



Presidential Power and Anti-Corruption Discourse in the Post-Soviet Russia

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Abstract

The present work seeks to substantiate and expound on the emerging research agenda that explores pervasive problems with politization of state-sponsored, anti-corruption activism in the post-communist countries. The study examines the evolution of anti-corruption discourse in the post-Soviet Russia from 1994 through 2020. Specific data from the annual presidential addresses to the Federal Assembly are used to conduct a quantitative analysis of frequencies of using corruption and anti-corruption terms by the three Russian presidents- Yeltsin, Medvedev, and Putin. A contextual examination of anti-corruption rhetoric is also performed to explain the results of the quantitative analysis.

Keywords: Post-Soviet Russia, Anti-Corruption Discourse, Russian Presidency.

1. Introduction

The Russian Criminal Code of 1997 defines corruption as an abuse of state power and public office for private gains. In contrast with the old Soviet version of 1961, it officially criminalized corruption, following the tradition of Western democracies, where corruption is condemned as evil that subverts economic growth by increasing transaction cost and undermines the government's legitimacy by eroding public trust (Seligson, 2002).

In the past three decades the persistence of corrupt practices in the post-communist societies has become a subject of a fast-growing research agenda (Chandler, 2002; Karklins, 2005). When the so-called *colour revolutions* in Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004) put a spotlight on anti-corruption movements recognizing them as vehicles for popular mobilization, the revolutionary potential of such movements in competitive authoritarian states became evident (Spirova 2008). However, in recent years the link between anti-corruption agendas and democratization has been seriously questioned, particularly in the context of democratic backsliding in the aftermath of some colour revolutions, as well as some aspiring democracies of eastern Europe (Kudelia, 2016; Knott, 2018; Stanley, 2019).

A growing number of studies has been exploring the increased politization of official anti-corruption discourse within electoral authoritarian regimes, arguing that they too have taken notes on the lessons of the *colour revolutions* and the Arab Spring (Pavlova, 2020). Apparently, anti-corruption rhetoric can be used not only by opposition to mobilize the masses against the corrupt regime, but also by the incumbent regime itself to deflect criticism, discredit leaders of the popular movements, and set examples by selectively prosecuting disloyal members of the ruling elite (Kudelia, 2016; Minakov, 2016; Ishchenko, 2020; Chen, 2020). According to this literature, the anti-corruption rhetorical practices are often used as a political tool in power struggles, in efforts to re-legitimize the existing regimes, as well as suppressing or energizing the voters' turnout during electoral campaigns (Pavlova, 2020).

The aforementioned rhetorical practices were mastered by the semi-authoritarian regime in the post-Soviet Russia, where pervasive meta-corruption ostensibly became a functional element of the governance model (Suhara, 2004; Shlapentokh, 2013; Ling, 2019). The corrupt sub-culture has been formally portrayed as reprehensible by the leadership in the Kremlin, yet intrinsically accepted, internalized, and even institutionalized at all levels of the Russian social, political, and economic realms. A few prominent academic studies even argue that patrimonial capitalism in contemporary Russia includes institutionalized corruption as its indispensable component of Putin's regime (Kazyrytski, 2019).

Historical lessons of the *colour revolutions* and post-election demonstrations in December of 2011 have taught the Russian leadership that a skillful management of the electoral process is not enough to prevent spontaneous public mobilization. To ensure long-term regime survival, the Kremlin learned to keep a watchful eye on anti-corruption sentiments among the public and adopted a rhetorical strategy of discrediting, rather than destroying, the anti-corruption opposition through an aggressive slew of baseless accusations and legal sanctions.

The present work seeks to examine temporal dynamics of anti-corruption discursive practices used by the three Russian presidents (Boris Yeltsin, Dmitri Medvedev, and Vladimir Putin) in their annual addresses to parliament from 1994 through 2020. The main method used was the quantitative frequency analysis of key terms pertaining to corruption and anti-corruption policies in the twenty-six presidential addresses. Quantitative assessment of the priority each of the presidents placed on the issues related to governmental corruption and anti-corruption policy can be interpreted as a snapshot indicator of perceived social and oppositional pressures experienced by the Russian heads of state within a specific context of each year.

