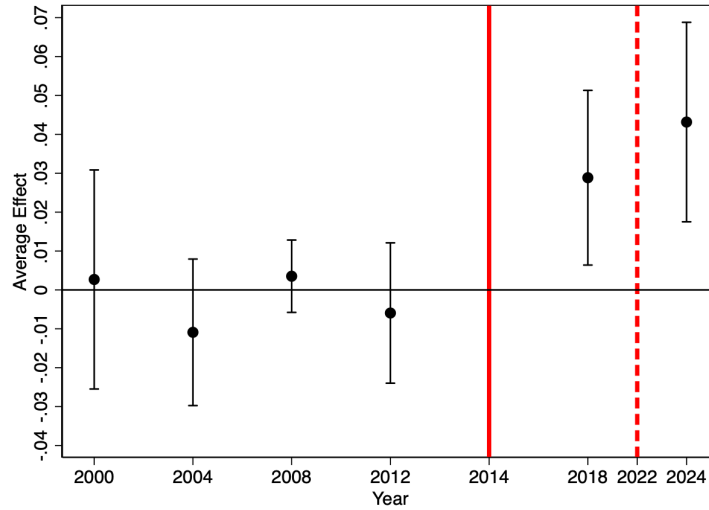
Note: Panels A and B report difference-in-differences event-study estimates of the effect of the ethnic Russian population share (2010) on provincial voter turnout and Putin’s vote share. Controls include urban population share, the old-age dependency ratio, and paved road density. Additional baseline 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. Putin’s vote share in 2008 is proxied by Medvedev’s vote share. The specifications include province and year fixed effects, as well as subregion-specific linear trends. Subregions refer to Russia’s 8 supra-provincial administrative regions. Standard errors are clustered at the province level (83 clusters; occupied Ukrainian territories 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 \(2010\)](#), 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

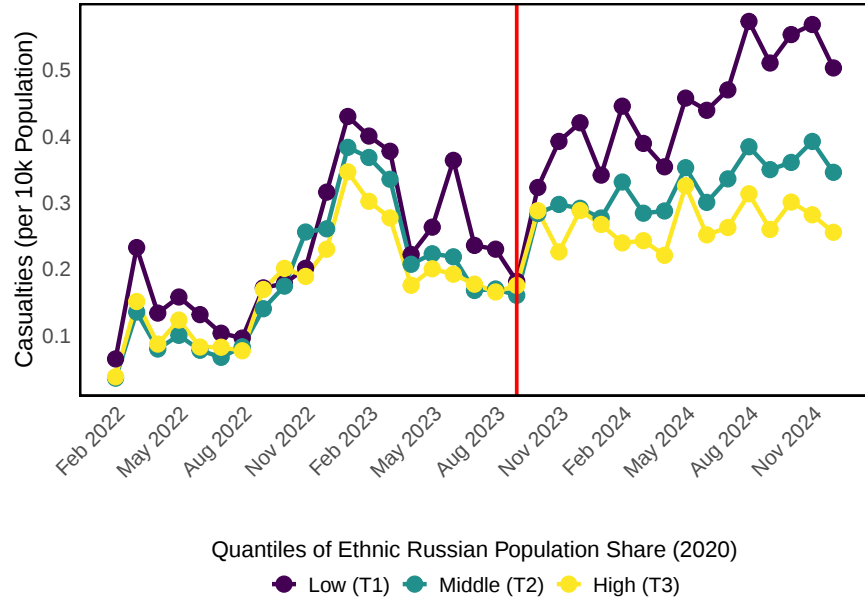


Panel B: Support for Putin



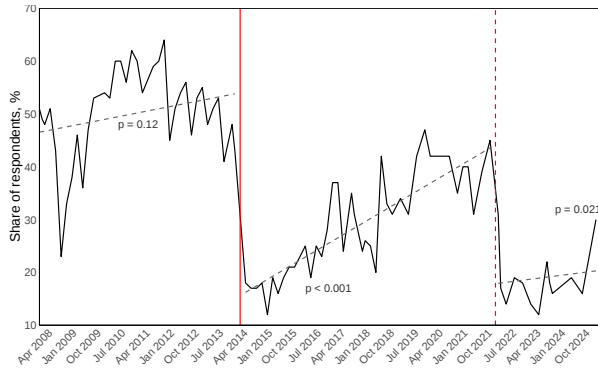
Note: Panels A and B report synthetic difference-in-differences (Arkhangelsky et al., 2021) event-study estimates of the effect of high ethnic Russian population share (2010) on provincial voter turnout and Putin’s vote share. To implement the SDiD estimator, treatment is dichotomized at the median provincial share of ethnic Russians in 2010 (85.3%): provinces above the median are classified as treated, while those below the median serve as controls. Baseline covariates – urban population share (2000) and real income per capita (2000) – are interacted with year indicators. Putin’s vote share in 2008 is proxied by Medvedev’s vote share. 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 provinces; occupied Ukrainian territories 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 (2010), and provincial controls from CEDAR (2024).

Figure 6: Russian Casualties Over Time by Terciles of Ethnic Russians

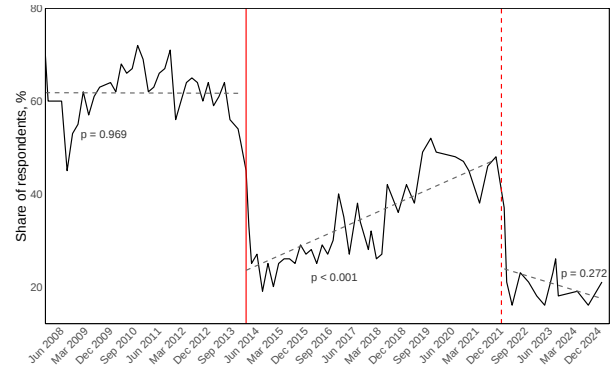


Note: The figure plots average monthly provincial casualties per 10,000 population since February 2022, separately for provinces in the bottom, middle, and top terciles of the ethnic Russian population share (measured in 2020), using data from [Mediazona \(2026\)](#). Annexed Ukrainian provinces are excluded from the sample. The red vertical line marks August 2023, when Yevgeny Prigozhin – the founder of the Wagner private military company and a central actor in Russia’s prison-based military recruitment – was killed. His death was followed by a shift in recruitment away from prison-based enlistment toward broader civilian contracting, particularly in provinces with lower shares of ethnic Russians.

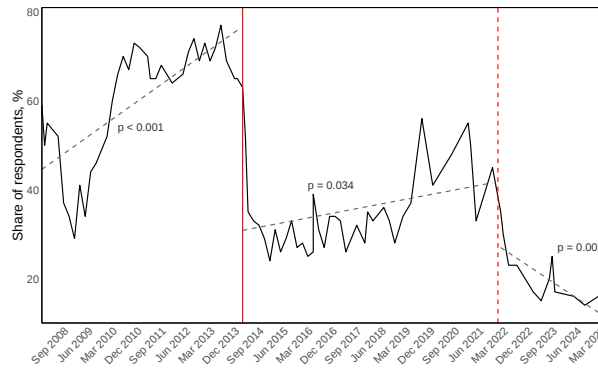
Figure 7: Attitudes Towards the US, EU, and Ukraine



(a) Attitude Towards the United States



(b) Attitude Towards the European Union

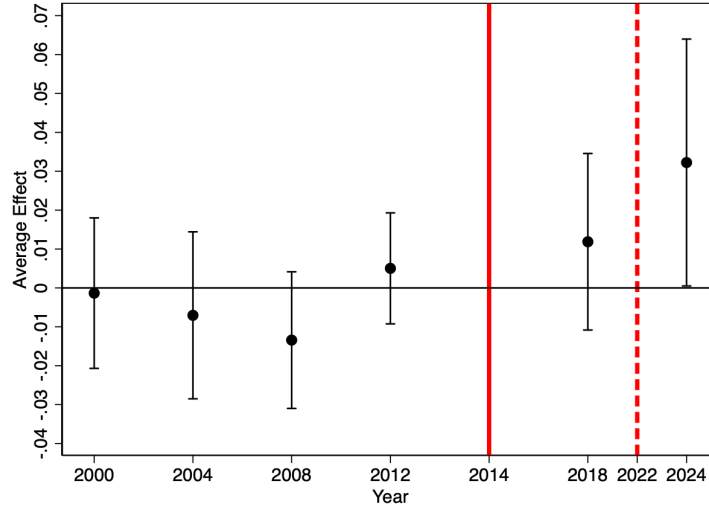


(c) Attitude Towards Ukraine

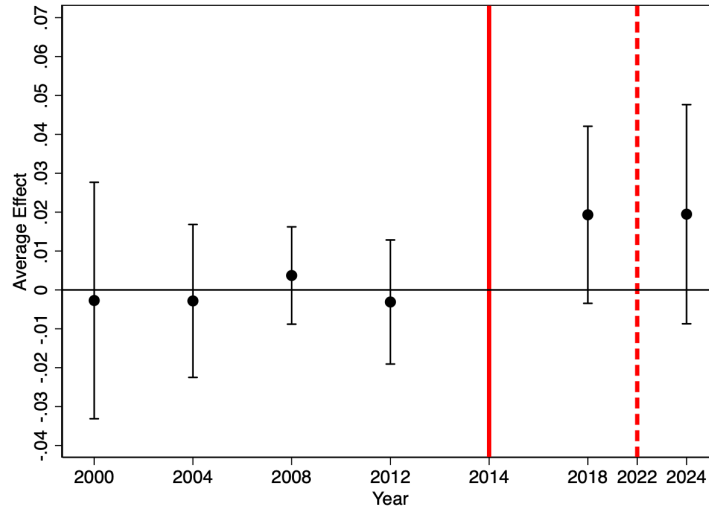
Note: The figure presents the share of respondents reporting “Good”, in response to the question: “How do you generally feel about [foreign country] at the moment?” Data come from regular opinion polls by [Levada Center \(2025\)](#). The solid red vertical line marks the annexation of Crimea in March 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 8: State Media Penetration and Support for Putin Over Time: Synthetic Diff-in-Diff Event Study

