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Personalization and Elite Rhetoric: How the Autocrat's Popularity and Political Repression Influence Policy Speech of Regime Officials

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ABSTRACT

We study the implications of regime personalization on the incentives of political elites to politicize their policy agenda and express loyalty to the ruler. Because revering the autocrat is one of the observable manifestations of personalization, while the process of personalization may be, in turn, influenced by an increased prevalence of leader-centered rhetoric, isolating the effects of personalization on policy and political rhetoric is difficult. We distinguish between the negative, fear-driven motivation to politicize speech by regime officials and the positive motivation linked to their expectations of regime durability. The former is influenced by political repression, whereas the latter is moored to the ruler's poll standing—of importance for electoral autocracies in particular. Drawing from over 1000 annual legislative addresses of Russian governors in 2007–2023, we show that elites politicize their rhetoric following arrests of their peers, and they also closely track the autocrat's popularity. We contribute to the literature on personalization and authoritarian speech.

RESUMEN

Estudiamos las implicaciones de la personalización del régimen en los incentivos de las élites políticas para politizar su agenda política y expresar lealtad al gobernante. Dado que la veneración al autócrata es una de las manifestaciones observables de la personalización, si bien este proceso puede verse influenciado, a su vez, por una mayor prevalencia de la retórica centrada en el líder, resulta difícil aislar los efectos de la personalización en las políticas y la retórica política. Distinguimos entre la motivación negativa, impulsada por el miedo, para politizar el discurso por parte de los funcionarios del régimen y la motivación positiva, vinculada a sus expectativas de durabilidad del régimen. La primera se ve influenciada por la represión política, mientras que la segunda está vinculada a la posición del gobernante en las urnas, lo cual es especialmente importante para las autocracias electorales. A partir de más de 1000 discursos legislativos anuales de gobernadores rusos entre 2007 y 2023, demostramos que las élites politizan su retórica tras los arrestos de sus pares y que también siguen de cerca la popularidad del autócrata. Contribuimos a la literatura sobre personalización y discurso autoritario.

摘要

我们研究了政权人格化对政治精英动机的影响，这些精英试图将其政策议程政治化并表达对统治者的忠诚。由于对独裁者的崇敬是人格化的显著表现之一，而人格化过程反过来又可能受到日益盛行的、以领导者为中心的言论影响，因此很难单独研究人格化对政策和政治言论的影响。我们区分了政权官员出于恐惧而将言论政治化的消极动机，以及他们在政权持久性的预期方面的积极动机。前者受政治压迫的影响，而后者则与统治者的民意支持率息息相关—这对于选举制独裁政体尤其重要。通过分析2007年至2023年期间俄罗斯各省州长年度立法演讲(共1000多次)，我们发现，精英们在其同僚被捕后会将自己的言论政治化，并且他们也会密切关注独裁者的受欢迎程度。我们对研究人格化和权威言论的文献作贡献。

1 | Introduction

With greater regime personalization, authoritarian elites increasingly pander to the ruler in their political speeches and writings. When elite and mass veneration of the ruler reaches significant levels in terms of magnitude and societal reach, a well-known phenomenon of personality cults[1] develops (Gill 1980; Rees 2004; Shih 2008; Tucker 1979). When it occurs, elites tend to politicize their public speech by making more references to the autocrat and his political agenda as part of their standard behavior, a new norm, as exemplified, for instance, by the following extracts from speeches of the Soviet officials at the 18th Party Congress in 1939: "Comrade Stalin's report is a historical milestone, marking the entry of the USSR into a new phase of development" (VKP(b) 1939, 47); "New party cadres grew up, nurtured by Comrade Stalin, tested in struggle and tested in work... Our entire party, all of us, old and young Bolsheviks, are moving forward together under the leadership of the great leader of our party, Comrade Stalin. We are marching in closed ranks around our Stalin, we are moving towards new victories, towards communism." (VKP(b) 1939, 46).

The boilerplate adoration of Josef Stalin in speeches of Soviet political elites, attributing all policy achievements to the ruler, particularly from the early 1930s onward, can be regarded as both the consequence of an increased power concentration by the dictator and the observable implication of such concentration. Many scholars regard the development of a leader's cult as an inevitable consequence of personalization, and the more power the ruler has concentrated in his hands, the more ostentatious the leadership cult is likely to follow (Svolik 2012). Simply put, because under strong personalization, there exists a power imbalance between the dictator and the ruling coalition, speech politicization with a particular emphasis on the ruler is driven by fear of individual elites of being excluded or purged. Although personality cults are commonly observed among Leninist-type party dictatorships as well as many personalist regimes during the Cold War (Gill 1980; Rees 2004; Shih 2008; Tucker 1979), contemporary autocracies, including personal rulerships, apparently eschew the same degree of veneration of their leaders as the regimes in the past (Baturo et al. 2024; Guriev and Treisman 2022). Do political elites in contemporary authoritarian regimes also politicize their speech by increasing their references to the autocrat, and what motivates their behavior?

To address this question, we develop an argument that draws from scholarship in comparative authoritarianism and personalization, and psychology literature (Ashforth 1994; Bugdol and Nagody-Mrozowicz 2021; Lazear 2000). We eschew various conceptual and measurement difficulties arising from potentially employing personalization as the independent variable, as we discuss further in the next section. Instead, we distinguish between the two types of elite motivations: negative and positive. One is driven by the fear of repression, whereas the other is influenced by the autocrat's mass popularity and other considerations, which provide cues about the regime's stability and the continuing ability of the autocrat to manage the regime. Both types of motivations are likely to influence the speech of political elites leading to increased references to the autocrat.

Scholarly accounts of comparative authoritarianism emphasize the centrality of violence in the interaction between the ruler and elites (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003; Geddes 1999; Svolik 2012). Dictators employ elite purges and arrests as a coup-proofing strategy (Sudduth 2017), as well as for informational purposes, to reveal their power so that a purge may also be treated as an observable implication of a dictator's personalization (Geddes et al. 2018, 79–80). Drawing from illustrative examples during the Great Purge in the Soviet Union and extant scholarship, we propose that the politically motivated arrests of elites, particularly in relevant reference groups, provide cues for incumbent elites about the precariousness of their own position, leading them to increase references to the autocrat in order to signal their loyalty stronger as a result.

In addition to a fear-based motivation, elites also have different incentives to refer to their autocrat in rhetoric. In particular, in the context of personal rule and executive elections managed by the majority of contemporary electoral authoritarian regimes, the continuing popularity of the autocrat is of crucial importance as it ensures future regime stability, diminishes the costs of mass repression, and ultimately protects and extends the time horizons of authoritarian elites. That is, we propose that the high standing in the polls by the incumbent autocrat provides the elites with important cues about regime durability, motivating them to revere their ruler in speech more strongly.

In summary, the politicization of policy speech by authoritarian elites is driven by the autocrat's poll standing, which the elites are informed about as a group, collectively, as well as by fear on the basis of the arrests of other elites in the same reference groups to which incumbent elites belong, individually. At the system, regime level, we expect to observe a positive trend in speech politicization as personalization increases, and the trend will be strongly driven by the two abovementioned factors.

We test the argument by drawing from the text corpus of annual legislative addresses to regional parliaments by important members of the political elite, regional governors (Baturo et al. 2025; Baturo and Mikhaylov 2014), expanding it to over 1000 addresses, in 2007–23, in Russia under Vladimir Putin. During this period, Russia experienced a significant autocratization and weakening of

political institutions as Vladimir Putin's concentration of power has grown. However, until the 2020 constitutional reform, which extended presidential term limits and formalized the president's dominance, as well as the onset of the war against Ukraine in 2022, Putin's regime can be described by its relatively weak personalism, in comparison with, for instance, the personalism of the majority of Central Asian presidents (Baturo and Elkink 2021). Likewise, no personality cult has developed in Russia, even though a degree of veneration of the ruler has been present and practiced by some elites (Cassiday and Johnson 2010). Importantly, for the purposes of this study, despite its autocratization and deterioration of election standards, regular public opinion polls have remained relatively free of bias and overt interference (Frye et al. 2017), rendering them suitable to study the effects of the observed popularity of the autocrat on elite behavior.

Employing quantitative text analyses, we estimate the share of references to Putin in governor speeches over time. Overall, we do trace a growing share of such references, loosely tracking increased personalization in Russia. However, the trend line fluctuates, and it is at the level of individual elites that we find a stronger explanation behind politicized, more ruler-centered speech. Specifically, governors who observe a larger number of arrests of high-profile regional elites in their federal subjects tend to increase their references to the autocrat. Likewise, but for different reasons, as we argue, governors also track Putin's popularity in the polls, and reflect it quite closely in their speeches. However, we find that their rhetoric does not appear to reflect other factors that may augur well for regime continuity, such as higher rates of economic growth or higher oil prices.