2. Research Methodology

2.1 Definition of corruption and corruption-related keywords in the official public discourse

Chapters 201- 291 of the Criminal Code of Russian Federation identifies a variety of violations as corrupt behaviours when focused on using public goods for personal benefits. This list of actions includes, but is not limited to, giving or taking a bribe, using public office for personal enrichment, obtaining material possessions, or obtaining and repaying personal favours. Corruption-related terminology of the Russian Criminal Code was used to identify the associated keywords that are most frequently used in the official anti-corruption discourse of the Russian government as presented in Table 1 below.

The twenty-six annual presidential addresses to the Federal Assembly were downloaded from the official document database on the Russian government's website (kremlin.ru) and Microsoft Word[®] was used to perform a computerized search for stemmas of the corruption-related keywords in Russian. Examples of such are given in Table 1 below. Each search result with its contextual field (one to two paragraphs of the adjacent text) was then carefully examined by a native Russian speaker to determine the specific corruption-related narrative. These contextual fields are analysed in the fourth section.

Russian Stemmas Used for Search	Corresponding Russian Lemmas Found in Addresses	English Translation
Взятк	Взятка, Взяткодатель, взятополучатель, взятополучение	Bribe, bribe-giver, bribe-taker, bribe-taking.
Взяточ	Взяточник, взяточничество	Briber, bribery
Злоупотребл	Злоупотребление	Abuse
Коррупц	Коррупция	Corruption
Коррумпи	Высококоррупцированный, декоррупцированный, закоррупцированный, коррупцированный	Highly corrupt, uncorrupted, overly corrupted, corrupted

Table 1. Stemmas and Lemmas Used to Assess the Frequency of Either Anti-Corruption or Corruption-Related Keywords in the Annual Presidential Addresses to Parliament (1994-2020)

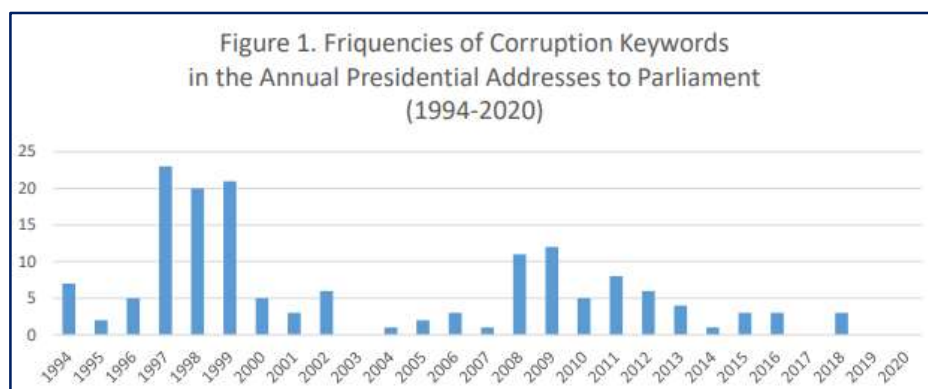
2.2 Presidential Addresses to the Russian Parliament

The official agenda of anti-corruption discourse in post-Soviet Russia has been primarily dominated by the three presidents (Startsev, 2019). The choice of annual presidential addresses to parliament as the data source for this study has to do with political importance of the annual addresses stipulated by the Russian constitution of 1993, regular occurrence, ease of access as well as relative consensus among academic studies with regard to significance of the annual addresses in shaping Russian political discourse (Martyanov, 2006). Practice of delivering an annual address by Russian presidents to the Federal Assembly (Federation Council and State Duma) was introduced by the e-paragraph in Chapter 84 of the 1993 Constitution of the Russian Federation. According to the federal law "On Strategic Planning in Russian Federation" signed into law on June 28th, 2014, annual presidential addresses to parliament is one of the key documents of strategic planning and is the basis of determining goals and priorities of social-economic development and national security of the Russian Federation. Content and format of each annual address is determined by the president and is not stipulated by any other legislative act, which qualifies the speech as a fairly accurate snapshot of executive priorities in any corresponding year.

The first presidential address to parliament was delivered by President Boris Yeltsin on February 24th of 1994. Since then, Yeltsin has delivered six annual addresses, Putin sixteen, and Dmitri Medvedev only four. It is our assumption that the frequency of mentioning either anti-corruption or corruption issues in presidential addresses reflects the degree of importance placed on dealing with corruption and developing anti-corruption measures by the presidential administration in a particular year.

