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SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

Debunking the autocratic fallacy? Improving public goods delivery in Russia

Christian Fröhlich

Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, Germany

Correspondence
Christian Fröhlich, Strassmannstr. 38, Berlin 10249, Germany.
Email: chrisfroehlich@gmx.net

Funding information
Berggruen Institute

Abstract

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has not only deeply challenged Russia's international standing but has also endangered its fragile domestic order. Data from the 2022 Berggruen Governance Index reveals that overall state capacity has been stagnating at a fairly low level since the beginning of the millennium, while democratic accountability has been declining steadily and profoundly. In contrast, the provision of public goods has strongly increased during the same period. This puts the assumption of the 'autocratic fallacy'—the idea that sustained public goods delivery relies on democratic accountability in the long run—to the test. We argue that Russia's resource abundance allowed for the maintenance of a regime-supporting social contract with the population. However, the basis of that contract has changed significantly due to economic decline, fired by, among other factors, several waves of sanctions and the costs of war and will press the Russian government to find urgent solutions to sustain a high level of public goods provision under such unfavourable conditions.

Thirty-two years after the end of the Soviet Union and the re-formation of contemporary Russia as a multiparty representative democracy by constitution, Vladimir Putin, who has served as either president or prime minister since 1999, leads a so-called 'special military operation' against the neighbouring state of Ukraine. This aggressive war—which has so far proved indecisive—not only deeply challenges Russia's international standing, but also endangers its fragile domestic order. Indeed, by risking the integrity of state infrastructure, the domestic economy and the living standards of ordinary Russians, Putin's war could backfire with regime-ending consequences. How well is the Russian state prepared to sustain domestic functionality and public support, particularly in light of a stagnating economy as well as the military operation's brutal assault on a country with widespread cultural and historical links to many Russians?

The Russian government has tightened control over media and the public sphere since the beginning of the war on Ukraine in February 2022. Among others, repressive regulations of public speech limit anti-war opposition to informal and ambiguous spaces. Given such repressive policies, how does the Russian regime secure public support? For many years, observers of Russian politics and society had a simple answer. After the devastating, crisis-ridden 1990s, an informal, unspoken social contract between the state and its citizens exchanged political and social stability—in particular, relatively generous public goods provision—for regime legitimacy and pro-government electoral behaviour.

This Russian social contract seems to counter the 'autocratic fallacy', that is the assumption held by non-democratic rulers (and others) that state capacity alone is sufficient for delivering public goods and, thus, securing regime legitimacy. This fallacy is often refuted with the argument that democratic accountability is needed to set priorities for state capacity to deliver public goods at higher levels. However, data from the 2022 Berggruen Governance Index (BGI)—which measures democratic accountability, state capacity and public goods provision across 134 countries since 2000[1]—shows how public goods provision improved rapidly and considerably in Russia between 2000 and 2019 (and jumped from 63 to 81 points on

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the BGI scale), while state capacity remained at a low, but stable level and democratic accountability fell to very low levels (from 53 to 37). This puts Russia into close proximity with China and India and clearly well outside the 'narrow path'[2] to good governance. However, the question remains as to how public goods provision can advance so much while mediocre state capacity barely improves.

Some weight has been put on the argument that resource wealth and high global commodity demand create opportunities for autocratic regimes to utilise some of the income for maintaining public goods provision in order to gain or preserve legitimacy with the populace (Crystal, 1990; Ross, 2001). But the opportunities are not always used. The phenomenon of countries with resource richness showing little economic growth and weak democratic and institutional development has come to be known as the 'resource curse' (Ross, 2015). While for many of those so cursed resource abundance prevents reforms towards better governance, for other countries the result has been rather the formation of more distributive states providing public services (Mazaheri, 2017). Before its invasion of Ukraine, Russia's resource wealth and its global commodification, which have washed enormous sums into state treasuries since the early 2000s, made the country almost independent from sovereign debt held abroad, but also gave Vladimir Putin leeway to maintain the social contract without needing to restructure state institutions while destroying democratic accountability.

1 | RUSSIA'S STAGNATING STATE CAPACITY

In Russia, the collapse of the Soviet regime did not initiate a process of democratisation and adaptation to western-style liberalism—as occurred in some post-Soviet countries—but rather created a particular form of post-Soviet authoritarian capitalism that interlaced with all spheres of society (Gel'man, 2015). The devastating transformational crises due to the 'shock therapy' of economic reforms during the 1990s left a weak state in their wake. By the early 2000s, Russian leaders rallied around the new president Vladimir Putin and built new institutions to (re)gain power. This meant giving up democratisation efforts for the sake of an 'authoritarian modernization' backed by rapid economic growth thanks to massive revenues from global oil and gas exports (Gel'man, 2022).

These decisions led not only to a retraction of economic reforms (and a re-nationalisation of corporations), but also to an overregulated state which combines a very high density of poor-quality state regulations with the sweeping discretion of regulatory agencies and state watchdogs. Since the 2010s, under the shadow of 'colour revolutions'[3] in the neighbouring post-Soviet countries of Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, political stability had to be preserved at any cost, and political loyalty was prioritised over efficiency (Gel'man, 2022). The resulting 'power vertical' established an encompassing and centralised hierarchy of control that judged performance of political actors, in particular regional and municipal authorities, by their production of regime-confirming election results, but not by their socio-economic achievements, while subordinating all societal spheres including the mainstream media. This system allowed for loyal oligarchs and top bureaucrats to capture state institutions and their assets (Osipian, 2018). In 2020, constitutional amendments were adopted that were designed to ensure that the political status quo will be maintained in the long run.[4]

BGI data give evidence of how a society- and country-wide, centralised power vertical in the framework of authoritarian modernisation under conditions of rent-seeking elites leads to low state capacity that practically has not changed over the course of 20 years (from 32 in 2000 to 34 in 2019) and even remains lower than in similarly large, but less economically developed countries, such as India (see Figure 1). Behind the average figures for state capacity, some dynamics can be seen in the subindices, shown in Figure 2, which, however, are not enough to launch overall state capacity on an upward trend.