Our study contributes to several strands of literature. First, we add to the scholarship on personality cults (Gill 1980; Rees 2004; Shih 2008; Tucker 1979; Tucker 1977). We show that elites do not just follow a new elite norm and all uniformly express their love for the autocrat as regime personalization increases; instead, they appear to be quite sensitive to various cues received from their environment, which in turn influence their motivations to make more references about their ruler, or not. Our approach suggests that leader cults are forms of strategic communication between followers and their leader.

We also contribute to the literature on personalization by finding that increased references to the autocrat indeed follow personalization, but we elucidate what sorts of signals elites respond to in the process, specifically. By politicizing their policy communication and paying more attention to the autocrat in speech, elites broadcast what is required to other, lower-ranking officials as well as the public, and thus contribute to leader-based legitimation, making their ruler more central in the regime's official narrative. Thus, we additionally relate to the literature on authoritarian propaganda and legitimation (Baturo and Tolstrup 2024; Baturo et al. 2025; Khokhlov 2024; Dukalskis and Gerschewski 2017; Gerschewski 2018).

Below, having first discussed the relationship between personalization and leadership cults, of which loyalty speech is an important component, we then distinguish between negative and positive motivations that affect elite verbal behavior during personalization. To test our arguments, we turn to the case study of Russia under Vladimir Putin and the corpus of policy speeches by regional governors. Then we explain the methods, discuss the results of statistical analyses, offer additional explanations, and provide illustrative examples.

2 | Personalization and Elite Speech

The concept of regime personalization can be understood both as a process—the accumulation of personal power over elites—as well as its outcome (Baturo and Elkink 2021; Geddes et al. 2018; Svolik 2012; Timoneda et al. 2023). The process of personalization encompasses different aspects of regime development and elite management, including acquiring control over political and military institutions by appointing loyalists and purging others (Geddes et al. 2018). However, if personalization is a process that can be observed through revealed behavioral outcomes, such as of the ruler's gaining power over institutions, appointing loyalists, or purging rivals, then it is impossible to explain personalization without first explaining the ruler's ability to conduct a successful purge or make strategic appointments in the first place (for critiques, see, e.g., Gill 2018, 2021).[2] In turn, increased pandering to the autocrat can be seen as an outcome of successful personalization; at the same time, it is one of the strategic tools used by the autocrat's supporters to build a leadership cult, thus also functioning as a cause, rather than an outcome, of personalization.

When elites refer to an autocrat[3] in speech while explaining their political strategies and policies in relation to him, their behavior is directly related to, and a manifestation of, a well-known phenomenon in authoritarian politics: that of a personality cult or leader's cult (Gill 1980; Rees 2004; Shih 2008; Tucker 1977, 1979). Although many definitions and approaches exist, a leader's cult can be simply described as "an established system of veneration of a political leader," engineered to integrate the political system around the person of the leader (Rees 2004, 4). In systems with leadership cults, governmental policies and actions have to be "supported by appropriate quotations from the writings of speeches" of the leader, "this being sufficient to justify the policy in question" (Gill 1980, 170).

Many contemporary scholars of authoritarianism gravitate to views that personality cults result from increased personalization when elites have to painstakingly pander to a ruler who has already concentrated power at their expense (Svolik 2012). In turn, the power of the autocrat can be gauged from the number of references made to him by name, whether in absolute numbers or relatively to other political actors (Baturo and Elkink 2021, 160–168; Jiang et al. 2024). Svolik (2012, 80–81) notes that following the consolidation of power in single hands, when dictators are able to establish personal rulerships and subordinate other elites, it is almost inevitable that a mass veneration of such leaders follows in the form of their personality cults. Similarly, Tucker (1977, 389) posits that "the combination of glory-hungry leaders and state control of the media is a potent source of pseudo-cults of personality." That is, as personalization increases and more power is concentrated in the hands of the dictator, elites may attempt to overbid each other in trying to present themselves as more loyal than others. As a result, cults of personality may develop in information cascades of flattery inflation as elites attempt to outbid other elites through the mechanisms of loyalty signaling and emotional amplification (Márquez 2021). However, this also means that elite members' verbal behavior not

only results from increased personalization but also contributes to it. Furthermore, different perspectives exist regarding the onset and dynamics of personality cults, including from the sociological, leadership, and psychological strands (Eatwell 2006, 2014; Tucker 1979). That is, cults may result from regime structural factors (Gill 1980); they may also be employed by leaders themselves as a screening mechanism to recruit and promote elites (Crabtree et al. 2020) or be driven by strategic interests of specific elite groups (Baturo et al. 2025; Gill 1980).

In summary, if a leadership cult, as observed from politicized, leader-centered speech by the elites, can be regarded as the outcome of personalization, the causality between the two concepts can also be reversed in situations when leaders instrumentally seek to increase their personal standing by initiating personality cults in society and/or among elites, thereby increasing their personal power overall (Dikötter 2020). This makes personalization difficult to employ as the causal factor, that is, the explanation for politicized speech by the elites in the empirical study.

2.1 | Negative and Positive Incentives Behind Elite Leader-Centered Speech

Rather than focusing on personalization per se as the factor behind loyalty speech, we propose to isolate the micro-foundations of changes in elite verbal behavior during personalization. We discuss more specific factors that are likely to influence political speech but which are not conceptually related to personalization per se: prior elite arrests as well as cues about regime longevity received from the information publicly available to elites, such as the autocrat's approval rating and economic performance of their regime. Both factors, while related to personalization, cannot be regarded as being affected by political speech.

According to the rationalist approach to authoritarian politics, dictators are assumed to aspire to maximize their personal power, whereas regime elites seek to constrain them (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003; Svolik 2012; Tullock 1987). Generally, elite purges or the arrests of individual officials are supposed to strengthen the leader's power at the expense of elites by disrupting and destroying their coordination potential (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003; Frantz and Kendall-Taylor 2014; Geddes et al. 2018; Meng 2020; Svolik 2012; Tullock 1987). To that end, dictators resort to violence against the elite by carrying out purges in order to prevent or place obstacles to elite coordination necessary for a successful coup (Sudduth 2017; Timoneda et al. 2023). Purges may be driven and justified by reasons of a dictator's security or ideology, but they may also be disguised and explained as an anticorruption campaign (Fu 2015; Griffin et al. 2022). In its extreme form, the so-called Great Purge, a purge may also be permanent and self-sustaining as the interests of the autocrat coalesce with bottom-up advancement considerations and the need by the security police to prove their usefulness, among other things (Brzezinski 1956).

Although a purge has negative consequences for the targeted elite, it may create career opportunities for new recruits into the ruling coalition (Kotkin 2017, 603). Furthermore, individual elites who were able to observe the negative fate of their purged peers are likely to remain loyal to the ruler for fear of being purged themselves and excluded from the ranks (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003, 135). The fear of being arrested is likely to have several behavioral consequences for the elites. For example, findings in workplace psychology underline that many employees respond to fear-based, negative motivation, such as fear of being fired, and show better effort in their job assignments (Ashforth 1994); they also have stronger motivation to signal their commitment to the firm, trying to impress their manager (Lazear 2000). In politics, fear of being arrested is likely to have similar, if not stronger, effects on individual elites, and will be especially noticeable and revealing through and in individuals' text and speech.

For example, in the Soviet Union, during the 15th Party Congress in 1927, when Stalin had not yet personalized his regime and still practiced strong elements of collective leadership (Gill 2018; Kotkin 2014), we estimate that 187 delegates in total make 282 references to the name of Josef Stalin in their speeches. At that time, the officials find it important to occasionally refer to their party leader by name, but they do not do it excessively yet, once or twice per speech, and many find it possible to, however mildly, disagree. For example, Nikolai Uglanov in his speech argues that "Then Comrade Stalin said in his report that we still have an artel, family solution to issues. Yes, there is now, and yet I must say that there is now much less of this artel resolution of issues, comrades, much less" (VKP(b) 1928, 124). When Uglanov is corrected from the audience by Boris Posern that "He was not talking about artel squabbles, but about the artel world", he then finds it appropriate to disagree by retorting that "No, Comrade Posern, as a rule, Party squabbles in the majority have their roots when matters are resolved in the artel manner. We have become much better in this regard" (VKP(b) 1928, 130). Other examples of Stalin not being venerated yet in 1927 abound.

For illustration, Figure 1 shows the extent of Josef Stalin's personality cult, as revealed from the speeches of Soviet officials made at seven party congresses during his rule. Following Vladimir Lenin's death in early 1924, during party congresses in 1924, 1925, and 1927, the semblance of collective leadership has remained, and in the 1920s, the congress attendees do not yet excessively refer to Stalin's name; we additionally estimate that deceased Lenin gets seven times more references than Stalin during this period. Importantly, the number of political arrests also remained relatively low at this time. Following Stalin's triumph over the Left Opposition and the so-called right tendency opposition (Gill 1980; Tucker 1979), and after a stark increase in political arrests in 1930–33, a new norm emerges at the 1934 "Congress of Victors," when suddenly references to Stalin increase sevenfold in comparison with the rates seen in 1927 and 3.5 times over those in 1930. Notably, 1930 is also the last year when the rates of references to Lenin still dominate those to Stalin (by the order of two): in 1934, total references to Stalin are 1.7 times those to Lenin, and this ratio changes in later congresses even further.