Panel A: Political Participation

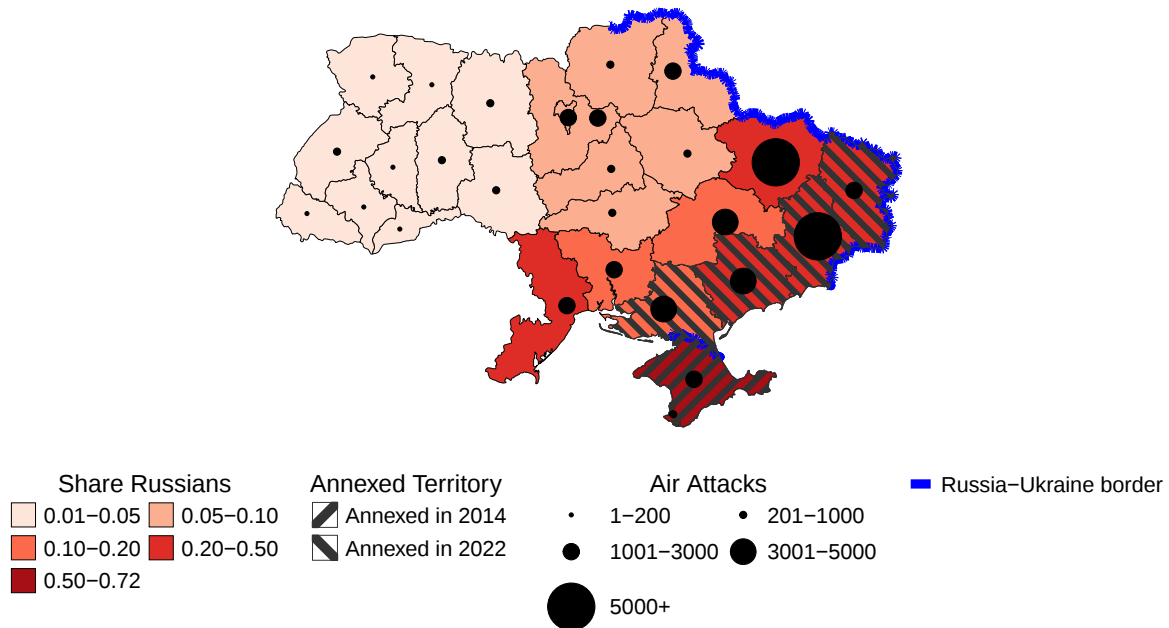


Panel B: Support for Putin



Note: Panels A and B report synthetic difference-in-differences (Arkhangelsky et al., 2021) event-study estimates of the effect of high state media penetration (2014) on provincial voter turnout and Putin’s vote share. To implement the SDiD estimator, treatment is dichotomized at the median provincial state media penetration in 2024 (94.0%): provinces above the median are classified as treated, while those below the median serve as controls. State Media Penetration 2014 measures the share of the provincial population covered by digital TV broadcasting in Q1 2014 based on FGUP NIIR (2014). Baseline covariates – urban population share (2000) and real income per capita (2000) – are interacted with year indicators. Putin’s vote share in 2008 is proxied by Medvedev’s vote share. 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 provinces; occupied Ukrainian territories 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) and provincial controls from CEDAR (2024).

Figure 9: 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. 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. Air attack data are from [Zhukov and Ayers \(2023\)](#) and ethnic composition data from [Ukrstat \(2001\)](#).

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

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Panel A				
<i>Dependent variable:</i>	Political Participation			
Share Russians 2010 $\times$ Post Annexation 2014 $\times$ Pre Invasion 2022	-0.002 (0.031)	0.027 (0.027)	0.041 (0.034)	0.055 (0.041)
Share Russians 2010 $\times$ Post Invasion 2022	0.077** (0.031)	0.075*** (0.027)	0.087** (0.034)	0.108** (0.049)
p-value: H0(Post Annexation = Post Invasion)	$p < 0.01$	$p < 0.05$	$p < 0.1$	$p < 0.1$
Province FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Urban Population Share	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Old-Age Dependency Ratio	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Paved Road Density	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Real Income per capita 2000 $\times$ Year FE	No	No	Yes	Yes
Urban Population Share 2000 $\times$ Year FE	No	No	Yes	Yes
Distance to Ukraine (km) $\times$ Year FE	No	No	Yes	Yes
Against All Vote Share 2000 $\times$ Year FE	No	No	Yes	Yes
E-Voting 2024 $\times$ Year FE	No	No	Yes	Yes
Subregion-Specific Linear Trends	No	No	No	Yes
Mean Dep Var	0.696	0.696	0.696	0.696
R ²	0.759	0.776	0.818	0.824
Observations	498	498	498	498
Panel B				
<i>Dependent variable:</i>	Support for Putin			
Share Russians 2010 $\times$ Post Annexation 2014 $\times$ Pre Invasion 2022	0.120*** (0.028)	0.145*** (0.029)	0.165*** (0.040)	0.145*** (0.036)
Share Russians 2010 $\times$ Post Invasion 2022	0.188*** (0.029)	0.185*** (0.029)	0.212*** (0.039)	0.183*** (0.041)
p-value: H0(Post Annexation = Post Invasion)	$p < 0.01$	$p < 0.1$	$p < 0.05$	$p = 0.15$
Province FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Urban Population Share	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Old-Age Dependency Ratio	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Paved Road Density	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Real Income per capita 2000 $\times$ Year FE	No	No	Yes	Yes
Urban Population Share 2000 $\times$ Year FE	No	No	Yes	Yes
Distance to Ukraine (km) $\times$ Year FE	No	No	Yes	Yes
Against All Vote Share 2000 $\times$ Year FE	No	No	Yes	Yes
E-Voting 2024 $\times$ Year FE	No	No	Yes	Yes
Subregion-Specific Linear Trends	No	No	No	Yes
Mean Dep Var	0.711	0.711	0.711	0.711
R ²	0.865	0.872	0.900	0.912
Observations	498	498	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. 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. Putin’s vote share in 2008 is proxied by Medvedev’s vote share. Standard errors are clustered at the province level (83 clusters; occupied Ukrainian territories excluded). Subregions refer to Russia’s 8 supra-provincial administrative regions. Election results are from [CEC Russia \(2025\)](#), ethnic composition data from [Rosstat \(2010\)](#), 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)
Panel A			
<i>Dependent variable:</i>	Political Participation		
Share Russians 2010 $\times$ Post 2014 $\times$ Pre 2022	0.055 (0.041)	0.054 (0.043)	0.057 (0.043)
Share Russians 2010 $\times$ Post 2022	0.108** (0.049)	0.115** (0.050)	0.110** (0.049)
Share Russians 2010 $\times$ Post 2014 $\times$ Pre 2022 $\times$ Monuments (per 100)		-0.003 (0.034)	
Share Russians 2010 $\times$ Post 2022 $\times$ Monuments (per 100)		-0.034 (0.030)	
Share Russians 2010 $\times$ Post 2014 $\times$ Pre 2022 $\times$ WWII Monuments (per 100)			-0.092 (0.249)
Share Russians 2010 $\times$ Post 2022 $\times$ WWII Monuments (per 100)			-0.107 (0.278)
Province FE + Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Subregion-Specific Linear Trends	Yes	Yes	Yes
Provincial Controls (Time-Varying)	Yes	Yes	Yes
Baseline Controls $\times$ Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mean Dep Var	0.696	0.696	0.696
R ²	0.824	0.824	0.824
Observations	498	498	498
Panel B			
<i>Dependent variable:</i>	Support for Putin		
Share Russians 2010 $\times$ Post 2014 $\times$ Pre 2022	0.145*** (0.036)	0.153*** (0.037)	0.150*** (0.037)
Share Russians 2010 $\times$ Post 2022	0.183*** (0.041)	0.181*** (0.042)	0.177*** (0.042)
Share Russians 2010 $\times$ Post 2014 $\times$ Pre 2022 $\times$ Monuments (per 100)		-0.041 (0.026)	
Share Russians 2010 $\times$ Post 2022 $\times$ Monuments (per 100)		0.004 (0.029)	
Share Russians 2010 $\times$ Post 2014 $\times$ Pre 2022 $\times$ WWII Monuments (per 100)			-0.210 (0.225)
Share Russians 2010 $\times$ Post 2022 $\times$ WWII Monuments (per 100)			0.269 (0.246)
Province FE + Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Subregion-Specific Linear Trends	Yes	Yes	Yes
Provincial Controls (Time-Varying)	Yes	Yes	Yes
Baseline Controls $\times$ Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mean Dep Var	0.711	0.711	0.711
R ²	0.912	0.912	0.912
Observations	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, with Medvedev's vote share used for 2008). Monument variables measure registered cultural heritage sites per 100 residents, including WWII monuments. Post 2014 and Post 2022 indicate elections after 2014 and 2022. 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, the Against All vote share, 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-specific linear trends. Subregions refer to Russia's 8 supra-provincial administrative regions. Standard errors are clustered by province (83 clusters); occupied Ukrainian territories are excluded. Data sources are [CEC Russia \(2025\)](#), [Rosstat \(2010\)](#), [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)
<i>Dependent variable:</i>	Russian Bombings			
Share of Ethnic Russians 2001	12.499** (3.430)	12.444** (3.384)	12.447** (3.437)	21.528*** (2.813)
Dist to Russia		-0.002 (0.002)	-0.002 (0.002)	0.000 (0.000)
Oil & Gas Assets Present			0.039 (0.465)	-0.157 (0.347)
Occupied				7.001*** (0.642)
Share of Ethnic Russians 2001 $\times$ 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 [Zhukov and Ayers \(2023\)](#) 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 2010 = 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 2010 All-Russian Population Census ([Rosstat, 2010](#)).