The present work seeks to examine the temporal dynamics of anti-corruption official discursive practices used by the three Russian presidents through analysis of their rhetoric in annual addresses to parliament from 1994 through 2020. The main method used here is a quantitative analysis of frequencies using the temporal dynamics of

common keywords pertaining to corruption and/or anti-corruption policies in the twenty-six presidential addresses. These frequencies are illustrated in the Figure 1* below.



3. Quantitative Analysis

The first hypothesis of this inquiry suggests that the three Russian presidents have placed significantly different priority on problems of corruption, which was reflected in the number of corruption and anti-corruption keywords used in the annual addresses.

An Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) shows that there is a highly significant difference ($p = 0.0004$) among the three Russian presidents use of corruption-related keywords in their presidential addresses to parliament (Table 2).

Speech Year	Yeltsin	Medvedev	Putin
1994	7		
1995	2		
1996	5		
1997	23		
1998	20		
1999	21		
2000			5
2001			3
2002			6
2003			0
2004			1
2005			2
2006			3
2007			1
2008		11	
2009		12	
2010		5	
2011		8	
2012			6
2013			4
2014			1
2015			3
2016			3
2017			n/a
2018			3
2019			0
2020			0
Sample Mean (X-bar)	13	9	3
Sample Size (n)	6	4	16
Standard Deviation (Sx)	9	3	2

Table 2. Frequency Corruption Keywords in Annual Presidential Addresses to the Federal Assembly (1994-2020)

The ANOVA results showed a p-value of 0.0004 which implies that the difference of corruption and anti-corruption keyword usage of the three presidents was different at a highly significant level.

* President Putin's Annual Addresses from 2003, 2019 and 2020 contain no references to corruption or anti-corruption. In 2017 Putin postponed his address to the Russian parliament until March 1, 2018.

It is an implicit underlying assumption of this study that the more frequently anti-corruption or corruption-related keywords are used in each presidential address, the higher priority is placed on anti-corruption discourse within the executive agenda. The priority of anti-corruption discourse can potentially be treated as an indicator of the regime’s insecurity in the aftermath of popular anti-corruption protests and international pressures from the Western democracies and international organizations.

The results of three two-sample t-tests of our second hypothesis are presented in Table 3. Data suggests that Boris Yeltsin’s use of anti-corruption rhetoric is significantly higher ($p=0.0003$) as compared to Vladimir Putin’s, while is not significantly different from that of Dmitri Medvedev. Also, Medvedev’s speeches contain significantly more anti-corruption keywords than those of Putin ($p=0.0000+$).

Presidential Dyads	p-values
Yeltsin vs. Medvedev	$p=0.4394$
Yeltsin vs. Putin	$p=0.0003$
Medvedev vs. Putin	$p=0.0000+$

Table 3. Two-Sample t-test results of Frequencies Corruption Mentions in Annual Presidential Addresses to Federal Assembly (1994-2020)

The evolution of anti-corruption rhetoric, words, and phrases adjacent to the key corruption-related terms are documented in Table 4 and discussed in the next section of this work.

4. Evolution of Russia’s Official Anti-Corruption Discourse

As the revelation boom of Perestroika ended in the early 1990s, anti-corruption discourse in Russian society was predominantly in the purview of investigating reporters, who rarely attempted to generalize about the sources, mechanisms and contributing factors of the corrupt behaviour. The most prominent narratives in journalism at the time had to do with exposing past cases of corrupt conduct by the Soviet bureaucrats or the Communist party officials as well as numerous injustices within judiciary and law enforcement of the already fallen Soviet regime.

Ironically, Boris Yeltsin, who gained popularity as an uncompromising corruption fighter and radical reformer, had only very modest achievements in creating legal anti-corruption framework in the newly independent Russia (Sakwa, 2021). The number of anti-corruption campaigns during Yeltsin’s presidency were primarily symbolic in character and aimed directly at his political opponents. Yeltsin used the power of his presidential office to veto numerous legislative acts (from supreme Soviet and later from State Duma) that threatened financial or economic interests of his supporters, who were Table 4 Context of Anti-Corruption Rhetoric in Annual Presidential Addresses to Federal Assembly (1994-2020)

