

RUSSIA 2018

PREDICTABLE ELECTIONS, UNCERTAIN FUTURE

edited by **Aldo Ferrari**
introduction by **Paolo Magri**



ISPI

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Introduction

For one reason or another, Russia has been under international scrutiny since at least 2013. Be it for the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent international crisis, Russia's role in Syria, or the alleged interference in the US presidential election, the international community has been increasingly directing its attention towards Russia and its leader. In 2018, two Russia-related events are to further attract the world's interest: the presidential elections taking place on March 18, and the World Cup, which will kick off in June. While the outcomes of the latter are still uncertain, nobody wonders who is going to win the elections, with President Vladimir Putin ready to serve another six-year-term.

If the outcome seems so ineluctable, why should these elections be worthy of notice? In fact, they bear important consequences for Russia's domestic and foreign policy alike. Domestically, the expected high rate of abstention might be a problem for Putin's regime, which is often labelled an "electoral authoritarianism" or "illiberal democracy", and to which formal demonstrations of popular consent matter. Even if Putin's approval rates have been remarkably high throughout the last years, a low electoral turnout would undermine the principle of legitimacy that even authoritarian regimes need or want to boast of. In fact, Putin worries about the prospect of repeating the scenario of 2016; back then, the ruling party, United Russia, won a comfortable majority in the parliamentary elections, but voter turnout hit an all-time low: less than 50% of Russians cast their vote, even less in major cities (only 28% in Moscow). While Putin is trying to mobilise the electorate through a campaign focusing on stability and social policies addressing

growing inequality – highly sensitive topics for a population deeply hit by the international sanctions – the lack of a credible and attractive alternative to Putin and the perceived likelihood of electoral fraud may keep the participation rate low.

When it comes to Russia's foreign policy, the main puzzle here is what the post-election "new old Russia" will look like and what role it will play in the international arena. One fundamental question stands out among many: will Putin continue to challenge the Western-championed liberal order or will he seek reconciliation with the West? To answer this question, a closer look is required, not only in terms of the outcome of the elections but also in light of the dynamics at play before and after the electoral competition. It goes without saying that playing the nationalist card to boost popular consent may not suffice at a time when economic resources are shrinking. As highlighted in the recent ISPI Report *Putin's Russia: Really Back?*, crucial variables such as the renewal of international sanctions or global oil prices will take their toll on the Russian economy and may further reduce Putin's ability to both cement his power at home and pursue his objectives abroad.

The authors of this Report paint a clear picture of 2018 Russia. A picture that is not a static one; on the opposite, not only does the Report give a snapshot of Russia's political system, its society, and its main domestic and international challenges, but it also traces their evolution while pointing at future scenarios.

For a start, Alessandro Vitale analyses Putin's role and position within the current Russian political system. The author describes how the Russian president managed to ensure, Soviet-style, the personification and indivisibility of power; at the same time, his regime sacrificed an independent and powerful civil society on the altar of order and institutional stability. What are the prospects for future institutional change? Even if combining economic regeneration and respect of constitutional rights with a strong state might prove increasingly problematic in the future, Russians keep considering the continuation of Putin's

rule as the best option to keep order at home while regaining great-power status abroad. Since Russian domestic political structures largely depend on foreign policy priorities, Vitale claims that this situation is likely to endure in the short-to-medium term.

In the second chapter, Aldo Ferrari looks at the increasingly conservative attitudes that Putin's political discourse shares with Russian society. Is Russia the "Land of a Conservative Society"? The enactment of several conservative bills – just to mention a couple, the "anti-gay propaganda" laws or the decriminalisation of domestic violence – seems to suggest so. Conservatism reverberates through Russia's international image: Moscow has indeed become a kind of conservative pole as opposed to the most recent Western social and legal developments. As a matter of fact, it seems that Russia has been increasingly waging a normative war against the West and its liberal values. Therefore, to fully understand the evolution in relations between Russia and the West, Ferrari analyses the emergence of their growing rift in terms of values. Nevertheless, Ferrari argues that this picture of a rapidly expanding conservatism in Russia's society should not be overestimated; a quick look at key indicators, such as abortion or divorce rates, suggests that Russian society is not that different from those of secular Western Europe.

Richard Sakwa's analysis of the nature and role of political opposition in Russia follows suit. The author offers an overview of both the systemic and non-systemic opponents to Putin's regime. The former play by the normative rules of regime politics, and in certain respects reinforce the administrative aspects of Russia's "managed democracy". The four parties that are currently represented in the Russian Duma are indeed the "usual suspects", as they have enjoyed unbroken representation at the national parliamentary level since their foundation. Non-systemic opposition, on the other hand, includes those parties and groups not represented at the national level, such as the *Yabloko* social liberal party, but also "spoiler" parties – that is, parties with names similar to existing parties to draw away their

votes – and threats to stability such as the Radical Muslim mobilisation and leftist nationalism. The author argues that the regime is claiming to introduce elements of competition into a fundamentally uncompetitive system to boost turnout, while only allowing mildly unconventional candidates not presenting a serious challenge to Putin, and barring, for example, candidates such as the lawyer and anti-corruption activist Alexey Navalny, the only independent and charismatic face of Russia's opposition.

In his chapter, Alexey Malashenko delves into Russia's unique relationship with Islam. His analysis starts with the figures defining the presence of Muslims in Russia: in 2017, there were some 17 million Muslims in the country, i.e. more than 11% of its population, although some politicians and state officials, including Putin, refer to much higher figures (up to 25 million). Muslim migrants from abroad (especially Central Asia) have become a part of the Russian Islamic community, and they abide more and more by Islamic rules (for instance, in terms of alcohol consumption). Some regions, mainly in the North Caucasus, are undergoing a process of Islamisation or even Shariasation. These factors cannot but shape the Russian government's policy toward Islam and Muslims, but also Russia's foreign policy goals and concerns. Yet the author maintains that the situation in the Russian Muslim community is relatively peaceful. Russian Muslims are politically passive and loyal to the authorities, even with regard to Russia's involvement in the Syrian conflict. Religious extremism and terrorism, while still present, decreased compared to previous years, as did the influence of and interest in ISIS.

Philip Hanson draws a parallel between Brexiteers and Russian advocates of economic sovereignty. Both share a suspicious view of foreigners and a readiness to sacrifice or deny the existence of benefits from existing patterns of international economic integration. The existence of international sanctions against Moscow makes the Russian case different, and in fact, Russian economic policy has a broader range of aspirations

(from import substitution to national control over IT systems). After a review of the chief policy document outlining the goal of economic sovereignty – the Strategy of Economic Security – Hanson spotlights the main challenges to future economic growth in Russia. He argues that, on the one hand, faster growth and protectionism are hardly reconcilable; on the other, the different growth proposals contained in the Strategy may pose high political costs for the elites, who could, therefore, hinder their implementation. For instance, the most important recommendation is to improve the business environment, in order to reduce the uncertainty experienced by private companies; this, however, would require upholding the rule of law and would drastically reduce the ability of officials to force targeted businesspeople to surrender their businesses or to collect bribes.

In the final chapter, Giancarlo Aragona investigates the main political dynamics at play both within the West and between the West and Russia and looks for the prospect of a possible thaw in the troubled relations with Moscow. It is true that the Trump presidency could have a dramatic impact on the very notion of “West” – given Trump’s peculiar interpretation of American interests and approach to power – and, therefore, on the West’s position *vis-à-vis* Russia. However, Aragona maintains that Trump lacks the political capital and authority to radically change the founding principles of US foreign policy and to achieve an easing of tensions with Moscow in the short-to-medium term, also in light of the investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election. At the same time, the author laments that, in shaping the Russian-Western relationship, the weight of the EU appears relatively marginal. While only some Member States play a significant role and are recognised as legitimate interlocutors by the Kremlin, the EU needs to agree on a united and balanced policy platform, showing fewer emotions and more historical depth in recognising the perimeters and nature of Russian interests in its near abroad and beyond.

As the old maxim from the Italian novel *Il Gattopardo* [*The Leopard*] goes: “For things to remain the same, everything must change”. It does not seem to be the case with Putin’s Russia. But as Putin grows older, and Russia shows increasing signs of strain, it remains to be seen whether the old maxim may finally come back to haunt him or not.

Paolo Magri
ISPI Executive Vice President and Director

1. Does Putin's Strong State Have a Future?

Alessandro Vitale

The long search for a successor who would be able to ensure state and institutional continuity ended when the entourage of the first Russia's President found this guarantee in the person of Vladimir Putin, nominated Prime Minister on 9 August 1999 and formally elected for a first term on 14 March 2000, after Yeltsin's resignation on 31 December 1999. Putin has served longer than anyone since Joseph Stalin. With 17 years in office, he surpassed the record of Leonid Brezhnev. Putin became president at age 47 and faces re-election to another six-year term this year. He was the unavoidable product of a particular institutional design: a strong "super-presidential" executive¹ and the concentrated power of the presidency as an institution. In terms of regime type, Russia is formally a semi-presidential constitutional system, but this does not tell us much about how the Constitution works in practice.

Granted extensive authority by the 1993 Constitution (conservative and centralising, without adequate constraints and check and balances) was part of a precise institutional design to ensure strong powers for the executive in order to restore a strong state² and it has been accentuated by an high degree of institutional and personal continuity between the Soviet and the post-Soviet

¹ M.S. Fish, "When More is Less: Superexecutive Power and Political Underdevelopment in Russia", in V. Bonnell and G.W. Breslauer (Eds.), *Russia in the New Century: Stability or Disorder?*, Westview Press, Boulder Co. 2001. See also M.S. Fish, *Democracy Derailed in Russia: The Failure of Open Politics*, Cambridge-New York, Cambridge University Press, 2005.

² A.I. Tsygankov, *The Strong State in Russia. Development and Crisis*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014. As declared by Vladimir Putin: "Russia needs strong state power and must have it". V. Putin, "Rossija na rubezhe tysjachiletii" (Russia in between millenia), *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 30 December 1999.

Russian political systems³. The presidency possesses an high degree of freedom of manoeuvre⁴. As a result, the emergence of a presidential state in the 1990s fostered the creation of a system that maintained some of the characteristics of the “Soviet order”.

In fact, based on these premises, Putin’s approach, characterised by the pursuit of a policy of “normal politics”, “managed normalisation”⁵, and stability⁶, permitted considerable changes in policy orientations and leadership style that effectively marked the beginning of a “new era” in Russia’s politics. Thus, it is not surprising that he reasserted the constitutional prerogatives of the state that he called “the dictatorship of law”. He managed to ensure, following Soviet style, that the regime did not fall under

³ G.M. Hahn, *Russia’s Revolution from Above, 1985-2000: Reform, Transition, and Revolution in the Fall of Soviet Communist Regime*, New Brunswick NJ, Transaction Publishers, 2002. See also O. Krishtanovskaya and S. White, “Putin’s Militocracy”, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, vol. 19, no. 4, October-December 2003, pp. 289-306.

⁴ However, it is worth remembering that Yeltsin’s political and physical weakness allowed the parliament – even after the 1993 crisis – to play a significant role. Although the presidency still possessed the upper hand over the parliament, it still managed to check the President’s power and influence public policy in a number of significant issue areas because the presidential administration and government were often divided. Putin disciplined policy making within the executive branch, and reengineered the internal procedures of legislative chambers in order to ensure consistent and reliable majorities in favor of presidential rule and to direct the whole decision-making process.

⁵ G. Pavlovsky in “Vremya Novostej”, 30 March 2004. Pavlovsky was a political analyst close to the Presidential Administration. “Managed normalisation” was supposed to provide the means to revive the state and enable it to incorporate different social demands through the creation of greater state autonomy from special interests (oligarchic economic interests and regional political elites). S. Prozorov, “Russian Conservatism in the Putin Presidency: The dispersion of a hegemonic discourse”, *Journal of Political Ideologies*, vol. 10, no. 2, p. 125. See also R. Sakwa, “Regime Change from Yeltsin to Putin: Normality, normalcy or normalization”, in R. Caeron (Ed.), *Russian Politics under Putin*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2004, pp. 17-36.

⁶ Undoubtedly, at the heart of Putin’s politics of stability was the influence of various phases of Russian history. In the foreign policy sphere Putin insisted that Russia should be treated as a “normal great power”. He also stated that Russia’s foreign policy should serve the country’s economic interest, a policy that was particularly evident in debates over the Union of Russia and Belarus.

the influence of the really independent civil society. Hence, the political regime very quickly became insulated from all internal political actors, such as political parties and the parliament. Administrative measures tended to predominate (a system of “managed democracy”, in Putin’s words or “sovereign democracy”⁷ in the notion advanced by Vladislav Surkov⁸, deputy head of the presidential administration between 1999 and 2011, and others) as it happened during the Soviet period – in deep contrast with an ordered society which mainly operates according to spontaneous processes. The idea of a “sovereign democracy”, grounded in the integrity of the state, has been paired with the concepts of “managed democracy” and “directed economy”, both of them presupposing the existence of a strong state. The Russian political class has perpetuated two key elements of the traditional way of exercising power: the personalisation of it and the principle of indivisibility of power which remains monolithic⁹: that is what has been called “vertical of power”.

⁷ For an overview of the issues in defining “sovereign democracy” see A. Kasantse, “Suverennaja demokratiya: struktura i sotsial’no-politicheskie funktsii konceptsi” (Sovereign democracy: the structure and social-political function of the concept), *Forum Novejshej Vostochnoevropejskoj Kul’tury* (Forum of the Newest East European Culture), vol. 4, no. 1, 2007, pp. 1-16.

⁸ According to Vladislav Surkov, Russia had its own democratic traditions and standards that were different from liberal and pluralist Western notion of democracy. “Sovereign democracy” depends on these traditions and standards, created and supported by Russian state sovereignty and meant a different “democratic” understanding of rights and political competition. Moreover, State and civilisation are mutually supportive, the president is the “unifier of differences” and guarantees against factional politics and “dangerous pluralism”. Obviously, “sovereign democracy” was supposed to immunize Russia from the “colour revolution virus” and to guarantee to recover the status of a “great power”, because first and foremost “sovereignty” means competitiveness on international scale. So, ensuring sovereignty for Russian democracy would preserve Russia’s status of a great power. See V. Surkov, *Russkaya političeskaya kul’tura. Vzgljad iz utopii* (Russian political culture. A glimpse from the utopia). V. Surkov, *Suverenitet – eto političeskij sinonim konkurentosposobnosti*. (Sovereignty is a political synonym of the ability to be competitive) Moscow, Lenand, 2006; V. Surkov, “General’naya Linija” (The main line), *Moskovskie Novosti*, 3-9 March 2006.

⁹ L. Shevtsova, “Post-communist Russia: a historic opportunity missed”,

The uncertain trajectory of post-Soviet Russia's political system

Despite the continuity in the constitutional and political system, undoubtedly Putin represented a shift towards a new style of leadership. He inherited the personalised system of rule developed under Yeltsin (who encouraged the development of teams based on loyalty and “protection-obedience”), at the same time developing new leadership skills. Not surprisingly, mobilisation of the country against internal and external enemies significantly increased. The renewed reliance on the concept of internal and foreign enemy, indeed, is often strongly related to a charismatic leader. Moreover, a dominant party that resembled that of Soviet period, groups of political supporters (like the *Nashi* - youth group), and new party rules that minimised the potential for the emergence of new opposition political parties appeared on the political scene. An evident innovation, compared to Yeltsin's traumatic “departyisation”, has been also the creation of a “new state apparatus” that absorbed many former Party and bureaucratic employees, reproducing the hierarchical internal structure of the old bureaucracy. While Yeltsin proclaimed democracy as the main goal to achieve, Putin established a new set of rules in the relations between state and society, regions and the centre, and officially proclaimed security as the main goal of the country's domestic politics. Furthermore, Putin included military figures and *siloviki* into politics, involving them at high levels in Russia's governing structures. As a result, “stability” hindered the development of a “natural” order, which is something that arises when the social, economic, and political systems find their own balance. On the contrary, this process undermined the spontaneous interaction of pluralistic political and social forces. Moreover, the result of a coherent but strong process of centralisation was the suppression of every form of (though already formal) territorial division of sovereignty and power, even

at the administrative level of decentralisation. Nevertheless, a coherent and durable new political order, strong, centralised, and controlled from the centre, began to emerge. Be that as it may, the Constitution allowed the preeminent power to reassert its own predominance while very often violating some basic rights and hindering many socio-economic transformation in the country and slowing down the modernisation of the economy. Putin's technocratic approach has been one of system management oriented by the concept of "normality" inside the country and "normal great power" in foreign policy.

Once he rose to power, Putin emphasised the importance of the state as a guarantor of order and made the defence of the state his first priority. On the opposite, at first he emphasised the importance of the rule of law, sponsored legislation facilitating the purchase and sale of land, and encouraged property-ownership. After his election, he spoke of his "pride in the fatherland" and told the public straightforwardly that "for Russia a strong state is the guarantee of order, the initiator and main driving force for change"¹⁰. The measures he took to this end were certainly authoritarian¹¹.

A range of reforms to the state system, announced by Putin in 2004 (he was formally elected for a second term on 14 March 2004), after the tragic and brutal Beslan school massacre (of 1-3 September), was seen as reflecting a strategy of "authoritarian modernisation". In fact, it was a *de facto* "manifesto" of an authoritarian regime based on the notion of "order" (*poryadok*) that – as it is well known – can be used by the ruling political class and the institutions of the administrative system to obstruct and subvert political freedom, even formally maintaining full respect to constitutional rule. As a result, the idea of "sovereign democracy" resulted into a regime that tended

¹⁰ See V. Putin, *Russia at the Turn of the Millennium*, Appendix to: N. Timakova and A. Kolesnikov, *First Person*, London, 2000, pp. 209-219. See also L. Shevtsova, *Putin's Russia*, New York, 2003.

¹¹ P. Longworth, *Russia's Empires. Their Rise and Fall: from Prehistory to Putin*, London, John Murray Publishers, 2005, p. 315.

to substitute for the people, or in a *de facto* split between the regime and society. The concept of “sovereign democracy” perpetuated the thinking behind the “managed democracy” that was characteristic of Putin’s first presidential term. “Sovereign democracy” became little more than a synonym for “administered democracy” or “managed democracy”.

Some key aspects and problems of Putin’s political system

The key aspects of the debate on the political system in Russia can be mainly identified in the problems of domestic territorial integrity and the country’s status in the world. Everything, as in the past, must be submitted to these key aspects at the core of post-Soviet Russia.

The 1993 Constitution declared that the President only defines the basic directions of the domestic and foreign policy. However, during Putin’s rule many different changes strengthened the President’s power to manage centre-periphery relations, *de facto* abolishing the federal structure of the state described in the Constitution. Already in 2000, Putin established seven supra-regional districts headed primarily by loyal individuals, emasculating regional leaders and institutions and undermining their authority and autonomy. This reform, among other reforms aiming at re-centralising powers, had decisive consequences for national elections too¹². Indeed, the Kremlin succeeded in elim-

¹² As Michael Rochlitz wrote: “The governors mostly have no previous ties to the region to which they are appointed and they have a higher degree of political loyalty to the presidential administration in the centre than governors with a strong regional power base”. M. Rochlitz, “At the Crossroads: Putin’s Third Presidential Term and Russia’s Institutions”, *Political Studies Review*, vol. 13, 2015, p. 62. Moreover, they are rewarded for providing electoral support and not for economic performance. On “electoral authoritarianism” and regions see G. Golosov, “The Regional Roots of Electoral Authoritarianism in Russia”, *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 63, no. 4, 2011, pp. 623-639. Nowadays, in order to keep his job a regional governor in Russia has to deliver sufficiently

inating divisions among regional elites: as a consequence, by late 2003, almost all regional leaders were supporting Putin and the majority party United Russia¹³. Putin's post-Beslan decision to eliminate gubernatorial elections *de facto* transformed the federation into a unitary state that pays only lip service to the guiding principles of federalism (self-rule of constituent units, shared rule, non-centralisation, plural sources of authority, limited government, fragmented sovereignty, and so on). But centralisation has reverse effects. It risks the breakdown of government structures in remote regions. Indeed, it depends on an evident centre's inability (or will) to decentralise decision making¹⁴.

What becomes more evident is that political institutions in Russia have been formally created (through a sort of "apparent" and "procedural democracy"¹⁵) using a Constitution but certainly they do not reflect a kind of "polyarchy"¹⁶ characterised by both true participation and opposition. The restoration of order has been achieved at the expense of political participation too. In fact, the people remain very distant from decision-making

high election results for the President and the ruling party. W. Reisinger and B. Moraski, "Defence or Governance? A Survival Analysis of Russia's Governors under Presidential Control", in W. Reisinger (Ed.), *Russia's Regions and Comparative Subnational Politics*, London, Routledge, 2013, pp. 40-62. See also M. Rochlitz, *Bureaucratic Appointments under Limited Political Competition: Evidence from Russian Regions*, Working Paper, quoted in M. Rochlitz (2015), p. 62.

¹³ By 2007, there was no effective opposition to the majority party in the provinces and governors were openly encouraged to deliver votes for it. This party is likely to win the elections thanks to monopolistic control over national television and solid backing from most regional fractions of political class. After the murder of Boris Nemtsov, one of the most prominent opposition leaders, and the inescapable fear it provoked, the regime consolidated power and eliminated all the sources of opposition, real and potential.

¹⁴ In fact, the issues not at the top of the presidential agenda remain ignored. B. Judah, *Fragile Empire: How Russia Fell in and out of Love with Vladimir Putin*, New Haven, Yale University Press, CT, 2013.

¹⁵ J.A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, London, Allen & Unwin, 1976. As it is well known, Schumpeter defined "procedural democracy" as the structural competition for votes in exchanges for policies.