Non-Titular Province = Indicator equal to 1 if a province is not an ethnic titular province. Ethnic titular provinces are those historically associated with a non-Russian titular ethnic group.

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) = Minimum geodesic distance (in kilometers) between each Russian province polygon (ADM1) and the Ukraine country polygon (ADM0), using boundary shapefiles from the geoBoundaries database. For provinces whose boundaries intersect Ukraine, the distance is set to zero. For non-contiguous provinces, the nearest points on the Russian province and Ukraine polygons are identified using `shapely`, and the distance between those points is then calculated geodesically with `geopy`. Spatial data handling is performed in Python using `geopandas`.

State Media Penetration 2014 = Share of the provincial population covered by terrestrial digital television broadcasting in the first quarter of 2014. The variable captures cross-provincial variation in access to federally distributed television channels immediately prior to the annexation of Crimea. Because the first digital multiplex primarily transmitted federal television channels, this measure serves as a proxy for exposure to state media. Coverage data was obtained from [FGUP NIIR \(2014\)](#).

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](#)).

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 casu-

alties in the war in Ukraine are obtained from Mediazona’s casualty database ([Mediazona, 2026](#)).

Subregion = Categorical variable indicating the federal district to which a province belongs. The sample includes eight federal districts of the Russian Federation: Central, Northwestern, Southern, North Caucasian, Volga, Urals, Siberian, and Far Eastern. This variable is used to define subregion fixed effects in the regression specifications.

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 ([Zhukov and Ayers, 2023](#)).

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:

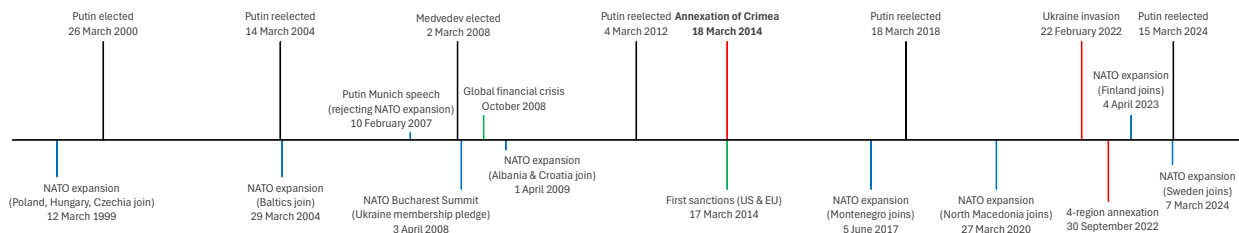
Oil & Gas Assets Present = Indicator equal to 1 if the province contains oil or gas assets.

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.

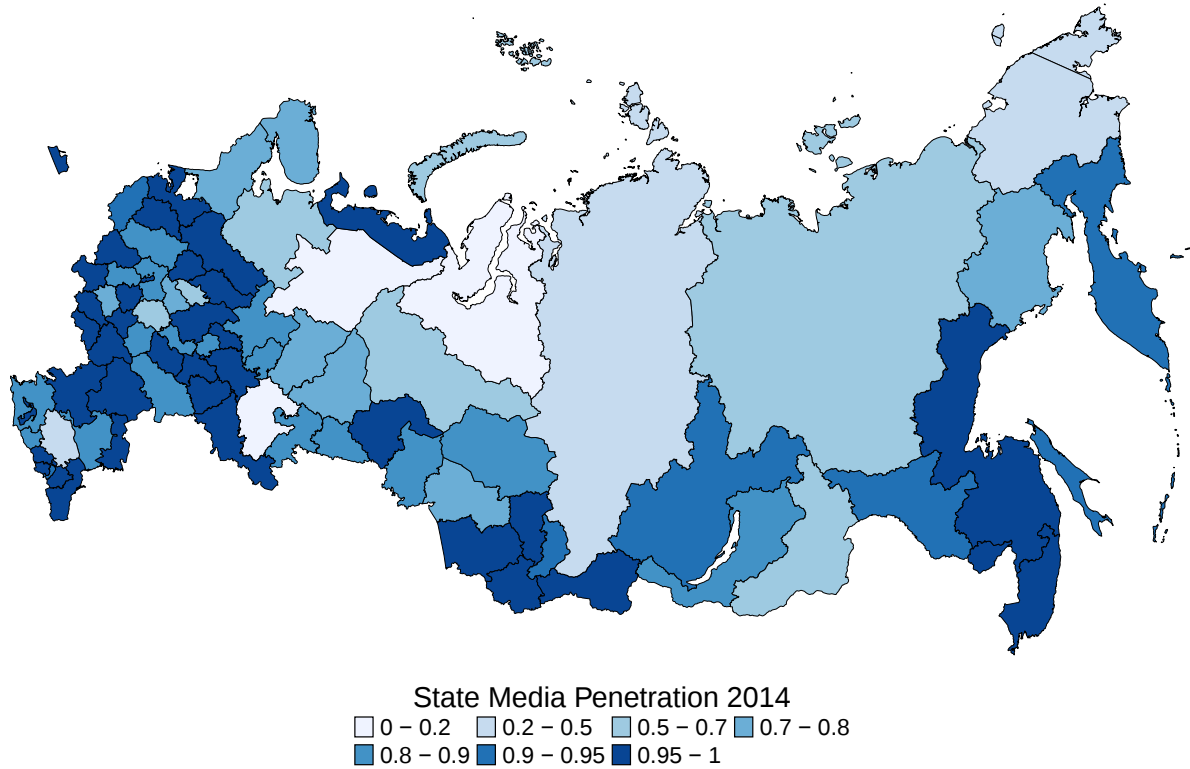
A3 Figures and Tables

Figure A1: Timeline of Main Events



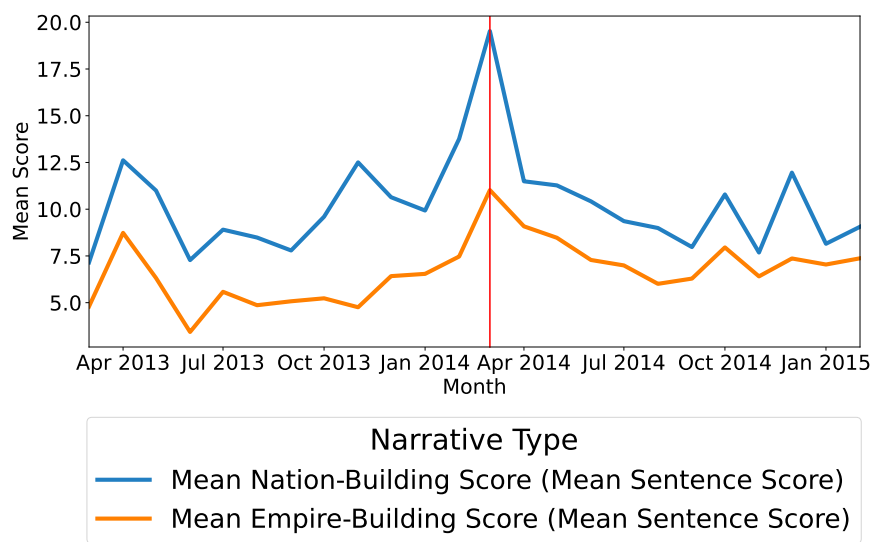
Note: The figure presents key events relevant to the study context, including the Russian presidential elections analyzed in this paper (shown in black). Events related to NATO conflict are shown in blue; episodes of Russian military aggression in red; and major economic shocks in green. Several additional 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)