Speech Year	Words and Phrases Adjacent to Keywords
1994	Rule of law, organized crime, strong state, increased penalties, barrier to businesses
1995	Criminalization of businesses, laws against corruption
1996	Weak state, nomenklatura, use of force, economic crimes, criminal justice
1997	Governmental apparatus, governmental transparency, taxpayers’ money, bribery, incompetency, income reporting, illegal income, money laundering, bureaucratic procedures
1998	Command economy, dual morality, “rules of the game”, consistent anti-corruption program, financial control, dangers of corruption, corrupt behavior, low-level corruption.
1999	Civil rights of citizens, concentration of power, electoral ambitions of criminal elements, influence over state agencies, criminal code, civil code, legislative and judicial responsibility, law enforcement, administrative discretion
2000	Capital flight, gray areas of legality, exploitation of entrepreneurs, customs administration, civil service professionals
2001	Arbitrariness in law enforcement
2002	Limited economic freedom, extortion, property rights, economic and societal security, transparency of economic reporting, true market competitiveness
2003*	n/a
2004	Transparency of natural resource use
2005	Unrealized potentials of civil society
2006	Barrier to economic development, social responsibility, corruption in the military
2007	Socially responsible business, terrorism, Russia’s international role
2008	Equality, poverty, social justice, legal nihilism, legacy of the past, just and democratic society, flaws of governance, legal anti-corruption measures
2009	Dependency on natural resources, digital technologies, digital government, quality of public discourse, barrier to modernization, societal norms, nepotism, clan politics
2010	Non-commercial organizations, excess of governmental ownership, increased penalties for bribery, imprisonment, fines for accepting and giving bribes.

2011	International anti-corruption conventions, loss of public trust, state and municipal-level corruption, systematic fight against corruption, governmental acquisitions, spending by public officials, UN Convention, illegal income increases.
2012	Everyday corruption, public indifference, low efficiency of governmental service, business privileges, state acquisitions, efficient societal control
2013	Local self-governance, scandals, legal basis, localized corruption
2014	Peaceful anti-corruption protests in Ukraine
2015	Electoral campaigns of candidates, barrier to Russia's development
2016	Civil servants at the municipal, regional, and federal levels of government, professionalism.
2017**	n/a
2018	Digital transformation of the whole system of government, reorganization of the system of social services.
2019*	n/a
2020*	n/a

*No anti-corruption phrases were denoted during these three speech years

**No Presidential speech to Parliament was presented during the 2017 calendar year allowed to enrich themselves with impunity (Suhara, 2004; Yakovlev & Zhuravskaya, 2009).

In the meantime, the unjust practices of the privatization campaign accompanied by painful economic transition and widespread governmental abuse of power, presented significant challenges to the legitimacy of the post-Soviet regime in Russia (Calarier 1997). Fearing popular discontent, the first Russian president Boris Yeltsin had issued a decree "On Fighting Corruption in the System of Governmental Service", which became the initial legal document, which drew the line between public and private sectors of the Russian economy by prohibiting any for-profit activities by governmental employees and introducing mandatory income disclosure by anyone considered for public office. Many of the decree's concepts and ideas were included into two federal law proposals. The first one "On Governmental Service" was adopted and signed into law in 1995, however the second proposal of Federal Law "On Countering Corruption" became one of the points of contention between the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet (Russian legislature prior to the 1993 Constitution) and the president, who vetoed the bill twice (Sakwa, 2021).

A year-long confrontation between Boris Yeltsin and the Supreme Soviet did not allow to proceed with building anti-corruption legal framework. It also did not help that protracted executive-legislative stand-off was full of public mud-slinging and mutual corruption allegations, many of which were quite believable for the Russian public. And even though the October 1993 constitutional crisis ended with the defeat of anti-Yeltsin's forces, many scholars argue that it was the Russian army with some help from the special forces that saved the president and completed unconstitutional dismissal of the Russian parliament (Sakwa, 2021).

Another significant uptick of interest in investigating state corruption occurred during Yeltsin's second presidency. But, as some political historians note, in the late 1990s anti-corruption narratives played a subservient role because the focus of the Russian national discourse was concentrated on the popular disenchantment with the promise of democratization, the dismay at legalization of the shadow economy, and the outrage at the dysfunctional post-Soviet institutions (Man, 2009; Yakovlev & Zhuravskaya 2009). The dramatic institutional changes related to economic transition to capitalism created an unprecedented legal vacuum, which allowed for rapid wealth accumulation by the former and newly emerging elites. All of this coincided with mass failure of law enforcement organizations that suffered from the lack of budget resources, legal knowledge, and training, as well as motivated cadres (Suhara, 2004).