By 1937, the personalization of power under Stalin has become complete; before that, as Kotkin (2017, 308) remarks, Stalin was "a dictator on conditional contract." The increase in the veneration of the leader is particularly noticeable at the time of the Great Purge, during the 17th Party Congress in 1939, when the delegates, knowing that over half of the previous congress' participants were purged by then, in real fear for their lives, do their utmost to signal their loyalty in speech, collectively with 3134 references to Stalin

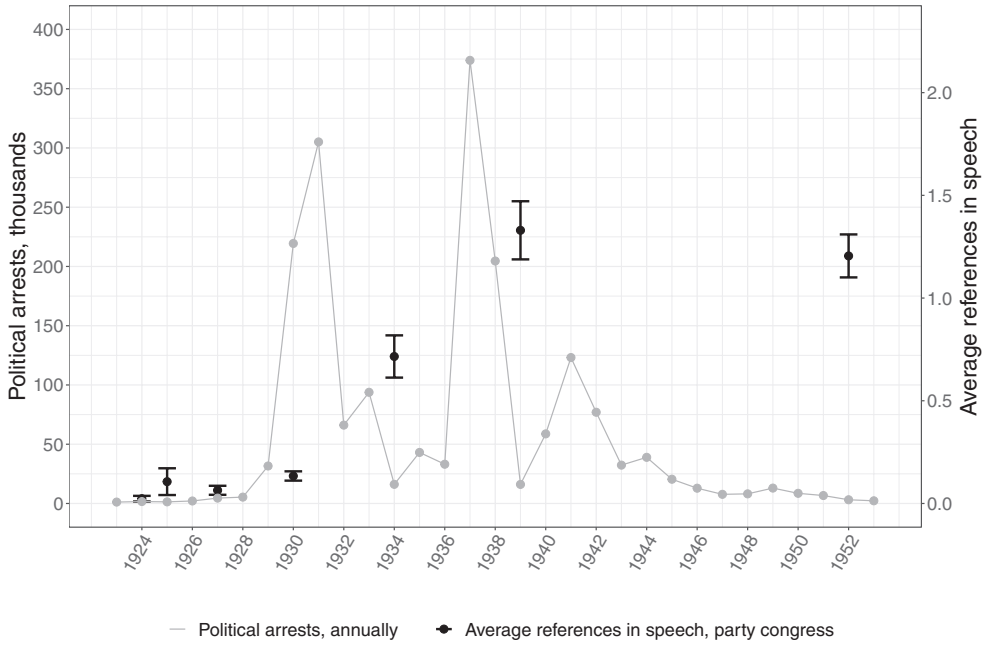

FIGURE 1 | Expressed loyalty to Josef Stalin and political repression. *Note:* Average references to Josef Stalin by delegates to the party congress, per cent of total speech; political arrests, in thousands, are annual estimates from the database of victims of political terror in the USSR by Memorial https://lists.memo.ru.

in total. In particular, 17 speakers each make more than 40 references to Stalin per speech, with the most slavish follower of Stalin, Lazar Kaganovich, topping them all with 117 references to the Soviet leader in one particular address to the congress that year.

Kaganovich's speech underlines not only the unquestionable authority of the Soviet ruler for political elites, which is reflected in, for instance, "Comrade Stalin's report raised the dignity of the Soviet country to new heights," but also Kaganovich's experience of political repression observed at close range, lauding Stalin's foresightedness in "our state, its very existence, would have been in the greatest danger if the Stalin's Central Committee had not boldly revealed the roots of the enemy's espionage and sabotage activities and, with all Bolshevik determination, had not cleansed our party and country of this trash, if, during this period, the great strength of the Stalinist leadership of our party and its Central Committee had not manifested itself" (VKP(b) 1939, 241).

The rapid increase in references to the leader overall during the Great Purge, which ultimately also contributes to the leadership cult, as well as specific examples of speeches from the individual elites, indicates that political actors under authoritarianism are likely to respond in their rhetoric to fear-based motivation linked to prior arrests of other elites. Promoting the cult may also improve the personal standing of those followers who find themselves particularly vulnerable (Gill 1980, 184). As a result, they will politicize their public speech by making more references to the autocrat:

Hypothesis 1. *Elites will make more references when there are more elite arrests observed, particularly in similar elite reference groups.*

However, not all personalist leaders develop personality cults as extensive as Stalin's.[4] It is a matter of degree, with some rulers having much more modest coverage; how the media dominance of leaders is maintained may also be determined by the prevalent norms and practices at the time. In particular, Guriev and Treisman (2022) point out that contemporary dictators, rather than pursuing absolute dominance in the media, appear to be satisfied with relative information dominance, that is, by denying access to potential regime challengers without creating larger-than-life, deity-like images for themselves. Still, as personal power grows, some degree of pandering to an autocrat in elite speech is to be expected (Gill 1980, 172).

Contemporary autocrats tend to be characterized by more modest leader-follower veneration, and they refrain from elite repression on the scale seen under leaders like Stalin or Mao. Furthermore, other considerations are likely to be present. The interests of elites are not always incompatible with those of the ruler (Khokhlov 2024, 2025), as they both value and prioritize the durability of their regime above all else (Geddes et al. 2018). In the context of personal rulership, for the majority of political elites, if not all of them, the survival of the political regime, most of the time, is synonymous with the political survival of their ruler (Geddes 1999, 122). This is because outside career options, whether those from exclusion from the ruling coalition or following the breakdown of the regime in the future, are usually foreclosed for them (Baturo 2017; Escriba-Folch and Wright 2015). As a result, elites in personal rulership have a vested interest in the continuing ability of their ruler to manage the regime and the population on his and their own behalf because the political institutions are usually very weak under personalism, and it is the personal standing of the autocrat that ensures the regime stability (Baturo et al. 2024; Chehabi and Linz 1998; Gerschewski 2018). In particular, contemporary personal autocracies all practice elections, including for the highest executive office (Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009). While most of the time, leaders of such electoral authoritarian regimes are able to dominate the electoral process and secure victories, factors such

as rulers' personal weaknesses and unpopularity, or inability to manage the economy raise the costs of holding elections for the regime, making it more difficult to deter mass protests, among other challenges (Olar 2019).

At the same time, elections reveal information about a ruler's strength to elites and regime opponents alike (Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009; Gehlbach and Simpser 2015; Little 2016; Simpser 2013). Oftentimes, authoritarian leaders manipulate elections even if they are likely to win in free competition in order to project dominance and convey the futility of resistance. By winning elections with a high margin, an autocrat also convinces elites that "their hold on power is secure" and encourages them to work harder on his behalf (Gehlbach and Simpser 2015, 213). A strong showing at the polls provides a lot of dividends to the ruler beyond "winning the election at hand" by also preventing elite defections, discouraging opposition from protests, and raising the bargaining power of the autocrat vis-à-vis other political actors, among other things (Simpser 2013, 3). As argued by Guriev and Treisman (2022, 130), "inflated margins help incumbents monopolize power" and increase their legitimacy. In turn, supermajorities ensure a stronger ability to cement the hold on power for the future, which can be used to pass constitutional reforms and abolish term limits (Baturo 2014). If the dictator is also popular, his popularity can in turn shield regime officials who engage in various transgressions on his and the regime's behalf (Guriev and Treisman 2022, 130).

We, therefore, propose that, beyond negative incentives to praise the autocrat, elites also respond to cues about regime and ruler political longevity, drawing on available information regarding such ruler's performance and standing with the public. In particular, when elites are able to observe that the ruler is popular among the masses and the regime delivers good economic performance,[5] that provides important information to them regarding regime stability and the likely prospects for their continuing political careers, in turn giving them a stronger positive motivation to express loyalty to the autocrat. Therefore, our second hypothesis is:

Hypothesis 2. *Elites make more references to the autocrat when he and his regime are doing well.*

Hypothesis 2a. *Elites make more references when the autocrat's public approval is higher.*

Hypothesis 2b. *Elites make more references when the economy is better performing.*

In relation to Hypothesis 2a, an alternative view suggests that when the autocrat is unpopular, doing badly at the polls, elites—owing to their vested interest in their champion—will instead stronger promote him in their speeches, in order to increase the media exposure of their leader as part of the governmental propaganda. We are, however, inclined to believe that when the autocrat and his political or policy agenda are unpopular, in order to protect the autocrat, elites will be more likely to emphasize other policy topics and eschew referencing the autocrat's name excessively so as not to annoy the public, although we intend to test which of these conjectures holds in the empirical section later in this article.