Figure A2: State Media Penetration 2014, By Province



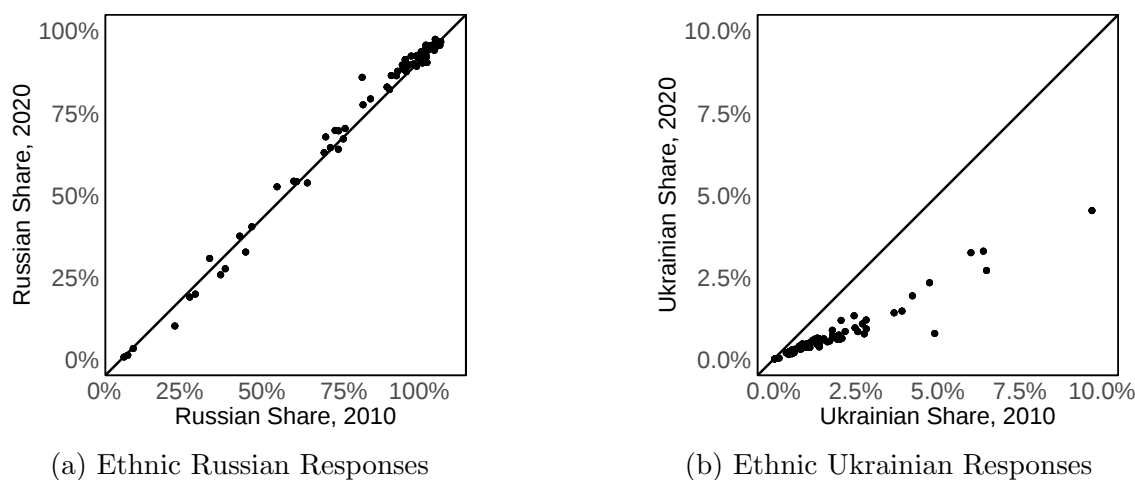
Note: The figure shows the share of the population covered by digital television in the first quarter of 2014 across 83 Russian provinces, based on official data from the Radio Research and Development Institute ([FGUP NIIR, 2014](#)). The variable captures cross-provincial variation in access to federally distributed television channels immediately before the annexation of Crimea. Since the first digital multiplex predominantly carried federal broadcasters, it provides a proxy for exposure to state media.

Figure A3: Nation-building and Empire-building Narrative Scores Over Time: Raw Data



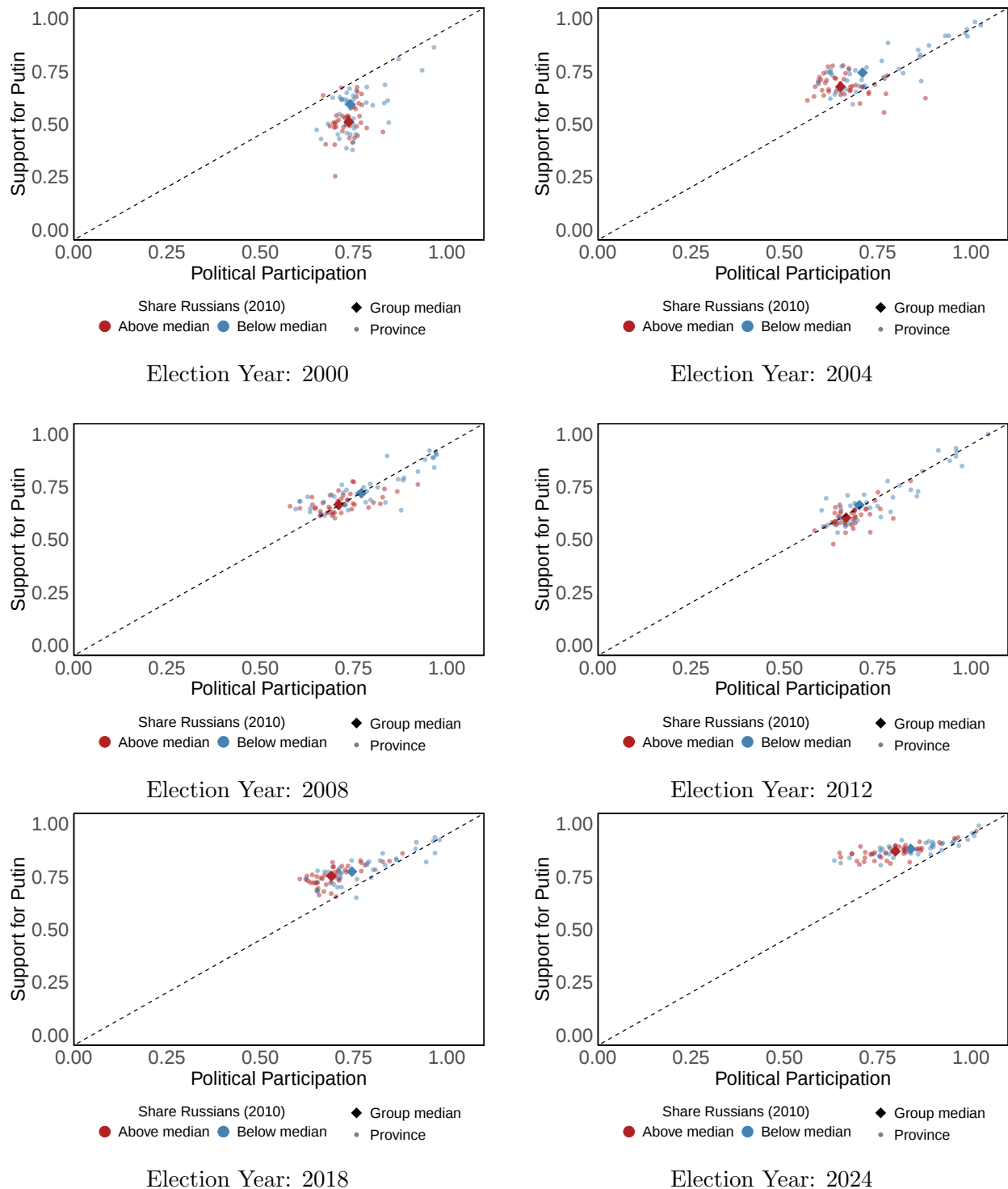
Note: The figure plots the monthly mean nation-building and empire-building scores assigned by ChatGPT to regional state media texts around the annexation of Crimea in March 2014.

Figure A4: Cross-Provincial Stability in Ethnicity Responses across the 2010 and 2020 Censuses



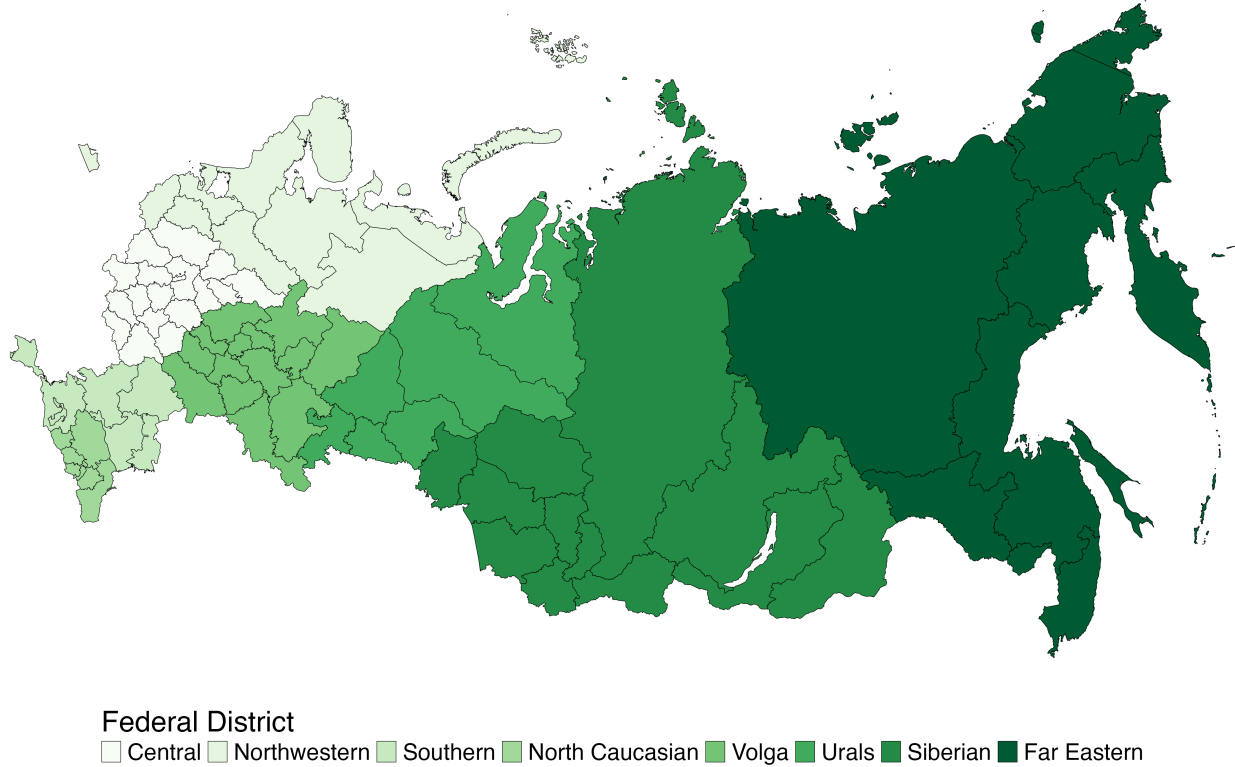
Note: Each point represents one of 83 provinces, excluding annexed Ukrainian territories. For each province, the axes report the share of respondents identifying with the indicated ethnicity among census respondents who answered the ethnicity question in 2010 and 2020, respectively ([Rosstat, 2010](#); [2022](#)). The 45-degree line indicates equality across census waves: points above (below) the line denote an increase (decline).