From 1993 through 1997 several attempts by the Russian parliament to adopt a federal law "On Counteracting Corruption" were blocked by president Yeltsin in fear of losing political support from his wealthy and influential allies (Sakwa, 2021). Even though Russia's Criminal Code and 1994 Federal Law "On Fundamentals of State Service in Russian Federation" contained provisions for prosecuting corrupt officials, Boris Yeltsin left his presidency without an explicit legally-framed anti-corruption law in place. Finally, in 2001, the federal law "On Countering Corruption" was adopted by the parliament and signed into law by president Putin.

Anti-corruption rhetoric was embedded in the Concepts of Administrative Reform of the Russian Federation in 2006-2010 and in 2004 a new Federal Law "On State and Public Service in Russian Federation" was issued. In 2006 the Russian parliament ratified the United Nations Anti-Corruption Convention as a part of the civil service overhaul spearheaded by Putin's administration and his initiative of establishing a *vertical of power*, which was a drive to increase the capacity of the Russian state (Hashim 2005). Notably, Russian legislators did not ratify Chapter 20 of the UN Convention (titled "Unlawful Enrichment of Public Officials") justifying the omission that this norm had already been addressed by the 2004 federal law "On State and Public Service in Russian Federation".

During Putin's second presidential term the topic of corruption reemerged in the Russia's official discourse with a renewed energy when it became framed as a key "enemy within" responsible for previous failures of civil service reform efforts (Kumar, 2005). However, Putin himself (for the most part) avoided the topic by scarcely mentioning it in his addresses and skillfully redirecting the public discontent against politically ambitious business

moguls (“oligarchs”), such as Khodorkovski, Berezovski, Guskinski, and Abramovich (Thompson, 2005; Guriev & Rachinsky, 2005).

Dmitri Medvedev touted the anti-corruption drive as one of the main priorities of his presidency. Within his first year in office, Medvedev approved the “Plan of Countering Corruption” (2008) and signed a packet of four federal laws, which included an overarching law “On Countering Corruption” and three more laws that amended twenty-five existing federal laws. Major changes had to do with the following points:

- 1) restricting activities of governmental officials prior to, during and after they leave public service;
- 2) broadening definitions of corruption-related activities and behaviours;
- 3) multiplying and enlarging categories of individuals and organizations that can potentially be prosecuted for their involvement in corrupt activities;
- 4) expanding the type of responsibility for involvement in corruption to be eligible for prosecution in criminal, civil, and administrative courts;
- 5) increasing the size of monetary penalties and mandatory jail time for corruption;
- 6) introducing a series of initiatives aimed at preventing and discouraging abuse of public office.

Some of the restrictions of public officials mandated in this legal framework were quickly reversed by Putin after his return to presidency in 2012. Specifically, the reversals affected some *gray areas* of public-private boundaries, such as a strict ban on serving on a board of directors of state-owned companies, while simultaneously holding a public office (Sakwa, 2021).

Ironically, the intensified official anti-corruption discourse and demonstrative installation of some of the legal measures during Medvedev’s presidency, raised public awareness of the hypocritical character of the existing political regime. The few remaining independent journalists, media commentators, and political researchers argued that the Kremlin’s campaign had more to do with discouraging disloyal-to-the-regime behaviors among the ruling elite rather than encouraging a systematic effort to counteract corruption (Chen, 2020; Pavlova, 2020).

The *color revolutions* lessons about regime survival were not lost on the Russian leadership, as it realized that it needed at least the appearance of some grass-root support to withstand a social discontent coupled with international pressures from the West. On May 10th, 2011 at the annual congress of the United Russia party, then Prime-Minister, Putin called upon for political mobilization of his supporters behind the regime’s anti-corruption campaign by organizing a so-called civic organization titled “All-Russia’s Popular Front” (Treisman, 2013; Monaghan, 2020). This tactic of co-opting social activism and mobilizing the regime supporters proven to be useful for years to come, such as during the 2012 and 2018 presidential elections, particularly when the revived imperial nationalism after the 2014 Crimean annexation gave the Front its second wind (Monaghan, 2020).