The subindex for fiscal capacity shows some fluctuation during the observation period: growth in the 2000s is dedicated to rapidly increasing income from the extraction industry, which filled the national reserves, and overall economic development boosted tax revenue. However, the 2008 global financial crisis exerted heavy pressure on national reserves, and the devaluation of the ruble in 2014 prolonged the downward trend. Since then, the central bank was able to stabilise fiscal policy on a slightly upward trend.

The slight fluctuation in coordination capacity reflects the establishment of the power vertical, which during the 2000s increased elite cohesion and strengthened administrative power. However, increasing appointments of members of the so-called *siloviki*[5] in the 2010s, meaning from among the personnel of law enforcement agencies such as the Ministry of Justice and the FSB political police, moved administrations more in line with the political elite's ideological stances, but did not improve coordination capacity.

The same goes for delivery capacity, which is severely restrained by endemic corruption and private appropriation of public goods based on nepotism and clientelism by political and economic elites. Consequently, Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index places Russia at 136th of 180 countries in the country rankings for 2021.[6] Delivery capacity had, however, improved slightly thanks to the government's

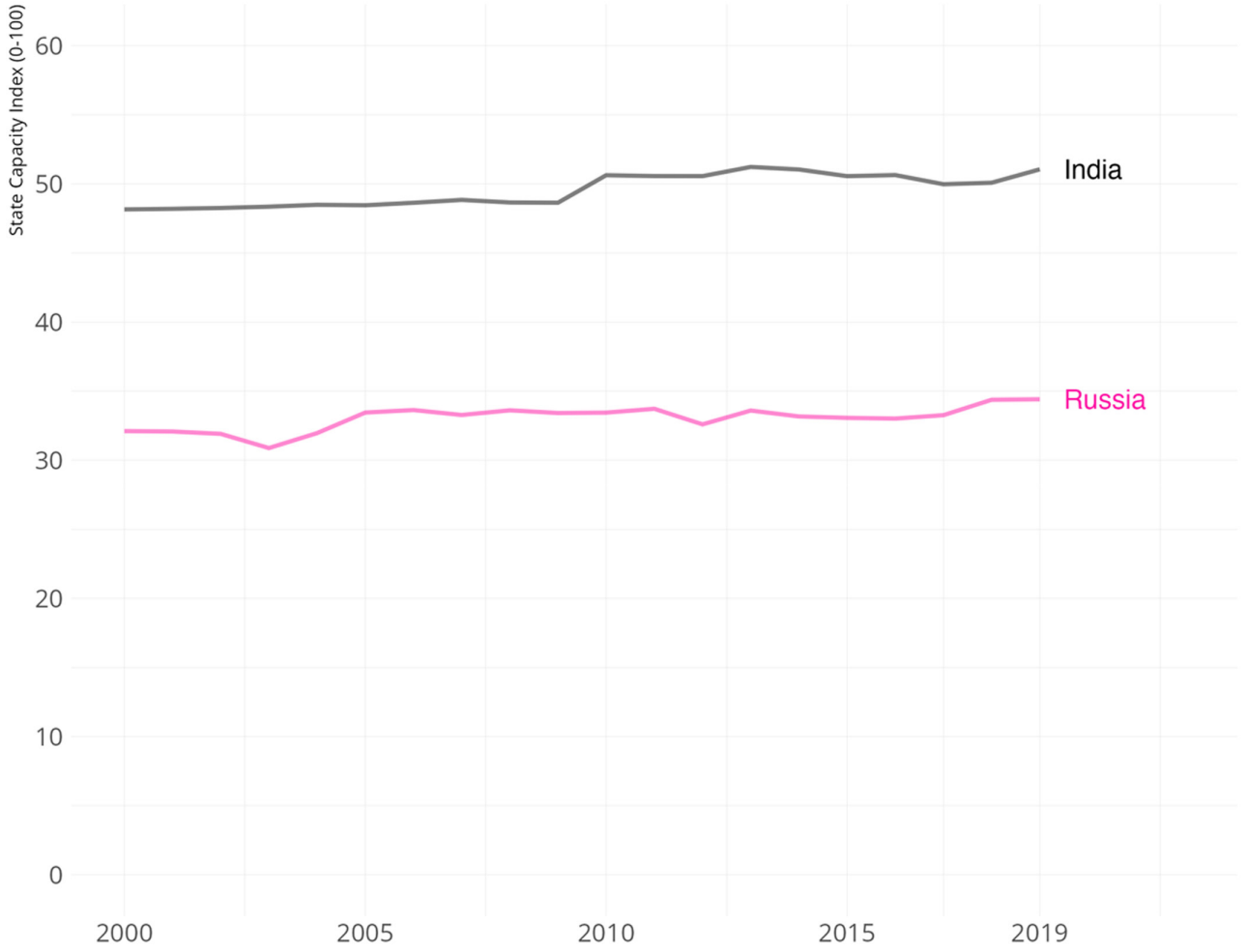

FIGURE 1 Russia's stagnant state capacity, 2000–2019. *Source*: Berggruen Governance Index 2022.

anti-corruption efforts in reaction to the oppositional protest wave of 2011–13.