Figure A5: Voter Turnout and Support for Putin: Above vs. Below Median Ethnic Russian Provinces



Note: Each panel presents the relationship between voter turnout and Putin's vote share in a given presidential election year across 83 provinces (occupied Ukrainian territories are excluded). Points represent provinces and are colored according to whether the province's share of Russians in 2010 is above or below the median (85.3%). 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 \(2010\)](#).

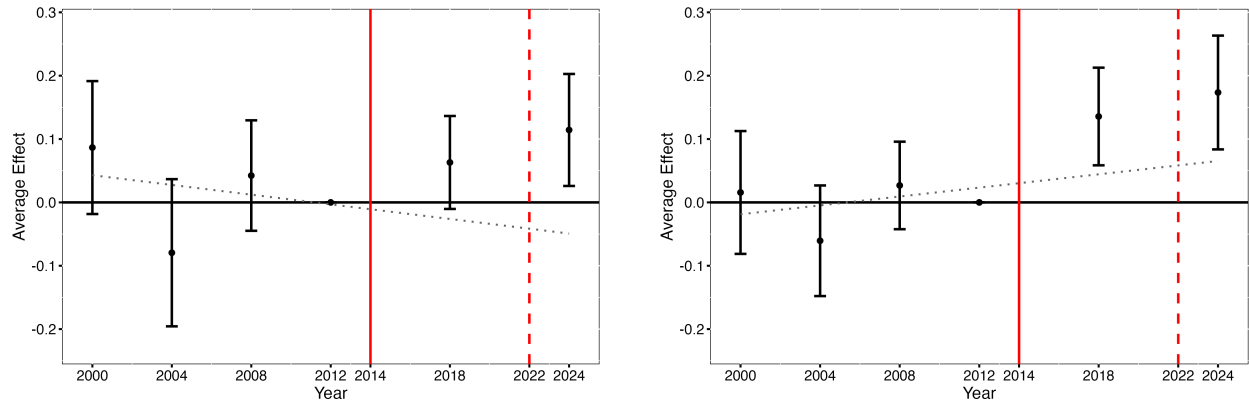
Figure A7: Subregions of the Russian Federation



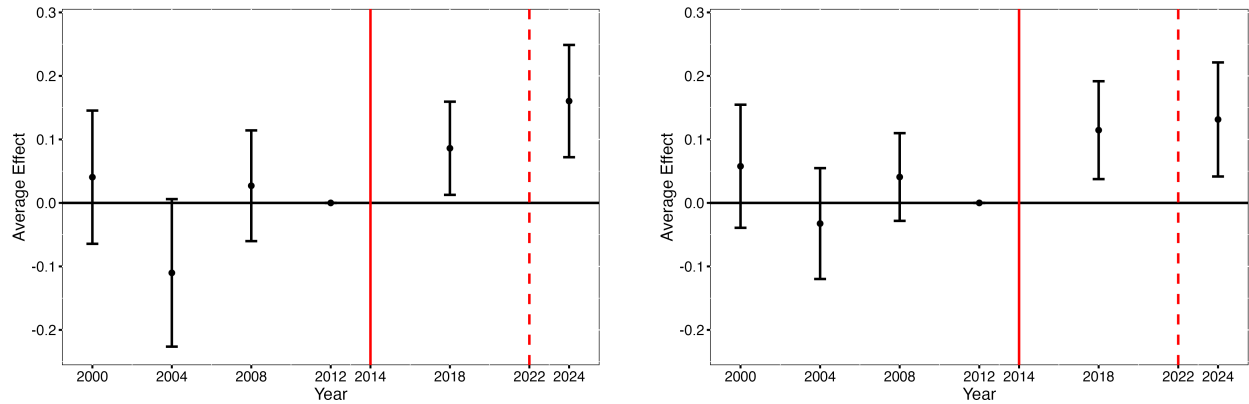
Note: The figure shows the eight subregions (federal districts) of the Russian Federation used in the empirical analysis: Central, Northwestern, Southern, North Caucasian, Volga, Urals, Siberian, and Far Eastern. Federal district fixed effects are included in selected specifications to account for broad geographic and administrative heterogeneity across provinces.

Figure A8: 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

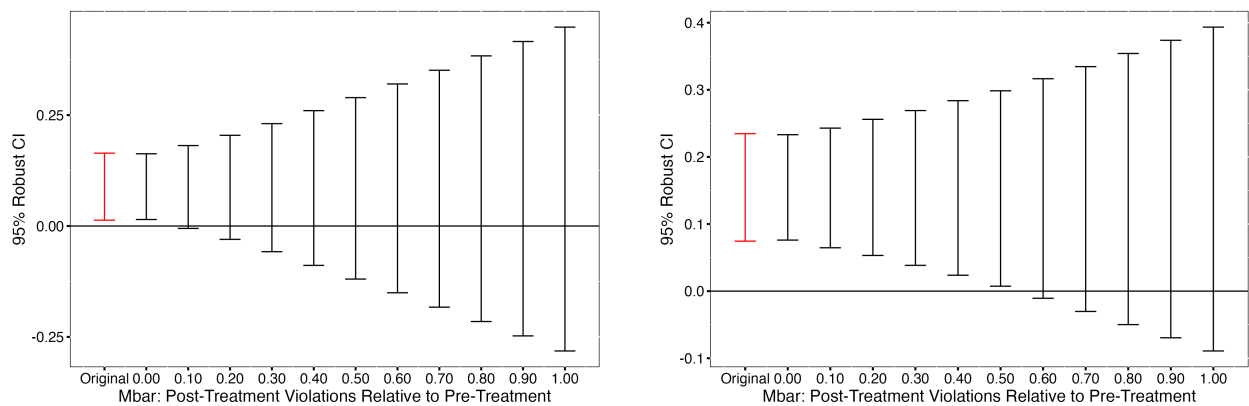
Panel A: Estimated Linear Trend



Panel B: Rotated Event Study

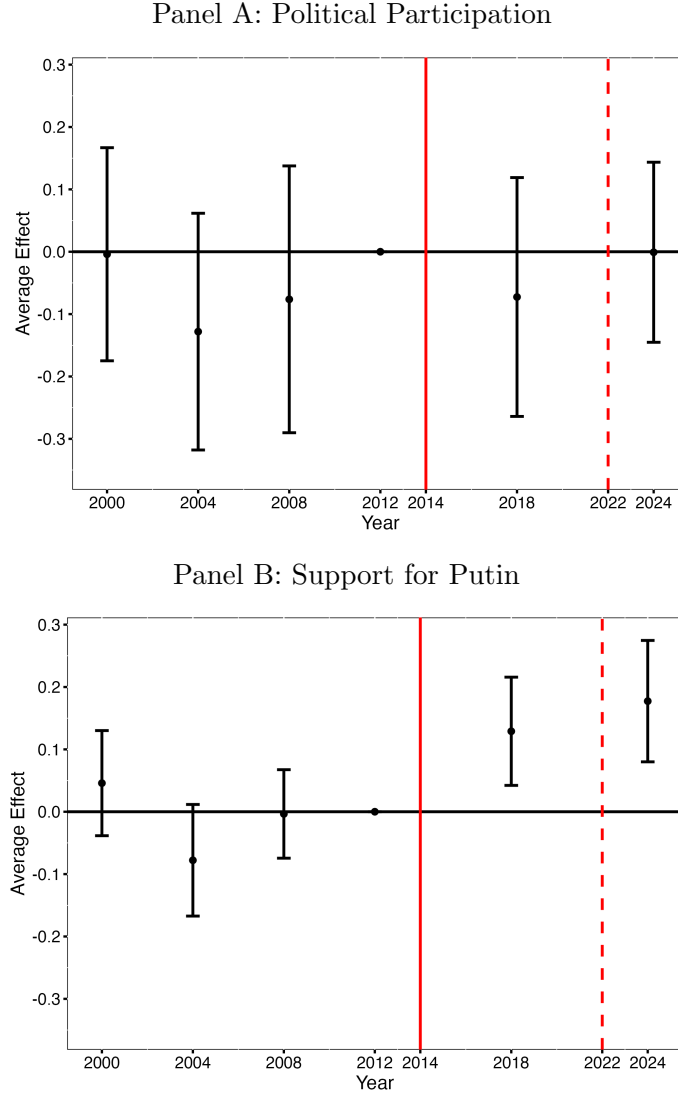


Panel C: Sensitivity to Potential Violations of Parallel Trends



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 violations of parallel trends, using the "honest approach to parallel trends" proposed by [Rambachan and Roth \(2023\)](#). In this panel, we report confidence sets for the average of all post-treatment coefficients, computed under the relative magnitudes restriction that post-treatment violations of parallel trends are no larger than Mbar times the maximum violation observed in the pre-treatment period.