3 | Regime Personalization in Russia

As outlined in the introduction, to test our argument, we propose to study the implications of regime personalization on elite rhetoric in Vladimir Putin's Russia. Over time, Putin has gradually concentrated the power in his hands, bypassing and weakening political institutions in the process (Baturo and Elkink 2014). Because the personalism index (Geddes et al. 2018) is available up to 2010, to trace the regime trajectory to 2023, instead, we draw from the two V-Dem indicators likely capturing regime personalization in Russia (Coppedge et al. 2023). The first, plotted in the left panel of Figure 2, is the presidentialism index, which accounts for the concentration of the executive power while another, on the right, is whether regime legitimation primarily occurs on the basis of the person of the leader, specifically gauging "To what extent is the Chief Executive portrayed as being endowed with extraordinary personal characteristics and/or leadership skills" (Coppedge et al. 2023, 224). As can be seen, both indicators display an upward trajectory, indicating gradual personalization over time, with the concentration of power increasing rapidly and notably in the first presidential term in 2000–2004 and then again after Putin's return to the presidency from 2012 to 2014, and similarly, leader-based legitimation increasing in 2004, 2012, 2013 and 2022.

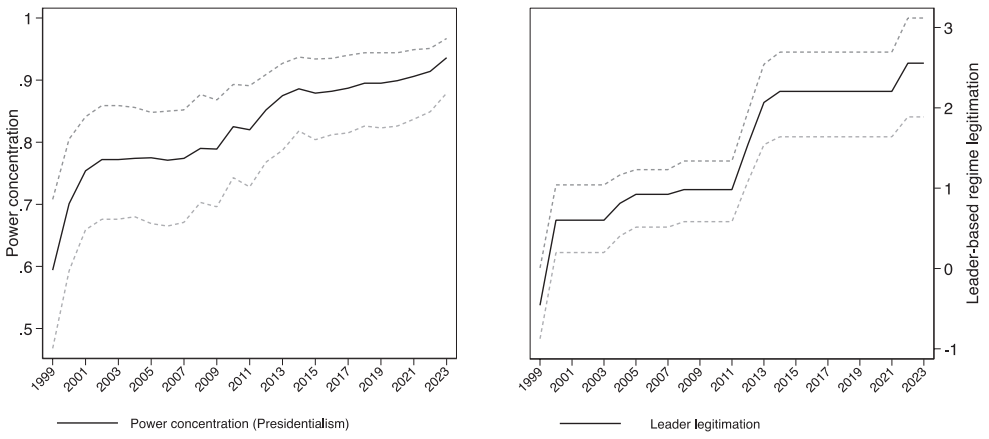

FIGURE 2 | Personalization in Russia, 1999–2023. *Note:* On the basis of v2xnp_pres and v2exl_legitlead and corresponding low and high estimates (Coppedge et al. 2023).

The media dominance of Vladimir Putin was clearly not tantamount to a leadership cult; neither cities nor towns, streets or stadiums were named after the Russian leader. Still, his speeches were published as a separate volume, and his biography and portraits found their way to Russian schools (Cassiday and Johnson 2010, 681).[6] He has also enjoyed significant media attention, which over time shifted its political coverage from a focus on institutions, including that of the presidency, to Vladimir Putin as a person (Baturo and Elkink 2021, 139–60). The phenomenon of loyalty speech among Russia's officials has also become increasingly noticeable over Putin's time in office.[7] In particular, from 2012, as is also seen in Figure 2, expression of loyalty and praise to Putin as a person has become more widespread among elites, with references to the regime in Russia as "Putin's regime" becoming commonplace internationally as well as, tacitly, domestically. In particular, Vyacheslav Volodin's, then deputy chief of the presidential administration, well-known assertion in 2014 that "If there is Putin, there's Russia, if there's no Putin—no Russia" illustrates not only the new loyalty norm but also the fact that Russia's governmental officials came to see their regime as Putin's regime first and foremost.[8]

Even though Putin's Russia, in terms of either its leader's veneration or the regime-driven violence against its own officials is clearly no match to Stalin's Soviet Union discussed in theory, targeted repressions against elites have always been one of the instruments of political control by the Kremlin. By empowering law enforcement agencies to start prosecutions against governors, for example, the presidential administration has weakened regional heads and completed the construction of the "power vertical" (Libman and Rochlitz 2019; Sharafutdinova 2010; Yakovlev 2021; Yakovlev and Aisin 2019). Many scholars qualify the informational autocracy argument by Guriev and Treisman (2022), pointing out that the authoritarian regime in Russia under Vladimir Putin in fact employed the "politics of fear" (Gel'man 2016; Rogov 2018). By harassing the regime's opponents and deliberately punishing members of the elite, the Kremlin sent a public signal about its domination. During the 2010s, the regime in Russia transformed from competitive and electoral authoritarianism towards a hegemonic and personalist autocracy (Baturo and Elkink 2014; Golosov 2023). At the same time, the Kremlin changed the main punishment mechanism against elites from the mere withdrawal of their erstwhile formal control over various resources and rents toward deliberate anticorruption proceedings for informal profiting from office, with the appropriate penalties entailed as a result (Rogov 2018, 169). In the process, formal institutions' role decreased compared to informal rules of the game (Rogov 2018, 172), reflecting the overall political deinstitutionalization and personalization in Russia (Baturo and Elkink 2021).

Political control over the media, established early on, has enabled the regime to ensure the positive coverage of the Russian ruler and his policies (Treisman 2011). This, in combination with a high rate of economic growth in the first decade in office and the deliberate prevention of viable political alternatives from acquiring national visibility, has assisted Putin's rate of public approval in being, on average, consistently high (Frye et al. 2017, 2023). In this regard, elections have been central to Putin's regime and his dominance as an instrument of projecting the dictator's power and the regime's strength, legitimizing his personal rule, controlling the elites, and monitoring the preferences of the population (Buckley et al. 2014; Buckley and Reuter 2019; Reuter and Turovsky 2022; Frye et al. 2014; Harvey 2016; Kalinin 2022; Gel'man 2015; Smyth 2021). Importantly for our argument, despite the process of autocratization, public opinion polls reporting Putin's popularity have remained largely free of bias over time (Frye et al. 2017, 2023).[9]

4 | Data: Governor Addresses to Regional Parliaments

Following their relative autonomy and significant influence in the 1990s, from 2000 onward, as Vladimir Putin was able to consolidate his power, governors lost the ability to influence federal politics (Hale 2006, 211–16; Gel'man 2013; Moses 2014). Among other tasks, governors are required to make annual policy addresses to regional parliaments. These are similar to the "State of the State" addresses made by many US governors (Baturo and Elkink 2021, 139–45). Their annual speeches may be titled as the address (*"poslanie"*), report (*"otchiet"* or *"doklad"*), policy speech ("*programnyj doklad*"), report on the social-economic development of the region or even speech ("*vystuplenie*"). Despite occasional title differences, they are all addressed to regional legislatures, including joint sessions with the regional executive, usually with public representatives in the audience, and they all cover diverse policy areas of importance to their region,[10] and are almost always televised. Although the majority of regions have their governors reporting annually, particularly in ethnic titular nationality republics, prior to 2010 there was no mandatory requirement to make an annual report.[11] As a result, there are more speeches in the corpus after 2010 than in the period of 2007 to 2010. Altogether, we collected 1055 subnational legislative addresses. The corpus includes 62 speeches on average per year overall from 2007, and 70 speeches on average per year from 2010, that is, covering 75 and 85% of Russia's regions per year on average, respectively. The majority of absent speeches for particular region-years can be explained by governors' replacements that year, when the departing governor does not make a speech and the incoming replacement intends to make his or her maiden policy address following a year in office.

On average, annual addresses are rather long. The average number of sentences is 403; with 2830 types, that is, unique words, and 8342 of tokens—counting each occurrence of the same word separately. For example, a not entirely hypothetical sentence of "When there is Putin, there is Russia, and there is no Russia when there is no Putin" has 17 tokens but 7 types. On average, governors are most verbose in 2020, 2007, 2018, and 2015. Speeches may vary in length and scope, with texts from the Mordovia republic, Tver, Smolensk, and Zabaykalie regions, as well as Crimea—the longest, and from Orel, Voronezh, or Chukotka—the shortest.