2 | AUTHORITARIANISATION: DEMOCRATIC ACCOUNTABILITY IN RUSSIA

While the *glasnost* political reform in the 1980s by then-secretary of the Communist Party Mikhail Gorbachev increased the openness and transparency of governmental institutions and allowed Soviet citizens to publicly discuss the problems of their society, the devastating economic crises and a re-centralisation of political power under the first president of Russia, Boris Yeltsin, led to wide dissatisfaction with democracy's promises and to a deep crisis of political participation (Howard, 2003). At the same time, the regime transition during the 1990s was accompanied by a rather weak anti-communist mobilisation, so that the institutional system preserved centralist and authoritarian elements (Whitefield, 2002). Still, in particular during the first decade of the new millennium, Russia tried to maintain a democratic image vis-à-vis the international community, but also in relation to its own population, much like most non-democratic regimes have done (Lewis, 2013; Lorch & Bunk, 2017). But soon the Putin regime abandoned full-fledged democratisation to pursue its own authoritarian modernisation project, which exerted centralised state control over all societal spheres, including the judicial apparatus, the media and civil society as well as the electoral process and its outcomes. BGI data reflect this 'authoritarianisation' of Russia and show a clear and rapid drop in the democratic accountability score from 53 in 2000 to 37 in 2019, a decline that is not matched in many other post-Soviet countries (see Figure 3).

When looking at the subindices for democratic accountability (Figure 4), their trajectories all reflect crucial processes in the development of Russia's state–society relations. Judicial oversight has become bound to political will. Executive officials may raise some questions but do so mostly as part of political shadow games, rendering institutional accountability very weak. The electoral process and its rules have been changed several times in the last 20 years with mixed elections of

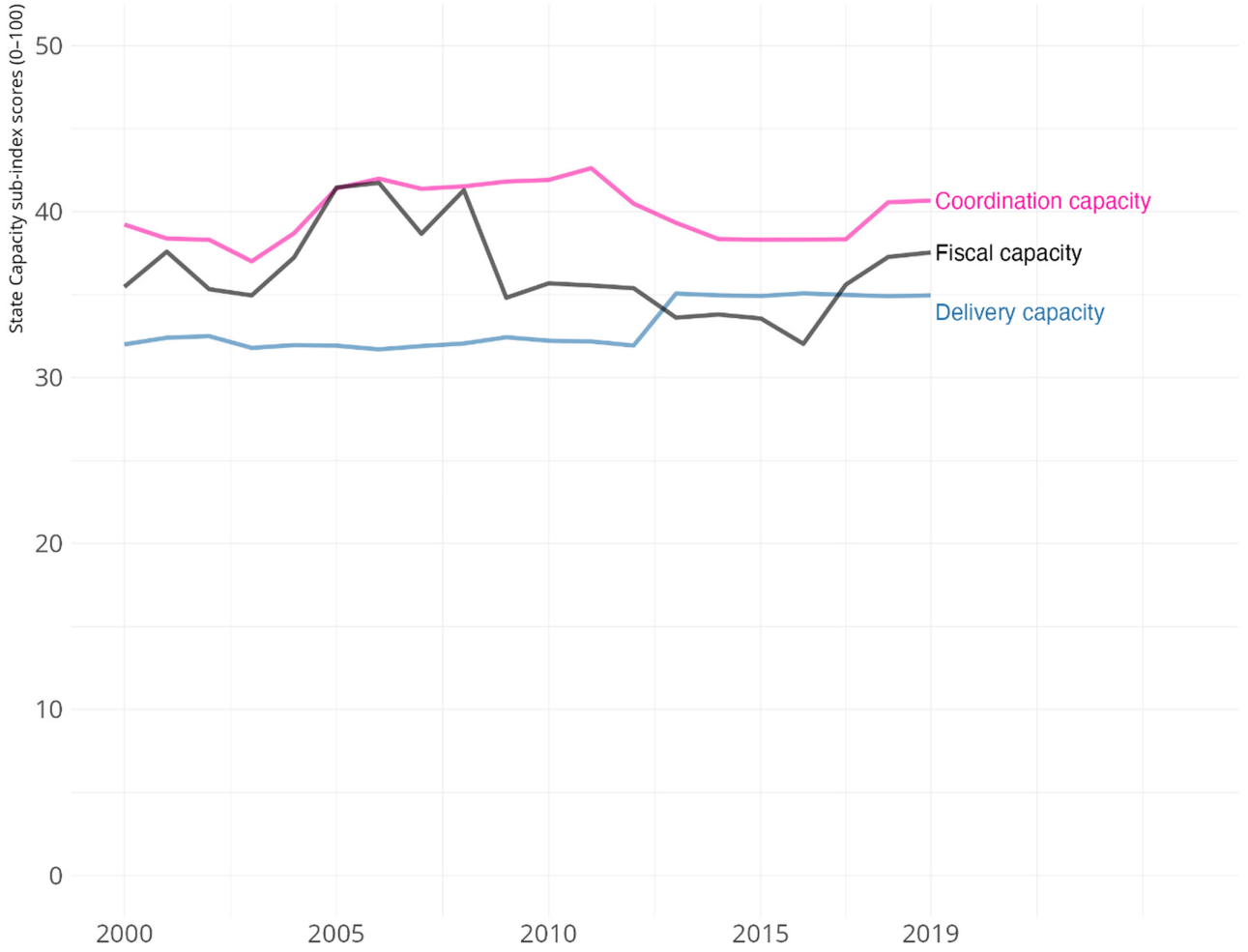

FIGURE 2 Development of Russia's state capacities, 2000–2019. *Source*: Berggruen Governance Index 2022.

the State Duma being the most amended—introduced in 2002, abolished in 2003 and reintroduced in 2013. Also, the threshold for parties to enter the State Duma was raised from 5% to 7% in 2003. In addition, widespread electoral fraud on all levels has been reported throughout the years. The most visible and publicly contested falsification took place during the 2011 legislative election, which led to one of the biggest and longest mass protest waves in the country's history. What is more, the electoral infrastructure is fully under government control, systematically discriminating against oppositional candidates and parties. The party system itself is also controlled by the government, which strategically installed and invented particular parties in order to bind certain groups of the populace and, thus, hold societal cleavages under control, while actually undermining political competition. Since Vladimir Putin became president the first time in 2000, no other party has substantially defied or challenged the dominant party United Russia in parliament or elsewhere. Electoral accountability has clearly deteriorated during the observation period.