However, the state co-optation of social movements and civic organizations did little to change the Russian public’s mind with respect to the prominence of corruption within Putin’s government, and the pro-Putin’s *party of power*. Despite all of the strategizing, in 2011 the parliamentary election did not go as planned and the United Russia lost its constitutional majority and post-electoral anti-corruption protests still took place in the two capital cities (Moscow and St.-Petersburg). The popular manifestation of discontent, coupled with some approving nudges from the West, had threatened Putin’s return to presidency in 2012 and reinforced the Kremlin’s fears of exploding into a *color revolution* (Koesel & Bunce, 2012). Non-coincidentally the protests brought into an international spotlight some new faces and fresh voices, shifting anti-corruption discourse in the Russian society from being dominated solely by the executive, to more of a state-society dialogue. One of the prominent figures of the newly emerged opposition to the Putin regime was Alexei Navalny. Navalny became known as a major political activist through using various channels of social media to expose the close ties of the Russian political power holders (Putin and Medvedev included) with the top business elites in Russia’s energy sector (Robertson, 2013).

After Putin’s return to presidency in 2012 the anticorruption efforts acquired a distinct anti-western flavor and even some nationalist characteristics. Even prior to the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Putin administration instigated an intense search for so-called “foreign agents” among the opposition and the regime’s half-hearted supporters. A series of federal laws aimed at “repatriation of foreign assets” were adopted and came into effect in 2012 and 2013. For example, Federal Law N230 “On Establishing Control Over Balance Between Personal Income and Spending by Governmental Officials” (December 3, 2012) required complete financial disclosure from public servants and their families. Federal Law N79 “On Prohibiting Governmental Officials to Open and Own Foreign Bank Accounts and to Possess and Use of Other Foreign Financial Instruments” (May 7, 2013) explicitly prohibited public and state officials to have any financial dealings with foreign companies or to own any material or financial assets abroad.

In his 2019 and 2020 annual addresses to the Federal Assembly president Putin had no references to corruption or anti-corruption measures, which happened with Putin only once before in 2003, but never with the two other presidents. Instead, in the 2020 address, which was delivered right before the onset of the COVID 19 global pandemic, Putin proposed a set of most significant amendments to the 1993 Constitution since its inception. He justified his proposal for constitutional reform by arguing that in the last 25 years since the foundational law went

into effect, the situation in Russia had changed completely, even though, he insisted, “the potential of the 1993 constitution is far from being exhausted” (Putin, 2020). Apparently, the so-called “potential” had something to do with allowing the living former Russian presidents (currently Putin and Medvedev) for two more terms in office. So, without even mentioning corruption in his speech, Vladimir Putin used the power of his office to demonstrate how it could be done.

5. Conclusions and Further Research

A few preliminary conclusions can be made:

1. In their addresses to Parliament all three presidents prefer to use the general English-derived term “corruption” (коррупция) rather than using words, terms and phrases of Russian-origin and/or the vernacular vocabulary;
2. Frequencies of corruption-related rhetoric vary significantly among the three Russian presidents. Vladimir Putin is an apparent outlier among the three as he did not address corruption-related issues nearly as often as his counterparts;
3. There is a qualitative transformation of the anti-corruption agenda in the rhetorical context of presidential addresses over the observed period (1994-2020);
4. Boris Yeltsin’s primary focus was on exposing corruption as a barrier to economic growth because it was increasing the cost of transactions, deterring foreign investment, and reducing the standards of living in Russia (Yeltsin, 1994-1999);
5. Through his first two presidential terms, Vladimir Putin emphasized the private sector’s role as the main source of corruption and hindrance to law enforcement (Putin 2000-2007). Mentioning of corruption and anti-corruption policies is completely absent from three of the sixteen Putin’s addresses (2003, 2019, and 2020);
6. Dmitri Medvedev’s anti-corruption agenda was focused on criminal prosecution of both sides of corrupt transactions (Medvedev 2008-2011). His short tenure as a Russian president was highlighted by one ambitious anti-corruption program, which resulted in the adoption of two federal laws and the drafting of three others which were passed in 2012 and 2013 after Medvedev traded places with Putin.

The present work focused on the annual presidential addresses to the Russian parliament as a gauge of the priority of anti-corruption policies in the executive agenda. A more complete understanding of the true intent behind the Kremlin’s anti-corruption drives could be developed by exploring three possible venues:

- 1) widening the corpus of presidential discourse to include other available and possibly less-formal speeches and public performances by the Russian Head of State;
- 2) compare frequencies of corruption mentions with frequencies of mentions of other lingering problems of state governance in Russia, such as demographic issues, population migration, balancing federal budget and so on;
- 3) compare frequencies, context, and patterns of presidential anti-corruption discourse with anti-corruption discourse by Prime Minister and members of the Russian parliament.

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