¹⁶ R.A. Dahl, *Polyarchy, Participation and Opposition*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1971.

and the authorities are only weakly and formally accountable to society. At the same time, the parliament has been pushed to the side-lines of the political system. As a result, nowadays parliamentary and other fractions of political class represent not mass movements but their own interests¹⁷. Moreover, after the elections of 2003 and 2007, a powerful hegemonic party (United Russia) emerged, which inherited forms of political activity and even some traditions of the former Soviet ruling Party, and came to dominate the parliament¹⁸. The political system, marked by formally free and fair elections¹⁹, is far from a “model democracy” that preserves the rule of law, separation of powers, shared and limited sovereignty, efficient check and balances, protection of liberties of speech, assembly, and property rights. The political

¹⁷ Already after January 2000 the Duma became a tool for legislative endorsement of nearly any initiative of the president. This trend became more marked following the 2003 presidential election, when the President’s allies gained the majority in the Duma. Nowadays, the Duma is a central arena for wheeling and dealing among powerful organised interests. The Russian upper house, the Federation Council, lost its political independence it once had enjoyed. See T. Remington, “The Russian Federal Assembly, 1994–2004”, *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, vol. 13, 2007, pp. 121–141.

¹⁸ As in other authoritarian regimes where the model of a dominant party regime has been used (in Mexico, Malaysia and so on), the rulers and the executive use the dominant party to control the political process. The party operates as a giant national patronage machine: not only, as it happens everywhere, it gives ambitious politicians the opportunity to build political careers, but thanks to their privileged access to the government, they can reward the wealthy and powerful interests that back them, steering lucrative contracts or jobs their way. In this context, the rulers benefit by ensuring that politicians will be loyal to the authorities rather than competing against them. Mobilising support for the regime at the elections, the party get from the authorities the assurance against the possibility that opposition parties would made serious inroads into the ruling party’s dominant status. Obviously, the authorities can do it using all their powers of control over different media and institutions. Subsequently, the politicians in the dominant party give up their political voice in return for the access to the benefits of office.

¹⁹ In Russia the problems of voter manipulation and electoral fraud have only increased. Already “in the 2011–12 electoral cycle the fraud and abuse were considered so widespread that popular demonstrations broke out”. K. Dawisha, “The Putin Principle: how it came to rule Russia”, *World Affairs*, May/June 2015.

system mimics (and undermines) some aspects of western democratic systems, actually serving the main purpose of creating a unified, centralised, and strong authoritarian state.

As it happens in many authoritarian regimes worldwide, democratically elected presidency and regimes are routinely ignoring constitutional limits (when they are present)²⁰ on their power. Indeed, relatively free elections are not in contradiction with strong executives, concentration of power, centralisation, fights against other groups and fractions of potential political “counter-political class” (oligarchs or opposition), weak legislatures and judiciaries, and few civil and economic liberties. Similarly, these countries have a “delegative” rather than “representative” character although consensus is high²¹. Basically, consensus doesn't matter because a government can, without obstacles, rely on the decision-making process and depoliticise the population. Only when it needs its plebiscitary support it tries to temporarily re-politicise citizens²².

²⁰ As Thomas Remington noted: “Although the constitution did not give the Federal Assembly a formal power of oversight over the executive, parliament has other formal powers which it can use to monitor or check executive power”. T. Remington, “The Russian Federal Assembly, 1994-2004”, *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, vol. 13, 2007, pp. 121-141. As a matter of fact, however, these powers can only be exercised to the extent that the parliament chooses to wield and the executive branch consents to their being used. Consequently, “in the current period, when political power is highly concentrated in the presidential administration, parliament's oversight power has been reduced to virtually nil”, *Ibidem*, p. 129. The critical aspect of that political environment is the degree to which the president dominates political processes.

²¹ G. O'Donnell, “Delegative Democracy”, *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1994, pp. 55-69. In this context the electorate delegates to the executive every process of decision-making to the executive. The only existing constrain is the constitutionally-limited term of office which can be often bypassed using informal expedients. Nevertheless, Putin's government is undoubtedly considered legitimate by the great majority of Russians, as evidenced by the outcomes of the various electoral cycles along with his consistently high personal ratings throughout different terms. Moreover, Putin's approval rates skyrocketed after the annexation of Crimea and the so-called “Putin generation” largely supports the President and shares his worldview, despite the poor performance of institutions.

²² G. O'Donnell, “On the State, Democratization and Some Conceptual

Instead of being accountable to the representative institutions and constrained by the Constitution, in Russia the government became *de facto* independent from all forms of sub-state constitutional, political, and social organisations. In fact, the political system lacks effective mechanisms of accountability. It is quite evident that formal, procedural democracy does not lead to an effectively working constitutional system which first and foremost means protection of constitutional rights. In this context, this sort of regime is mainly under-institutionalised.

Not surprisingly, in this context, a leader can become strong and even ignore those whom he is meant to represent. Moreover, the role of non-formalised but strongly operative practices is very relevant in post-Soviet Russia. It depends on widespread forms of neo-patrimonialism²³, the absence of independence of the administration, the *de facto* widespread private appropriation of public offices with their arbitrariness, the use of tax system as an authentic weapon against enemies or powerless and coercible people, patronage, personalistic rule, legal arbitrariness, and corruption.

Problems”, *World Development*, vol. 21, no. 8, p. 1367. The notion of a “delegative” political system is very relevant in the Russian case and has a clear application to this country. It is not surprising that it has been fruitfully used in analysing this case-study. However, the use of “full delegation” of authority analysing Russian politics remains controversial because of the nature of institutions.

²³ N. Robinson, “Russian Neo-patrimonialism and Putin’s ‘Cultural Turn’”, *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 69, no. 2, 2017, pp. 348-366. According to Lilia Shevtsova, concentrated power in Yeltsin’s and Putin’s regimes proves that both have evolved in a “neo-patrimonialist” direction. L. Shevtsova (2007), p. 898. Stephen E. Hanson used term “plebiscitarian patrimonialism” which refers to the right to rule “as if the state were its ‘personal property’” claimed by the Russian leadership. The results of this rule are then electorally ratified by the people, intended as a true reflection of the “(general) national will”. “Plebiscitarian patrimonialism differs from other forms of patrimonial rule, in its very real privileging of the electoral mechanism for building state legitimacy”. S.E. Hanson, “Plebiscitarian Patrimonialism in Putin’s Russia: Legitimizing Authoritarianism in a Postideological Era”, *The Annals of the American Academy*, 636, July 2011, pp. 32-48.

The entwining of institutional and personal factors in a weak (or sham) constitutional order²⁴ (*Scheinkonstitutionalismus*) and a still under-developed civil society encouraged the dominance of a power system centred on the presidency. In Russia, particularistic informal practices have been in tension with the proclaimed principles of the universal and impartial prerogatives of the constitutional state. A set of informal behavioural norms predominate even though it does not formally violate the letter of the Constitution. Moreover, this kind of informal behaviour (due to the fact that historically Russia has failed to acquire the basis of constitutionalism and still embodies the “coherent” version – that is, without the constitutional exception – of the modern State) is governing every political practice²⁵, but ultimately proves counter-productive because it relies on the personal

²⁴ It is clear that (as it happened with the various Soviet “pseudo-constitutions”) Russia’s 1993. Constitution failed to define and limit the powers of the leadership. It even did not even attempt to fulfill the classic functions of a Constitution, let alone foster the practices of constitutionalism such as the impartial exercise of the rule of law, limited government a true separation and balance of powers. This is embedded in the 1993 document, although this separation is unbalanced in various aspects. In fact, the Russia’s post-Soviet constitution actually establishes the basic principles of the polity but it lacks tools to limit the exercise of power.

²⁵ As Michael Rochlitz wrote: “These informal practices, permeating every level of government, often replace formal institutions and determine the way political decision are taken, policies are implemented, and jobs and positions are distributed. They permit the ruling elites and the Russian president to mobilize resources, balance between competing clans [...]”. M. Rochlitz (2015), p. 59. However, according to the “institutional” view of Russian policy-making, one should not underestimate the participation of institutionalised policy participants such as the government, ministries, bureaucratic agencies, policy experts, some business associations and social actors in the decision-making process. This approach takes into account the influence of the Russian institutional structure on the policy strategies of agencies and individual actors and possesses an high degree of complexity. It takes into account also grass-roots initiatives carried out by local communities interacting with local administrators. See M. Khmel'nitskaya, *The Policy-Making and Social Learning in Russia: the Case of Housing Policy*, Basingstoke, Palgrave MacMillan, 2015; L.J. Cook, *Postcommunist Welfare States: Reform Politics in Russia and Eastern Europe*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 2007; S. Wengler, *Post-Soviet Power*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015.

intervention of leadership politics and administration rather than on the self-sustaining practices of a genuinely constitutional system.

Since Yeltsin's time, personalised leadership and its oligarchic allies operated largely independently from the formal rules of the political and constitutional systems. This is the reason why the pyramidal political class that inherited the Soviet system considered itself free from accountability and popular supervision and surveillance.

Does Putin's strong state have a future?

Each presidential term has entailed unforeseen developments and policy choices. In the past fifteen years, Russia experienced radical shifts in the balance of internal power across the institutions. It may suggest that Russia's political balance of power is likely to evolve still further. For example, after the wave of protests in 2011-2012 there was an evident and growing institutional disequilibrium. However, it is clear that Russians today, as in the past, desire a "stability of power". The federal executive continues to be the pre-eminent force in the Russian polity and by all indications political class and people, despite street protests²⁶, support this and will ensure its long-term continuation.

It is too easy to say that cultural and historical preconditions made this development (the authoritarian drift) inevitable²⁷. In fact, this state of affairs is not necessarily permanent. Obviously a shift to a more balanced relationship between the constitutional branches and a true balance of power will require significant and deep regime changes²⁸. The role of interests and the

²⁶ S. White, "Taking it to the Streets: Raising the Costs of Electoral Authoritarianism in Russia", *Perspectives on European Politics and Society*, vol. 14, no. 4, 2013, pp. 582-598.

²⁷ V. Gel'man, *Authoritarian Russia: Analyzing Post-Soviet Regime Changes*, Pittsburgh, PA, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015.

²⁸ T. Remington (2007), pp. 121-141.

strategies of domestic stakeholders are crucial²⁹.

In fact, the Kremlin's monopoly on policy-making is absolute and concentrated. An élite faction that concentrate power in the hands of a leader who relies on bureaucracy, security forces, and big business for support, perpetuates its rule by making its control over access to power unchallengeable³⁰. The government is barely accountable to society and its representatives. The system presents some illiberal aspects and an evident "delegative" character³¹. Centralisation and authoritarian policymaking are quite evident. Success in restoring order is achieved through coercion, corruption, and repression³², making the outlook for the future uncertain at best³³. In such a regime, the potential for reform is fairly limited.

The current one-party dominance is so entrenched that is far from giving way to a more truly competitive party system. Political parties in Russia don't offer alternative visions of policy direction and the parliament is not an authentic arena for deliberation. The media are not as free as they were at the beginning of the 1990s. The members of the parliament are not encouraged to stake out policy positions independent of the President. They are not counterweights to the executive branch and its decisions. The absence of independence and the use of

²⁹ "For instance, the president would need give up much of the informal power he possesses, and other institutions (such as parliament) would need at least to win an independent political mandate from the electorate". *Ibidem*, pp. 121-141.

³⁰ This involves co-opting, weakening, or destroying rival factions, creating sanctions to prevent defection from the winning group, and reducing the possibility of threats emerging from the electoral system. N. Robinson and S. Milne, "Populism and political development in hybrid regimes: Russia and the development of official populism", *International Political Science Review*, vol. 38, no. 4, 2017, p. 415.

³¹ Achieving security over control of power constricts the space for free political competition by strengthening authoritarian political practices. *Ibidem*, p. 415.

³² As Taylor puts it: "The authoritarian state-building project is likely to fail". B.D. Taylor, *State Building in Putin's Russia: Policing and Coercion After Communism*, Cambridge UK, Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 321.

³³ G.B. Robertson, "Book Review: State Building in Putin's Russia: Policing and Coercion after Communism", *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 45, no. 3, 2012, pp. 394-405.

administrative methods to marginalize political opposition, reduced the freedom of manoeuvre for opposition political parties and candidates in elections. A balance in the distribution of power inside the institutional structure became almost a utopia. Furthermore, there are still complicated issues at stake. The strong centralisation creates problems and makes it difficult to find local solutions. National interest groups and judicial bodies are still dependent on the executive. The relationships between government and big business, the state and the economic forces (of free enterprise, when they are still active) is quite controversial and difficult to solve. The fusion of power and property is quite evident. Legislation and arbitrary power often prevail without control. The economic sphere continues to experience heavy political pressure, also for foreign policy reasons³⁴.

As it is well known, Russia's economy in Putin's third term is still dangerously dependent on energy exports and hydrocarbons. This dependence became increasingly prominent and poses several questions to economic stability. After sanctions, Russia still needs investment capital from the world markets. Russia needs cooperation and assistance in developing Siberia and the Far East. A sort of "closed commercial state" (in *Fichtean* sense) is destructive to Siberian and Far East's potentialities. Russia has problems with strengthening international economic relations. Furthermore, Russia has been suffering from a long and deep "brain drain". Russia has lost young scientists, entrepreneurs, economists, and engineers. They now live and work outside the country. The country's problems, arising from an aging and declining population, can only be reversed by years of sustained economic growth. In fact, the gradual "restatisation"

³⁴ Celeste A. Wallander even argues that Russia's "patrimonial authoritarianism" is also at the root of its foreign policy strategy: indeed, geopolitical goals are pursued primarily not through military means, but rather "Through commercial relationships and transnational patron-client relationships. The interests at stake are not national security interests arising from geopolitics or national wealth". C.A. Wallander, "Russia's Transimperialism and its Implications", *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2007, p. 119.

of the Russian economy, along with Putin's elimination of both regional and national political opposition, can exacerbate the difficulties connected with the new presidential term.

In a strong state with strong personal rule, both the power system and the constitutional order succumb to "clientelist" pressures and intense fight for power, exerted by powerful interests in society. The government assumes an independent political existence, but at the same time, it also becomes a regime dependent on informal political practices³⁵. The way in which the Russian political class have begun to deploy state resources to stay in power represents an interesting example in authoritarian political regimes³⁶. The state's role in determining electoral outcomes is quite evident and crucial because the political class needs elections to legitimize its rule. However, as it is well known among political scientists, elections can unexpectedly change. They can suddenly acquire a more significant, prominent procedure, especially during a time of crisis, in which they might acquire meaning again³⁷.

The future development of the Russian regime is facing different scenarios: repressive authoritarianism, political decay, regime collapse, creeping democratisation³⁸, a systemic crisis,

³⁵ See, for example, the classic book of D. North, *Institutions, Institutional Changes and Economic Performance*, Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 1990. According to Hanson, these overly-personalised and informal institutions are the biggest obstacle to systemic modernisation and economic development of the country. P. Hanson, "The Economic Dimension of Russia's modernization", in S. Gusti, *Modernizing Russia: Internal and External Implications and Challenge*, ISPI Studies, 2011, pp. 25-44.

³⁶ The state controls economic resources: those controlled by society (or "economic sphere") are incomparable. Consequently, who is in power has a tremendous and unfair advantage. Moreover, the tight-knit circle, the group of security officials (the so-called *siloviki*), the restricted "power *équipe*" (with a high level of small group cohesion) around the President sought to use public positions for personal gain, being protected by the same political system. But according to Taylor, although they "Represent a highly unified corporate identity, there are in fact also divisions among the *siloviki*". B.D. Taylor (2011).

³⁷ As dictators in Kenya, Serbia, and so on recently learned at their expenses.

³⁸ As wrote Lilia Shevtsova: "To understand Russia today one needs to be aware

continued stagnation, or some transformation towards liberal democratic and true constitutional political order. Admittedly, it is difficult to imagine why should the political class change habits, mentality, and interests, supporting transformations that might undermine its position introducing reforms³⁹. The period of stagnation that began in 2013 gave the political class an additional push in the direction of political restoration⁴⁰ and if it will continue, it is more likely that it will end with new forms of authoritarianism aimed at hindering a continuous decay.

Post-Soviet state building is complex and controversial because the Soviet legacy generated particularly inauspicious conditions for the rebuilding of institutions. The policies of post-Soviet Russia have failed even to generate coherent authoritarianism. Indeed, the country still lacks any consensus about its basic principles of state legitimacy and it is very complicated to study and describe what is happening under the surface of Russian society. No one knows for sure for how long people will be satisfied with the status quo, the economy, the political system, and the political class in power. It remains an open question if Putin has strengthened the state or merely a specific regime. In fact, Russia is still dysfunctional.

The main problem is how to combine economic regeneration, respect of constitutional rights, political stability, and the elimination of social distress with a strong state. But this process is a complex one: in Russia, the political regime has led to a combination of weak institutional structures and the

of a complicated interplay of continuity and change, in which continuity often imitates change discrediting the very ideas of innovation and modernization”, L. Shevtsova (2007), p. 891.

³⁹ Undoubtedly, there was a kind of historical regularity, a sort of gravitational force that constantly pulled Russia in the direction of autocracy and repeatedly overcame forces that might have caused her to abandon it. That force was the self-interest of the Russian ruling class. Moreover, as pointed out Marshall T. Poe: “Autocracy enabled the elite to successfully defend its interests both against external and internal threats”. M.T. Poe, *The Russian Moment in World History*, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2003, p. 103.

⁴⁰ M. Rochlitz (2015), p. 65.

over-management of the political system⁴¹. Official populism (the protection and unification of the people) justifies a diminution in political pluralism while giving no guidance on how to reconstruct state and public administration and solve the material problems that Russia faces.⁴² In sum, this kind of leadership, whose authoritarian form is characterised by an active and dynamic “Caesarist strategy”⁴³, is clearly fraught with contradictions⁴⁴ and becomes increasingly hard to manage. The policies of post-Soviet Russia have failed to generate coherent authoritarianism. In Russia, Caesarism cannot assure the “normalisation” of the political and civil society. Nevertheless, paradoxically society sees the ruler as the guarantor of order and certainty. Indeed, the majority of Russians is ready to support a constitutional change allowing Putin to be elected forever and without any term limits. Feeling increasingly powerless in influencing the political process, people became cynical about the importance of the elections. Thus, Putin's rule is considered the best chance, compared with the unpredictability of fair and free elections. But in fact, the country still lacks any consensus about basic principles of state legitimacy⁴⁵. Where power is ex-

⁴¹ N. Robinson and S. Milne (2017), p. 413.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 422.

⁴³ A “Caesarist strategy” (in Gramscian terms) “Is one in which a leader or government opts for a series of authoritarian measures to cover up potential instabilities that might occur at the level of civil society”. O. Worth, “Unravelling the Putin Myth: Strong or Weak Caesar?”, *Politics*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2009, p. 54.

⁴⁴ State capacity to control the country politically – through massive investment in the security apparatus and legislative measures aimed at controlling election outcomes better – do not correspond to positive effects in terms of state efficiency and coherence. See M. Mendras, *Russian Politics: The Paradox of a Weak State*, London, C. Hurst & Co., 2012. As stated Richard Sakwa: “Putin's model of ‘democratic statism’ became high contradictory”. R. Sakwa, “Putin's Leadership: Character and Consequences”, *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 60, no. 6, 2008, pp. 879-897. Furthermore, it is not difficult to find some incompatibility between the informal institutions put into place to guarantee the political control of the country and the kind of institutions needed to foster economic growth. See M. Rochlitz (2015), p. 62.

⁴⁵ S.E. Hanson, “The Uncertain Future of Russia's Weak State Authoritarianism”,

cessively centralised, discontent may emerge, especially when State interests are still involved and deemed more important than individual or societal interests and priorities, as it was under the totalitarian rules of the Nineteenth century. Due to this fact, many conflicts may appear in Russia. As Lilia Shevtsova pointed out in 2007, new conflicts may explode: “Between the regime’s attempts to manage business and the needs of the market; between the state’s expansion and its attempts to control society and the population’s aspirations to run its own affairs; between the growing Russia’s integration into the globalised world and the Kremlin’s attempts to close off society from external influences”⁴⁶. Formally Russia remains a strong state but in practice it could reverse into a weak state because of its characteristics and the fact that it is frequently unable to deliver on its promises. Consequently, even situational factors which today appear to ensure stability may tomorrow have an opposite effect. At times, elite attempts of building plebiscitary support for authoritarian rule have opened up the potential for genuine revolution from below⁴⁷.

Russia has been ruled for most of its history by autocratic governments, but to infer from this historic recurrences that Russian people are somehow predisposed to authoritarian governments⁴⁸ is to ignore that popular and constitutional governments are exceptionally rare in world history, particularly before the Twentieth century⁴⁹. Copying ideas, policies, and institutions from abroad is difficult in Russia since they are derived from the experience of other cultures.

Admittedly, Putin’s address to the country on 26 May 2004

East European Politics & Societies, vol. 21, no. 1, February 2007.

⁴⁶ L. Shevtsova (2007), p. 906.

⁴⁷ It must be remembered that social and political protests are not new to Russia and have played an important role in the history of the strong state system. A.I. Tsygankov, *The Strong State in Russia. Development and Crisis*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 155.

⁴⁸ This is also the Putin’s opinion. See V. Putin, “Address to the Federation Council” delivered on 12 December 2012.

⁴⁹ M.T. Poe (2003), p. 2.

stating his priorities such as “A stable democracy and developed civil society” was in deep contrast with the concrete realisation of a strong state. It must be noted, on the contrary, that the idea that the collapse of the Soviet Union would imply the end of Russia's great-power status (maintaining of *derzhavnost'*: Russian national greatness) is flawed. In fact, a strong state is the main tool to achieve, both at home and abroad, the true aim of the government: the status of great-power. Despite every academic discussion about “electoral authoritarianism”⁵⁰, “hybrid regime”⁵¹, or “competitive authoritarianism”, we must consider first and foremost that the post-Soviet Russian state is based on the permanent search for new spheres of influence, possibly through the territorial enlargement of the post-imperial country. The Russian political class subordinates every other problem to this dilemma – and always did.

Russia's domestic political structure largely depends on its foreign policy priorities. Thus, on regional scale, this tendency is particularly dangerous, considering that nearly every state border in the former Soviet Union remains uncertain, fuzzy, and hotly questioned. At any rate, in Russia the problem of the strong state is still open and the future of the country remains uncertain.

⁵⁰ A. Schedler, “Electoral Authoritarianism”, in R. Scott and S. Kosslyn (Eds.), *Emerging Trends in the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, New Jersey, John Wiley & Sons, 2015.