However, the subindex for societal accountability shows a more intense downward slide. Media freedom is practically absent, with all TV channels under state control and all newspapers either coopted or closed down. The last of them, the oppositional newspaper Novaya Gazeta and the independent TV channel Dozhd, ceased their activities in Russia in March 2022 because of persecution in the form of regulations concerning reporting on the 'special military operation' in Ukraine. The Internet has been the last resort of freedom of expression, while the laws on demonstrations and public events have been amended to severely restrict dissent and critique of the state's status quo. Even this last resort became vulnerable (Daucé & Musiani, 2021): persecution and imprisonment because of things people say online, in particular in social media, have rapidly increased in recent years. The crackdown on anti-war protests (particularly in February and September 2022) and the following repression of expression of opinion exceed every previous attempt of public control.

Non-democratic states often lack independent structures and institutions of public interest representation

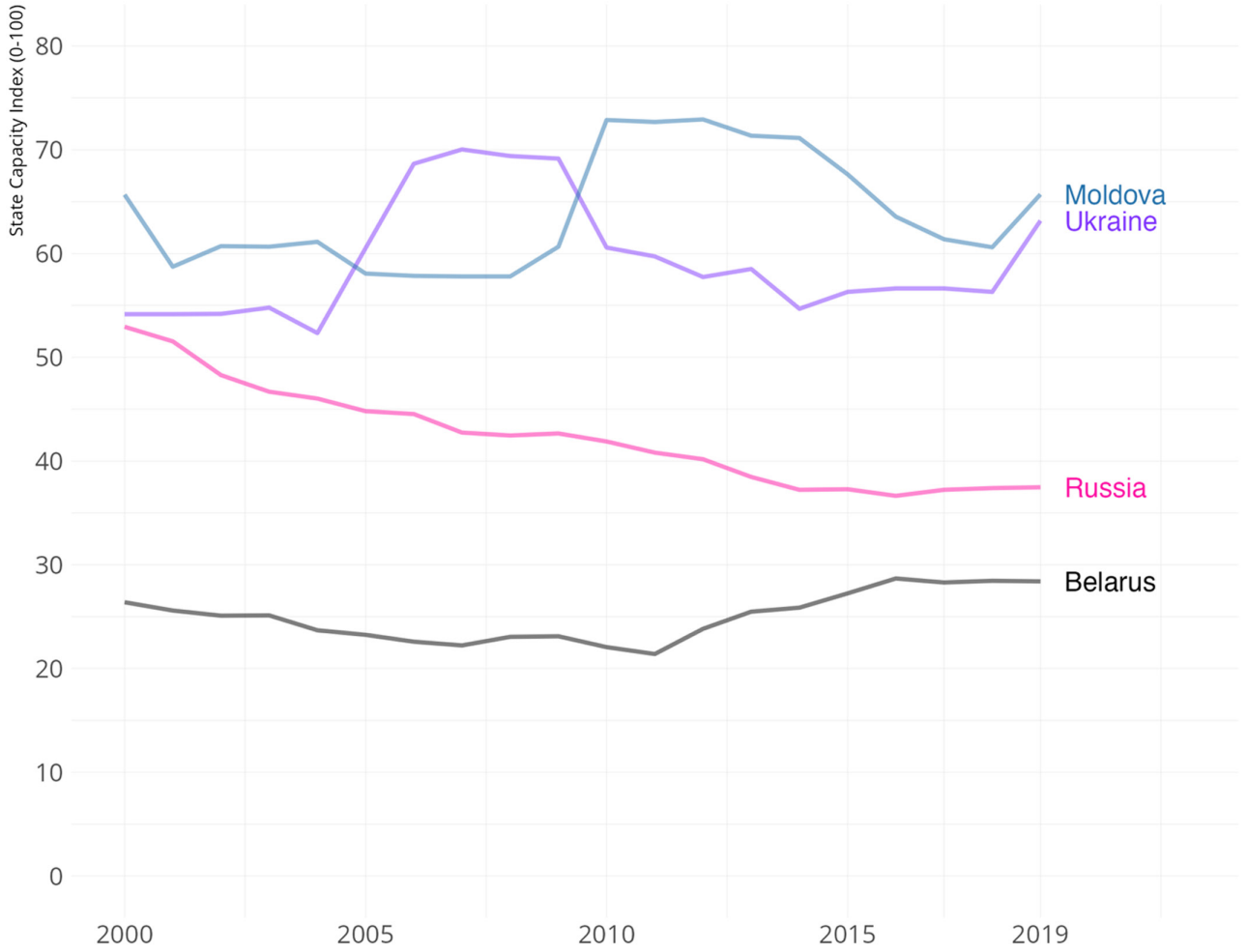

FIGURE 3 Countervailing accountability trends in post-Soviet states, 2000–2019. *Source*: Berggruen Governance Index 2022.