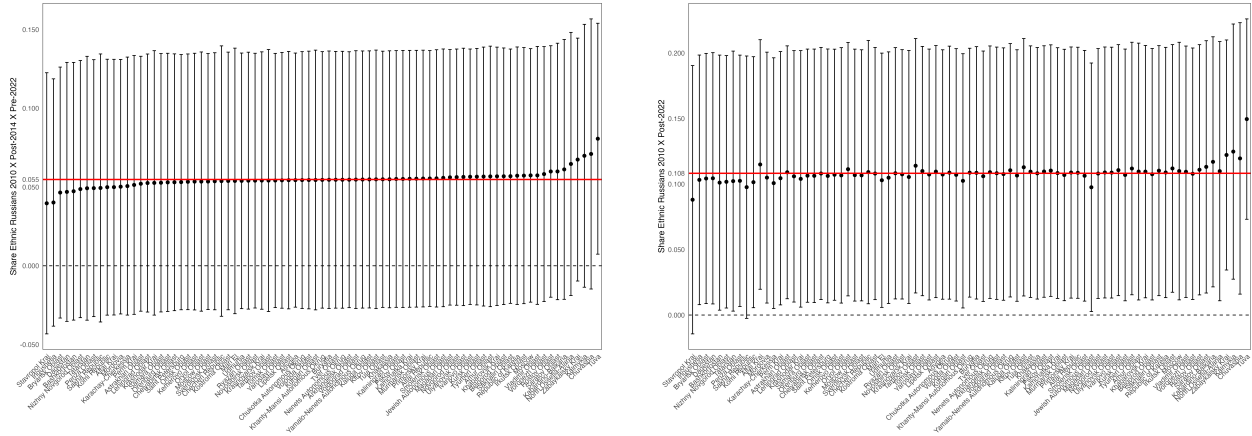
Figure A9: Robustness to Fraud Adjustment (Shpilkin, 2009)



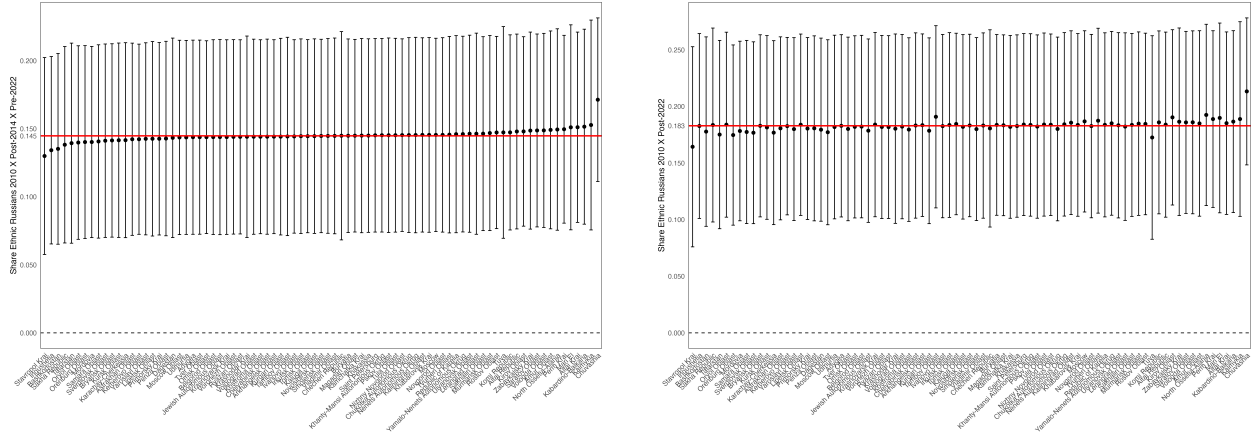
Note: Panels A and B report difference-in-differences event-study estimates of the effect of the ethnic Russian population share (2010) on provincial voter turnout and Putin’s vote share, adjusted for electoral irregularities using the method proposed by [Shpilkin \(2009\)](#). The Shpilkin method infers 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. Putin’s vote share in 2008 is proxied by Medvedev’s vote share. The specifications include province and year fixed effects, as well as subregion-specific linear trends. Subregions refer to Russia’s 8 supra-provincial administrative regions. Standard errors are clustered at the province level (83 clusters; occupied Ukrainian territories 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 \(2010\)](#), and provincial controls from [CEDAR \(2024\)](#).

Figure A10: Robustness Check: Leave-One-Region-Out

Panel A: Political Participation



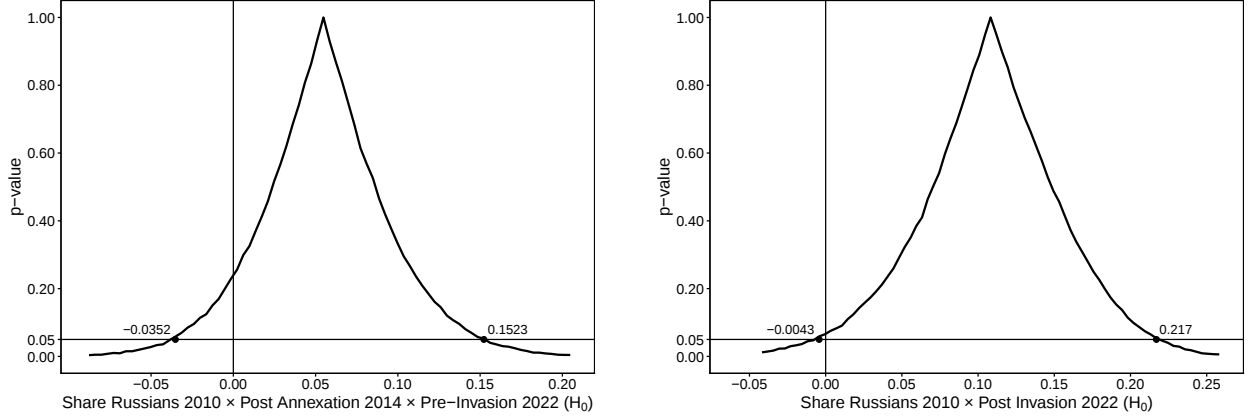
Panel B: Support for Putin



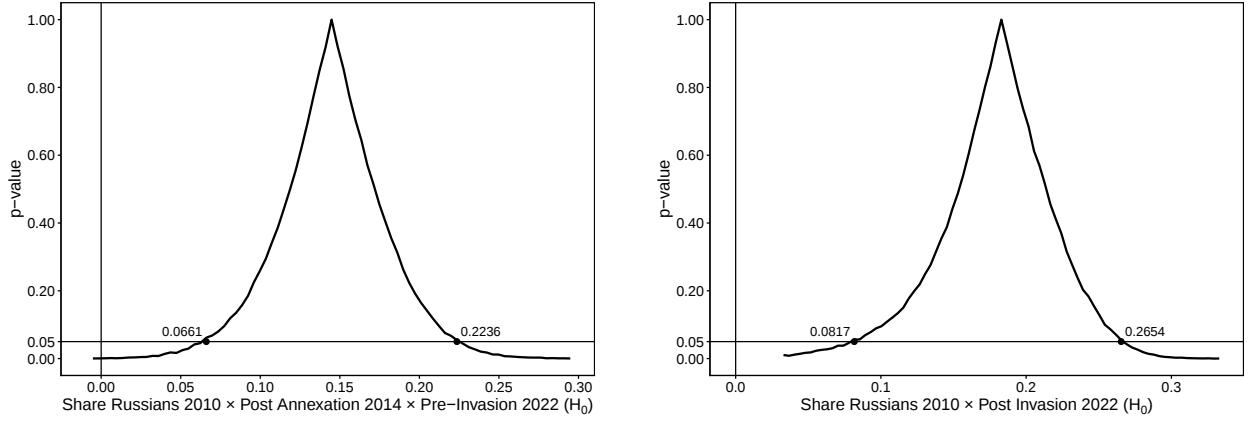
Note: This figure reports leave-one-region-out estimates for the main outcomes. Each point shows the coefficient obtained by re-estimating the baseline specification after excluding one region at a time. The left column presents the interaction between provincial ethnic Russian population share and the post-Crimea Annexation period, while the right column presents the interaction with the post-Full-Scale Invasion period. Panel A reports voter turnout, and Panel B reports support for Putin. The red horizontal line indicates the baseline coefficient estimated using the full sample. The unit of observation is a province-year, and outcomes include electronic voting in 2024 where applicable. 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. Putin's vote share in 2008 is proxied by Medvedev's vote share. The specifications include province and year fixed effects, as well as subregion-specific linear trends. Subregions refer to Russia's 8 supra-provincial administrative regions. Standard errors are clustered at the province level (83 clusters; occupied Ukrainian territories are excluded). Election results are from [CEC Russia \(2025\)](#), ethnic composition data from [Rosstat \(2010\)](#), and provincial controls from [CEDAR \(2024\)](#).