⁵¹ S. Levitsky and L.A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After Cold War*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2010.

2. Russia. A Conservative Society?

Aldo Ferrari

Over the last few years, Russia has been increasingly in conflict with the West. It is a primarily geopolitical contrast that reflects a different and conflicting view of international relations, particularly on the post-Soviet areas placed between Russia and the European Union (South Caucasus and Eastern Europe, especially with reference to Ukraine and Georgia). In addition to such a geopolitical contrast, the cleavage between Russia and the West tends to assume a cultural dimension, too. From the ideological point of view, in recent years, Russia has in fact become a kind of conservative pole as opposed to the most recent Western social and legal developments. Therefore, to fully understand the evolution of the relations between Russia and the West, we should also consider the emergence of a growing distance in terms of values. Besides, the nature and aims of contemporary Russian conservatism are quite controversial and have often been subjected to biases¹.

¹ See, for example, A. Makaryshev and A. Yatsik, *A New Russian Conservatism: Domestic Roots and Repercussions for Europe*, Notes Internationals, Barcelona Centre for International Affairs (CIDOB), no. 23, June 2014; D. Ernst, “[Putin’s Right Hook: The Strategic Implications of Russia’s New Conservatism](#)”, *The Federalist*, 24 February 2014; P. Grenier, “[The Varieties for Russian Conservatism](#)”, *The American Conservative*, 19 June 2015; L. Polyakov, “[“Conservatism” in Russia: Political tool or historical choice?](#)”, *Russie.Nei.Visions* no. 90, Institut français des relations internationales (IFRI), Russia/NIS Center, 2014; Y. Netesova, [What does it mean to be Conservative in Russia?](#), Institut français des relations internationales (IFRI), December 2015; K. Bluhm, [Modernization, Geopolitics and the New Russian Conservatives](#), Frei Universität Berlin, 2016; [Konservatism vo vněšnej politike: XXI vek](#) (Conservatism in Foreign Policy of the XXI Century), 2017.

A conservative shift?

As a matter of fact, at first, Putin's ideology was not conservative. His leadership style tended to incorporate a large spectrum of ideological positions from both liberal and nationalist sides, mainly stressing on the importance of managerial figures. This non-ideological stance was first challenged by the colour revolutions in Georgia (2003) and particularly in Ukraine (2004). After those traumatic political events, suspected by the Kremlin of being promoted by the West, the regime began to move toward a more coherent ideological posture in order to avoid any revolution in Russia itself². But it was a rather slow process. Still, in 2006, even the leading party of the country, United Russia, could not be considered a conservative one. As the journalist Yulia Netesova observed, "There were many things that I could say about United Russia in 2006, but I never thought of it as a conservative party [...]. Looking back from 2016 I understand that I was wrong. The conservative wave was coming and Putin knew it all the way [...] So when did this all happen? How can a Russian be a conservative? Does this mean something different in Russia?"³.

According to most analysts, Putin's true conservative shift occurred only in his third presidential term, after some years of active incubation.

The role of the Orthodox Church

The growing role of the Orthodox Church in the Russian society was certainly key in this process. Orthodoxy is Russia's most important religious tradition since the Baptism of the country (988). In the cultural vacuum that followed the eclipse

² M. Laruelle, [Putin's regime and the ideological Market: A difficult balancing Game](#), 16 March 2017.

³ Y. Netesova, ["What does it mean to be Conservative in Russia?"](#), *The National Interest*, 10 August 2016.

of communist ideology after the fall of URSS in 1991, the Orthodox Church rapidly gained a remarkable place in Russian society thanks to its moral and spiritual prestige⁴.

The death of Patriarch Alexy II and the election of Metropolitan Kirill to the Patriarch's throne in 2009 inaugurated an era of closest cooperation between the Church and the State. The idea, already stated in 2000, that the Church could implant Christian values in social decisions at the national and international levels, started to be concretely put in practice. Unlike Patriarch Alexy II, who used to hold a largely neutral, detached position with respect to the state, political parties, and conflicts, from the very beginning Patriarch Kirill promoted the active participation of the Church in the political life of the country⁵. Although Orthodoxy is not the official religion of Russian Federation, which recognises four traditional religions (including Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism), in the last years, this process led to a growing collaboration between the State and the Church. Today, Putin and the Patriarch show a large convergence of interests on many issues, starting from the defence of the so-called "traditional values" (family, ethical issues, demographics, to name just a few).

The emergence of an official conservatism

The defence of these traditional values is obviously at the centre of the new Russian conservatism, which emerged through a quite complex evolution. The neo-Eurasian ideas of Aleksandr Panarin (1930-2003), Vadim Tsymbursky (1957-2009), and Aleksandr Dugin (1962) have made a contribution to this

⁴ D. Shmonin, *Religion and Education in Contemporary Russia: the Dynamics of Recent Years*, ISPI Studies, February 2014.

⁵ S. Firsov, "Tserkov'i gosudarstvo pri Sviateysem Patriarkhe Kirille (Gundiaev): osnovniye tendentsii razvitiya" (Church and State under Patriarch Kirill (Gundyaev): main trends of development), *Vestnik Russkoj khristianskoj gumanitarnoj akademii* (Herald of the Russian Christian Humanitarian Academy), vol. 14, no. 3, 2013, pp. 351-360.

intellectual elaboration, but their ideological radicalism only partially fits this aim. Indeed, the diffused overestimation of Dugin's role does not help in understanding contemporary Russia⁶. As Marlene Laruelle argues, "Dugin's networks are those of the European New Right, rooted in barely concealed fascist traditions, and with some assumed intellectual and individual affiliations with the Nazi ideology and post-Nazi elusive transformations. On the contrary, the Kremlin has progressively created a consensual ideology without doctrine, founded on Russian patriotism and classical conservative values: social order, authoritarian political regime, the traditional family etc"⁷.

As a matter of fact, these conservative values emerged from other and less radical Russian intellectual circles. One of the most relevant initiatives of the growing conservatism in Russia is the founding of the so called "Conservative Press Club" in 2003 by the journalist Egor Kholmogorov and the political scientist Mikhail Remizov. In 2004, the internet platform pravaya.ru became a very active centre of conservative ideas hosting, in 2006, the important manifesto "Imperatives of National Rebirth" (*Imperativy Natsional'nogo Vozrozhdenia*). This text, written with the contribution of Sergey Baburin, who played an important political role in the beginning of the Nineties against Yeltsin's Western-oriented reforms, appealed for the formation of a "National Conservative Union". In the same year, a similar text, *The Russian Political Conservatism*, written mainly by Mikhail Remizov and Boris Mezhuev, was published, while the huge (800 pages) document called *Russian Doctrine* – which can be considered the most comprehensive project of the new conservative trend – appeared in 2007. Many representatives of the contemporary Russian conservatism worked on this text:

⁶ See for example A. Barabashin and H. Thoburn, "[Putin's Brain: Alexander Dugin and the Philosophy Behind Putin's Invasion of Crimea](#)", *Foreign Affairs*, 31 March 2014.

⁷ M. Laruelle, "Dangerous Liasons: Eurasianism, the European Far Right, and Putin's Russia", in M. Laruelle (Ed.), *Eurasianism and the European Far Right: Reshaping the Euro – Russian Relationship*, London, Lexington Book, 2015, p. 23.

Michail Leont'ev, Vitalij Aver'janov, Egor Kholmogorov, and Mikhail Remizov. The later Patriarch Kirill joined the discussion around this document too⁸.

In 2012, Alexandr Prokhanov, a well-known writer and publicist who, since 1991, appealed for the national rebirth of the country upon conservative political and moral principles, founded the Izborsk Club, a true centre of the new ideology in Russia, which among its member includes the First Deputy Prime Minister Dmitrii Rogozin, Alexander Dugin, and some of the authors of the *Russian Doctrine*, such as Vitaly Aver'ianov. This group produced another important document, the so-called *Mobilitation Project*, which gives a particularly intense version of the new Russian conservatism⁹.

As a matter of fact, a large group of Russian intellectuals worked on the elaboration of a cultural conservative platform, which aimed at becoming the official ideology of the country. They usually shared the idea of Russia as an independent civilisation mainly based on the view of the Orthodox Church and proposed a kind of modernisation that was different from the liberal and individualistic type chosen by the West. These ideas were already largely embraced by the government during the Medvedev-Putin tandem, but they gained a somehow official status only at the beginning of Putin's third presidential term, in 2012.

After the huge wave of demonstrations that swept Russia from December 2011 to March 2012, instead of making concessions to this emerging political opposition, Putin choose a completely different direction. His re-election was followed not only by a series of legislative measures designed to restrict the activities of the opposition by further limiting the activities of NGOs and by reducing Internet freedom, but also by the

⁸ K. Bluhm, [Modernization, Geopolitics and the New Russian Conservatives](#), Frei Universität Berlin, 2016.

⁹ M. Laruelle, "The Izborsky Club, or the New Conservative Avant-Garde in Russia", *Russian Review*, vol. 75, no. 4, 2016, pp. 626-644.

launching of a conservative ideological campaign¹⁰. Putin decided to give this conservative posture a more official stance by commissioning works from several think-tanks. The Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Research (ISEPR) became the main group engaged in elaborating ideas of conservatism¹¹.

In an interview released on 4 September 2013 Vladimir Putin, who previously accurately avoided any identification with a specific ideology, even accepted the label of “conservative pragmatist”:

I think it is perfectly possible to say that I am a pragmatist with a conservative orientation [...]. Conservatism does not mean stagnation, anyway. Conservatism means reliance on traditional values but at the same time it aims at development [...]. And usually, in almost every country of the world the conservatives gather the resources and promote the economic growth, but then the revolutionaries come and destroy everything in a way or another¹².

As a matter of fact, these words give a good explanation of Putin’s personal approach to conservatism, which for him is not a definite ideology, but a kind of political, economic, and moral platform for Russia. Even before the crisis in Ukraine and the dramatic rise in political confrontation, Putin had clearly indicated the gap with the West in terms of values. Some observers have even referred to a “cultural war” launched by Putin¹³, which had its climax in the speech made by the Russian President on 19 September 2013 at the final plenary meeting of the Valdai Club, the international forum organised by the Ria Novosti agency that brings together politicians, Russian analysts, and civil society from Russia and abroad. On this occasion, as well as tackling a series of political issues, Putin also

¹⁰ A. Ferrari, *A new struggle between power and culture in Russia*, ISPI Analysis n. 231, 4 February 2014.

¹¹ M. Laruelle (2017).

¹² [Intervju Pervomu kanalu i agenstvu Associated Press](#).

¹³ See D. Clark, [Vladimir Putin’s culture war](#), 8 September 2013.

spoke about issues with a social and even a moral dimension:

Another serious challenge to Russia's identity is linked to events taking place in the world. Here there are both foreign policy and moral aspects. We can see how many of the Euro-Atlantic countries are actually rejecting their roots, including the Christian values that constitute the basis of Western civilisation. They are denying moral principles and all traditional identities: national, cultural, religious and even sexual. They are implementing policies that equate large families with same-sex partnerships, belief in God with the belief in Satan¹⁴.

Putin reiterated many similar arguments in the speech to the Federal Assembly on 12 December 2013, stating:

We know that there are more and more people in the world who support our position on defending traditional values that have made up the spiritual and moral foundation of civilisation in every nation for thousands of years: the values of traditional families, real human life, including religious life, not just material existence but also spirituality, the values of humanism and global diversity. Of course, this is a conservative position. But speaking in the words of Nikolay Berdyaev, the point of conservatism is not that it prevents movement forward and upward, but that it prevents movement backward and downward, into chaotic darkness and a return to a primitive state¹⁵.

In Putin's political discourse, traditional values are now exalted according to an openly conservative approach. The Russian President is rapidly becoming a kind of icon of global conservatism¹⁶ and his popularity grows even among the US representatives of this current¹⁷. Not by chance, a star of the US conservatism as Pat Buchanan wondered whether "Is Vladimir Putin a paleoconservative? In the culture war for mankind's future, is

¹⁴ Vladimir Putin Meets with Members the Valdai International Discussion Club. [Transcript of the Speech and Beginning of the Meeting](#).

¹⁵ <http://news.kremlin.ru/transcripts/19825>.

¹⁶ B. Whitmore, [Vladimir Ilyich Putin, Conservative Icon](#), 19 December 2013.

¹⁷ D. Ernst (2014); P. Grenier (2015).

he one of us?”¹⁸.

One of the most striking points of this ideological course is the Federal Law “for the Purpose of Protecting Children from Information Advocating for a Denial of Traditional Family Values”, also known in English-language media as the “anti-gay propaganda law”. This law, drafted by Yelena Mizulina, the chairperson of the Russian Duma’s Committee on Family, Women, and Children, was almost unanimously approved by the State Duma on 11 June 2013 (with just one abstention) and signed into law by President Putin on 30 June. It is remarkable to observe that according to a survey conducted in June 2013 by the All-Russian Center for the Study of Public Opinion (VTsIOM), almost 90% of Russians surveyed were in favour of the law¹⁹.

This ideological line puts Russia in growing contrast with Europe and the United States, as demonstrated already by the decision of many Western leaders to boycott the Sochi Winter Olympic Games in early February 2014 in order to protest against Russia’s “anti-gay propaganda” law. Anyway, Moscow did not change its stance and on the basis of such conservative ideas, the minister of culture Vladimir Medinsky drafted, in the beginning of 2014, a document titled *Materials and proposals for a project of the bases of a cultural policy of the state*, which can be considered a kind of official document of the new Russian ideological orientation. This document rejects, for example, the Western principles of multiculturalism and tolerance:

Without denying the right of any nation to preserve its ethnographic identity, we consider unacceptable the imposition of values alien to the Russian society. No reference to “creative freedom” and “national identity” cannot justify a behaviour unacceptable from the point of view of Russian traditional values. [...] At the same time, the term “tolerance” in its modern sense

¹⁸ P.J. Buchanan, “[Unlike Nixon, Trump Will Not Go Quietly Thursday](#)”, Official Website, 14 December 2017.

¹⁹ [Law Banning Gay Propaganda: Pro et Contra](#), Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VCIOM), Press Release no. 1553, 11 June 2013.

does not allow a clear separation between the racial, ethnic and religious intolerance and intolerance to social phenomena that are alien and dangerous from the point of view of Russian society and its inherent values, which leads to inappropriate use of the term “tolerance” for the purposes of state cultural policy²⁰.

The law for the partial decriminalisation of domestic violence signed by President Putin on 7 February 2017 is usually considered another important step in the conservative process. This law was also drafted by Yelena Mizulina. The Russian Orthodox Church and the traditional “family values” organisations supported Mizulina’s efforts. For instance, the All-Russian Parents’ Resistance has warned that criminalisation of familial battery will lead to prosecution of parents who were acting in their children’s best interests²¹.

Nevertheless, this picture of a rapidly expanding conservatism in Russia’s society, mainly within the family, should not be overestimated. For instance, a recent survey of the already quoted All-Russian Center for the Study of Public Opinion states that the relationships within the family are being quickly modernised. The position of men is still strong: 29% recognize that the husband is the head of their families (34% among male respondents; 61% of those think that the eldest man should be head of the family); only 7% mention the wife (12% among women). At the same time, according to this survey, the authoritarian approach in Russian family is quickly displaced by a much more democratic attitude and the family life of Russians keeps improving: married or cohabiting persons are comfortable with its various aspects much more than it was five or ten years ago²².

²⁰ http://stdrf.ru/media/cms_page_media/127/kultpolitika.pdf.

²¹ See D. Litvinova, “If He Beats You, It Means He Loves You”, *The Moscow Times*, 5 August 2016.

²² Russian Public Opinion Research Center, “Modern family: who is the head?”, Press release no. 1970, 7 July 2017.

A thousand-year glorious history

Besides the insistence on traditional moral values, in recent years the Russian government has devoted a huge attention also to the country's history aiming to consolidate the nation around a single official version of the past. This state-led approach tends to glorify both the Tsarist and Soviet legacy, exalting the historical continuity and greatness of Russia's history. President Putin has introduced the idea of what he terms a "thousand-year history" that incorporates many glorious pages from the country's past, including the victories over the Poles in 1612 and the French Grande Armée in 1812, the heroic though useless defence of Sevastopol during the Crimean war, and mainly the Soviet Union's 1945 victory over Germany in the Great Patriotic War²³. This list includes also Russia's takeover of Crimea in 2014, but not the 1917 Revolution. Indeed, although almost all members of the Russian elite – President included – have been members of the Communist party, the 1917 Revolution represents a delicate political and cultural problem. It was in fact a moment of violent rupture of the Russian state system, which before "stabilising" in the Soviet regime caused a bloody civil war and the emigration of millions of people. From this point of view, the Revolution was an event that has nothing positive in the eyes of those who hold power in contemporary Russia: "[...] but then the revolutionaries come and destroy everything in a way or another". As a matter of fact, Putin has consolidated a neo-conservative regime that refuses every political bottom-up upheaval, from the "colourful revolutions" of Georgia and Ukraine to the "Arab Springs". In this perspective, the 1917 Revolution is too important an event to be completely ignored, while appearing intrinsically negative. The same holds true for its leader, Lenin, who upended the Russian political system and whose figure, although still positively evaluated by public opinion, is not well-regarded by the elite. Unlike his

²³ See A. Kolesnikov, [A past which divides. Russia's new official history](#), Carnegie, 5 October 2017.

successor, Stalin, who is instead seen as the rebuilders of the state – obviously in Soviet form – and the winner of World War II, which the Russians call the Great Patriotic War.

As a recent survey conducted by Levada Center shows, Russian public opinion is very divided on its assessment of the revolutionary event:

TABLE I - DO YOU THINK THAT THE OCTOBER REVOLUTION PLAYED A POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE ROLE IN RUSSIA'S HISTORY?²⁴

	November 1996	October 1999	October 2000	March 2014	March 2017
Very positive	19	18	17	8	10
Mostly positive	28	28	32	40	38
Mostly negative	21	25	22	22	25
Very negative	12	10	13	6	6
It is difficult to say	21	20	17	24	21

In this situation, Russian authorities are understandably reluctant to assume a too definite position on the 1917 Revolution. The October anniversary is in fact largely perceived as an obstacle to the construction of a national identity with no room for contrast between the Red and White epigones. Kremlin's current authorities wish for a shared national self-consciousness, proud of the past as well as the present and the future of the country. Instead, the instances of internal fracture, destabilisation and risk for the existence of the Russian state are starkly condemned. In this sense, the 1917 Revolution fits in a series of negative times, ranging from the Epoch of the Torbids (*Smuta*) – which at the beginning of the Seventeenth century almost led to the collapse of the young Russian empire – to the first post-Soviet decade, when Yeltsin's uncertain guidance seemed

²⁴ <https://www.levada.ru/en/2017/04/21/the-october-revolution>

to push the country in the same direction. Putin, the strong leader who according to the great majority of the Russians has brought the country on the right track, cannot therefore be excited about the centenary of the Revolution. In the run-up to the March 2018 presidential elections, which should sanction its easy re-election, Putin chose to devote to the Red Star's centenary limited attention, if not hostility.

Putin's role is central also in deciding which historical figures should be considered particularly important for contemporary Russia. This is the case, for example, of the Prime Minister of the Russian Empire Pyotr Stolypin (1862-1911) and the philosopher Ivan Ilyin (1883-1954). Putin decided that Ilyin's remains were to be reinterred in Russia in 2005, and a statue of Stolypin was erected outside the Russian White House in 2012. The importance of history as a major criterion of self-identification for ordinary Russian citizens is confirmed by surveys conducted by the independent Levada Center showing that, in recent years, the number of respondents who list history among the key factors that instil a sense of pride in Russia has been consistently high (around 40%)²⁵.

The other Russia against the conservative shift

Therefore, religion, traditional values – particularly in family life – and shared national history seem to be the main pillars of the official conservatism launched by the political elite of contemporary Russia. But, as observed from a liberal point of view by Masha Lipman, the picture is not so simple:

Russia's social conservatism is a complicated, controversial issue. The country may appear to be fairly conservative, if one looks at its widespread homophobia or public condemnation of irreverence toward Russian Orthodox Church. Yet, when it comes to other social habits, such as divorce, abortion, or birth rate, the picture is very different. Russia has one of the world's highest

²⁵ A. Kolesnikov (2017).

rates of both divorce and abortion, and some of the most liberal laws on the latter. Russia's birth rate is not dissimilar from that of secular cultures of western Europe. Premarital sex and single motherhood are fairly common; in one survey, a mere fourteen per cent of respondents said they believed a single parent can't raise a child properly. And while a large majority of Russians identify themselves as Orthodox Christians, the proportion of those attending services or observing religious rituals in Russia is not dissimilar from many European countries²⁶.

Besides, the conservative shift is not shared by a large part of the most educated component of Russian society²⁷. During the first years of his rule, Putin has been able to count on extensive popular support, thanks both to a generally positive economic trend and to the widely inclusive nature of his ideology. As a matter of fact, he succeeded in cutting any real political opposition almost to zero. After being largely excluded by the voters themselves, the parties making up the liberal opposition failed to get into parliament. In recent years, rather than expressing themselves in the political arena, these parties have limited themselves to a number of key sites of cultural action. Anyway, since 2011, Putin and his party lost consensus in the larger cities, above all in Moscow and St Petersburg. A new kind of opposition emerged, mainly among Western-friendly people. This opposition has different channels of expression. Probably the most remarkable among them are the newspaper "Novaja Gazeta" owned by Mikhail Gorbachev and State deputy Alexander Lebedev²⁸, the human rights association "Memorial", dedicated to the victims of Soviet repression²⁹, the Levada Center, a non-governmental sociological research organisation founded towards the end of the Soviet period³⁰, the

²⁶ M. Lipman, "[The Battle Over Russia's Anti-Gay Law](#)", *The New Yorker*, 10 August 2013.

²⁷ L. Shevtsova, *Valdajskaja doktrina Putina* (La dottrina di Putin a Valdai), cit. in A. Ferrari and S. Giusti, [A new struggle between power and culture in Russia](#), ISPI Studies no. 231, 4 February 2014.