and of societal participation in the policy process due to unfree and unfair elections, unfree media and restrictions on non-systemic opposition. That is why those regimes have difficulties detecting in advance social problems and contentious actors threatening their status quo. Thus, the activities of civil society organisations (CSOs) can serve the regime as means of monitoring social processes and identifying social needs (Lorch & Bunk, 2017; Lorentzen, 2013). By allowing a certain, narrow degree of participation for CSOs in the political process, for example in advisory councils, the state makes use of their insider information about the pressing concerns of their clientele, while at the same time depoliticising discontent by channelling social problems into unthreatening forms (Froissart, 2014; Giersdorf & Croissant, 2011). While the Russian state did not pay much attention to CSOs before the 2000s (Jakobson & Sanovich, 2010), the 'power vertical' approach prompted Russian leaders to review their relations with civil society (Crotty et al., 2014; Gel'man, 2015; Robertson, 2009). Thus, the number of CSOs remained rather high in Russia, but at the same time the state has been trying to separate socially oriented CSOs engaged in addressing social problems from those concerned with human rights and political advocacy (Skokova et al., 2018). A number of legislative restrictions on CSO behaviour have been adopted since 2012, the beginning of Vladimir Putin's third term as president, while social orientation and relation to the state's public discourse offer opportunities for certain CSOs. At the same time, institutional, legal and coercive measures to silence dissent within civil society have expanded.

3 | PUBLIC GOODS PROVISION IN RUSSIA

During communist rule, the Soviet state held absolute control over the allocation and distribution of resources and welfare in society, which established an enduring general expectation among the populace that the state is and should be responsible for providing public goods, in particular, education, health care and housing (Anikin et al., 2022). However, the consequences of transition from a planned to a market economy had

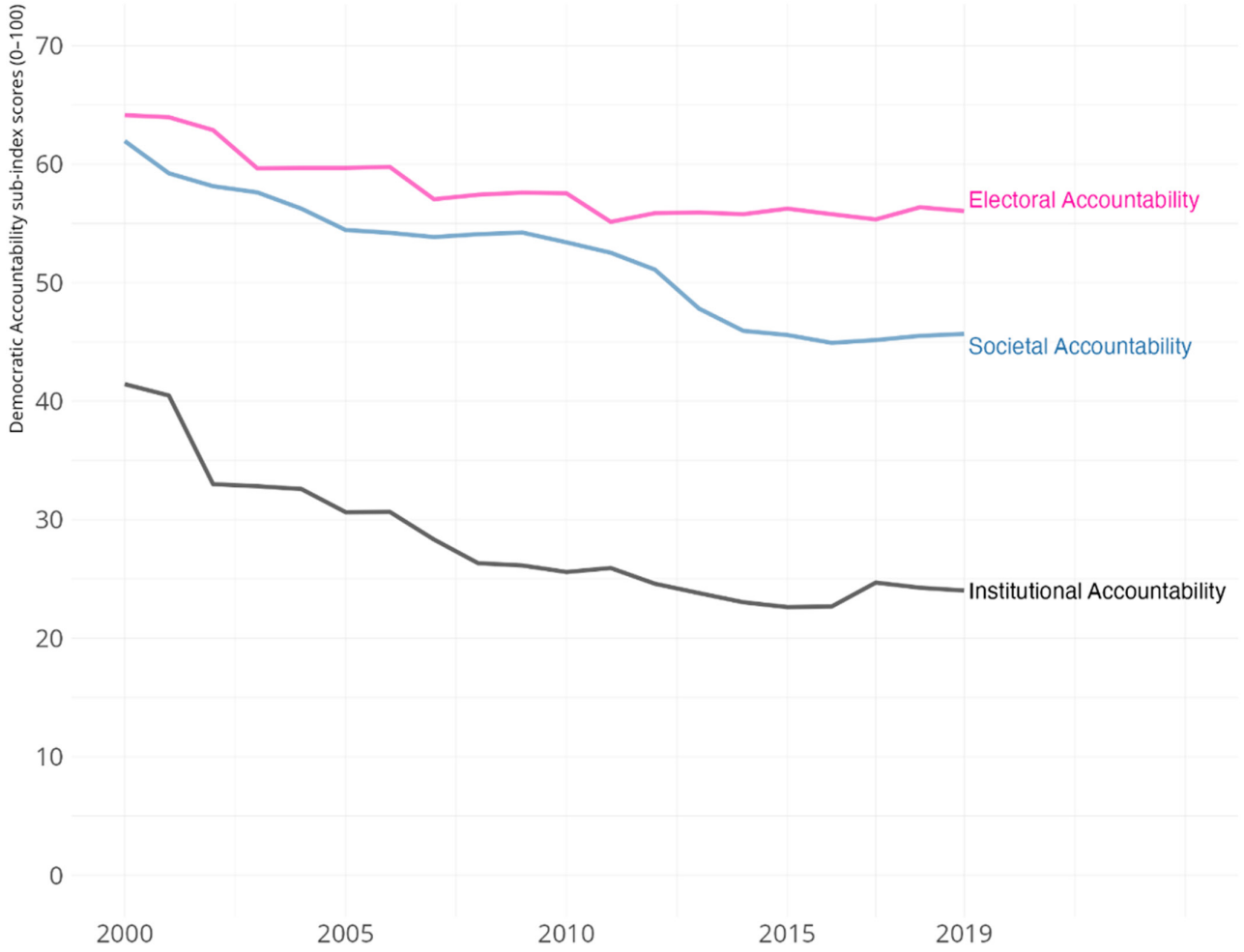

FIGURE 4 Development of Russia's democratic accountability, 2000–2019. *Source*: Berggruen Governance Index 2022.

been most severe during the 1990s, causing a particularly deep economic recession, radical austerity and almost complete state withdrawal from the sphere of social protection. That is why the BGI data for public goods provision in Russia started out at a rather low level (63) in 2000. As seen in Figure 5, Russia's score at the beginning of the millennium was much lower than other post-Soviet countries, such as Poland (83) and the Baltic states (between 77 and 80), which had gone through the transition of the 1990s with less severe crises and had progressed more with regard to privatisation and market liberalisation.