There are governors who refer to Putin's name often, and some of them do so in almost every paragraph even, sometimes multiple times, such as Ramazan Abdulatipov of Dagestan. They also praise the president quite generously. For example, in 2021, the leader of Chechnya Ramzan Kadyrov, from the start, declared that:

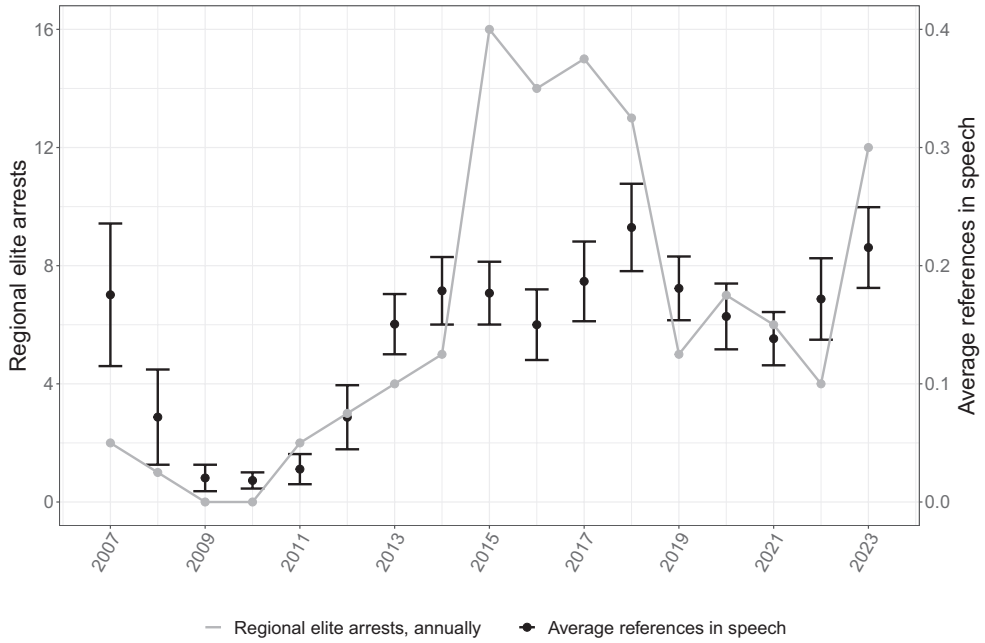

FIGURE 3 | Regional elite arrests and references to the autocrat in speech. *Note:* Annual number of regional elite arrested; average share of references to Vladimir Putin and his office per month.

> 2020 was not an easy year both for the country as a whole and for our republic – a year of another challenge for us, a year of trials that we coped with. We coped together, thanks to our unity and the personal support of the Head of State Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin.[12]

In 2015, Sergey Aksenov of Crimea lavishly praised Putin in his first annual report, saying that:

> I would like to especially thank President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin because, for the first time in the history of Crimea, the head of state personally pays attention to solving specific problems on the peninsula. This has never happened in Crimea. Probably, this is one of the keys to our success.

In contrast to Stalin's regime, at the time of this writing at least, elites in Putin's Russia risk their political positions and freedom rather than lives.[13] In turn, this is likely to influence how often they feel compelled to refer to their leader in speech. Instead of Stalin, perhaps a veneration of another Soviet leader, Leonid Brezhnev, is more appropriate for comparison with that of Putin. Drawing from the same official Party congress transcripts, we estimate that while in the first congress during Brezhnev's rule, 23rd in 1966, 135 delegates made 233 references to him by name, in 1971 (24th) 156 individuals made 363 references, and in 1976 (25th) 163 delegates already made 597 references, or an increase from 1.7 to 2.3 to 3.7 references per speech, on average.[14] While Brezhnev had a much weaker cult than Stalin did, he still was "referred to more frequently in a wide range of contexts and in a more laudatory fashion than any of his colleagues" (Gill 1980, 172).

5 | Methods and Descriptive Statistics

We examine the propensity for public display of loyalty to the incumbent political leader by analyzing a text corpus of 1055 annual legislative addresses made by the governors of the Russian Federation in the period from January 2007 to November 2023, as discussed above. Specifically, we measure the count of references to Vladimir Putin by name, as well as references to his offices, that of the president from the earliest speech available for 2007 to May 2008 and from May 2012 to 2023, and as *Premier* during the interim period of 2008–12, recalculating as the share to all terms per each document in order to address the issue of documents with varying length (see Figure 3).

To account for the regional repressiveness in Russia, we rely on two data sources. First, we use data on arrests of top regional elites from the list of *Peterburgskaya Politika* Foundation.[15] It covers the prosecutions against governors and vice-governors from 1996 to 2018, reflecting key dynamics of elite repression. We extended the list to 2019–2023 by coding regional elite arrests mentioned in the bi-monthly National Rating of Governors by Centre for Information Communications "Rating"[16] and a web search with combinations of keywords "governor" or "vice-governor" + "arrested" or "detained." The extended list includes 114 instances of arrests among governors and their deputies. We collapsed data on the region-year level. The annual number of arrests per region in 1996–2023 ranges from 0 to 4.

Figure 3 plots the average references to Putin in governors' policy speeches and the number of regional elite arrests in 2007–2023. In 2008–2011, both elite arrests and references to Putin remained low, reflecting the limited use of repression and the elites' uncertainty about the center of power in the Putin-Medvedev "tandemocracy"

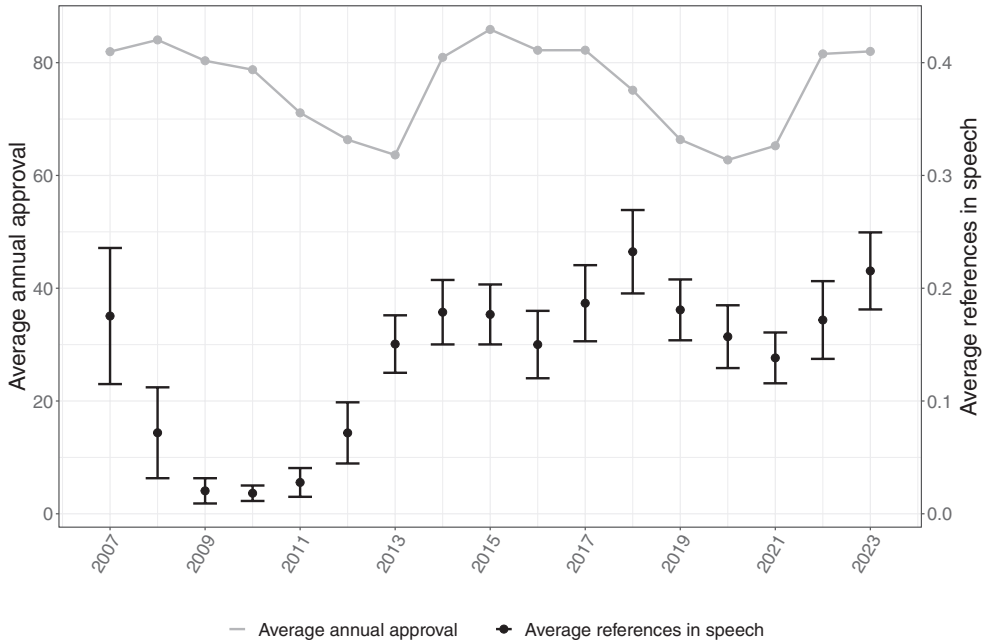

FIGURE 4 | Annual approval and references to the autocrat in speech. *Note:* Average monthly approval data from Levada; average share of references to Vladimir Putin and his office per year.

(Baturo and Mikhaylov 2014; Hale and Colton 2010). After Putin's return to the presidential office in 2012, the average share of references doubled and reached the 2007 level. In parallel, the number of regional elite arrests jumped in 2015–2018 to 13–16 annually, reflecting the increased Kremlin's control over governors through selective anticorruption trials (Yakovlev and Aisin 2019). The veneration reached a peak in 2018, the year of Putin's re-election for the fourth term, and then decreased in 2019–2021, along with the decline in regional arrests. Following the war's onset in Ukraine in 2022, elite arrests and references to Putin both have shown an upward trend, again.

Similarly, Figure 4 visualizes trends in loyalty displays to Putin and his average annual approval ratings. Because the text data are available from 2007, we also plot approval from that year onward as well. From September 1999 to November 2023, on average the approval rate[17] has remained at 75%, with the lowest at 59% and highest at 89%. First, there was a rally in approval when Putin assumed the presidency and in light of his perceived competence in handling the second Chechen war. Then, the approval has, however, declined to the mid-60s figures. In 2001, it returned to growth until Putin's popularity reached the 80s by the 2004 presidential election; then, following the protests against social benefit reforms from 2004 to 2005, it declined again. The approval has however recovered again around 2007–2008. In the period from 2010 to 2014, Putin's approval experienced a significant decline until it rallied again following the takeover of Crimea from Ukraine. The rally has lasted until 2018, when it decreased again, particularly following a very unpopular pension reform. It then remained in its "low" period until February 2022, when the war against Ukraine triggered another rally-round-the flag effect, in combination with a higher degree of repressiveness.

Overall, the approval ratings and references to Putin appear to follow similar trajectories in 2007–2023. When the political leader's approval is high, on average, governors make more references to him, publicizing their allegiance and subordinate role in the power vertical. In turn, when Putin's ratings decline, regional heads appear to reduce their public displays of loyalty to the autocrat.

6 | Analyses

We next turn to test our core hypotheses. The dependent variable is the share of references to Vladimir Putin and his office in speech, and the regression formula for the fixed-effects (FE) model specifications is as follows:

$$\text{References} = \beta_{00} + \beta_1 \text{Public approval}_{it} + \beta_2 \text{Elite arrests}_{it} + \beta_{3\ldots n} \text{Controls}_{it} + \gamma_i + \epsilon_{it}$$

where i and t denote a region and a year, γ_i is the regional fixed effects and ϵ_{it} is the random error term. Because speeches vary in length, for robustness, we also specify the negative binomial model with the count of references as the dependent variable.