²⁸ An English version is available on-line: <http://en.novayagazeta.ru/>

²⁹ <http://www.memo.ru>

³⁰ <http://www.levada.ru>

Carnegie Moscow Center, established in 1994 as a subdivision of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington³¹, and the radio station “Ekho Moskvy” (The Echo of Moscow)³².

Furthermore, a growing number of personalities in Russian culture openly oppose the establishment and its conservative orientation. The clash between power, personified by Putin, and much of the world of Russian culture actually began several years ago³³. Obviously, it is often hard to pin down this multifaceted cultural opposition to a specific political identity. This is the case, for example, of Eduard Limonov, a sometimes disconcerting writer and political activist who was a supporter of the Serbs in the Bosnian civil war in the Nineties, founder of the National Bolshevik Party (banned in 2007) as well as ally of ex-world chess champion Garry Kasparov in the political coalition “The Other Russia”. Limonov was arrested on numerous occasions and condemned for his political activities, and his paradoxical positions and solipsist extremism make him an isolated though fascinating figure within the scene of intellectual opposition to Putin.

A more consistent civic and political stance distinguishes writer-journalists like Arkady Babchenko and Yulia Latynina, who also work for *Novaya Gazeta*. Both, like Anna Politkovskaya before them, paid great attention to the war in Chechnya which Babchenko experienced first-hand as a soldier. This trend has grown rapidly in recent years, sweeping up numerous Russian writers in its wake. The well-known Boris Akunin (pseudonym of Grigory Chkhartishvili, born in Tbilisi in 1956 to a Georgian father and Jewish mother), has begun to play an increasingly active role in Russian political life, starting a blog called *Love of History*, a platform for comments on numerous historical and political events that are extremely critical of the Russian regime³⁴.

In the last few years, many leading Russian authors openly

³¹ www.carnegie.ru

³² <http://www.echo.msk.ru>

³³ See A. Ferrari and S. Giusti (2014).

³⁴ <http://borisakunin.livejournal.com>

aligned themselves with this opposition and their activities continue to defy Putin and his regime. Russian literature therefore seems to have at least partially regained the role it had in the Tsarist and Soviet periods when it acted as a catalyst for political protest. This trend is also confirmed by interviews given by a number of intellectuals discussing the conservative ideas upheld by Putin. For example, when asked how to interpret recent laws on foreign funding of NGOs and against blasphemy and homosexuality, film director Andrei Nekrasov stated:

The regime is at a certain stage – it’s getting old. It needs an emergency injection of support at any cost, even at the cost of these scandalous laws. These laws are popular in Russia because there’s a deep culture of conservatism in the country and Putin needs the support that comes from this ideological element³⁵.

Russian contemporary art, like literature, is becoming increasingly hostile to the establishment, on occasions clashing with it. As well as the all-too famous case of Pussy Riot, we just have to think of artist Konstantin Altunin, whose provocative paintings of Putin and Medvedev in women’s underwear led to him having to flee the country³⁶. There is no shortage of similar examples. In fact, the rise in “protest culture”³⁷ in recent years seems destined to continue growing in the near future, lending support to the theory that culture will represent one of the main thorny issues that Putin has to tackle. The picture that emerges is basically one of a growing conflict between the broadening conservative establishment and a large segment of Russian society, in particular, of its more educated and modern classes. This conflict reflects and partly determines the gradual rise of a strong opposition to Putin within the educated middle classes

³⁵ [PEN interviews Russian writers ahead of G-20 Summit in St. Petersburg](#), ICORN, 25 August 2013.

³⁶ R. Oliphant, “[Putin in negligee painting forces artist to flee Russia](#)”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 August 2013.

³⁷ See in this regard the in-depth study by M. Gabowitsch, *Putin Kaputt!? Russlands neue Protestskultur*, Berlin, Suhrkamp Verlag, 2013.

in the big cities, an opposition that will certainly increase in the near future, also in response to the increasingly conservative bent of his ideology. The risk, which is clearly apparent to those aware of Russia's historic dynamics, is that the country is heading towards a duel between culture and power like the one that took place during the last decades of Tsarist Russia and ended with no winners.

The growth of conservatism within Russian society

Anyway, at the moment the conservative line is apparently prevailing. As a matter of fact, Russian society is getting even more conservative. In 2003, in response to the question "Do you personally sympathize with the ideas of conservatism or not?", 37% replied "definitively yes" or "probably yes", while 33% answered "probably not" or "definitely not"; 30% were undecided. In 2014, 48% answered "yes", definitively or probably, 35% replied "definitively or probably not", while 17% remained undecided³⁸.

But apart from the rise of conservative attitudes among Russian citizens, the main question concerns the true meaning of this ideological evolution for those in power. Is this conservative shift only a kind of short period ideological tool to divert the attention of the Russian population from the growing economic difficulties? Or should we look at this process in a different way, taking into serious account its relation with Russia's earlier cultural and political tradition?

Most part of Western scholars tend to prefer the first answer. According to Marlene Laruelle,

The Kremlin does not have many options at its disposal to maintain control of the public sphere. The very inspiring theme of nationalism poses inherent problems in terms of its contents (impossible to get unanimous definitions) and endangering both the survival of the regime (the mobilising potential of

³⁸ L. Polyakov (2015).

nationalism is largely anti-Kremlin) and the country (risk of increased ethnic tensions, and the issue of the integration of migrants). Only moral conservatism can become more explicit, with benign effect. It enjoys a silent majority, respects social hierarchies, does not call the legitimacy of the Kremlin into question, stigmatizes sexual minorities that are less threatening than ethnic minorities, and lacks destabilising potential³⁹.

The Polish scholars W. Rodkiewicz and J. Rogoża recognize only an instrumental meaning to Russian conservatism:

At the outset of his third presidential term, Vladimir Putin openly declared that henceforth he would be guided in his policies by “conservative values”. However, in reality the Kremlin has been treating its own conservative ideology in a purely instrumental manner. Its resort to conservatism has been aimed solely at enhancing the legitimacy of the regime by claiming that it reflects Russian tradition. While it is the Kremlin’s genuine intention to maintain a strong, centralised state authority, the conservative social and moral rhetoric is in fact being used as just another “political technology”, i.e., a tool for manipulating public opinion, both at home and abroad. The invocation of this ideology means neither that the current rulers of Russia really adhere to conservative values, nor that they have a long-term programme to implement them. We are in fact dealing with another kind of “Potemkin village”, the aim of which is to divert public attention from Russia’s real socio-political and economic problems, and to provide the authorities with arguments to implement repressive internal policies and an anti-Western foreign policy⁴⁰.

Anyway, the question of Russian contemporary conservatism probably deserves a less biased approach. In such a perspective, some useful indications can come from both the West and Russia. So, Canadian scholar Paul Robinson, at the end of an article linking Putin to the long tradition of the Russian liberal-conservatism (Frank, Struve, Berdjaev, Ilin), concludes: “But

³⁹ M. Laruelle, “[Conservatism as the Kremlin’s New Toolkit: an Ideology at the Lowest Cost](#)”, *Russian Analytical Digest*, no. 138, 8 November 2013.

⁴⁰ W. Rodkiewicz and J. Rogoża, [Potemkin Conservatism: an Ideological Tool of the Kremlin](#), *Russian Analytical Digest*, no. 171, 14 July 2015.

the point here is not whether liberal-conservatism is the right choice for Russia. Rather, the issue is that we in the West fail to recognize this ideology for what it is. Putin has a clear vision of a strong, centralised, law-based government with defined and limited competences, consistent with native Russian schools of thought. Our relations with Russia would be greatly improved if we were to acknowledge and engage with this reality instead of tilting at irrelevant caricatures of a police state⁴¹.

Another interesting suggestion comes from the Russian scholar Leonid Polyakov, who stresses the fact that the new Russian conservatism has something to say not only to the Western right-wing political leaders and ideologists: “However the pivot towards Asia promises very different prospects for the Russian conservative discourse. Putin’s conservative formula (development on the back of national traditions) is an almost perfect match both for Asian modernisations that has already taken place (in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore) and the hopes and intentions of the next modernisation projects in the East and the South-East. Most importantly, this formula perfectly reflects the experience of the People’s Republic of China, the main strategic partner of today’s Russia”⁴².

A particularly interesting result of the Russian contemporary reflection about conservatism can be considered the special issue of the journal “Russia in Global Affairs” that appeared in May 2017 with the title *Conservatism in Foreign Policy of the XXI Century*. In the introduction to this volume, that includes articles written by many leading Russian historians and political scientists, Fyodor Lukyanov starts from the fact that President Putin called conservatism his political credo, at the same time reflecting and inspiring the emergence of such an ideological perspective in the Russian society. But in his perspective, conservatism is not only a reserve of national moral values. According to Lukyanov, indeed, conservatism must be regarded

⁴¹ P. Robinson, “[Putin’s Philosophy. The Russian leader’s paradoxical, strong-state ‘liberal-conservatism’](#)”, *The National Conservative*, 28 March 2012.

⁴² L. Polyakov (2015).

as the most appropriate approach to the present international scenario, where a new political situation is rapidly replacing the liberal order that followed – or seemed to follow – the fall of Soviet Union in 1991. Not only Russia, but also China and USA after the election of Donald Trump, are actually building the future of their countries on the basis of the primacy of the national cultural tradition. Therefore, Russia should definitively dismiss the liberal Western-oriented attitude, that in any case is no longer so impelling because of the dramatic rise of the East in global politics. From this point of view, conservatism is not an old-minded ideology but an extremely effective political instrument to manage the new post-liberal and post-Western international order⁴³.

Conclusion

The conservative stance elaborated in the last years will probably remain at the centre of the Russian political discourse in the future. It was a real success, indeed. In foreign policy, it has allowed Russia to find a common language with many non-Western countries and even with representatives of conservatism in Europe and the United States, thus gaining for the first time since the collapse of Soviet Union a kind of soft power beyond its borders. Within the country, the stress on conservatism produced a largely shared platform of cultural and moral values that only a minority of Russian citizens seem to refuse from a liberal and Western-oriented point of view. In a multi-ethnic country such as the Russian Federation, the emergence of a radical ethno-nationalist movement is probably more dangerous for the elite than this kind of opposition. Therefore, Putin's regime is presently giving some concessions to the liberal wing, mainly in economics, recalling such figures as Aleksei Kudrin

⁴³ F. Lukyanov, "[Konzervativizm dlja épochi nestabil'nosti](#)", in *Konzervativizm vo vneshej politike: XXI vek* (Conservatism in Foreign Policy of the XXI Century), 2017.

and Sergei Kirienko⁴⁴. But this happens within a largely established conservative orientation that is presently the leading force of the Russian political discourse.

⁴⁴ M. Laruelle (2017).

3. Moscow: In Search for an Opposition

Richard Sakwa

Institutionalised political contestation and opposition is an essential component of a democratic society, but in keeping with the profoundly hybrid character of Russian politics, the country both has and has not an opposition. In formal constitutional terms, it is clear that elections are held regularly, public space is populated by political parties that regularly compete in elections, and there is a vigorous clash of ideas and programmes. At the same time, it is clear that something is missing: the essential ingredient that makes elections genuinely competitive accompanied by the alternation of power. Although the precise outcome of each electoral cycle is unknown, and every election in Russia throws up its own surprises, the broad result is entirely predictable. It has now become almost proverbial to state that Russian practice inverts the usual formula of stability of rules and uncertainty of outcomes into a permanent instability of rules and certainty of outcome.

There are many ways to conceptualise the contrast between an apparently competitive party and political system and the managed character of the process. Andreas Schedler outlined the concept of “electoral authoritarianism”, in which he describes how formally free elections lack the freedom, fairness, and integrity appropriate for a genuine liberal democracy, and instead become instruments of an authoritarian rule rather than of democracy¹. Levitsky and Way have identified “competitive authoritarianism” as the defining feature of many post-communist systems, a regime type that, they argue, should be

¹ A. Schedler (Ed.), *Electoral Authoritarianism: The Dynamics of Unfree Competition*, Boulder, CO, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006.

distinguished from democracy on the one side, and full-blown authoritarianism on the other². Both these models have been widely and creatively applied, and they accurately diagnose the problem. However, such models tend to lack a sense of the dynamic elements in such systems, a feature which is certainly apparent in Russia.

For this reason, the dual state model probably has more to offer. In contemporary state theory, the constitutional state exists separate from the government and the ruler of the time, and endures beyond the lifespan of a particular administration, and is rooted in law and statute and a certain idea of the general public good. The constitutional state is regulated by impartial norms of law and managed by a disinterested bureaucracy. In Russia, this Weberian ideal has been subverted by the emergence of an enduring administrative regime, which draws its legitimacy from claiming to apply the principles of the constitutional state and derives its authority from its representation of the common good, but in practice exercises power in ways that subvert the impartial and universal application of the rules established by the constitutional state. Already under Boris Yeltsin in the Nineties there was a divergence between the practices and the culture of power of the administrative regime and the constitutional state. Instead of consolidating the rule of law, the authority of constitutional institutions such as parliament and the formal procedures of modern governance, “regime” practices predominated, characterised by arbitrary interventions and the management of elections. Under Vladimir Putin, from 2000 onwards, the administrative regime became rather more sophisticated. The regime did not repudiate the formal framework of the Constitution, but the sphere of discretion (which exists in all political systems), became extraordinarily wide³.

² S. Levitsky and L. Way, “The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism”, *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2002, pp. 51-65; S. Levitsky and L.A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2010.

³ R. Sakwa, “The Dual State in Russia”, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, vol. 26, no. 3,

Dynamics of systemic opposition

It is in this framework that the opposition in Russia operates. The conventional distinction is between the systemic and the non-systemic opposition. The systemic opposition accepts not only the normative framework of regime politics, but in certain respects reinforces the administrative aspects of what in Russia is called “managed democracy”. Four parties are currently represented in the State Duma (the lower house of the bicameral parliament): United Russia (UR), the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF), the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), and Just Russia (*Spravedlivaya Rossiya*, SR). These parties have enjoyed unbroken representation at the national parliamentary level since the first significant election after their foundation.

United Russia was established in 2001 through the merger of Unity with the remnants of what, at one time, appeared to be a winning opposition combination. Unity was created in autumn 1999 to represent the regime after the failure of the previous body occupying the niche of what is called “the party of power”, Our Home is Russia. On the other side, the combination of Fatherland and All Russia (OVR), headed by the mayor of Moscow Yuri Luzhkov and the veteran politician and former Prime Minister, Yevgeny Primakov, represented the emergence of a genuine opposition party. The December 1999 parliamentary election saw Unity do remarkably well after just a few months of existence, but only after a ferocious official media campaign against Primakov, who had been nominated by OVR to be its presidential candidate in the March 2000 elections.

The December 1999 election was as much a contest between regime types as between parties. The election represented a fateful turning point. Although there is still plenty of pluralism in the Russian political system, late 1999 was the moment when

July-September 2010, pp. 185-206; R. Sakwa, *The Crisis of Russian Democracy: The Dual State, Factionalism and the Medvedev Succession*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011.

the possibility of a change of administration by an organised opposition force was possible. Putin's election to the presidency in spring 2000 ushered in a new era during which the advantages of regime incumbency would be institutionalised and carefully managed. The system had already emerged under Yeltsin, notably in the 1996 presidential election when Gennady Zyuganov, the CPRF leader, had been defeated through the application of massive administrative and financial resources (aided by American advisors). However, it was only in the early Noughties that what had been ad hoc and reactive became systemic and organised.

In the new Putin system, order and stability became the watchwords. United Russia dominated the party, electoral and legislative spheres, and although other parties survived, the "systemic opposition" was effectively forced to align with UR. Like Mexico's Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) in an earlier age, UR united the various elite factions and aggregated their interests. The party also became the vehicle for bureaucrats and the channel for their advancement. Even Putin was aware of the party's limitations, and this is why in 2011 he created the All-Russia People's Front (ONF) to act as a check on the bureaucratic degeneration of the pedestal party and as an alternative vehicle for monitoring and political mobility. United Russia is not the ruling party but the dominant party, a very different political model. It is the party *of* power, not the party *in* power. It does not rule, since this is achieved by the professional administrative class in the Presidential Administration and the government, but it acts as the dominant force in the party and electoral spheres, and provides the majority in parliament to pass the regime's legislation.

Russia's democratic institutions are smothered by the regime. Critique of the regime is stifled or channelled into the impotent fulminations of the CPRF and LDPR, while SR became increasingly supine under the leadership of Sergei Mironov. Just Russia had been established by Vladislav Surkov in the mid-Noughties to provide a left-centre balance to United Russia

but failed to develop as an autonomous social democratic party. In 2011-2012, some of the SR deputies emerged as genuine oppositional figures, notably father and son Gennady and Dmitry Gudkov and Ilya Ponomarev, but in the next few years, they were expelled from parliament and the party. Just Russia lost all dynamism and momentum. Although it had achieved membership of the Social Democratic International, the very survival of the party is increasingly questioned.

The CPRF, under its aging leadership, remains loyal to an imprecise version of Orthodox Sovietism – a combination of Russian Orthodox religiosity and Soviet-era nationalism, combined now with an assertive Russian patriotism. Earlier, there had been an expectation that the party would evolve and adopt some sort of social democratic programme, but instead it devised a peculiar niche of its own⁴. Although ferocious in its critique of the government in parliament, the CPRF was careful not to offend Putin and tended to vote with the regime on most important bills. Its social conservatism only amplified the traditionalist character of the regime, especially marked after Putin's return for a third presidential term in 2012.

As for the LDPR under Vladimir Zhirinovsky's flamboyant leadership, it represents Russia's small-town and obscurantist nationalism. Its characterisation as a populist party is accurate to the degree that it reflects a certain anti-elitist and anti-metropolitan animus, as well being critical of the West and globalisation. Like populism elsewhere, its programme remains amorphous in classic ideological terms and leader-centred. In parliament, it tends to vote with the regime. It is unlikely that the party will survive once Zhirinovsky retires.

A crisis of all the major systemic parties can be identified. Even though UR remains dominant, its ambivalent position as a top-down party of power and bottom-up representative

⁴ L. March, "For Victory? The Crises and Dilemmas of the Communist party of the Russian Federation", *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 53, 2001, pp. 263-90; L. March, *The Communist Party in Post-Soviet Russia*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2002.

institution means that its identity is unstable and derivative. The CPSU remains the largest opposition party but its voter base is eroding, while the long-term future of the LDPR and Just Russia is in doubt.

The non-systemic opposition

The idea of a “non-systemic” opposition is becoming increasingly redundant. The term covers those parties and groups not represented in the national parliament, although some may retain a presence in regional and municipal legislatures. Pre-eminent among these is the Yabloko social liberal party, led by the veteran oppositionist Grigory Yavlinsky. Yabloko is one of the few genuine grassroots parties in Russia, with a loyal membership, regular congresses, and a coherent political programme. It enjoyed representation in the Duma from the first Russian post-communist election in December 1993 until it failed to pass the five per cent representation threshold in December 2003. Putin’s restrictive party legislation, adopted in July 2001 and subsequently amended many times, reduced the number of officially registered parties to reach the nadir of only seven participating in the December 2011 election. In that election Right Cause, the (much degraded) inheritor of the old neo-liberal Union of Democratic Forces (SDS), finally crashed out of the system, winning only 0.6% of the vote, compared to Yabloko’s 3.43%.

In the aftermath of the loosening of party registration laws in 2012 (see below), the country enjoyed a boom in party formation, with 77 parties registered with the Ministry of Justice in late 2017. Many of these were “spoiler” parties, often choosing names similar to existing parties to draw away their vote. This was notably the case with the Communist Party Communists of Russia, which won 2.27% of the vote in the September 2016 State Duma election, helping to push down the CPRF vote to only 13.34%, its worst performance since 2007. Some activist MPs from Just Russia had been involved in the 2011-2012

protests, including Ponomarev and the Gudkovs, but they were soon purged. The loyalist Mironov reasserted his authority, and the party soon declined into irrelevance.

In this period, even the non-systemic opposition managed to achieve a degree of organisational unity. The People's Freedom Party (*Partiya narodnoi svobody* – Parnas), Democratic Choice, and the Party of Progress coordinated their work in the Democratic Coalition (*Demokraticheskaya koalitsiya*) to fight the various elections of September 2015, and to provide a joint platform in the Duma elections of September 2016. The new movement incorporated Vladimir Ryzhkov's newly-re-registered and respected Republican Party of Russia. In the event, following bitter internecine leadership conflicts – the endemic problem of the Russian opposition – Ryzhkov left the party, along with some other leading figures including the former Just Russia deputy Gennady Gudkov, who fought the election with Yabloko. This left the former Prime Minister, Mikhail Kasyanov, to take the party into the September 2016 parliamentary election. Primaries exposed Parnas's relatively weak voter base as well as the severe divisions in its leadership. The top three positions on its party list were chosen without primaries. Kasyanov was designated to head the list, but following a personal scandal (exposed on NTV) his position was challenged by activists such as Ilya Yashin, who called for his removal.

On the other flank, the regime has long recognised that the greatest threat to its much-vaunted stability comes not from the disorganised and largely ineffective democratic opposition, but from ethno-nationalist mobilisation of various stripes. Post-communist Russia fought two wars to pacify Chechnya and, in the end, came to an untidy arrangement allowing the rebellious republic a high degree of autonomy without independence⁵. Radical Muslim mobilisation represents an enduring challenge to stability, in the Volga republics but above all in the North Caucasus. By the time of Putin's third term, the number of

⁵ R.B. Ware (Ed.), *The Fire Below: How the Caucasus Shaped Russia*, London and New York, Bloomsbury, 2013.

terrorist incidents in the region had declined, but the potential for violence remained⁶.

The greatest danger, however, comes from Russia nationalism, especially when combined with a leftist agenda. The great majority of Russia's 120-odd political prisoners, if such a category still applies, are not "democrats" but Russian nationalists. Sergei Udaltsov, the head of the Vanguard of Red Youth movement, was one of the activists in the "For Fair Elections" movement in 2011-2012, and as a result of the disorders on the eve of Putin's inauguration in May 2012, in July 2014 was sentenced to 4½ years in jail. Udaltsov considers himself more of a Soviet patriot than a Russia nationalist and supports the transfer of Crimea to Russian jurisdiction and the people's republics in the Donbass. On his release in August 2017, he called for a single opposition candidate to stand against Putin the March 2018 presidential election. The CPRF even toyed with the idea of making him their presidential candidate. Udaltsov ruled out working with Alexei Navalny, one of the other main leaders of the 2011-2012 protests, as being too pro-Western.