Not surprisingly for the world's largest country, behind Russia's public goods provision score are geographical disparities. Regional differences in the degree of resource independence from the centre, local political competition and openness are considerable. For example, regions having plentiful natural resources, such as Tatarstan with its massive oil deposits, could maintain some economic and political autonomy (Toepler et al., 2020). Even under Russia's non-democratic regime conditions, some level of political competition at the regional level can serve to increase public goods provision (Nye & Vasilyeva, 2015).

The beginning of Vladimir Putin's first presidency in 2000 coincided with strong global commodity demand and Russia's export of rich natural resources such as oil, gas and precious metals let the nation's income grow exponentially. In contrast to state withdrawal during the 1990s, the beginning of the new millennium saw the introduction of a certain 're-traditionalisation' in social welfare provision with a more expansive statist welfare role under (semi-) authoritarian regime conditions, paid for by the commodities boom (Cook, 2010). This was part of the above-mentioned unwritten social contract between the Putin regime and the Russian citizens, who traded growing social security and individual welfare for political loyalty and non-interference.

When looking closer (see Figure 6), both the social and economic public goods subindices rose rapidly at the beginning of the 2000s and remained at a higher level during the second decade of the period BGI covers. In particular, the rapid increase of life expectancy

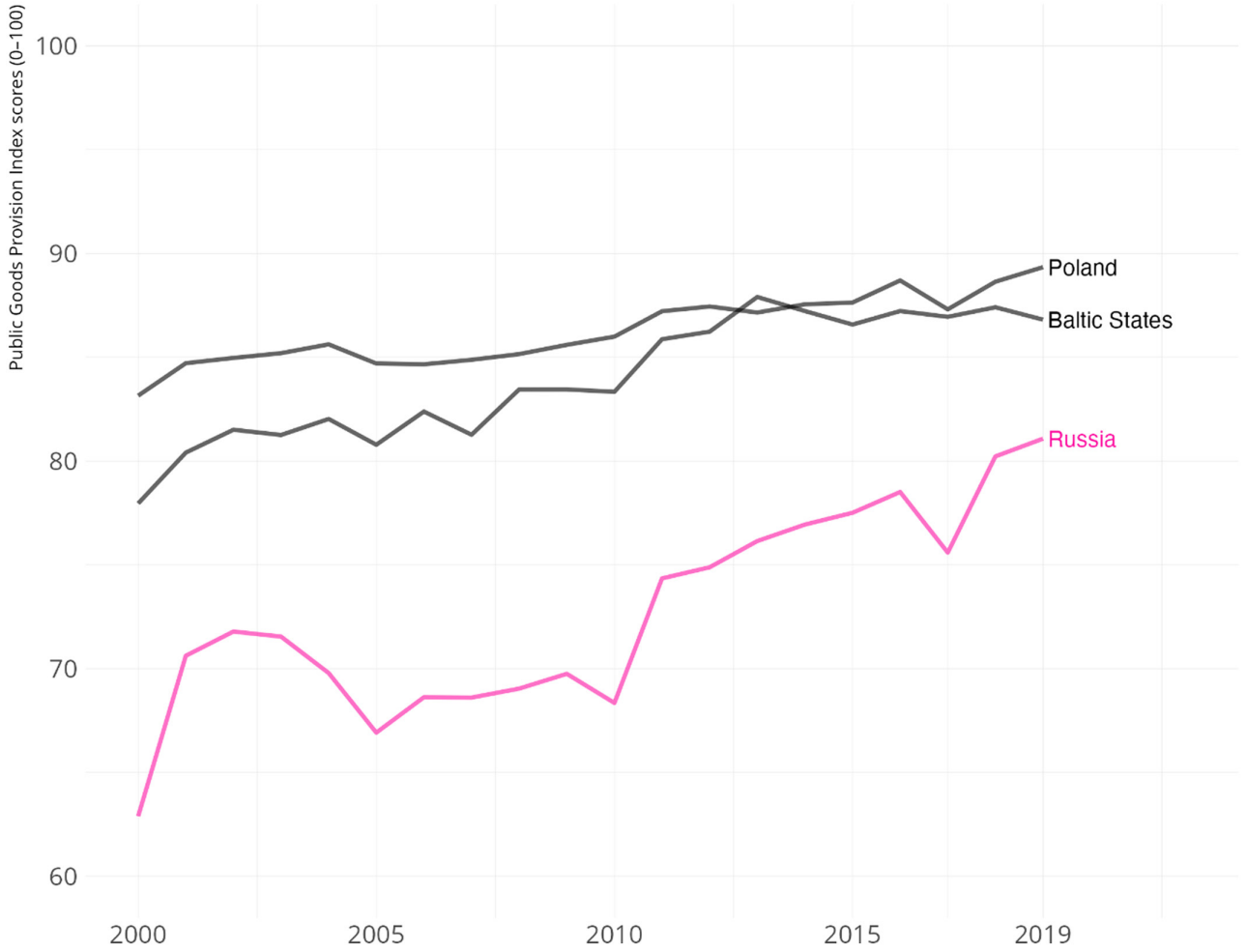

FIGURE 5 Russia's catch-up in public goods provision, 2000–2019. *Source*: Berggruen Governance Index 2022.