Figure A11: Confidence Interval by Wild Bootstrap

Panel A: Political Participation



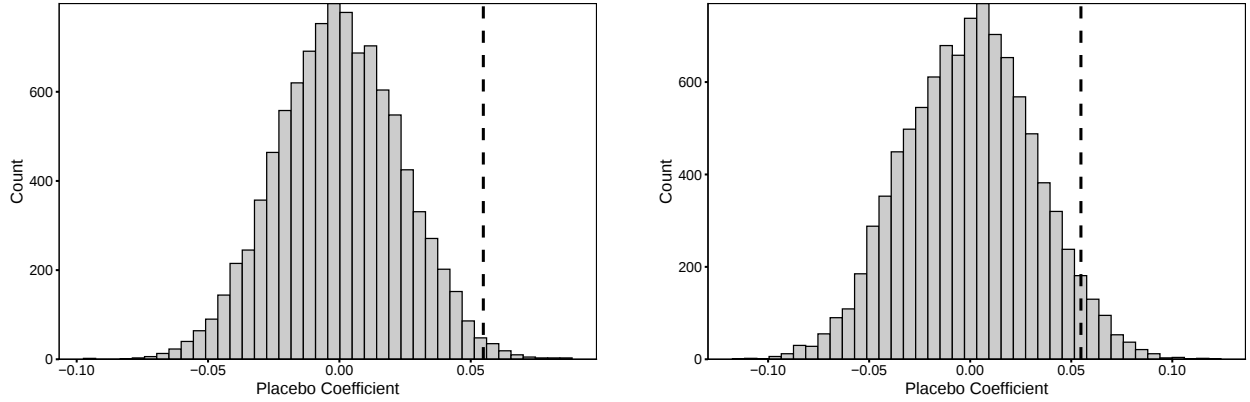
Panel B: Support for Putin



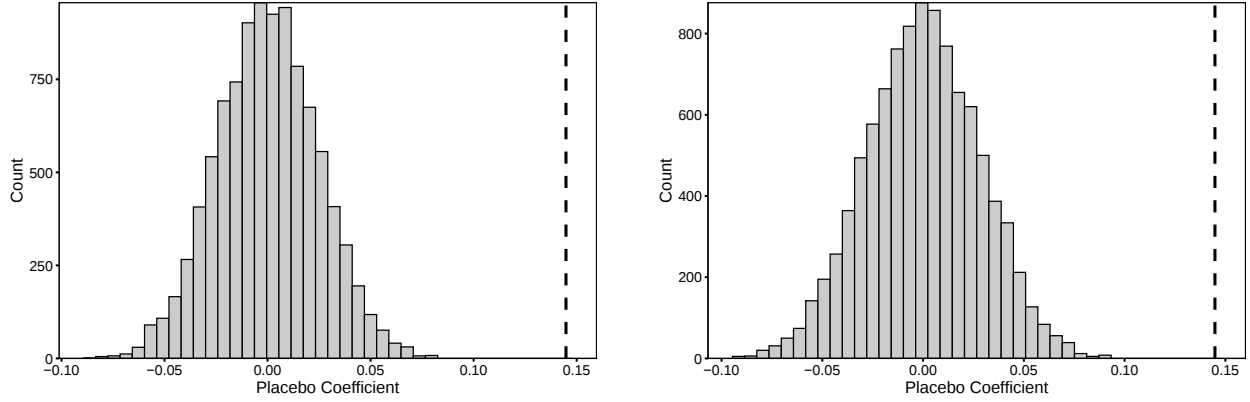
Note: The figure reports wild cluster bootstrap p-value curves for the interaction terms between the provincial share of ethnic Russians and the post-Crimea annexation and post-full-scale invasion indicators, using the wild bootstrap clustering procedure of [Cameron et al. \(2008\)](#). The left column reports the interaction between ethnic Russian population share and the post-Crimea Annexation period, while the right column reports the interaction with the post-Full-Scale Invasion period. Panel A presents confidence intervals for the estimated effects on voter turnout, while Panel B presents confidence intervals for the estimated effects on Putin's vote share. The unit of observation is a province-year, and outcomes include electronic voting in 2024 where applicable. 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. Putin's vote share in 2008 is proxied by Medvedev's vote share. The specifications include province and year fixed effects, as well as subregion-specific linear trends. Subregions refer to Russia's 8 supra-provincial administrative regions. The sample consists of 83 provinces; occupied Ukrainian territories are excluded. Election results are from [CEC Russia \(2025\)](#), ethnic composition data from [Rosstat \(2010\)](#), and provincial controls from [CEDAR \(2024\)](#).

Figure A12: Randomized Inference

Panel A: Political Participation

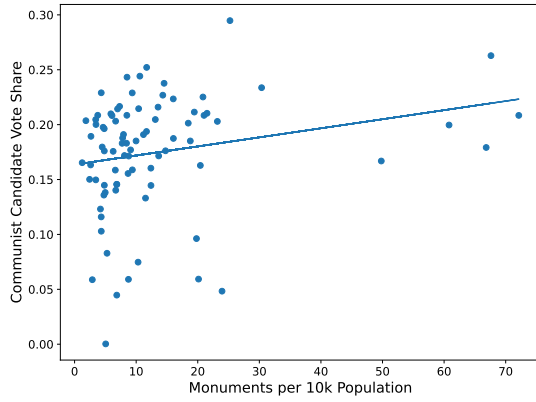


Panel B: Support for Putin

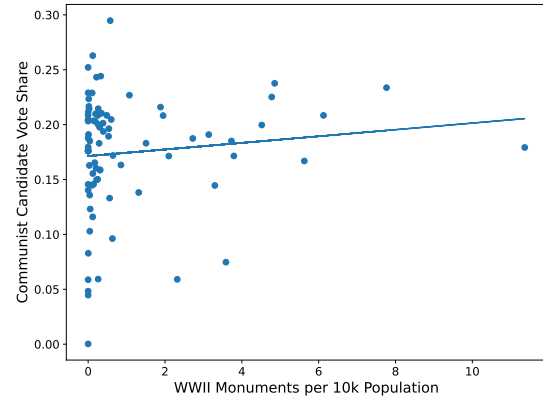


Note: The figure presents placebo distributions obtained from randomized inference tests based on 10,000 permutations of the regional share of ethnic Russians across Russian provinces. In each iteration, ethnic composition is randomly reassigned across regions while preserving the panel structure, after which the baseline specification is re-estimated using reconstructed interaction terms for the post-2014 and post-2022 periods. The histograms show the distribution of placebo estimates for the interaction between ethnic Russian population share and the post-Crimea Annexation period (left column) and the post-Full-Scale Invasion period (right column). Dashed vertical lines mark the corresponding observed coefficients from the baseline regressions. Panel A reports results for voter turnout; Panel B reports results for Putin's vote share. The unit of observation is a province-year, and outcomes include electronic voting in 2024 where applicable. 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. Putin's vote share in 2008 is proxied by Medvedev's vote share. The specifications include province and year fixed effects, as well as subregion-specific linear trends. Subregions refer to Russia's 8 supra-provincial administrative regions. The sample consists of 83 provinces; occupied Ukrainian territories are excluded. Election results are from [CEC Russia \(2025\)](#), ethnic composition data from [Rosstat \(2010\)](#), and provincial controls from [CEDAR \(2024\)](#).

Figure A13: Correlations between Monument Measures and the Communist Party Vote Share in the 2012 Presidential Election



(a) All Monuments



(b) WWII Monuments

Note: This figure shows the relationship between the provincial number of monuments – Panel (a): all monuments and Panel (b): monuments related to World War II – and the vote share of the Communist Party-affiliated candidate in the 2012 presidential election (the pre-treatment period). The sample consists of 83 provinces; occupied Ukrainian territories are excluded. Election results are from [CEC Russia \(2025\)](#), and monument data are from [Russian Ministry of Culture \(2025\)](#).

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 вы-давливают русских и русскоязычное население с их исторических терри-торий”.
Source: TASS. (2021, December 23). Putin says indigenous peoples law excludes Rus- sians in Ukraine. https://tass.ru/politika/13281223	
“ They began suppressing Russian cul- ture, the Russian language ... ”	“Начали подавлять и русскую куль- туру, и русский язык ...”
Source: TASS. (2022, December 22). Putin: Russian culture and language were sup- pressed in Ukraine, but no one noticed it. https://tass.ru/politika/16668285	
“ In Ukraine, hatred of everything Russian has become the official ide- ology ... ”	“На Украине официальной идеоло- гией стала ненависть ко всему рус- скому.” ...
Source: Putin, V. (2023, February 21). Presidential Address to the Federal Assem- bly [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
<i>Dependent Variables</i>	
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.
<i>Independent Variables</i>	
Share Russians 2010	Share of residents self-identifying as ethnically Russian in the 2010 All-Russian Census (ethnic Russian population divided by total population).
Non-Titular Province	Indicator equal to 1 if a province is not an ethnic titular province.
<i>Province Characteristics</i>	
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.
State Media Penetration (2014)	The share of the provincial population covered by digital TV broadcasting in Q1 2014
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.
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.
Subregion	Categorical variable indicating the federal district to which a province belongs.

Note: This table reports variable definitions. All outcomes are measured at the province-year level unless otherwise indicated. Election results are from [CEC Russia \(2025\)](#); ethnic composition data are from [Rosstat \(2010\)](#); provincial controls are from [CEDAR \(2024\)](#); casualty data are from [Mediazona \(2026\)](#); media penetration data are from [FGUP NIIR \(2014\)](#); and monument data are from [Russian Ministry of Culture \(2025\)](#).