The rebirth of politics?

The 24 September 2011 *rokirovka* (castling move) between Putin and Medvedev delivered a shock to elites and political society as a whole. Although President Dmitry Medvedev since 2008 may not have achieved much, he defined an intra-systemic alternative and indicated an evolutionary path away from managed democracy and towards a more open and competitive system. His supporters in the Institute for Contemporary Development (INSOR) issued a range of papers and ideas about how to make the system more competitive and transparent. Medvedev and Putin openly clashed over the West's intervention in Libya, but

⁶ G.M. Hahn, *Russia's Islamic Challenge*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2007; G.M. Hahn, *The Caucasus Emirate Mujahedin: Global Jihadism in Russia's North Caucasus and Beyond*, Jefferson, NC, McFarland, 2014.

even then, some in the elite believed that Medvedev would be allowed a second term. In the event, Putin came under severe pressure from the guardianship-security bloc to foreclose what this group feared was Medvedev's excessive liberalism at home and neo-Gorbachevite capitulationism to the West abroad. On 24 September, it was announced that Putin planned to return to the presidency and that Medvedev would be nominated for the post of Prime Minister. Medvedev even stated that this is what had already been decided when he had assumed the presidency in 2008. The managed character of the system was laid bare, as well as the manipulative character of the regime.

This was the period of the "Arab Spring", with regime change in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and the disturbances in Syria that burgeoned into outright civil war. There was also a spirit of protest in the air that betokened what some called a "Russian spring". The white ribbon became the symbol of aspirations for a more open and law-bound system, in which corruption could be exposed, the arbitrariness of the regime constrained, and the pressure on businesses from administrative bodies (as well as corrupt law enforcement agencies) would finally ease. Even some officials took to wearing the ribbon as the first signs of an intra-elite split emerged between those aligned with the aspirations vested in the Medvedev programme of moderate reform (if not in the man himself) and the partisans of the restoration of Putinite order and stability. There were also signs that the population was restive, with Putin openly booed at a sporting event, and some leading cultural figures speaking out in favour of change.

Thus, even before the Duma election on 4 December the country was stirring. In the event, the widespread fraud and ballot stuffing provoked the widest political protest movement of the Putin years⁷. The "democratic opposition" in Russia exhibited a persistent inability to unite, but the protests from December 2011 brought together disparate movements united

⁷ S.A. Greene, *Moscow in Movement: Power and Opposition in Putin's Russia*, Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 2014.

in their condemnation of electoral fraud, coming together in a movement called “For Free Elections” (“*Za chestnye vybory*”). Tens of thousands came onto the streets, notably in the mass demonstrations in Bolotnaya Square on 10 December and Sakharov Avenue on 24 December. However, when it came to advancing a positive programme of substantial political change, other than the basic slogan of “Russia without Putin”, the opposition divided between liberal, statist populist, and nationalist positions. When a regime falls, the external opposition usually plays a facilitating role, but the most important factor is intra-systemic elite splits. In this case, Alexei Kudrin, the liberal Minister of finance from 2000, had already, earlier in 2011, called for free and fair elections, and following the vote spoke at the opposition rallies. He later went on to create an independent think tank, the Centre for Strategic Research (CSR), which offered Putin advice on economic and political reform.

In his final state-of-the-nation speech on 22 December 2011, Medvedev outlined a programme of political reform, including the restoration of gubernatorial elections, and changes to the party and electoral systems. These reforms were implemented by the head of the domestic politics section of the Presidential Administration, Vyacheslav Volodin, in 2012, with various modifications since then. In other words, pressure from the non-systemic political opposition forced the regime to push the pendulum within the dual state towards more open politics within the parameters of the constitutional state. At the same time, the reforms were constrained by the incumbent regime’s unwillingness to cede political control. The opposition itself failed to institutionalise its potential and lost popular support. The demobilisation phase was accompanied by disunity, polarisation, and disappointment, with a division between those who sought to enter systemic politics and others who became more radicalised⁸.

⁸ V. Lasnier, “Demobilisation and its Consequences: After the Russian Movement *Za chestnye vybory*”, *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 69, no. 5, July 2017, pp. 771-93.

Putin's return to the presidency in 2012 proved a watershed moment in Russian political development. On the one side, contentious politics returned with a vengeance, although that particular wave of mobilisation soon ebbed. On the other side, the regime sought new forms of legitimacy. A number of stratagems were adopted. First, politics underwent a "cultural turn", with a greater emphasis on identity politics and conservative social motifs. It was in this period that the Duma adopted a range of repressive and socially-conservative legislation, including the ban on "homosexual propaganda" among minors. Although same-sex relationships remained legal and the "gay scene" continued, intolerant attitudes were encouraged. More than this, the social liberalism of the West was condemned. A law protecting the dignity of religious feeling was also adopted, apparently at the prompting of the Russian Orthodox Church. This was the period when parliament acted as a "crazy printing press", rushing out ill-considered and intolerant laws, not all sponsored by the Kremlin but reflecting the empowered conservative sentiments of the assembly.

Second, the political reforms outlined by Medvedev were largely implemented, including the restoration of gubernatorial elections, the return of a dual election system to select the 450 members of the State Duma (half by first-past-the post constituency elections, and half by the proportional party list system). The changes were hedged in with restrictions that blunted their democratising character. In the 87 gubernatorial elections staged since their reinstatement in 2012, only one required a run-off vote. In such conditions, it is hardly surprising that turnout is low and declining.

At the same time, the new overseer of political matters in the Kremlin, the pragmatic Volodin, introduced elements of a greater competition into the managed political system, goals that were obviously incompatible yet reflected the regime's understanding that the old methods of political management – as demonstrated in 2011-2012 – had counter-productive effects. The regime still tried to win, but by less of an overwhelming

– and thus delegitimising – margin. Putin's great fear is to be swept from office through some sort of popular movement, and thus concessions were accompanied by new forms of control.

Regime reset and new patterns of opposition

In other words, in Putin's third term the regime tried to find ways out of the political and developmental impasse by introducing elements of competition into a fundamentally uncompetitive system. The various attempts to create an enduring framework for the oppositional mobilisation against electoral fraud in 2011-2012 soon dissolved. Organised opposition was in disarray, and instead the focus shifted to individuals. Chief among them is Alexei Navalny, the firebrand anti-corruption campaigner at the head of the Foundation for the Struggle against Corruption (FBK). Navalny became one of the few nationally-recognised independent politicians. In December 2016, he announced his intention of standing in the March 2018 presidential election, although his criminal record gained in what were almost certainly politically-motivated trials precluded him from running. The Kirovles scandal dates back to the time when he served on a voluntary basis as an advisor to the liberal governor of the Kirov region, Nikita Belykh, in 2009. In July 2013, Navalny was sentenced to five years in jail, but it was subsequently suspended, allowing him to participate in the September 2013 Moscow mayoral election. Navalny won an impressive 27%, and thereby became the unofficial leader of the democratic opposition. In a second case, in December 2014, Navalny and his brother Oleg were convicted of embezzling over \$500,000 from the cosmetic company Yves Rocher.

Navalny's criticism of Putin was harsh, yet he remains, against all the odds, a major political player. His case reflects the limits and achievements of the Putin system, trapped in some no-man's land between democracy and authoritarianism, with elements of both, but in which the logic of neither is given free rein. This is why Navalny was allowed to run in the 2013

Moscow mayoral election, and why some other opposition figures won posts in regional mayoral elections. Between 2012 and 2014, oppositionists won mayoral elections in a number of cities: Evgeny Urlashov in Yaroslavl (Civic Platform, 2012), Galina Shirshina in Petrozavodsk (Yabloko, 2013), Evgeny Roizman in Ekaterinburg (Civic Platform, 2013), and Anatoly Lokot' in Novosibirsk (CPRF, 2014). The rebirth of politics after 2012 was limited but serious. The moderate programme of deconcentration – not genuine liberalisation – was derailed by the intensification of conflict with the West over Ukraine from late 2013.

An amendment to the law on local government was passed in May 2014, allowing regional legislatures to choose their local executive model. Elected mayors were replaced by city managers, chosen by UR-dominated city legislatures, with the process overseen by regional governors⁹. By late 2017 only eight of 79 regional capitals continued to hold mayoral elections. In practice, concessions and exceptions were allowed, with Roizman remaining mayor of Ekaterinburg, although his nomination by Yabloko to run for governor in September 2017 was disqualified. He failed to collect the required number of endorsements from local municipal deputies – the ‘municipal filter’, requiring typically the support of between 5 and 10% of local councillors. The incumbent governor, Evgeny Kuivashev, won re-election. This was a typical case in which strong candidates are not allowed to register.

Even incumbent oppositions are forced out of office, as happened to Shirshina in December 2015 in Petrozavodsk. Shirshina had stepped in only after the experienced Yabloko politician Emilia Slabunova (who is now the national chair of Yabloko) had been disqualified from running a fortnight before the election, on the grounds of fault in her paperwork – she appears not to have mentioned her PhD on her nomination papers. Shirshina continued to fight against the heavy-handed

⁹ J. Moses, “Political Rivalry and Conflict in Putin’s Russia”, *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 69, no. 6, August 2017, pp. 961-988.

actions of the governor of Karelia, Alexander Khudilainen¹⁰. Khudilainen's efforts were not enough to save him, and he was one of five governors forced to resign in February 2017 as the Kremlin purged the gubernatorial corps in the run-up to the 2018 presidential election. His successor, Artur Parfenchikov, has to ensure support for regime candidates in regional and national elections, but in ways that do not provoke instability.

The push for more competition saw the incumbent CPRF governor of Orël, Vadim Potomsky, elected by a large margin in September 2014. The CPRF challenger, Sergei Levchenko, won the gubernatorial election in Irkutsk in September 2015, the first competitive opposition victory since gubernatorial elections were restored in 2012. The toehold of democratic oppositionists in local legislatures allowed them to stand in elections without gathering signatures. The regime reset was not entirely dead, and once the worst of the crisis over Ukraine was over, there were attempts to make the September 2016 Duma election rather more competitive. The aim was to avoid a repetition of the protests provoked by the flawed election of December 2011. The electoral system had now changed, with the dual system of half the 450 deputies elected in single-mandate constituencies and the other half on party lists through proportional representation, with the five (down from seven) per cent threshold restored. The goal remained to win a majority for UR, but one that would involve less fraud and ballot-rigging. The task set for regional leaderships was to ensure the victory of regime representatives but by legal means.

For the first time in post-communist Russia (apart from the first election in December 1993), the parliamentary vote was decoupled from the presidential election, which because of the extension of the presidential term to six years was now scheduled for March 2018. The Duma election was also unusual because of the prominent role of the ONF. Established in

¹⁰ For a powerful study of local politics in Petrozavodsk and the strategies of the opposition, see A. Fouks, "[Karelia: A Story of Autocracy and Resistance](#)", 16 November 2017.

May 2011 as a popular vehicle for Putin's re-election bid, the ONF was registered as a public movement in June 2013. In May 2016, the ONF took a prominent part in the UR primaries to select candidates for the forthcoming national election, with about 200 selected. In the event, approximately 60 ONF candidates were elected to the State Duma, mostly affiliated with the overwhelming UR majority.

The return to the dual electoral system paid handsome dividends to the ruling party. United Russia won an overwhelming constitutional majority with 76% of the seats, a total of 343 UR deputies. Joel Moses shows how the various regional elections in 2015 and beyond "exposed a Russia politically divided by rivalry and conflict"¹¹. Putin and the Kremlin were challenged to balance the interests of the various levels of regional government, the interests of establishment and governmental stakeholders, and political parties and the ONF. The vertical dimension of Russian politics is able to impose its preferences, but it operates in an environment where horizontal interests constrain and shape politics. This is not an environment where *diktat* and decrees can work, and instead responsive policies, co-optation strategies, and flexible strategies disarm, incorporate, and disorient the opposition.

The emergence of real opposition?

After nearly two decades in power, there is growing dissatisfaction with the suffocating character of regime politics, although this does not mostly translate into political opposition. Navalny became a leader capable of forging some sort of alternative consensus. He exploited the liminal character of Putinism by exploring the tension between its regime and constitutional character. By definition, the exceptional character of a regime system presupposes a base normality. In post-communist Russia, this is precisely the constitutional state, and this is what provides the

¹¹ J. Moses (2017), p. 982.

dual state with its dynamism. This is generated by the inherent tension between the normality incarnated by the legalism of the normative state, and the exceptionalism represented by the administrative regime.

This ambivalence was exploited by Dmitry Gudkov's creation of the United Democrats project in Moscow for the municipal elections in September 2017. Yabloko participated despite its long-term refusal to join democratic coalitions. The United Democrats won 176 seats, a further 108 were gained by independents, and over 70 by the systemic opposition. Even though UR candidates won 1,152 out of the 1,502 seats, the authorities lost control of 28 out of Moscow's 125 municipal councils. However, even in districts where the opposition won a plurality of seats, such as in Filëvsky Park, they were prevented from taking the chair because of the rule that the incumbent remains in post after an election unless two-thirds of the councillors vote for a change. The law does not explain what should be done where no group can muster such a majority¹². A similar situation held in the Konkovo Municipal District Council. Elsewhere, democratic activists such as Ilya Yashin, now the head of Krasnoselsky Municipal District, tried to demonstrate that they could govern in a new manner¹³. Elsewhere, Yabloko won 8.5% of the seats in the Pskov City Duma election. Overall, it was notable how little ethnic Russian nationalist mobilisation took place. The regime had been able to put the genie of Russian nationalism back into the bottle after letting it out at the time of the reunification of Crimea.

The general dissatisfaction was brilliantly exploited by Navalny. His FBK organisation chronicled the abuses and excesses of the ruling elites. In a series of powerful videos, Navalny exposed the corruption within the Putin system. In one notable film about Dmitry Medvedev posted in early 2017 (with

¹² [“In Western Moscow, Putin Allies Lose an Election but Cling to Power”](#), Reuters, 24 November 2017.

¹³ M. Eismont, [“New Politicians are Searching for a New Agenda”](#), *Vedomosti*, 23 November 2017 [in Russian].

English subtitles), Navalny traced the various properties and assets, including a Tuscan vineyard and villa, whose alleged ownership was hidden behind a number of front companies¹⁴. In less than a month, the video was viewed over ten million times on YouTube, and today some 27 million have seen the video. Another notable exposé a year earlier had discovered the alleged links in the chain hiding the assets of the Prosecutor General, Yuri Chaika. Navalny's slick and professional videos gained millions of viewers. His exposure of venal corruption, the acquisition of properties and assets in Russia and abroad, provided a damning indictment of the meta-corruption associated with the rule of the Putin elite. On the back of this, Navalny built up a nationwide network of regional headquarters staffed by thousands of volunteers¹⁵. Navalny became one of only two individuals in Russia with substantive political autonomy – the other one being Putin.

As Navalny prepared for his run for the presidency, there was a steady rise in the number of social and political protests. Social protests covered such issues as the violation of social rights, falling living standards, job losses, defrauded investors, increases in utility charges, and the non-payment of wages¹⁶. One of the largest protest movements encompassed truckers incensed by the introduction of the Platon system of road tolls introduced in November 2015, managed by Rostec and the Rotenberg brothers. There were also protests against Sergei Sobyenin's plans in Moscow to demolish thousands of Khrushchev-era five-storey housing blocks. Most of these social protests complained of specific policies and were not opposed to the government as a whole.

¹⁴ "On vam ne Dimon" ("Don't Call me Dimon"), YouTube.

¹⁵ J.M. Dollbaum, "When Life Gives You Lemons: Alexei Navalny's Electoral Campaign", *Russian Analytical Digest*, no. 210, 14 November 2017, pp. 6-12.

¹⁶ Y. Kuznetsova, in a report of the Centre for Economic and Political Reform, "["Eksperty zayavili o rezkom roste chisla protestov v Rossii"](#)" (Experts said a sharp increase the number of protests in Russia), *RBK*, 10 July 2017.

As for political protests, the most notable were organised by Navalny and his supporters. In 2017, Navalny initiated nationwide protest rallies on 26 March and 12 June, reflecting an upsurge in dissatisfaction with falling living standards, economic inequality, corruption, and political stagnation. Most alarming for the authorities was the youthfulness of the protesters. The initiative had clearly shifted from the old generation of middle-aged “angry urbanites” to a new generation of disaffected youth¹⁷. Navalny’s call for a monthly minimum wage of 25,000 roubles (about \$440) was accused of being populist and, in a time of budget deficits, meant that the middle class would be squeezed to provide the funds.

Navalny became the charismatic face of the opposition. He advanced classic liberal postulates on the rule of law, transparent government, and constitutionalism, but he also embraced certain ideas drawn from the more conservative repertoire of nationalist ideas. In a well-publicised debate on 20 July 2017 with Igor Strelkov (Girkin), the militant nationalist and virulent monarchist who took his forces from Crimea to foment rebellion in the Donbass in March 2014, both came out as losers. Strelkov appeared to lose interest in the discussion, while Navalny was unable to advance any sort of coherent worldview. Perhaps more important was that the debate took place at all, providing a discussion free of official interference. It indicated the return of elements of public political debate. More disturbing, the debate showed that Strelkov had strong and coherent nationalist views, combining a distinctive view of the global economy and various conspiracy theories; while Navalny was unable to advance a coherent response¹⁸. For Navalny, the main enemy was domestic crony capitalism, and he vowed to clean

¹⁷ K. Shamiev and T. Shentseva, “[The Deep Roots of Russia’s Young Protestors](#)”, *Intersection*, 4 September 2017.

¹⁸ K. Gaaze, “Zdravyy smysl protiv trekhlineiki: Kak v Rossii uchatsya govorit’ o politike” (Common sense against the trilinear: How in Russia learn to talk about politics), RBK, 21 July 2017. The debate was aired on *Ekho Moskvy*, TV Rain (*Dozhd*) and the Reuters websites.

up the vast public procurement system, which accounts for 37% of the economy. By contrast, the enemy for Girkin was the West, which in his view carved up the USSR according to borders drawn by the Bolsheviks and destroyed Russia's industrial base¹⁹. Strelkov noted that, in 2014, he believed that Putin was ready to stage a "revolution from above" in Ukraine but, by 2015, when the "revolution" did not come, he lost faith in Putin. He also criticised the official line on Chechnya. The debate once again demonstrated that the greatest threat to Putinite stability comes not from the liberals but from nationalists.

This perhaps explains why Navalny is subject to sharp attacks from Western-oriented liberals. They condemn him for his refusal to accept that Crimea should be returned to Ukraine, for his attacks on migration from Central Asia, and for his erstwhile nationalist slogan of "stop feeding the Caucasus" (i.e., subsidising the region). While Navalny's anti-corruption policies are popular, his stance on migration is less so, with polls suggesting that xenophobic sentiments are at an all-time low. Nevertheless, Navalny articulated popular concerns and, in addition to his nationalist themes, he was moving towards class politics. He condemned Putin for creating a system of predatory capitalism that profits only the top 0.1%. Although Navalny is accused of Trump-like irresponsibility and populism, he certainly does not intend to further skew the tax system in favour of the rich.

Putin's fourth term and beyond

Although Putin long delayed announcing his candidature for the 18 March 2018 presidential election, the country prepared for Putin's fourth – and final – six-year term. The problem for the Kremlin was how to stimulate interest in an election whose outcome was predetermined. The fundamental questions were who Putin would run against, the turnout, and by what margin

¹⁹ L. Bershidsky, "[Putin's no Good, but Where's the Alternative?](#)", Bloomberg, 21 July 2017.

Putin would win. A number of strategies were devised, including trying to devise a programme with some fresh ideas, and allowing mildly unconventional candidates to boost turnout while not presenting a serious challenge to Putin's incumbency. Perhaps an even bigger problem was how to ensure that the coalition could be maintained as the regime itself changed. In the longer perspective, the regime began to prepare for a Russia without Putin. The time horizon for the regime was 2024, when Putin's putative fourth term would end. There have already been changes in the style of government and personnel policy in preparation for the big change. Notably, despite the reintroduction of gubernatorial elections, over two dozen regional governors were replaced in the year before the election.

Putin ran as an independent candidate, requiring him to gather 300,000 signatures in support of his nomination. This accentuated Putin's position above the existing institutions and party system, and further marginalised UR's place in Russian political life. Although UR had won a constitutional majority in the 2016 elections, its "brand" was tainted and it was never able to shake off Navalny's 2011 epithet as "the party of crooks and thieves". Putin's independent status emphasised his distance from the ruling elites and his historical role as the putative saviour of Russia. As the presidential election approach, plans have resurfaced once again to create a two-party system. Mironov would be replaced by a more authoritative leader, and the party boosted to provide credible balance to UR. This would be difficult, since the CPRF already absorbed the protest vote, while the LDPR filled the more populist segment of the party spectrum, even though it had in effect become a branch of UR²⁰. The new head of the internal affairs department of the Presidential Administration, Sergei Kirienko, gained unprecedented authority, managing not only political affairs but also masterminding a social strategy. He advanced an even more ambitious plan to restructure the party system, floating the idea

²⁰ A. Gorbachev, "[“Kreml’ reanimiruet ideyu dvukhpartiinoi sistemy”](#) (The Kremlin reanimates the idea of a two-party system), *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 18 October 2017.

of merging SR, CPRE, and LDPR to create a centre-left opposition to UR as part of a classic two-party system. The speaker of the Duma, Volodin, opposed the plan²¹.

It is clear that the existing systemic parties are hardly in a position to challenge the regime, and thus a strategy of survival predominates. However, the dual character of the system means that elections provide an opportunity to advance the legal rational “constitutionality” of the system²². The initial goal for the 2018 presidential election had been based on the 70/70 formula – 70% turnout and 70% for Putin. In 2012, Putin won with 63.6% of the vote. The interesting question was who would run against Putin. The old guard represented by Zhirinovskiy, Zyuganov, and Mironov was hardly likely to set the electoral pulse racing.