at birth[7] (basic medical care indicator) from 65 years in 2000 to 69 years in 2010 and 73 years in 2019 turns out to be the strongest carthorse for the social public goods delivery subindex.[8] But also educational equity is at a good level, showing relatively low levels of an 'achievement gap' between students from the highest and lowest socio-economic groups (Shmis & Parandekar, 2018). However, the quality of gender equality is ambiguous and receives much international criticism. Although women are well integrated into educational systems and the labour force, they are significantly underrepresented among political and economic decision-makers, while violence against women is a widespread issue among the populace.[9] Still, economic public goods such as food, employment, and health care have been consistently delivered in a gender-independent way and throughout the country thanks to the social contract bound to the general resource-based economic upheaval. And while unemployment has remained rather low at around 5% between 2000 and 2019, disposable incomes have been distributed very unequally among the population. Consequently, the Gini index for Russia rose to a high level of 42.3 in 2007 and 40.9 in 2013.[10] Only the delivery of environmental goods changed little. This has remained at a very high level from the beginning of the observation period, since access to energy and fuel have been traditionally very good, while air pollution on average for the whole population in such a vast country has been quite low.

Still, Russians' broad access to public goods such as education and healthcare in Russia has to be contrasted with their quality. It has been argued that Russian social welfare has been subject to a radical neoliberalisation under Vladimir Putin that suppressed salaries and increased the need for 'additional payments' for improved quality and access (Yudin, 2022). At the same time, neoliberal reforms have been disguised by a state rhetoric of a re-traditionalisation of social welfare, thus, developing a 'Soviet-style neoliberalism' (Hemment, 2009). That is why the social contract has been occasionally called into question. For example, in 2005, country-wide street protests by pensioners successfully opposed

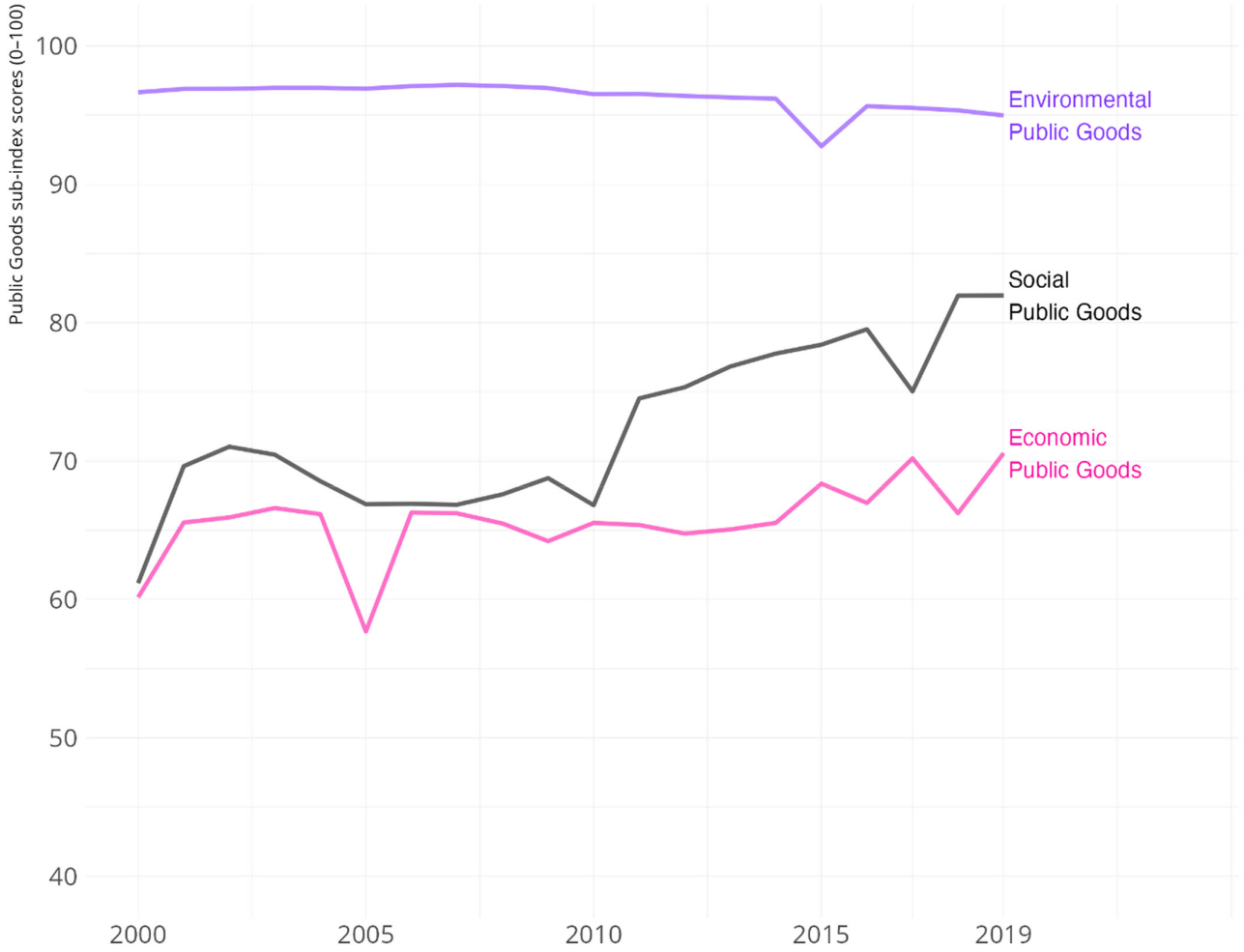

FIGURE 6 Development of Russia's public goods provision, 2000–2019. *Source*: Berggruen Governance Index 2022.

reforms aimed at monetising social benefits (Wengle & Rasell, 2008). And in 2018, another protest wave (unsuccessfully) campaigned against the state's reforms to raise the pension age (Brand, 2018).