Table 1 reports the results of linear regression models with fixed effects using the within-regression estimator and cluster-robust standard errors nested within regions. Given the significant differences between the federal subjects of Russia, with their unique political histories and context, our fixed-effects model specifications, which are standard in the literature (Allison 2009), account for unobserved regional-level characteristics and minimize the omitted variable bias.

The first column includes the results of a simple baseline model, with the main explanatory variables only: *Approval monthly* and *Elite arrests, region*, as described in the previous

TABLE 1 | Autocrat's popularity, repression, and expressed loyalty in speech.

	DV: Share of references						DV: Count
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Approval, monthly	0.190***	0.153**	0.155**	0.168**	0.144**	0.143**	1.590**
	(0.047)	(0.064)	(0.065)	(0.068)	(0.065)	(0.064)	(0.662)
Elite arrests, region, lagged	0.033***	0.053***	0.049***	0.032**	0.041**		0.223**
	(0.008)	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.010)	(0.013)		(0.079)
Economic growth		−0.000	−0.000	−0.000	−0.001	−0.001	−0.001
		(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.010)
GDP pc (log)		0.014**	0.013**	0.005	0.011**	0.011**	0.115**
		(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.004)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.053)
Presidential election			0.024	0.005	0.023	0.025+	0.289**
			(0.014)	(0.015)	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.124)
UR deputies, region			0.074	−0.004	0.052	0.051	0.485
			(0.080)	(0.075)	(0.084)	(0.083)	(0.500)
Crimea referendum				0.006			
				(0.017)			
Tandem period				−0.098***			
				(0.012)			
Appointed by Putin					0.046**	0.051**	
					(0.019)	(0.018)	
Education level					−0.023	−0.026	
					(0.017)	(0.017)	
Outsider to the region					−0.017	−0.016	
					(0.022)	(0.022)	
Elite arrests, region						0.027**	
						(0.009)	
Constant	−0.042	−0.200**	−0.253**	−0.068	−0.176	−0.170	−3.943***
	(0.035)	(0.086)	(0.107)	(0.094)	(0.108)	(0.107)	(0.884)
Log-likelihood	736.10	542.14	547.35	592.25	553.78	551.05	−1357.23
σ_u	0.070	0.082	0.083	0.076	0.081	0.081	
σ_e	0.126	0.120	0.120	0.112	0.119	0.119	
ρ	0.239	0.318	0.323	0.316	0.318	0.313	
N	1053	710	709	709	709	709	678
N regions	84	83	83	83	83	83	77

Note: The dependent variable is the share of references in 1–6, count of references in 7, all specifications are fixed-effects models with cluster-robust standard errors for panels nested within regions.
+$p < 0.10$.
**$p < 0.05$.
***$p < 0.001$.

section. Model 2 adds economic control variables for the annual economic growth in the region, as well as the level of economic development in the region, *GRP per capita* (*log*). Then, in Column 3, we also include political control variables: *Presidential election*, a binary variable taking the value of one for a 6-month period around the 2008, 2012, and 2018 presidential elections, and the share of legislative seats held by the ruling party, United Russia, in the regional legislature (*UR*

deputies, region). All things being equal, governors may be more likely to refer to Putin around the time of presidential elections, when they have to advocate for his candidacy; in turn, political actors facing a higher share of governmental loyalists may also tend to express loyalty stronger.

In Column 4, we include the same specification as in Column 3, but additionally account for the time period effects. Specifically, and as seen from Figures 3 and 4, the share of references to Putin declined from 2008 to 2012, when Putin complied with the presidential term limits at the time by stepping down into the powerful office of prime minister and securing the election into presidential office of his loyalist, Dmitry Medvedev. As a result, many governors were initially uncertain about the power distribution at the federal center and occupied equidistant positions between Putin and Medvedev in terms of their references to both and their expressed policies (Baturo and Mikhaylov 2014). In turn, following the takeover of Crimea in 2014, political elites have increased their references to Russia's autocrat; the president's public approval has also increased quite dramatically since 2014. Therefore, Column 4 includes two additional controls for these two periods.

Expressing loyalty may not only be a required attribute of any member of the authoritarian elite but also result from other factors. In Column 5, we account for the possible effects of the individual backgrounds of Russia's governors. *Outsider* is a binary indicator, where 1 corresponds to the subnational leaders without any experience of living, studying, or working in a region of their responsibility. The governor-outsiders are also usually selected from the federal technocrats who tend to be more dependent on and loyal to the president. Likewise, we include an indicator for whether governors were first appointed by Vladimir Putin to their gubernatorial office, or whether they were appointed by Yeltsin earlier, were directly elected for the first time, or were appointed during the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev. We also account for governors' education, with lower values standing for the lack of university education and higher values for the doctoral degree (PhD). It is conceivable that governors with a PhD may focus on regional economic policy in their annual addresses and spend less time referring to Putin.

Because the effects of arrests may also be short-term or even contemporaneous, with elites incorporating the negative information about their peers' arrests at the same time as such arrests occur, for robustness, in Column 6, instead of a lagged measure of arrests, we include an indicator accounting for arrests in the same year when the speech is made. As can be seen in Table 1, the choice of the lagged explanatory variable does not affect the results, however. In Table 2, for additional robustness, we also include alternative measures for repressiveness.

To visualize the effects of the main predictors, Figure 5 plots the marginal effects of the elite arrests and monthly approval on the expressed loyalty in speech, estimated following Model 5, Table 1. As can be seen from the left subplot, a change in the observed public approval from the lowest level to the highest, on average, leads to an increase of 0.05 in the share of references, or half of the standard deviation of this variable, or about 5 additional references to Vladimir Putin in speech. In turn, increasing the number of regional elite arrests has a more dramatic effect on governor speech: when the number of arrests changes from none to five, the expected increase in references is 0.16, or almost a 1.2 standard deviation of this variable.

In summary, across all specifications in Table 1, we find strong support for Hypotheses 1 and 2a. In column 7, we additionally specify the negative binomial regression model with the count of references to Russia's autocrat instead of share, and the results are not affected. On the basis of the economic growth indicator, we do not find support for H2b; however, we examine this further in Table 2.

As seen from more specific examples in Figure 6, some governors do not refer to Vladimir Putin, also ignoring his speeches and decrees and focusing on regional policies and issues instead. In particular, Sergey Furgal of Khabarovsk, who in 2018 won in a landslide against a Kremlin-backed candidate, devoted his 2020 speech to the regional response to COVID-19 and failed to make a single reference to Vladimir Putin by name in his address. Interestingly, the address was delivered only a day before his arrest on allegations of past criminal activities, which, together with two arrests of top regional elites in 2019, in turn, conceivably sparked the references to the autocrat by Furgal's replacement, the new governor, Mikhail Degtyarev. A similar level of Putin's veneration is observed among governors of the Republic of Dagestan. When Ramazan Abdulatipov entered the office in 2013, he began to show his loyalty to Putin in his policy addresses rather excessively. The repression of Dagestanian prime minister Abdusamad Gamidov and his three deputies in 2018 might have precipitated the increase of references to Putin in speeches of Dagestan's governors that followed, Vladimir Vasilyev in 2019 and Sergey Melikov in 2022. In a similar manner, the heads of the Kirov and Volgograd regions, Igor Vasilyev and Andrey Bocharov, modulated their public expressions of loyalty to Putin following the arrests of Kirov's governor, Nikita Belykh, in 2016, as well as Volgograd's regional vice-governors and ministers in 2013–2020, respectively. In summary, even though the study is based on observational data rendering causal inference difficult, the evidence from Figure 6, however, provides additional face validity to our argument linking elite repression and political speech.

Additional and supplementary explanations are possible, however. Although we include the level of economic growth to account for the economic development, at the same time, higher growth rates may influence the approval of Russia's autocrat, so we may be conflating the effects of these two variables. In Table 2, we report the results of the additional fixed-effects regression models with cluster–robust standard errors for panels nested within regions. We omit economic growth in Column 1, whereas in Column 2, we retain it but instead omit the measure of public approval. As can be seen, however, the omission of economic growth does not affect the statistically significant coefficient of *Approval, monthly*, whereas economic growth, whether together with public approval (Table 1) or without (Column 2 in Table 2), is not a statistically significant predictor.

Furthermore, elites can receive cues about regime durability not only from the public approval of the autocrat or the rate of economic growth but also from other sources of information.

TABLE 2 | Additional explanations.