Hence, there was talk of a possible run by the patriotic film director Nikita Mikhalkov, and the declared candidacy of Ksenia Sobchak. She was the daughter of Putin’s former mentor and sponsor, Anatoly Sobschak, the mayor of St Petersburg in the first half of the Nineties, and she was even rumoured to be Putin’s goddaughter. She became involved in contentious politics during the protest wave of 2011-2012, and she became one of the most recognised opposition leaders. She then hosted a talk show, *Sobchak Live*, on TV Rain, one of the few remaining independent networks in Russia. Following months of rumours, she declared herself as a candidate in October 2017. She positioned herself as the “protest candidate” and argued that a vote for her represented a vote “against all”. She was helped by the political consultant Vitaly Shklyarov, who had worked for Bernie Sanders in the 2016 US presidential campaign. She denied accusations that she had been put up by the Kremlin to stimulate interest in the election and thus boosting turnout.

²¹ Interviews with various party officials (who prefer to remain anonymous) in Moscow in November 2017.

²² This is explored by Andrei Semënov, “How Far Can They Go: Russia’s Systemic Opposition Seeks its Place”, *Russian Analytical Digest*, no. 210, 14 November 2017, pp. 2-5.

She declared that she would give up her candidacy if Navalny somehow managed to get on the ballot paper. This was unlikely, since the head of the Electoral Commission, Ella Pamfilova, on 17 October 2017 declared that Navalny was not eligible to run until 2028 because of his two criminal convictions. It was at this time that Navalny organised nationwide protest rallies on 7 October, Putin's 65th birthday.

In historical terms, the Russian political situation today remains open, with fundamental questions of political identity and competition still in play. This historical openness is in part derived from the closed nature of the political system, where fundamental policy questions are suppressed rather than resolved. The dual system still operates, with contention between constitutional and administrative rationales. This means that there is scope for a political opposition to exploit openings and opportunities; but it also means that the regime works to ensure that these opportunities do not threaten its own power or the stability of the system. A political opposition can be found, but it survives in the interstices of the administrative and constitutional systems rather than as a formal part of the political system itself.

4. Islam in Today's Russia

Alexey Malashenko

In 2017 there were some 17 million Muslims in the Russian Federation (a census carried out in 2002 showed a smaller figure – 14.5 million), i.e. more than 11.4% of its population. Still, politicians, including President Vladimir Putin, and the media usually give another figure, – 20 million – because “Russian Muslims,” or, to put it more correctly, Muslims living in Russia, include migrants from Central Asia and South Caucasus (some 2.5 – 3 million people). In 2017, Ravil Gaynutdin, Head of the Russia Mufties Council, mentioned a figure of 25 million¹.

It should be noted that, first, there is no official confessional statistics in Russia, second, the information on the size of ethno-confessional minorities is inaccurate, and, finally, third, there is no clarity when it comes to counting migrants. Therefore, all data mentioned here and below should be regarded as estimates.

The percentage of Muslims in Russia can be compared to their share of the population in France (from 9 to 13%), the Netherlands (7%), or Germany (about 7%). European statistics, however, is also far from accurate.

The Tatars constitute the most numerous Muslim ethnic group in Russia – 5.3 million; Bashkirs are the second-biggest group – 1.6 million, and the Chechens are the third. Muslims are a majority in seven Russian regions – 99% (nearly a hundred percent) in Ingushetia, 96% in Chechnya, 94% in Dagestan, 70% in Kabardino-Balkaria, 63% in Karachay-Cherkessia, 54.5% in Bashkortostan and 54% in Tatarstan. In nine regions

¹ http://islamio.ru/news/policys/pravedlivaya_kritika_ili_banalnyy_shantazh

their number exceeds 10% of the population². These figures are approximate. In some regions migrants are taken into account when the percentage of Muslims is calculated, in others it is not. (The counting process is further complicated by the fact that some Muslims, especially those from the Caucasus, register one region as a place of their residence, but in fact live in another one).

Islam is actively spreading in the Urals, Siberia and penetrates into the Far East. This is a result of growing Muslim migration from abroad, and internal migration from the North Caucasus as well.

According to some estimates, by 2025 the number of Muslim citizens of Russia – if the current dynamics persists – will reach 20.9 million, and by 2050 will exceed 31 million³.

As we already mentioned, Muslim migrants from abroad have become a part of the Russian *Ummah* (Islamic community). According to the Russian Federal Migration Service (FMS), in the beginning of 2015 4.3 million of migrants from Central Asia were staying in Russia (in 2005 there were only 1.5 million of them) including 2.2 million Uzbeks, 983,000 Tajiks and 540,000 Kyrgyz people (unofficial sources give a much bigger number of Kyrgyz migrants – more than a million in 2017). In addition, more than 1.5 million of Azerbaijanis live in Russia. In recent years the number of migrants from Central Asia diminished due to the deterioration of the economic situation in Russia and newly introduced entry restrictions.

Migrants are visibly present in big cities, especially Moscow and St. Petersburg, in the southern regions and those bordering Central Asia, as well as in raw-material producing areas, the Tula and Novosibirsk regions, in Yekaterinburg and Tyumen⁴.

² R, Silantyev, *Noveishaya istoriia islamskogo soobshchestva v Rossii* (The recent history of the Russian Islamic community), Ichtiost, Moscow, 2005, p. 149.

³ [World Population Prospect. Vision Population DataBase](#); D. A. Vishnevskii (Ed.), *Demograficheskaya modernizatsiya Rossii* (Russia's demographic modernisation), *Novoye Izdatel'stvo* (New Publishing), Moscow, 2006, pp. 441, 503.

⁴ “Sotsial'nye riski migratsii” (Social risks of migration), Part 2 of the research

Migration is becoming more Islamised. Not long ago Uzbeks and Tajiks, especially from the older generation, were drinking alcohol, eating food prohibited by Sharia Law, and seldom visited mosques, but in recent years their religious identity has become more pronounced. On Fridays, migrants visit a mosque: for them, as a researcher from Saratov Natalia Mukhametshina put it, it is “a piece of Motherland, where they, in addition to socialising with compatriots and brothers in faith, can relax their minds”⁵. Ethnic migrant mosques are appearing in Russia. In 2005 a “Tajik mosque” was opened in Yakutsk, and in 2013 in Vladivostok (Muhiddin Kabiri, Chairman of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan, was present at the opening ceremony); another “Central Asian” mosque is functioning in Tatarstan. The number of Imams from Central Asia in Russian mosques is growing. According to various data from 7 to 17% of them have Tajik or Uzbek Imams.

Muslim migrants are settling in the territories to the east of the Urals and the Russian North. The number of Muslims in these regions is 1776 thousand while the total population of this part of Russia is 37.6 million⁶. From 1989 to 2010, in the Urals Federal District (UFD) the number of Central Asians grew by 70%, that of the Azerbaijanis – by 110%, and that of migrants from North Caucasus – by 140%. During the same period in the Siberian Federal District (SFD) the number of migrants from Central Asia grew by 30%, and that of the Azerbaijanis

project *Immigratsia naselenia v Rossii: ekonomika, sotsial'naya sfera, natsionalnaya bezopasnost* (Population immigration in Russia: the economy, social sphere and national security), National Strategy Institute, Moscow, 2015, pp. 13-24.

⁵ N. Mukhametshina, “Musulmanskoye soobshchestvo Rossii pod vliyaniem migratsionnykh protsessov (na primere Saratovskoi oblasti)” (Russian Muslim community under the influence of migration processes: the case study of the Saratov region), *Vestnik Rossiiskoi Natsii* (Bulletin of the Russian Nation), Moscow, 2011. No. 4-5, p. 230.

⁶ See A. Malashenko and A. Starostin, *The Rise of Nontraditional Islam in the Urals*, Carnegie Moscow Center, September 2015; “Islam na rossiiskom Dalnem Vostoke” (Islam in the Russian Far East), *Rossia v global'noi politike* (Russia in global politics), no. 4, 2016.

– by 60%. In the Far East Federal District (FAFD) the number of Central Asian migrants increased by 40%. And it should be noted that these figures are too low, as many migrants come there illegally.

87% of migrants from Central Asia are male and mostly young. Their presence affects the gender balance in the areas where they live. Given the common Muslims' perception that "non-Muslim" women are "easy meat", this situation may lead to the same type of conflicts that some German cities experienced after a number of asylum-seekers sexually assaulted some women. Migrants "cluster" on a family or clan basis. The factor of religious solidarity is becoming more visible. They form new diasporas that extend their influence over profitable spheres of economic activity, and monopolize markets, especially farm ones.

The pressure of migration on the school education system is increasing. In Moscow schools there are two or three children from migrant families in every class; in some districts their number is as high as 30 to 40%. Migrant children are sometimes prone to aggressive behavior, which causes conflicts on ethnic and religious grounds⁷.

Over the last 2-3 years, some groups of Muslim migrants in Russia as well as in Europe embraced radical sentiments

The Russian Islamic community, as a whole being loyal to authorities, is however influenced by the radical trend developing in the global Muslim *Ummah*, variously defined as fundamentalism, Wahhabism, Islamism or Salafism. In Russia these radicals are most often called the Salafis.

The Russian Muslim community's vulnerability to Salafis (Islamists) can be explained by two reasons. The first of them is an internal one – the complicated social and economic situation, government corruption etc. provoke protest sentiments among Muslims. The second one is external influence. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia was invaded

⁷ *Politika "zamestchayubei migratsii" v Rossii: posledstvia i alternativy* (The politics of substitutive migrations in Russia: consequences and alternatives), The Institute of the National Strategy, Moscow, 2014.

by radical ideas; foreign missions and international Islamic organisations like the Muslim Brotherhood, the al-Haramain Foundation, the SAAR Foundation and al-Qaeda started their activities in the country. In the second decade of the XXI century Russian Muslims came under the influence of the developments in the Middle East, the Arab Spring, the rapid activation of local Islamists, and, finally, the creation of the Islamic State.

The Russian Islamists' ideology, like elsewhere in the Muslim world, is based on a wish to build up a system of social relations corresponding to the Islamic tradition and Sharia Law with an Islamic state (a Caliphate or an Emirate) as its preferable form. Theoretically it is possible to create such a state, but only after the secession of its supposed territory from the Russian Federation. That was the claim of the Chechen insurgents, whose separatism was suppressed after 2000 when Vladimir Putin came to power. Still many Muslims believe in the possibility of the Islamic alternative's "soft implementation" through the creation of an "Islamic space" in Russia with de facto Sharia laws that can be supposedly compatible with the Russian Constitution.

The process of Islamisation or even Shariatisation is in progress in the North Caucasus, especially in Dagestan, – its biggest republic – where hundreds of religious courts are already functioning, resolving family/household, land and property disputes. Many Dagestanis believe that the rulings of Sharia judges are more fair than those by official secular courts.

There is an opinion that such a space has already taken shape in Chechnya, where the population is obliged to abide by Islamic norms of behavior. President Vladimir Putin is aware of this fact, but he lets the Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov to Islamize the republic in exchange for his absolute loyalty to the Federal Center, or rather to Putin personally. (Kadyrov himself denies that a total "Islamisation" is taking place in his republic).

In the Muslim Russia there is a confrontation between traditional and unorthodox Islam. The traditionalists support Islam linked to the local ethnic and cultural tradition retaining

rudimentary elements of paganism and allowing deviations from the religious dogma. They are sharply criticised by unorthodox Salafis, who reject Islam's ethnic and cultural peculiarities, and call for a return to the "true Islam" of Prophet Muhammad's times. Russian Salafism can be regarded both as a dissident trend and a religious political movement. It consists of three trends. The first one is represented by young Muslims who are seeking answers for moral questions in Islam. They are engaged in religious self-education, hold illegal assemblies and seminars. Yuldash Yusupov, an ethnologist from Bashkortostan, thinks that "Salafism is a religious system for young people"⁸, regarding it as a youth subculture of sorts.

The second trend of Salafism is characterised by public religious activity. These Salafis form Jamaats, trying to attract as many believers as possible into their ranks. Moreover, they demand from Muslims, and first of all businessmen, to pay Zakat – a Muslim tax – to support the Jamaats. They control several mosques in the North Caucasus and the Volga region. Since 2009 Salafi mosques were functioning in Dagestan and the big cities in Tatarstan. In Kazan the Salafis controlled the Qolsharif Cathedral Mosque for some time⁹. The Salafis advocate mandatory elections of the mosques' Imams (currently they are usually appointed by Spiritual Directories loyal to the authorities). In 2011 Nayil Sakhibzyanov – a Salafi *Mukhtasib* – tried to create a "parallel muftiate (Muslim administrative territorial entity)" in the Bashkir city of Almetyevsk. Salafis of the second type, however, use peaceful methods, avoiding radical forms of confrontation with the official clergy, and, of course, with secular authorities.

Only third-type Salafis are prone to extreme methods, including terrorist acts. In the North Caucasus the actions of

⁸ [Stanet li Bashkiria novoi "goryachey tochkoj" postsovetskogo prostranstva?](#) (Will Bashkortostan become a new flashpoint of the post-Soviet Space?), Gumilev-center.ru, 24 January 2012.

⁹ ["Arabskaya revoliutsiya" v Tatarstane: islamskie fundamentalisty v regional'noi politike](#) (The "Arab revolution" in Tatarstan: Islamic fundamentalists in regional politics).

extremist Salafis have become commonplace. In the rest of Muslim Russia, the third trend revealed itself somewhat later. In 2003-2005 extremists carried out several explosions on the gas pipeline at the border between Tatarstan and the Kirov region. In 2010 their arms caches were found in the Nurlat district of Tatarstan. In 2012, they organised clandestine production of explosives and suicide-bomber belts in the Vysokogorsky district of the same republic.

In 2010 the authorities managed to prevent several Salafi actions, including in Bashkortostan and the Urals. In 2012 an appeal by a “Mujahidin Amir” Marat Khalimov calling for “active struggle” was posted in the Web. Some experts immediately called Khalimov’s subordinates “forest Mujahidin,”¹⁰ thus putting them on equal footing with the insurgents in the Caucasus. In November 2013 a large petrochemical factory in Nizhnekamsk was shelled by an improvised rocket of the *Qassam* type used by Hamas in Palestine. In 2012 the Mufti of Tatarstan Ildus Faizov was badly wounded by a car bomb; on the same day a popular theologian Valiulla Yakupov, who advocated Islamic traditionalism, was assassinated.

Russian Vice Prime Minister Alexander Khloponin, who occupied the post of Presidential Plenipotentiary Envoy in the North Caucasian Federal District in 2010-2014, stated: “As far as the penetration of radical Islam is concerned, [...] the North, the Volga region where 40% of Russian Muslims live, and the Urals are the sore spots today”¹¹.

Nobody knows the exact number of Salafis in Russia. M. Zinchenko, a political scientist from Pyatigorsk, thinks: “Today Neo-Wahhabites¹², according to various estimates, constitute

¹⁰ [Ekspert: Boyeviki v Tatarstane deystvuiut vmeste a religioznymi radikalami na ulitse](#) (Militants in Tatarstan are acting together with religious radicals in the streets: expert).

¹¹ A. Khloponin, “Ya za to, chtoby zaprety ostalis” (I think prohibitions should remain), *RBC*, 18 June 2015.

¹² Newly minted terms like Neo-Wahhabism or Neo-Fundamentalism and other “neos” sometimes look obscure.

from 2 to 10% of Russian Muslims”¹³. In 2005 there were 2000 Salafis in Dagestan, according to the Republic’s Interior Ministry¹⁴. The Ansar website gives a much bigger figure: according to it, Salafis in Dagestan already constitute from 5 to 10% of its population¹⁵.

Many scholars, Imams, theologists and politicians are rejecting Islam’s simplified “dual” classification, thinking that it is splitting the Muslim community. The adherents of both directions continue to compete with each other, but more and more often are finding common ground, which serves as a basis for Inter-Islamic dialogue. At theological and scientific conferences an opinion is voiced that Salafism is a legitimate trend within Islam, and only its extreme forms should be resisted. This, for instance, is the view of Damir Mukhitdinov, Imam-mukhtasib for St. Petersburg and the Leningrad region.

Among politicians the dialogue between traditional and unorthodox Islam is supported by Yunus-bek Yevkurov, leaders of Dagestan and Chechnya. In fact, it is a *trialogue*, rather than a dialogue, as it takes place in the “triangle” – traditional Islam – Salafism – the state. This dialogue is a difficult one. It goes on in a situation of mutual distrust, and the government is not easing its pressure on the Salafis, closing their mosques and confiscating their religious literature. Still, the parties concerned do not intend to terminate their dialogue.

In my opinion, sooner or later the strictly dualistic interpretation of Islam will run its course and will be replaced by a formula postulating Islam’s “unity in diversity”. In all probability,

¹³ M. Zinchenko, “Depolitizatsiia islama kak osnova stabilizatsii na Severnom Kavkaze” (Depoliticising Islam as a basis for stabilisation in the North Caucasus), in *Mir cherez yazyki, obrazovanie i kul'turu: Rossiia – Kavkaz – Mirovoe soobshchestvo* (Peace through languages, education and culture: Russia – the Caucasus - the global community), Pyatigorsk, 2011, p. 109.

¹⁴ H. Omarova. “Respublika Dagestan. Sistemnyi krizis razrastaetsya?” (The Republic of Dagestan. A systemic crisis aggravating?), 27 February 2013.

¹⁵ “Ofitsialnyi i neofitsialnyi islam in Dagestan” (The official and unofficial Islam in Dagestan), Part 2, *Salafism ili neofitsialnyi islam* (Salafism or unofficial Islam), The Ansar News and Analytical Channel, Ansar.ru (Yandex).

we will witness a synthesis of traditional and unorthodox Islam with a certain preeminence of the latter.

The situation in the Middle East – the emergence of the Islamic State in 2014 and Russia's involvement in the Syrian civil war – contributes to the radicalisation of Russian Muslims' sentiments. At first, Moscow's assistance to President Bashar al-Assad did not cause any protest among Russian Muslims. Moreover, clerics loyal to the Russian government – for instance Ravil Gaynutdin, Chairman of the Russia Mufties Council, Talgat Tadzhuiddin, Head of the Central Muslim Spiritual Directorate, Ismail Berdiyev, chairman of the Coordination Centre of North Caucasus Muslims, and the Mufti of Tatarstan Kamil Samigullin – say that Muslims support Moscow's official line.

However, there have been some exceptions, too. For example, Nafigulla Ashirov, Co-chairman of the Mufties Council and Chairman of the Muslim Spiritual Directory for the Asian part of Russia, thinks that some Muslims are “concerned by Russia's actions in Syria”. A popular website “The Voice of Islam” emphasised that statements of each Russian Mufti do not represent “the opinion of all Muslims, but only that of those who are in spiritual subordination to that Mufti – i.e. as a rule a very narrow circle of Imams and public figures...”¹⁶. Salman of Bulgar, Imam of the Tauba mosque in the city of Naberezhnye Chelny, is sure that Muslims are afraid to criticize Russia's foreign policy openly, but still “clench their teeth and pray for Muslims in Syria”¹⁷. There is an opinion that, in spite of a relatively passive reaction of the population, Russian operation in Syria “provoked a very strong discontent among Muslim political activists in the Caucasus”¹⁸.

¹⁶ [“Rossiiskie musulmane o bpombardirovkakh v Sirii”](#) (Russian Muslims on the bombings in Syria).

¹⁷ [“Musulmane Rossii – otnoshenie k interventsii v Sirii”](#) (Russian Muslims – their attitude to the intervention in Syria).

¹⁸ N. Silayev, “Vremya chuzhakov” (The time of aliens), *Profile*, 9 October 2017, p. 19.

In 2013 two demonstrations in support of Syrian Islamic opposition and against Russian policy in that country – each of them with several hundred participants – took place in Makhachkala, and another – a small one – in Kazan. Their organizers accused the Kremlin in “waging war against Islam”.

There is no accurate information on the number of Muslims who have a negative attitude toward Russia’s actions in Syria. Sometimes it is stated that nearly a third of all Russian Muslims are against Moscow’s Syria policy.

The attitude of Russian Muslims to the Islamic State (ISIS) is also controversial. On the one hand, they despise its brutality – terrorist attacks and public executions. On the other hand, some young people respect the ISIS, sincerely believing that it defends Islamic values, struggles for social justice, against alien external influences. A widespread tentative indication is that ISIS supporters in Russia might be as many as half a million.

The fact that thousands of Russian Muslims are willing to fight on the ISIS side is a proof of its popularity. It is difficult to estimate their exact number. In May 2015, the director of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) Alexander Bortnikov gave a figure of 1700 individuals¹⁹. According to the CIS Anti-terrorist Centre, 5000 Russian citizens fought in the ranks of ISIS²⁰. In October 2016 a federal TV channel mentioned a figure of 6000. In early 2017 president Putin, referring to the information provided by the General Staff of the Armed Forces and the FSB, said that about 4000 of Russians (and 5000 people from other post-Soviet states) take part in the Syrian war²¹. According to other data, 7000 Russian citizens fight on the ISIS side²².

¹⁹ <http://mir24.tv/news/society/12713622>

²⁰ T. Gushchina and T. Morozova, “Ushedshie v IGIL: Mify i realnost’” (They left for ISIS: Myths and reality), *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 27 July 2016.

²¹ V. Panfilova, “Rossiia mozhет peresmotret besvizovyi regim so stranami SNG” (Russia may revise the visa-free regime with CIS countries), *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 28 February 2017.

²² D. Sokolov, “Pobeda nad razumom” (The triumph over reason), *Vedomosti*, 11 April 2017.

Many Muslims call their trips to the Middle East “the Hegira”, comparing this act to Prophet Muhammad’s journey from Mecca to Medina in the year 622. They also go to the “ISIS front” in order to live in the Muslim world, where they would not be a minority.