However, despite slowing economic growth due to the effects of the 2008 global financial crisis (falling investment and consumption), declining oil prices and international sanctions because of the annexation of Crimea in 2014, BGI scores for social public goods provision kept rising after 2010 and even in 2018/2019 thanks to the reintroduction of federal projects intended to boost development in areas such as education, healthcare, public health, ecology and labour productivity. As part of the social contract, this familiar tactic aimed at shoring up support for the autocratic regime in a situation of economic decline because citizens are less likely to rebel against the state if social goods provision remains high (Taydas & Peksen, 2012). However, continuation of public goods provision on such a high level and upward trajectory will be difficult because of growing budget constraints, which already caused a halt or considerable resizing of some federal projects in 2020 (Engqvist, 2021). The question is what will happen to the social contract and the legitimacy of the regime if public goods provision falls considerably?

4 | CONCLUSION

The further advance of the invasion of Ukraine and the ongoing weight of international sanctions will determine whether the Russian government can maintain the high level of public goods provision that seems to secure public support and a low level of societal discontent. If it does maintain public goods provision at a high level, it will expose the autocratic fallacy as itself a fallacy; in other words, it will show that state capacity does not need to be particularly strong and that democratic accountability is not necessary for high performance in public goods provision.

In the foreseeable future, the Russian state will have to deal with the additional costs of its hostile war on Ukraine, with a shrinking or stagnant GDP and high inflation. That would mean that social spending—the

basis of the social contract with its populace—will be difficult to sustain at the current level. The real value of pensions and other social welfare payments are already eroding due to inflation, and more than additional, one-time payouts will be required to maintain the high level of public goods provision. Thanks to stable revenue from high prices of oil and gas on global markets, the Russian economy shows some degree of resilience. But disposable incomes per capita have declined and inequalities have risen since the start of the invasion of Ukraine, and high inequalities will hamper the Russian state's ability to deliver public goods. But even decreasing social spending will most likely not push ordinary Russians to the streets because the previous social contract has been partly replaced by a promise of returning to imperial power and victory over global adversaries.

Despite the relatively good health of the Russian energy sector, most other industries have been hit hard because of Western sanctions against the import of intermediate and high-tech goods (Marcus et al., 2022). The next several months will determine whether the country's economic hardship will increase regional disparities and inequalities. Previous research has shown how differently Russian regions are able to maintain public goods provision because they differ in their historically developed capacities to do so (Foa, 2020). Thus, Russia's regional governments will deal with tough trade-offs between social spending and budget deficits in different ways. However, Russia's low level of democratic accountability continuously poses a great problem known to all authoritarian regimes, namely the lack of signals from within society about the actual status of its public legitimacy and of social grievances in the population. During a sustained economic crisis under wartime conditions, the quality of governance, thus can hardly be expected to improve.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There are no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available at https://governance.luskin.ucla.edu/datasets/.

ORCID

Christian Fröhlich https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3300-0889

ENDNOTES

[1] The Berggruen Governance Index is a collaborative project between the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs and the Berggruen Institute examining, as of 2022, the performance of 134 countries in key areas over a 20-year period to advance understanding of why some countries are governed more effectively and enjoy a higher quality of life than others. See the articles 'Introducing the Berggruen Governance Index: I. Conceptual and Methodological Framework' and 'Introducing the Berggruen Governance Index: II. Initial Results 2000–2019', both by Anheier, Lang and Knudsen, in this special issue. The full dataset is available for download in various formats at https://governance.luskin.ucla.edu/datasets/. A data exploration tool offers readers a variety of ways to examine the data; available at https://governance.luskin.ucla.edu/index/.

[2] The concept implies that, in order to achieve good governance, all three dimensions—state capacity, democratic accountability and public goods provision—need to advance simultaneously and in balanced interdependence with each other. See Acemoglu and Robinson (2019), Hirschman (1986).

[3] 'Colour revolutions' are a series of anti-regime protest movements in post-Soviet (Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, Georgia) as well as in Asian (Lebanon, Tunisia) countries that are named after an identity-forming colour or flower.

[4] The 2020 amendments to the constitution included, among others, the extension of the number of presidential terms for Vladimir Putin, the precedence of the Russian constitution over international law, and the right of the Federation Council to remove constitutional and supreme courts. They were approved by a national referendum.

[5] Siloviki are people working for state agencies that have the right to use force (= *sila*) against other people.

[6] https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021/index/rus.

[7] https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.LE00.IN?end=2020&locations=RU&start=1960&view=chart.

[8] What is more, the rapid growth in life expectancy is associated with a strong decline in male (from 26.2 L in 2000 to in 19.1 L in 2018) and female (from 6.9 L in 2000 to 4.6 L in 2018) per capita alcohol consumption during the same period; see https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.ALC.PCAP.MA.LI?end=2018&locations=RU&start=2000&view=chart.

[9] https://data.unwomen.org/country/russian-federation.

[10] https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI?end=2019&locations=RU&start=2000.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Christian Fröhlich has a PhD in Sociology from the University of Leipzig and is currently a research associate at the Freie University Berlin. His research interests lie in the comparative study of civil society, citizenship and social inclusion in post-Soviet countries.

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