Table A3: Description of variables: Ukrainian Side

Variable	Description
<i>Dependent Variables</i>	
Air Attacks	Cumulative number of air attacks targeting a Ukrainian province between February 24, 2022 and December 19, 2025.
<i>Independent Variables</i>	
Share Russians 2001	Share of residents self-identifying as ethnically Russian in the 2001 All-Ukrainian Census (ethnic Russian population divided by total population).
<i>Province Characteristics</i>	
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. Air attack data are from [Zhukov and Ayers \(2023\)](#) and ethnic composition data from [Ukrstat \(2001\)](#)

Table A4: Statistics Summary: Data on Russia

	Mean	SD	Min	Max	N
<i>Panel A: Dependent Variables (varies by province-year)</i>					
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
<i>Panel B: Ethnic Shares (varies by province)</i>					
Share Russians (2020)	0.688	0.234	0.006	0.910	498
Non-Titular Province	0.699	0.459	0.000	1.000	498
<i>Panel C: Control Variables (varies by province-year)</i>					
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
<i>Panel D: Baseline District Characteristics (varies by province)</i>					
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
State Media Penetration (2014)	0.844	0.215	0.000	1.000	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

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 by the share of Russians in 2010 and an indicator for non-titular provinces. 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, the share of the population covered by digital TV broadcasting in Q1 2014, 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 occupied Ukrainian territories. Election results are from [CEC Russia \(2025\)](#); ethnic composition data are from [Rosstat \(2010\)](#); provincial controls are from [CEDAR \(2024\)](#); casualty data are from [Mediazona \(2026\)](#); media penetration data are from [FGUP NIIR \(2014\)](#); and monument data are from [Russian Ministry of Culture \(2025\)](#).

Table A5: Statistics Summary: Data on Ukraine

	Mean	SD	Min	Max	N
<i>Panel A: Dependent Variables (varies by province-year)</i>					
Air Attacks since 2022 ($\times 1,000$)	1.641	2.196	0.022	9.505	25
<i>Panel B: Ethnic Shares (varies by province)</i>					
Share Russians 2001	0.111	0.109	0.012	0.390	25
<i>Panel C: Control Variables (varies by province-year)</i>					
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. Air attack data are from [Zhukov and Ayers \(2023\)](#) and ethnic composition data from [Ukrstat \(2001\)](#)

Table A6: Robustness to Share Russians in the Census Data

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Panel A				
<i>Dependent variable:</i>	Political Participation			
Non-Titular Province $\times$ Post Annexation 2014 $\times$ Pre Invasion 2022	0.006 (0.014)	0.012 (0.012)	0.013 (0.014)	0.014 (0.015)
Non-Titular Province $\times$ Post Invasion 2022	0.044** (0.019)	0.038** (0.018)	0.038* (0.021)	0.040* (0.023)
p-value: $H_0(\text{Post Annexation} = \text{Post Invasion})$	$p < 0.05$	$p < 0.1$	$p = 0.21$	$p = 0.21$
Province FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Urban Population Share	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Old-Age Dependency Ratio	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Paved Road Density	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Real Income per capita 2000 $\times$ Year FE	No	No	Yes	Yes
Urban Population Share 2000 $\times$ Year FE	No	No	Yes	Yes
Distance to Ukraine (km) $\times$ Year FE	No	No	Yes	Yes
Against All Vote Share 2000 $\times$ Year FE	No	No	Yes	Yes
E-Voting 2024 $\times$ Year FE	No	No	Yes	Yes
Subregion-Specific Linear Trends	No	No	No	Yes
Mean Dep Var	0.696	0.696	0.696	0.696
R ²	0.760	0.776	0.817	0.823
Observations	498	498	498	498
Panel B				
<i>Dependent variable:</i>	Support for Putin			
Non-Titular Province $\times$ Post Annexation 2014 $\times$ Pre Invasion 2022	0.056*** (0.013)	0.060*** (0.013)	0.059*** (0.014)	0.045*** (0.015)
Non-Titular Province $\times$ Post Invasion 2022	0.075*** (0.018)	0.071*** (0.018)	0.069*** (0.019)	0.047** (0.021)
p-value: $H_0(\text{Post Annexation} = \text{Post Invasion})$	$p = 0.15$	$p = 0.42$	$p = 0.38$	$p = 0.86$
Province FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Urban Population Share	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Old-Age Dependency Ratio	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Paved Road Density	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Real Income per capita 2000 $\times$ Year FE	No	No	Yes	Yes
Urban Population Share 2000 $\times$ Year FE	No	No	Yes	Yes
Distance to Ukraine (km) $\times$ Year FE	No	No	Yes	Yes
Against All Vote Share 2000 $\times$ Year FE	No	No	Yes	Yes
E-Voting 2024 $\times$ Year FE	No	No	Yes	Yes
Subregion-Specific Linear Trends	No	No	No	Yes
Mean Dep Var	0.711	0.711	0.711	0.711
R ²	0.857	0.864	0.891	0.906
Observations	498	498	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). Non-Titular Province equals 1 for provinces that are not ethnic titular province. Ethnic titular provinces are those historically associated with a non-Russian titular ethnic group. 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. Subregions refer to Russia’s 8 supra-provincial administrative regions. Standard errors are clustered at the province level (83 clusters; occupied Ukrainian territories excluded). Election results are from [CEC Russia \(2025\)](#), ethnic composition data from [Rosstat \(2010\)](#), and provincial controls from [CEDAR \(2024\)](#). *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

A4 Titular Province Classification

For robustness checks using the titular-province indicator, provinces are classified as titular if they are federal subjects in which a non-Russian ethnic group is institutionally recognized in the official status or name of the region. This includes ethnic republics, autonomous okrugs, and the Jewish Autonomous Oblast. The following provinces are coded as titular:

Table A7: Titular Provinces

Adygea	Mari El
Altai Republic	Mordovia
Bashkortostan	Nenets Autonomous Okrug
Buryatia	North Ossetia-Alania
Chechen Republic	Republic of Karelia
Chuvashia	Sakha Republic
Dagestan	Tatarstan
Ingushetia	Tuva
Jewish Autonomous Oblast	Udmurtia
Kabardino-Balkaria	Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug
Kalmykia	
Karachay-Cherkessia	
Khakassia	
Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug	
Komi Republic	

All other federal subjects are classified as non-titular provinces.

A5 Sample Construction

This subsection documents the construction of the Russian province-year panel used in the empirical analysis. The starting point is polling-station-level presidential election data obtained from the Russian Central Election Commission for six presidential elections: 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012, 2018, and 2024. Polling-station observations are first aggregated to the provincial level after excluding locations that do not belong to the territorial sample of the Russian Federation. Specifically, we remove polling stations located outside Russia (“за пределами Российской Федерации”), the Baikonur voting district, and administrative observations reported directly under the Central Election Commission rather than assigned to a province.

Polling stations located in annexed territories are also excluded from the sample. This applies to Crimea and Sevastopol, which appear in the official election returns beginning in

2018, and to Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson, which appear in 2024. These territories are not included in the provincial panel in order to preserve a geographically consistent pre-treatment sample.

Polling stations with implausible electoral characteristics are excluded from the sample. Specifically, we remove polling stations where turnout exceeds 100%, polling stations where the reported vote share for the incumbent exceeds 100%, and polling stations with fewer than 100 registered voters. These restrictions eliminate precinct-level reporting inconsistencies and very small polling stations that may introduce disproportionate noise into province-level aggregates.

Province names are harmonized across years using a unified Russian–English concordance. After harmonization, election returns are aggregated to the province-year level. The resulting election panel is merged with ethnic composition data from the 2002, 2010, and 2020 Russian population censuses, province-level socioeconomic controls, and geographic variables. Control variables are aligned to election years. Because the latest socioeconomic panel ends in 2023, values for 2024 are constructed by carrying forward the most recent available observation within each province, using 2023 values where available and 2022 otherwise.

The final analytical sample is a balanced panel of 83 Russian provinces observed in six presidential elections between 2000 and 2024, yielding 498 province-year observations. Each province is consistently assigned to one subregion used in the fixed-effects specifications.

A6 Large Language Model Coding Prompt

This appendix reports the prompt used to assign nation-building and empire-building narrative scores to regional news texts. Each sentence was evaluated independently using ChatGPT, which assigned two separate scores on a 0–100 scale and one narrative label. Scores were later aggregated to the article level using mean sentence scores.

System prompt:

You are a careful political text coder.

Your task is to analyze one Russian-language sentence and assign two independent scores:

1. **Nation-building score (0–100):** Measures how strongly the sentence emphasizes shared national identity, historical unity, collective belonging, compatriots, cultural continuity, protection of co-ethnics, historical justice, and civic or ethnic national integration.

2. **Empire-building score (0–100):** Measures how strongly the sentence emphasizes territorial power, state grandeur, geopolitical dominance, hierarchy, strategic control, imperial continuity, restoration of great-power status, and center–periphery dominance.

Instructions:

- Score every sentence regardless of topic.
- If neither narrative is present, assign low scores.
- A sentence may contain both narratives.
- Use conservative scoring.
- Assign high scores only when narrative evidence is explicit.
- Avoid speculative interpretation.
- If evidence is weak, prefer low scores.

Then assign one label:

- nation-building
- empire-building
- mixed
- neutral/descriptive

Labeling rules:

- If one score exceeds the other by at least 15 points and both are not very low, assign the dominant label.
- If both scores are substantial and close, assign “mixed”.
- If both scores are low, assign “neutral/descriptive”.

Write justification in English.

Return valid JSON only:

```
{  
  "nation_score": integer,  
  "empire_score": integer,  
  "label": string,  
  "justification": string  
}
```