Recruitment of Mujahedin takes place in various parts of Russia. The call for arms is spread via the Internet, whose Russian sector features thousands of relevant accounts. Dozens of websites are working for this purpose – the *Al-Hayat* and *al-Furkan* being the most popular – the well-known *Dabiq* journal is distributed. ISIS disseminates its propaganda via social media, for instance the very popular *Odnoklassniki* (Classmates) network. Russian was for a long time the third most used language in the propaganda sphere (after Arabic and English). According to Nikolai Patrushev, Secretary of the Russian Security Council, this recruitment network took roots and so far it has been impossible to destroy it completely.

A system of interrelated radical and extremist groups has taken shape in Russia – starting at the Pacific coast, it crosses the whole Russian territory, Central Asia and South Caucasus. It is also linked to the Chinese Xinjiang region, Afghanistan and Turkey. One can call this network an “Islamist route”, used by thousands of potential jihadists to get to the Middle East.

In 2016-2017, however, the inflow of militants to ISIS started to dry down. This can be explained by political and military setbacks suffered by the ISIS, the loss of faith in its success. According to the Russian Foreign Ministry, in 2017 (as of October) only five Russian Muslims left for the Middle East to fight. How does this figure correspond with reality, it is difficult to say. Anyway, one has to admit that the very idea of creating a state on the basis of Islamic tradition has by no means exhausted itself; terrorist “ sleeper cells ” still exist in Russia – they display no visible activity, but are ready to enter the scene in conflict situations, both inside the country and elsewhere in the Muslim world.

All these factors shape Russian government's policy toward Islam and Muslims, influence the so-called Islam-State relations.

The government demands unquestionable loyalty from the Muslims. However, this is impossible – at least because of the fact that Russian Islam is a part of the global one with all its different tendencies, and first of all Islamism. The Kremlin has not been able to gain complete control over the Russian *Ummah*, and will hardly succeed in the future.

The authorities are gradually realising this, though official propaganda continues to attribute protest sentiments to external influence, the intrusion of ideas and radical missionaries from the Middle East, the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, Pakistan etc. External influence does exist of course. But one has to admit that its seeds fall on the fertile soil of the Muslims' frustration and discontent with the social and economic situation.

The authorities have chosen force as their main instrument to combat Islamism. "State activities towards political Islam are most often reduced to law enforcement and operations of security agencies; very rarely we see positive steps aimed at the incorporation of Islamic values into the political stabilisation process..."²³. Many Islamic organisations, both extremist ones and only suspected in extremist activities, were banned. Among them we should name the "Highest Military Council (Mejlisul Shura) of the united Mujahidin forces of the Caucasus", the Congress of the peoples of Dagestan and Ichkeria, Al-Qaeda, The Muslim Brotherhood, Lashkar-e-Taiba, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Jamiyat al-Islah al-Ijtimai, Jamiyat Ihja at-Turas al-Islami, Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami, Nablighi al-Islami etc. (the last two organisations claim that they are against terrorism). Many jamaats are accused of terrorism, and quite a number of ordinary citizens as well, who are not engaged in terrorist activities, but share the ideas of "unorthodox Islam",

²³ L.R. "Sykiäinen. Rossiiskaya gosudarstvennaya politika v otnoshenii islama: iskhodnye printsipy, tseli i napravleniya" (Russian government policy towards Islam: guiding principles, aims and directions), *Vatanym* (My Motherland), Moscow, Federal Voluntary Organization, January 2004, pp. 3-4.

criticize the authorities and help their family members who belong to the opposition.

In 1999 Wahhabism was prohibited by law in Dagestan; in 2001 a similar ban was imposed in Chechnya and Kabardino-Balkaria. Legislation prohibiting Wahhabism was not passed on the federal level, however, because some clerics and experts managed to prove that such a law would only aggravate the situation in the Muslim regions. Also Wahhabism is a religious trend legally existing in many countries of the Muslim world, including Saudi Arabia – a state which Russia tries to improve relations with (in 2017 Saudi King Salman visited Moscow).

The authorities' combat against Islamists is often accompanied by violations of legal norms – this is especially true for North Caucasian republics. In Chechnya under unofficial orders of the Republic's leader Ramzan Kadyrov houses belonging to militants' families are destroyed (burned down), individuals arrested as suspected terrorists are subjected to tortures. Human rights activists cite a lot of cases when people arrested by security forces simply disappeared.

Prohibition of various religious publications included in the federal list of extremist materials is one of the instruments for combating extremism. Often these prohibitions are imposed groundlessly, without expert evaluation by specialists in religious studies. For instance, in the early 2000s in Dagestan the Quran translated by Valeria Porokhova was removed from sale without any explanation; in 2014 the Quran translated into Russian by the Azerbaijani scholar Elmir Kuliyeu was prohibited (for unknown reasons Kuliyeu was accused of Salafism by official experts). There were some absurd cases when Islamic literature was banned because the books included quotations from the Quran, which, in the opinion of "experts" (who had nothing to do with religious studies) backed by courts, incite interethnic and religious hatred, as in these quotations "Muslims worshipping 'Allah' are set against [...] other confessions [...]" An advantage of a certain group over other people is postulated

on the grounds [. . . of its affiliation with Islam, the Muslims”²⁴.

These prohibitions irritate Muslim clergy and some Muslim politicians including the Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov. Ravil Gaynutdin, Chairman of the Russia Mufties Council, has repeatedly urged to put an end to the “festivals of district courts” that try to qualify as extremist both the classical theological literature and contemporary authors. Nafigulla Ahirov stated that “secular court should not pass judgments on the problems of Islam, and especially its sacred texts”²⁵. In late 2015 the State Duma, apprehensive of discontent among Muslims, passed an amendment to the existing legislation, prohibiting district and municipal courts to hear cases related to extremism. The proposition of the Chechen deputy Shamsail Saraliev to make holy scriptures’ texts immune from trials was also supported.

In spite of this hard line, the government understands that the desired results might not be achieved only by pressuring Islamic opposition. President Putin’s meeting with the heads of the leading Muslim Spiritual Directorates in October 2013 is a telling event in this connection. The meeting was timed to coincide with the 225th anniversary of the Orenburg Muhammedan Assembly, created by Catherine the Great in 1788 as the first government institution to regulate and control the life of the Muslim community.

In his speech before the clergymen, President Putin outlined the main challenges facing the Muslim community. The biggest one, in his opinion, is the “socialisation of Islam”, meaning “the development of the traditional Muslim way of life, thinking and views in accordance with contemporary social reality and as a counter to radical ideology”²⁶.

²⁴ [“Opyat zapheshcheny molby s ayatami Qurana”](#) (Prayers with Quran Ayats banned once again).

²⁵ [“Soviet muftiev obzhaluet reshenie suda otnositelno knigi ‘Molba k bogu’”](#) (The Mufties Council will appeal against the court judgment on the book “Plea to God”).

²⁶ Henceforward all quotations from President Putin’s speech are taken from *Islam Minbare*, November 2013, no. 11.

The Islamisation of migration has also attracted the Kremlin's attention. The authorities deem it necessary to enlist Russian Muslim clergy to work with migrants, to participate in the social adaptation of individuals coming to Russia to live and work.

The President made an important statement concerning political Islam. Criticising religious radicals, he said that the politicisation of religion is "not always a positive process". Thus, Putin indirectly admitted the legitimacy of political Islam, and the fact that this trend is not necessarily a negative one. These words show that the Kremlin, maybe under the influence of the Arab Spring, admits Islam's political potential. In the Syrian conflict Russia collaborates with Lebanese Hezbollah. The Kremlin also maintains regular contacts with Palestinian Hamas.

As the former Head of Dagestan (in 2013-2017) Ramazan Abdulatipov put it, religion is separated from the state by Constitution, but the state is not separated from believers²⁷. Therefore, Islam is a "political factor," and various political views and actions (including oppositionist ones) can be manifested through it.

At the same time, the Kremlin is displeased by the lack of unity between the two largest Muslim religious organisations – the Central Muslim Spiritual Directorate (CMSD) and the Russia Mufties Council (RMS). Moreover, some government officials, first of all in Moscow, support the RMS, while others, and the Russian Orthodox Church as well, back the CMSD. As far as the Coordination Centre in the North Caucasus is concerned, this is an amorphous organisation, torn by conflicts between republican Muftiates. Dozens of Muslim Spiritual Directorates function in Russia today, but, apart from the aforementioned ones, only the Muftiates of Dagestan and Tatarstan are really respected. In 2016-2017 Imam Albir Krganov – with the support of the Russian Orthodox Church – created a Spiritual Assembly

²⁷ V. Popov, "[Islam trebuat bolshego vnimania](#)" (Islam requires more attention), *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 11 November 2013.

of Russian Muslims, but the new organisation failed to build substantial trust among believers.

On the other hand, an integration trend exists within the Muslim clergy. In 2010 the League of Muslim Journalists carried out a survey and found out that 55% of influential Russian Muslim clerics support the creation of a unified religious structure. Additional 20% share this idea with some reservations²⁸. Some clergymen even want to restore the Soviet system of control over religious life. Nazymbek Ilyazov, Head of the muftiate in the city of Astrakhan, for instance, thinks that “in the Soviet period for the clergy it was much easier to work for the clergy”, and “now it is essential to revive the Soviet tradition of governing the religious sphere of public life [...] Muslim Spiritual Directorates should work in the interests of the state [...]”²⁹.

However, it is absolutely impossible to create such a system – suffice to mention that the Russian Orthodox Church rejects this idea, regarding it a threat to its autonomy.

It is difficult to evaluate the secular authorities’ attitude towards Islam and Muslim without taking the position of the Russian Orthodox Church into account. Formally, relations between Islam and Orthodoxy are perfect. First, Orthodox and Muslim clerics alike support government policies, and, second, they have conservative views, sharing a negative attitude to “Western values”. It is worth noting that the Orthodox Church views democracy as a system incompatible with Orthodox values, while Muslim conservatives cherish the idea of a specific “Islamic democracy” and special “human rights in Islam”.

This proximity of views, though facilitating mutual

²⁸ “Itogi vserossiiskogo oprosa musulmanskih liderov vpechatlyaiut dazhe skeptikov i protivnikov obyedineniia” (The results of an all-Russian survey of Muslim leaders impress even the skeptics and opponents of unification), Muslim Press News Agency, *Islam Minbare*, no. 3, 2010.

²⁹ “Umma trebuet arbitra. Interview Vladislava Kondratieva s rukovoditelem Astrakhanskogo dukhovnogo upravlenia musulman Nazymbekom Ilyazovym” (The Ummah demands an arbiter. Interview with the Head of the Astrakhan Muslim Spiritual Directorate Nazymbek Ilyazov. By Vladislav Kondratiev), *Nezavisimaya Gazeta – Religions*, 15 January 2014.

understanding, does not translate into mutual sympathy between the Muslim and Orthodox clerical establishment. High-ranking Orthodox clerics sometimes speak dismissively of Islam. Even Patriarch Kirill in his interviews has repeatedly and pointedly mentioned “religious terrorism”.

A negative attitude by Orthodox clergy to ethnic Russians' conversion into Islam is a very telling fact. Archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin – an extremely conservative Orthodox ideologue – calls these people traitors, adding: “A war has been declared on us – they want us to change our lives completely against our will. This should be treated absolutely seriously – it is a global clash as serious as the clash with Nazism in 1940s”³⁰.

Muslims, for their part, also regard their fellow believers' conversion into Orthodoxy negatively. For instance, in Tatarstan the “Kryashens” – Christianised Tatars – are sometimes subjected to abuse. In St. Petersburg one clergyman gave his blessing to Orthodox propaganda among migrants. In Moscow in 2009 abbot Daniel Sysoyev, engaged in missionary activities among Central Asian migrants, was murdered in his church.

Muslims are especially irritated by confessional, and, by association, political ambitions of the Russian Orthodox Church that continuously calls Orthodoxy “the religion of the majority” and claims a special position in the state and society. Muslims object that by Constitution Russia is a secular state, where religion should be disconnected from politics.

Conclusion

The situation in the Russian Muslim community can be regarded as a relatively peaceful one. Like most citizens, Russian Muslims are politically passive and loyal to the authorities.

Rivalry between traditionalists and Salafis does not lead to harsh confrontations and murders, as it happened in a relatively

³⁰ TV Tsentr pro russkikh musulman, “[Predatel vseгда opasen I...](#)” (Center TV channel on Russian Muslims: “A traitor is always dangerous...”).

recent past. The dialogue between the two trends in Islam is going on, though in a “dot-and-dash” manner.

Religious extremism and terrorism is still present, but the level of these activities is lower than in the previous years. This can be proved by the statistics of armed clashes in the North Caucasus: the number of their victims has fallen from 1705 in 2010 to 287 in 2016³¹. In other parts of Russia – including the Muslim Volga region – there were no terrorist attacks at all in 2014-2015.

Muslim migrants are relatively peaceful – their behavior in Russia is markedly different from that of their counterparts in Europe. Incidents with their participation are relatively rare. The terrorist attack in St. Petersburg, organised in 2017 by migrants from Central Asia is rather an exception. Muslim migrants have become a part of Russian *Ummah* and are fitting into the Russian society, though with considerable difficulty.

The influence of external factors – the situation in the Middle East and the Islamic State in particular – has diminished in comparison with the period immediately after the proclamation of the ISIS Caliphate in 2014. Interest in the ISIS is declining. And, as far as Russia’s involvement in the Syrian conflict is concerned, most Muslims are indifferent to it.

Still the situation in the Russian *Ummah* is evolving by a sinusoidal motion. The threat of mounting tensions and even conflicts remains a probability. In October 2016 several terrorist attacks took place in the North Caucasus, showing that Islamists still have some force left in them. Efforts to eliminate the roots of Islamism have not succeeded so far. The economic crisis is aggravating and living standards deteriorate. This leads to a growth of protest sentiments that can be manifested, among other things, in a religious, Islamic form.

It is also unclear how Muslims who have returned from the Middle East will behave. So far these individuals full of militant and religious energies are lying low. But Nikolai Patrushev,

³¹ http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/0013/136541/new_2.jpg

head of the Russian Security Council, thinks that “people who have received such a combat experience and who remain religiously and politically ‘charged’, after returning to their permanent places of residence [...] can pose a rather serious threat to their countries’ security”³².

Apart from Islamist activity, conflicts can be provoked by harsh actions of security forces, unmotivated bans on religious literature etc.

All this requires an elaboration of new adequate approaches from the Russian government. For such a step consistent shifts in the secular authorities’ ideology, practice and even political psychology are necessary.

³² Sovbez RF: Boeviki, “[Islamskogo gosudarstva iz stran SNG mogu stat ugrozoi natsionalnoi bezopasnosti](#)” (ISIS Militants from CIS countries can pose a threat to national security: Russian Security Council), *Info Islam*.

5. Russia's Quest for Economic Independence

Philip Hanson

In Britain, Brexiteers say they aim to “take back control”. A similar sentiment lies behind much of contemporary Russian economic policy. The Brexit campaign has specific targets: above all, replacing EU regulation with British regulation. Russian economic policy has a broader range of aspirations: from import substitution through severe limits on external debt to national control over IT systems. But the similarities in underlying motivation are strong. Brexiteers and Russian advocates of economic sovereignty share a suspicious view of foreigners and a readiness to sacrifice or deny the existence of benefits from existing patterns of international economic integration.

In the Russian case, a suspicious view of at least some foreigners is understandable. Moscow is after all subject to sanctions imposed by the US, the EU and a number of other countries from 2014. But several of the ‘fortress Russia’ elements in Russian economic policy pre-date sanctions. Economic sovereignty is a long-standing preoccupation in Russia, even though the official Strategy of Economic Security was reformulated only in 2017¹ (*O strategii* 2017; the previous version dates from 1996).

The first section of the paper outlines the definition and coverage of economic security in Russian policy. Subsequent sections are devoted to the main components of the strategy: limiting public debt; limiting the economy’s sensitivity to the oil price; limiting dependence on foreign technology by import

¹ [O strategii ekonomicheskoi bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii na period do 2030](#). (On the Economic Security Strategy of the Russian Federation until 2030).

substitution; raising the domestic economic growth rate. The final section contains conclusions about the prospects of faster growth – perhaps the most important aim of an economic security policy – after the 2018 presidential elections.

Economic sovereignty and economic security in current Russian official thinking

The key idea in Russian policy statements on economic sovereignty is that Russia must minimise its vulnerability to outside influences. In 2006, Vladislav Surkov, then a Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration, introduced his notion of sovereign democracy by saying that Russia wished to cooperate with other nations “according to just rules *and not to be managed from outside*”² (emphasis added).

These outside influences might come from deliberate actions targeted at Russia, such as sanctions, or they might be the result of the undirected working of markets. The frequently-expressed distaste for Russia becoming a “raw material appendage” (*pridatok*) of the West suggests the latter fear. This distaste is as much an expression of wounded pride as of economic anxiety, but the fear that primary producers have less control over their own fates than advanced and diverse economies seems to play a part.

In July 2015, the Russian Security Council instructed the Ministry of Economic Development to draft a new Economic Security strategy³. Nearly two years later, after inter-departmental vetting and amendment, the new doctrine on economic security appeared⁴. In it, the definition of economic security is

² V. Surkov, [“‘Nasha rossiiskaya model’ demokratii nazyvaetsya ‘suverenaya demokratiya’”](#) (‘Our Russian Model of Democracy’ is named ‘Sovereign Democracy’), address to United Russia officials, Moscow, 28 June 2006.

³ [“Nikolai Patrushev: Nuzhno razrabotat’ strategiyu ekonomicheskoi bezopasnosti Rossii”](#) (Nikolai Patrushev: It is necessary to develop an economic security strategy of Russia), *Pravda*, 3 July 2015

⁴ O strategii ekonomicheskoi bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii na period do

given as “the preservation of national sovereignty by defence against internal and external [economic] threats”⁵. The reference to internal threats is, at first sight, an anomaly. It becomes clear later in the document, however, that domestic sources of economic weakness are treated as threats to Russia’s economic security, along with external influences. This is a source of potential conflict within the policy-making process: the most plausible treatment of domestic economic weakness may require greater openness to the world economy (v. *infra*).

The document lists a number of concerns arising, it is claimed, from current circumstances. During the “transition from a unipolar to a multipolar world” instability increases: international markets fluctuate more; international debt is more unstable, and the natural-resource export model is undermined. In self-defence, Russia needs to achieve a “sufficient” level of technological independence and therefore lower “critical” dependence on imported technology. Strategic reserves of capacity must be created; the vetting of foreign direct investment in strategic industries must be strengthened; indicators to be monitored include the federal budget balance, both domestic and international debt, and inflation. The language about these indicators is vague, but the implication is that the public finances should be conservatively managed.

The economic security strategy is the work of several agencies, and it shows. It expresses concerns about low investment and even about property rights in Russia, as domestic sources of weakness. But there is no discussion of the opportunity cost of economic security measures in the form of potential gains from international integration forgone. It is as if gains from international trade and investment did not exist, which is weird, given Russian official position on regional economic integration and the benefits of the Eurasian Ec Union.

2030 (On the Economic Security Strategy of the Russian Federation until 2030), cit.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

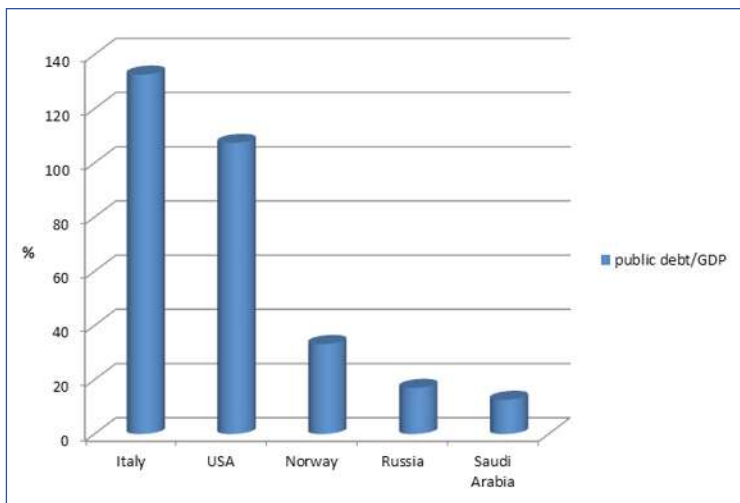
Controlling public debt

The current Russian official preoccupation with fiscal prudence may well be at least in part the result of a chastening experience in the Yeltsin era. In August 1998, the Russian government defaulted on part of its public debt, unilaterally restructuring its debt in GKO's (short-term state bonds). The GKO's were rouble-denominated but widely purchased by foreign investors and held by Russian banks that were themselves indebted to Western banks. Returns on the GKO's had touched 100% before the bubble burst. A Western bail-out launched a month earlier had failed to restore confidence in Russian finances⁶.

The default was followed by a burst of inflation, a seizing-up of Russian financial markets and a massive devaluation of the rouble. In the event, the rapid decline of the rouble from about 6 to the US dollar to over 20 helped to start the subsequent recovery, but the humiliation and the immediate losses to Russian banks and other investors were not forgotten. When rising oil prices brought the opportunity to run surpluses in the balance-of-payments current account and the federal budget, those surpluses were squirreled away in foreign currency reserves, the paying-down of foreign debt and the building-up of budgetary reserve funds. There was a net outflow of private capital, except in 2006 and 2007, as Russian businesspeople sought safe havens for their wealth while the policymakers in the financial and economic bloc of government pursued orthodox conservative policies of financial prudence. Both the state and the private sector were playing it safe. The result, as shown in Figure 1, is that Russia, like other oil-exporters, has very modest levels of sovereign debt.

⁶ P. Hanson, "The Russian Economic Crisis and the Future of Russian Economic Reform", in N.V. Chowdray (Ed.), *Global Economic Crises, An Introduction*, Hyderabad, ICAFI University Press, 2004, pp. 179-183.

FIG. 1 - RUSSIA AND SELECTED COUNTRIES:
GROSS PUBLIC DEBT AS A SHARE OF GDP, 2016 (%)



Source: IMF World Economic Outlook database, April 2017

Until early 2015, Russian sovereign debt had an investment-grade credit rating from all three major credit-rating agencies, Standard & Poor's, Moody's and Fitch. (At the time of writing, Russia's rating is below investment grade so far as the first two of these agencies are concerned). There has been a long period during which the Russian state could have borrowed abroad on good terms. Indeed, even in 2016, modest Eurobond offerings totalling \$3 billion were readily taken up, despite sanctions and credit ratings.