	DV: Share of references						
	Popularity			*Repression*			*Regions*
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Approval, monthly	0.158**		0.160**	0.186**	0.136**	0.173**	0.190**
	(0.065)		(0.065)	(0.064)	(0.062)	(0.064)	(0.063)
Presidential election	0.023	0.019	0.024+	0.032**	−0.008	0.040**	0.029+
	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.013)	(0.014)	(0.015)
UR deputies, region	0.075	0.086	0.072	0.112	−0.073	0.101	0.005
	(0.079)	(0.082)	(0.080)	(0.081)	(0.074)	(0.080)	(0.052)
GDP pc (log)	0.013**	0.013**	0.013**	0.014**	0.002	0.013**	0.008+
	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.003)	(0.006)	(0.005)
Elite arrests, region, lagged	0.049***	0.052***	0.048***				0.031**
	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.012)				(0.011)
Economic growth		−0.001	−0.000	−0.001	0.001	−0.001	0.001
		(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Oil price, change			−0.001				
			(0.001)				
Repression, region, lagged				0.003**			
				(0.001)			
Repression, federal, lagged					0.001***		
					(0.000)		
Federal minister, arrest						0.049**	
						(0.015)	
North Caucasus							0.040
							(0.042)
Titular republic							0.032
							(0.021)
Constant	−0.257**	−0.135	−0.254**	−0.309**	−0.053	−0.283**	−0.177**
	(0.106)	(0.095)	(0.107)	(0.110)	(0.089)	(0.109)	(0.086)
σ_u	0.082	0.083	0.083	0.083	0.075	0.080	
σ_e	0.119	0.120	0.120	0.121	0.112	0.121	
ρ	0.322	0.325	0.322	0.322	0.312	0.307	
N	709	709	706	709	709	709	709
N regions	83	83	83	83	83	83	83

Note: The dependent variable is the share of references in 1–7. In Columns 1–6, specifications are fixed-effects with cluster–robust standard errors for panels nested within regions; in 7, pooled regression with cluster–robust standard errors.
+$p < 0.10$.
**$p < 0.05$.
***$p < 0.001$.

In Russia, one of the most important factors of domestic economic stability is the capacity to draw from natural resource rents, with oil and gas revenues in particular contributing a sizeable share of federal budget income. Likewise, a significant degree of rent-seeking at the elite level is determined by the redistribution of rent from natural resources. In Column 3 of Table 2, we, therefore, include an additional variable, *Oil price change*, on the basis of changes in average monthly Urals

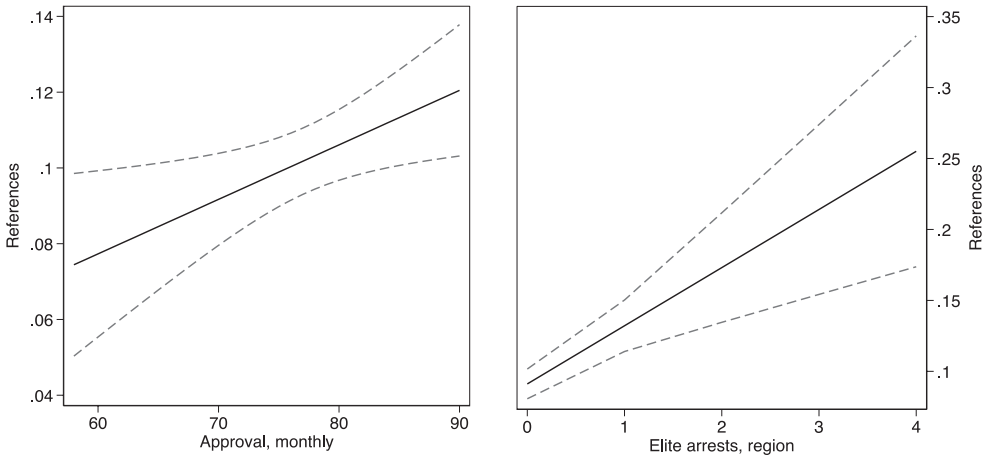

FIGURE 5 | Marginal effects of the explanatory variables on speech. *Note:* Estimated following Model 5, Table 1.

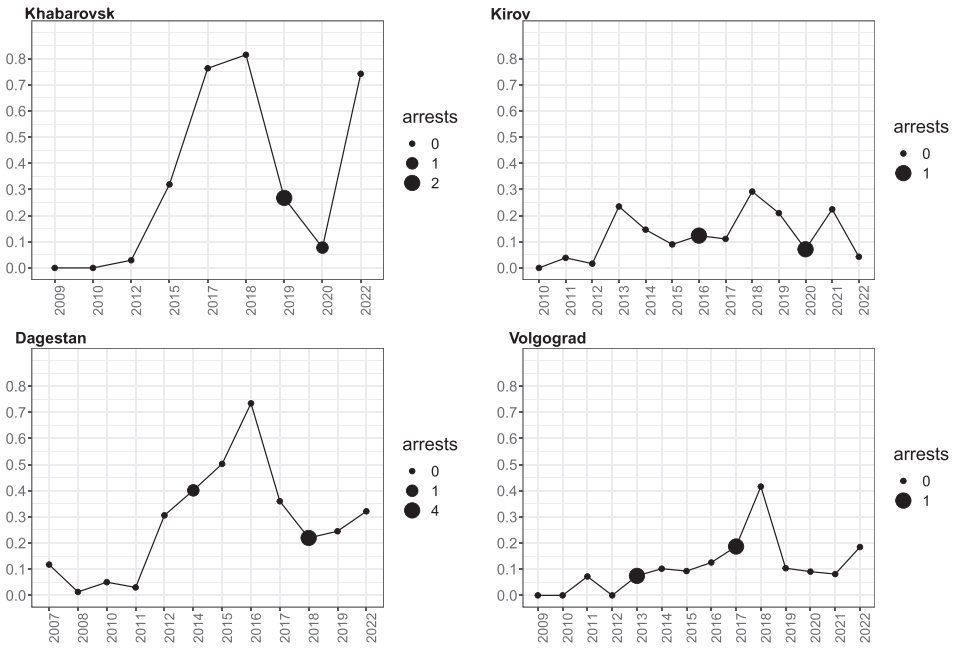

FIGURE 6 | Elite arrests and references in speeches, illustrative examples. *Note:* Share of references in speech of individual governors on the *y*-axis, with additional visualizations for regional elite arrests per year, selected federal regions.

crude oil price (gas prices are also indexed through the average oil price). However, results indicate that the governors are not sensitive to international oil prices. Furthermore, the inclusion of this additional indicator does not affect the statistically significant coefficient on *Approval, monthly*, leading us to reject Hypothesis 2b.

In Columns 4 to 6, in Table 2, we include several alternative indicators of political repression. Specifically, we use a proxy of a broader regional-level (Column 4) and federal-level (Column 5) repressiveness from the database of politically motivated criminal prosecutions in 2003–2024 by OVD-Info.[18] Besides the change in elite punishment strategies over time, the Kremlin also increased the arbitrary law enforcement against wider population groups. After the mass "For Fair Elections" campaign in 2011–2011-12, in particular, the regime employed harsh measures against the participants and organizers of political protests. At the same time, the prosecutions of the members of Islamic organizations contributed to the surge of repression (Rogov 2018, 172). We collapsed the politically motivated criminal cases from the OVD-Info database by region and the year of commencement of persecution. The average value is 2.2, and the annual number of political prosecutions varies from 0 to 126. Then, we include the lagged values of repressiveness for specific regions in Column 4, but also for the whole country, including from all regions, in Column 5.[19] Furthermore, in Column 6, we also account for the most notable and visible cases of high-profile prosecution against federal elites, namely, federal ministers. Specifically, we include a dummy variable for a six-month period following the arrests of Alexei Ulyukaev, Minister of Economic Development, arrested in November of 2016 over bribe allegations, and Mikhail Abyzov, former Minister of Open Government, arrested in March 2019 for fraud and other crimes.[20]

The results reported in Columns 4 to 6 indicate that political elites are also sensitive to cues received from the overall political repression and to specific and highly visible arrests of federal elites, as the coefficients on these alternative indicators of political repression are positive and statistically significant.

As yet another additional test, in Column 7, we include a dummy variable for titular nationality republics, as well as republics of the North Caucasus (*Caucasus*), since their leaders tend to be more loyal to the autocrat owing to the reliance on federal transfers and delivery of high electoral results for the president and United Russia (Ivanov and Petrov 2021, 163). Because these variables are time-invariant, we specify pooled regressions. Although the coefficients on these two predictors are positive, they are, however, not statistically significant.

In summary, we find consistent evidence that regime personalization and political speech are related. Specifically, negative motivation, rooted in observed repression of regional elites in the past, drives governors to increase loyalty in their speech (Hypothesis 1), whereas a more positive motivation linked to the durability of the personalist regime, in turn, received from cues of public approval of an autocrat (Hypothesis 2a), equally increases the share of references. Certainly, while the repressiveness of the Russian regime over time, from 2014 and particularly from 2022, has changed significantly, as of 2025 it has not reached the levels typical for many closed autocracies, as we also discussed earlier, contrasting it in reference to Stalin's regime. The Putin regime has retained many elements of the so-called informational autocracy (Guriev and Treisman 2022), where instead of mass repression, the popularity and the image of the ruler are generally employed to maintain the nondemocratic rule. Yet, as we show in this study, and as part of the same informational autocracy toolkit, elites appear to react to the information not only regarding the ruler's popularity among the masses but also to that related to repression—even if targeted and relatively low-scale—of their peers, in order to calibrate their messages. Should the regime continue on the same trajectory, the loyalty in speech is likely to increase further, as it did under Stalin from the late 1920s (Kotkin 2017). We thus generally find support for both the positive and negative motivations in governors' policy rhetoric, that is, that the governors may be motivated by the logic of a "terrible" and a "benevolent" (as perceived by the mass public) "tzar" alike.[21]

7 | Conclusions

Regime personalization is associated with the changes in norms of elite verbal behavior, such as an increased propensity to refer to the autocrat in policy speeches that ostensibly should be about socioeconomic regional goals, not about federal politics or the leader's agenda. However, and more specifically, we find support that elites respond to arrests of other elites in their reference groups, as well as to other notable arrests and the overall deterioration in terms of political repression. Interestingly, in the context of the electoral autocracy, elites appear to track the popularity of their autocrat and amplify his coverage in their policy speech when he is already popular. We also do not find support that the elites rely on other environmental cues about regime durability.

In Russia, elites, including regional ones, have enjoyed a degree of career stability, particularly from 1999 to 2012. When Putin circumvented term limits and returned to the Kremlin in 2012, it is very likely that elites came to perceive him as permanent in the Kremlin for the long haul. As a result, Putin has largely become autonomous from his ruling coalition. When Putin's erstwhile clients needed him more than he did them, his Brezhnevite "stability of cadres" was slowly abandoned, and dismissals and even arrests have increased. Elites found themselves to be replaceable and felt it was more important to express loyalty, and express it stronger, in speech. We relied on public speeches, but if private policy discussions with the Russian president followed the same trend, reduced capacity and willingness for policy competence also likely ensued.

Future research will extend our argument beyond the corpus of gubernatorial addresses to regional legislatures in Russia. The analysis of the public rhetoric of other lower-tier authoritarian elites, such as the State Duma members and government ministers, can be used to corroborate our findings. It will also be intriguing to trace the relative level of the leader's veneration across authoritarian regimes, such as Turkey, Venezuela, and Belarus, in line with large-N research on authoritarian propaganda (Carter and Carter 2023) or authoritarian legitimation (Baturo and Tolstrup 2024; Dukalskis and Gerschewski 2017; Khokhlov 2024).

Another important future extension is related to the scope conditions and the analytical utility of the proposed framework. We draw from a single case study of an important autocracy, yet rhetorical pandering to the incumbent leader is not a property of only authoritarian elites. For instance, US governors are also known to make frequent references to the president by name in their State of the State speeches, even if the magnitude of their pandering is lower than we have found in this study (Weinberg 2010). Similarly to their authoritarian peers, democratic governors are also likely to follow the president's popularity, reflecting it in their rhetoric while hoping to ride the presidential coattails. In turn, a fear-based motivation will be either absent or likely to be driven not by repression per se, but rather by concerns over the lack or withdrawal of the president's endorsement during gubernatorial elections or primaries (Heseltine 2023; Khokhlov 2025).

Future research may also explore other aspects of policy speech beyond references to the leader, whether in authoritarian or democratic settings. Although in the context of an increasingly authoritarian regime in Russia, such references, used herein, can provide valid inferences regarding loyalty speech—in the data, we have found no examples of governors referring to the incumbent either negatively or to assign blame (Beazer and Reuter 2019)—detecting praise or blame-shifting to the federal cabinet or other actors may require an additional sentiment analysis to understand whether particular terms are employed positively or negatively (Young and Soroka 2012). Likewise, because political speech is highly multidimensional, future research may also draw from policy speeches of Russian governors to better understand their economic policy preferences, strategic usage of emotive language or irony to emphasize political or policy themes, or text complexity to obfuscate or tailor their messages to specific

audiences, among other things. We hope that our theoretical and empirical framework contributes to an important research program regarding the strategic use of language under authoritarianism.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

Endnotes

[1] The personality cult is a multifaceted concept encompassing various elite and mass behaviors, such as excessive quotations or naming streets after the ruler (Rees 2004). It may also be seen as a scale variable ranging from a low to a high degree of a leader's elevation over elites, whether in official rhetoric or media coverage (Baturo and Elkink 2021, 155–168). In this article, we study the references to the autocrat in elite speech, which relate to verbal aspects of leader veneration.

[2] To address this problem, scholars focus on the initial conditions influencing the relative power of the ruler and elites prior to assuming power, that is, prior to the process of personalization, including elite cohesion (Geddes et al. 2018), leader's strength (Meng 2020), resource rents (Chehabi and Linz 1998) as well as post-coup opportunity structures (Timoneda et al. 2023); yet leaders also acquire power in subtle, incremental steps (Svolik 2012, 60).

[3] Usually an incumbent autocrat, but there can also be a dead one if the current leader derives the legitimacy from him, or a hereditary successor (Kotkin 2014).

[4] Even Stalin's personality cult may be relative. In early 1975 in Zaire under Mobutu, for a period of time the state media were not permitted to make references to any other name of officials, except for Mobutu's name (Young and Turner 1985, 169).

[5] See Huntington (1991) for performance legitimacy and the basis for political order under authoritarianism.

[6] However, as of 2020, 22 streets are known to have been named after Putin, e.g., Putin Avenue in Grozny, the capital city of the Chechen Republic. See https://openmedia.io/news/n2/v-chest-putina-v-rossii-nazvali-ulicy-v-22-gorodax-i-posyolkax-bolshe-poloviny-na-severnom-kavkaze/.

[7] Russia's *Kommersant-Vlast'* weekly ran an annual Lisost' k Telu (Leaking the Body, a pun on Blizost' k Telu, closest to the body, with the body being that of the president) ranking of officials' speeches, from 2007 to 2013. For example, governor Vorobiev of Moscow region is included: "I believe that what Putin has done has allowed us not to lose the country. Putin is a patriot, Putin is strong." Kommersant-Radio FM, January 6, 2013, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2100884, accessed September 4, 2022.

[8] "*Moscow Times*, October 23, 2014, 'No Putin, No Russia,' Says Kremlin Deputy Chief of Staff," www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/10/23/no-putin-no-russia-says-kremlin-deputy-chief-of-staff-a40702.

[9] Frye et al. (2017) show that the polls adequately reflect the true support for Putin. Also, in Frye et al. (2023) the authors follow up and admit the limitation of the prior list experiment but, on balance, confirm their findings. From 2020 on, there is some evidence for political interference, when, for example, around the 2020 constitutional referendum, the Kremlin-connected Public Opinion Foundation (FOM) did not publish Putin's ratings for some time (Guriev and Treisman 2022, 127). We, however, rely on the data from the independent pollster, Levada Center, as explained elsewhere in text.

[10] A potential corpus of all speeches and interviews in which elites may express their loyalty over time is potentially unlimited, and will include every utterance of officials ever digitally recorded, rendering the task potentially intractable. Instead, the corpus of annual policy addresses is suitable to measure the effects of personalization on speech politicization because governors are required to cover regional policy only and they do not have to discuss politics or refer to the ruler or federal politics, generally.

[11] The requirements for governors' annual reports varied regionally, however. Federal Law N 29-F3, in force from March 29, 2010, required all governors to give an annual report. We were able to source 29 speeches in 2008 and 44 in 2009, before the law, and already 69—in 2010. We scraped legislative addresses from presidential or legislative web pages; we also sourced them from the archives of newspapers or official publications whenever they were not available from official web pages.

[12] This and other quotations are from governors' speeches included in the text corpus used herein.

[13] However, the July 2025 death, attributed to a suicide, of the transportation minister Roman Starovoit might indicate the changing nature of fear-based elite incentives. After Starovoit was appointed as a federal minister, a number of arrests for the misuse of public funds for defence contracts were made in the Kursk region, where Starovoit had previously been a governor. Many observers believed that Starovoit himself was likely to be arrested next. See https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2025/07/russia-elites-internal-pressure?lang=en.

[14] In comparison, on average, there are 5.6 references to Putin per governor's address in the 2007- 23 period, as explained below. The contemporary texts of Russian governors are also much longer than party delegate speeches made under Leonid Brezhnev, however.

[15] https://fpp.spb.ru/fpp-top250-criminal-cases.

[16] https://russia-rating.ru/info/category/gubernators.

[17] The percentage of respondents who approve of the activity of Vladimir Putin: "In general do you approve or disapprove of the activity of Vladimir Putin as president (prime minister) of Russia?" Based on monthly data from http://www.levada.ru/indikatory/odobrenie-organov-vlasti/.

[18] https://data.ovd.info/politpressing.

[19] We lag the repressiveness measures by one period, that is, one year, in line with the standard practices to account for possible endogeneity and autocorrelation. Since the data is at the region-year level, it is reasonable to assume that the governors reflect the repressiveness levels in their public speeches with no significant delays. We additionally test the models including the repressiveness indicators at lags of 2 and 3 years and the results are not affected.

[20] We also include Dmitry Serdyukov, who in November 2013 was charged with criminal negligence in his earlier role as a minister of defense (until his dismissal a year earlier in November 2012); he was amnestied next year, however.

[21] We thank an anonymous reviewer for this wording.

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