Fiscal prudence has been pursued for reasons of conservative financial policy, steered by two Finance Ministers: Aleksei Kudrin from 2000 to 2011 and then Anton Siluanov. But there is no question that this fiscal conservatism has been supported by President Vladimir Putin. If Putin had wanted more borrowing and fiscal stimulus, he would have got it. This budgetary caution fits well with the search for economic independence.

Borrowing abroad is a particularly sensitive issue. In autumn 2017, as the inter-departmental budget battle for 2018 heated up, the Ministry of Finance was reported as being simply unable to provide spending departments with the funds they sought over and above the expenditure plan for 2018, because the main budgetary reserve fund was almost completely used up and domestic financial markets were too small to provide the funding requested. The option of borrowing abroad was not mentioned⁷ (Butrin, 2017).

In recent Russian macro-economic policy, the case for austerity rather than stimulus is, in any case, strong: the economy lacks the spare capacity for real output to expand without inflation. That does not mean, however, that this conservative policy is without its costs. With public expenditure on state pensions and the military high and rising – at least through 2015 –, state investment in human capital (healthcare and education) has been squeezed. These are precisely the expenditure headings that former Finance Minister Aleksei Kudrin, in high-profile reform proposals, wants to see growing⁸.

Dependence on oil

Countries in which exports of primary products are large relative to GDP face certain risks. The prices of those exports are likely to be volatile. The availability of natural resource rents may keep incentives for enterprises lower than in countries where those rents are not present and may provide more scope for corrupt relations between the state and businesses.

The existence of these risks does not mean that nations that are rich in natural resources are necessarily handicapped in their

⁷ D. Butrin, “[Den’gi ne pukhnut](#)” (Money doesn’t smell), *Kommersant*, 8 September 2017.

⁸ T. Lomskaya, “[Kudrin predlozhit Putinu zanyat’sya obrazovaniem i zdorov’em](#)” (Kudrin proposed to Putin to tackle education and healthcare), *Vedomosti*, 6 September 2017.

economic performance. Norway, a developed country with a high “dependence” on oil and gas exports, has strong open-society institutions and a robust system for managing its hydrocarbon wealth.

Russia, however, has struggled to cope efficiently with its wealth of oil, gas, coal, and metals – particularly oil and gas. Before the oil price decline of 2014, oil and gas accounted for about two-thirds of Russian exports, and revenue from them covered around a half of federal government spending. By heavily taxing oil and gas and, from 2004, channelling a substantial part of the revenue into reserve funds, the government succeeded to some extent in insulating the domestic economy from oil-price fluctuations; but not completely.

In the boom years, state spending crept up with the oil price, and that price was the dominant influence on the rouble/dollar exchange rate. Moreover, natural resource rents were used to prop up, by both formal and informal transfers, inefficient economic activity in other sectors⁹.

When the oil price fell in late 2014, the pressures on the budget and the exchange rate of the rouble were intense. This served as a reminder that both fiscal prudence and economic security required stronger insulation of the budget and the domestic economy from the oil market.

First, the federal budget for 2017-19 was planned with a conservative oil-price assumption (annual average oil price) of \$40 per barrel (/b).

Next, there was an attempt to create legislation that would lock in a reduction in the budget's sensitivity to the oil price. On 5 July 2017, the Duma approved at first reading a rule that oil and gas budget revenues accruing from an oil price above \$40/b must be channelled into the Reserve Fund and not into current spending – \$40/b being the cut-off point in 2017, rising by an annual 2% in subsequent years as an adjustment to US inflation¹⁰.

⁹ C.G. Gaddy and B.W. Ickes, “Putin’s rent management system and the future of addiction in Russia”, in S. Oxenstierna (Ed.), *The Challenges for Russia’s Politicized Economic System*, Abingdon, Routledge, pp. 11-33.

¹⁰ V. Visloguzov, “[“Gosduma vzyalas’ za pravilo”](#)” (The Duma has taken a stance),

Earlier “budget rules” have been based on a similar objective but this is the strongest version adopted thus far. It remains possible for the leadership to suspend the rule, with the endorsement of the Duma; but with “economic security” at stake, that will not be done lightly. The funds thus sterilised should in principle remain in the Reserve Fund – largely depleted at the time of writing but allowed by the same legislative amendment to the Budget Code to be replenished from the National Welfare Fund.

If this rule is respected and the Urals oil price stays mainly above \$40/b, the budget and the economy at large should cease to be hostages to the international oil market. All being well, the budgetary reserves would be built up for use in another oil-market downturn. The objectives of fiscal prudence and economic security would both be served.

There is, however, a political catch. Strict adherence to the budget rule would limit the scope of what Gaddy and Ickes describe as Putin’s rent management system. Funds to buy off business lobbies and to look after Putin’s cronies would be more tightly rationed. The effects on intra-elite tensions could be to exacerbate them.

Import substitution

In September 2017, the Russian government submitted to the Duma draft legislation that would require all state-controlled companies to seek government approval for the purchase of aircraft, helicopters, and ships from abroad¹¹. On 8 September, President Putin told IT specialists in Perm’ to cut down on their use of imported hardware and software for security reasons. They told him that 90% of the hardware currently employed in

Kommersant, 6 July 2017.

¹¹ A. Vorob’ev, A. Toporkov and D. Beloglazova, “[Goskompaniyam pridetsya soglasovyyat’ s pravitel’stvom pokupku samoletov, vertoletov i sudov](#)” (The Oil companies will have to coordinate with the government on the purchase of planes, helicopters and boats), *Vedomosti*, 10 September 2017.

Russia and 70% of the software was imported – so there was a long way to go¹². These were simply new steps in the development of the Russian state's import substitution campaign – another element in the search for economic security.

That campaign has its precursors in Russian economic policy, but the import substitution campaign that can be observed today began with three presidential instructions issued in May 2014, following the West's first round of asset-freezes and visa bans but before the broader financial sanctions that were to follow in the summer¹³.

The government was instructed to assess the possibility of “competitive import substitution in industry and agriculture”, and to do so in two-and-a-half months; to compile (in just one more month) a list of goods and services that could be purchased by the state from producers within the Eurasian Economic Union; and, in one further month, to work out plans for implementing import substitution.

So far as can be judged from published reports, these instructions came out of the blue. In April, there had been a discussion led by the President of the problem of supplies of military equipment from Ukraine and what to do if they were halted by Kiev. That is the nearest reported high-level discussions came to focussing on import substitution before May 2014.

Meetings, legislation, and state spending followed. A Government Commission on Import Substitution, chaired by Prime Minister Medvedev, was established. Subsidised credits from the Fund for the Development of Industry have been deployed to encourage import-substituting production. The Ministry of Industry and Trade has a leading role in the campaign, under the government commission¹⁴.

¹² “[Vstrecha s predstavitel'yami informatsionnogo klastera Permskogo kraya](#)” (A meeting among the representatives of the information cluster of Permskij Krai); 8 September 2017.

¹³ R. Connolly and P. Hanson, *Import Substitution and Economic Sovereignty in Russia*, Chatham House Russia and Eurasia Programme Research Paper, June, p. 10.

¹⁴ For more details and Russian sources, see *ibid.*

The scope and scale of the campaign are not easy to determine. In 2015, there were said to be 570 import-substitution investment projects under 19 branch programmes. How many of them were (a) real and (b) in existence only because of the campaign, is impossible to say. In the same year, the Fund for the Development of Industry reportedly allocated a modest R20 billion to 59 projects. That suggests activity on a limited scale.

The import substitution programme is intended to reduce Russia's dependence on foreign technology by building up domestic production of high-quality equipment and know-how in a range of industries, from farm machinery to IT. Domestic production appears to include inward foreign direct investment, leading to production by foreign subsidiaries or joint ventures – though this is not stressed.

A programme of this sort carries risks. It entails micro-management by the state, which can be a source of inefficiency. Excluding foreign suppliers from a market reduces the pressure of competition, slowing the innovation, quality-improvement, and cost-reduction that a producer would otherwise have to undertake in order to survive. Even if the exclusion of imports is planned at first to be for a limited period, the resulting protection may create an effective lobby for extending restrictions, organised by the firm or firms protected.

It may be possible for a nimble, efficient state agency to manage an import-substitution programme of limited scope and duration – preferably one that focuses on areas of real competitive potential – without succumbing to these risks. But few would describe the Russian state as nimble and efficient. There has been no shortage of domestic critics highlighting these risks and calling either for a scrapping of the campaign or at least a cautious and moderate approach to it.

One of the more discreet and tactful critics has been the Prime Minister, Dmitrii Medvedev. This is, at any rate, the gist of an article in the journal *Voprosy ekonomiki* that bears

his name¹⁵. Perhaps he did not write it, but it is to be hoped that at least he read it, for it contains some sound advice for the chairman of the Government Commission on Import Substitution (Medvedev himself): countries that have joined the selected group of leading economies have not done so by restricting trade; cooperation with the West will at some point be resumed; and import-substitution should not become the “slogan of the day”.

Others have made the point that protection reduces competition and therefore incentives to efficiency, and that even “temporary” protection tends to endure¹⁶.

In the event, cuts to state spending have probably done more than the critics to curb expenditure on import substitution projects. Such expenditure restrictions will have more impact on investment funding for these projects than on the bans on state procurement, for example, of imported furniture¹⁷. The latter may incur costs in the form of higher prices for the purchasing departments but any such effect is indirect and less easily observed than the cost of an investment programme.

At the same time, changes in the exchange rate of the rouble against the dollar and the euro tended for much of 2014-16 to favour import-substitution, regardless of the campaign. What the campaign and a favourable exchange rate seem to have failed to do is to create momentum in Russia's domestic production.

The import substitution campaign has been primarily about industry and IT. There has also been a new protectionism in agriculture: the counter-sanctions¹⁸. Unlike the import substitution campaign, the counter-sanctions were officially and

¹⁵ D. Medvedev, “[Novaya real'nost': Rossiya i global'niye vyzovy](#)” (A new reality: Russia and global challenges), *Voprosy ekonomiki*, no. 10, 2015, pp. 3-29.

¹⁶ See for example, Igor Nikolaev blog on Ekho Moskv, 13 September 2017, [“Teper' i bez inostranoi mebeli”](#) (‘Now’ and without foreign furnitures).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ R. Connolly and P. Hanson (2016), pp. 17-18; A. Kostyrev, [“Plody zapreshcheniya”](#) (The forbidden fruit), *Kommersant*, 7 August 2017.

explicitly a response to Western sanctions. Introduced in the summer of 2014 and periodically renewed, they are an embargo on the import of most food items from those countries that had imposed sanctions on Russia.

There are some leakages around the embargo, including the invention of Belarusian prawns, but the counter-sanctions unquestionably provide some protection for Russian farming. Have they stimulated growth in farm output? It is the case that value added in agriculture, fishing, and forestry grew at 3.3% a year in 2014-16 while Russia's overall GDP was falling¹⁹. But that comparison probably gives too favourable a view of the effect of counter-sanctions. The farm sector also benefitted from the weaker rouble and good weather conditions, and had not been doing badly before 2014. Still, the counter-sanctions very likely helped.

This particular policy raises a number of issues. First, complaints about higher food prices and lower quality resulting from the counter-sanctions are said to be common. The embargo is estimated to have added R4,400 a year (€65) to average food bills²⁰. Second, the stimulus to production may be limited in its impact by uncertainty about the duration of the embargo. This is suggested by the contrast between falling beef-herd numbers and rising numbers of pigs on Russian farms: the former require longer-term investment planning than the latter. Third, the protected sector, as usual, seeks to prolong the protection. The Minister of Agriculture, Aleksandr Tkachev, has said he would like to see the counter-sanctions lasting for ten years²¹.

Protectionist policies in general – both the import substitution campaign and the counter-sanctions – build up lobbies for their perpetuation. Now that antagonism between Moscow and Washington is entrenched, there may be a long period in which international political pressure for dismantling these protectionist measures is lacking. Therefore, the lobbies may

¹⁹ Rosstat, http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/vvp/vvp-god/tab11.htm

²⁰ A. Kostyrev (2017).

²¹ *Ibid.*

have their way without having to try too hard. Most economists see net benefits accruing to most countries from freer trade and investment, and will treat this as bad news for the Russian economy.

Economic security, as defined in the 2017 strategy, might be held to justify the cost of this protectionism. But a main aim set out in the strategy is to reduce Russia's dependence on imports of advanced technology by developing a broad range of internationally-competitive high-tech production in Russia, and that may be particularly hard to achieve. It is one thing to put up with an absence of Camembert and stylish furniture, and make do with home-made substitutes. It is quite another to make do with a lack of advanced gas turbines or computers. Catching up in high technology without either close links with the world's leading companies or the stimulus of competition is, to put it mildly, challenging.

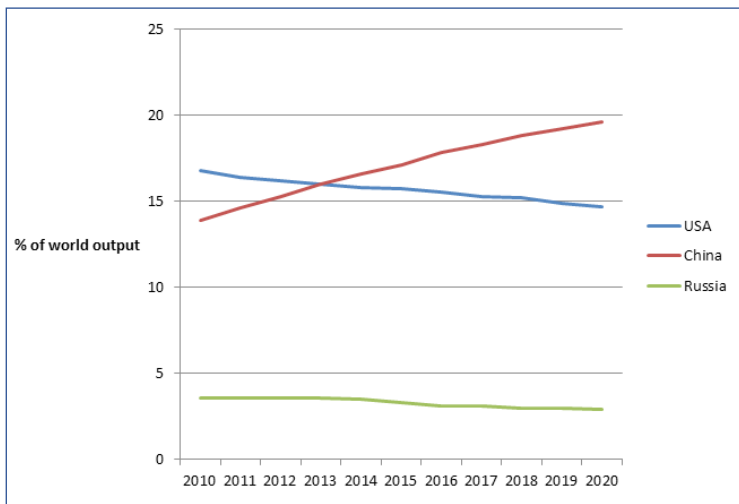
Faster growth

In the 2017 strategy there is a list of indicators of Russia's national economic security²². They include measures of sustainability of the public finances, such as the ratio of public debt to GDP and the size of the budget deficit – topics already discussed above – but the list also contains GDP per capita at purchasing power parity and Russia's share of global output: in other words, the country's levels of productivity and prosperity and its economic weight in the world. The experience of economic 'stagnation' since about 2012 is a source of deep concern for the Russian leadership. It brings with it fears of popular discontent and a loss of international influence.

Russia's changing share of world output since 2010 is shown in Chart 2 alongside the equivalent shares of China and the United States. The projections through 2020 are those of the IMF.

²² О стратегии экономической безопасности Россииской Федератсии на период до 2030, cit., p. 17.

FIG. 2 - SHARES OF GLOBAL OUTPUT AT PURCHASING POWER PARITY, UNITED STATES, CHINA AND RUSSIA 2010-2016 ESTIMATED AND 2017-20 PROJECTED (%)



Source: IMF World Economic Outlook database, April 2017

Russia has an economy that is much smaller than those of China or America and much less productive than that of America. But for the leadership's sense of geopolitical progress, so far as that can be judged, the real challenge is that Russia has ceased, at any rate for the time being, to "catch up" – to have a growing economic weight in the world.

Nor does this seem likely to change in the near future. The IMF's view of Russian prospects is shared by the majority of independent forecasters. In the August 2017 poll of twenty-four forecasters by the Development Centre of Moscow's Higher School of Economics the median forecast was for 1.4% GDP growth in 2017, edging up to 1.8% in 2023²³.

²³ <https://dcenter.hse.ru/prog2/>

The reasons for this are, in short, the following. The inputs of both capital and labour into production have been stagnating, and at least in the case of labour will continue to do so, for demographic reasons. Investment in human capital, upgrading health, skills, and knowledge, is widely perceived also to be languishing. The output might still be made to grow faster if the introduction and diffusion of new products and processes and investment in both human and physical capital were to accelerate. But the private sector is deterred from innovation and investment by its vulnerability to asset-grabbing by, typically, a collusive combination of corrupt officials and business rivals with better access to political favours. In other words, their property rights cannot reliably be defended²⁴.

This is a systemic problem, and the loss of dynamism in the economy since 2012 may perhaps be associated with a worsening of an already-poor ecosystem for private business. Anders Aslund suggests that the period from 2012 on has been characterised by a combination of crony and state capitalism – the state's share of the economy growing while the private sector is increasingly dominated by a small group of associates of President Putin²⁵. At all events, uncertainty appears to have increased for most of the Russian businesses, though not for friends of Putin. The state, even if it were in principle capable of injecting vitality into the economy, has been limited by its own adherence to financial orthodoxy.

One response to “stagnation” has been a search for a new economic strategy that could lead to faster growth. The official objective is a sustained growth rate faster than the global average, so that Russia might increase its share of global output by 2020. It is not yet clear whether the new strategy is to be unveiled as part of Putin's presidential campaign or only after the presidential election. It may well be that the more alluring

²⁴ For an extended description and discussion of this problem, see P. Hanson, *Reiderstvo: Asset-Grabbing in Russia*, Chatham House paper, 2014.

²⁵ A. Aslund, *Russia's Crony Capitalism: Stagnant but Stable*, CASE Seminar Proceedings no. 148, 2017.

parts of the programme will be on show during the election campaign and the less alluring bits afterwards. A rise in the retirement age would be an example of the latter.

The search for a new strategy has been conducted as a competition between contending drafts, the main ones being three. There is the government's own version, drafted by the Ministry of Economic Development (MED). Then there are the drafts proposed by two civil organisations – the Stolypin Club (SC), led by the presidential ombudsman for business, Boris Titov, and the Centre for Strategic Research (CSR) led by former finance minister Aleksei Kudrin – with quite different visions of the way ahead. The CSR has had by far the most media attention but has kept the details of its proposed plan secret. However, Kudrin and the CSR have put out so much material that their preferences are clear. What is not clear is how many of their declared preferences are incorporated in their proposals to President Putin.

The MED “target” scenario includes a very moderate loosening of fiscal austerity compared with present policy, and the ritual advocacy of an improved environment for business. An earlier version sought curbs on real wage growth to boost corporate profits and thus investment but that seems to have faded from view.

The centrepiece of the SC plan is fiscal and monetary stimulus. The government deficit should be kept at 3% of GDP – modest enough by Western standards but shocking to the Russian Ministry of Finance – funded by foreign loans and a monetary emission of R1.5 trillion. The debt of small and medium enterprises should be restructured. And there is the usual call for an improved business climate – for which Titov has campaigned for years²⁶.

Orthodox critics of the SC proposals argue that they might briefly boost output but that in the medium and longer term

²⁶ A. Prokopenko, [“Stolypinskii klub napisal al'ternativu kontseptsii Kudrina”](#) (The Stolypin club wrote an alternative to Kudrin's concept), *Vedomosti*, 1 March 2017.

their main consequence would be inflation. Unemployment is low and so, according to Rosstat, is spare capacity, so the critics have a point. In any case, the whole direction of fiscal and monetary policy, backed by Putin, is one of caution. Yes, the leaders want faster growth, in part for security reasons, but they also fear debt and inflation, also for security reasons. They would have to be convinced that there was no alternative route to faster growth before they would even consider following the advice contained in the SC plan.

The CSR proposals, insofar as they can be inferred from CSR reports and Kudrin's articles, are for continued fiscal restraint plus liberal reform. They include some increase in the share of state spending allocated to health-care and education, offset by a drop in the shares allocated to "unproductive" uses; a step-by-step rise in the pension age; substantial privatisation; reform of state administration; and measures to improve the business climate including reforms to make the courts more independent²⁷.

The "unproductive" expenditure headings that Kudrin earmarks for relative reduction include defence and the category "security and law enforcement". The former share should, in Kudrin's budget manoeuvre, edge down over seven years (2017-24) from 3.1 to 2.8% of GDP; the latter from 2.3 to 1.8%. If, boosted by reforms, the economy were to grow at an average rate of 3% a year, these diminished shares would still allow defence spending to increase marginally in absolute terms. But they would shave a little off security and law enforcement. If ever a proposal was designed to annoy the *siloviki* – the security bosses – this is it. It labels their life's work 'unproductive' and offers to reduce the resources made available to them by the state. Is this really part of the CSR proposal to Putin, which has not been made public, or is it merely a sideshow designed to please the liberal intelligentsia?

²⁷ Centre for Strategic Research (CSR) presentation on reform, <http://csr.ru/wp-content/2017/01/GF4.pdf>; T. Lomskaya (2017).

If the CSR proposal to Putin includes a downsizing of the security establishment, privatisation of leading banks and energy companies, and the establishment of an independent judiciary – all aims that Kudrin and CSR have publicly espoused – it would amount to a complete re-fashioning of Russia's political economy. Putin and his close associates may indeed be concerned about Russia's slow growth, but are they so concerned that they would risk that sort of change?

Conclusion. Conflicting aims and political obstacles

There are two underlying problems that impede Russia's search for economic invulnerability. One is that the conditions for economic security as officially defined are not mutually compatible. The other is that one of those conditions – faster growth – may be at odds with the interests of the political elite.

Conflicting aims. Dennison's First Law is as follows. *The simultaneous pursuit of diametrically opposed objectives sometimes leads to difficulties* (Stanley Dennison, liberal Cambridge economist). Governments of all kinds in all places are apt to run into difficulties of this sort. Policies pursued in contemporary Russia in the name of economic security have been no exception.

Russia approaches the 2018 presidential elections with an array of policies designed to maintain, among other purposes, the nation's economic security: fiscal and monetary conservatism, the sterilisation of the inflow of petro-dollars, import-substitution, and the boosting of growth. But the objectives these measures are meant to serve are not all amenable to the same treatment.

The biggest conflict is between faster growth and protectionism. There may be occasions when protecting a particular line of production stimulates innovation and growth in the industry that is protected, so that it becomes internationally competitive. And there are some lines of production where security in the broad sense makes it desirable at least for some states

to cultivate an independent national capability: fighter aircraft, for example. But protectionism reduces competitive pressure on the protected producers and less competition generally means less incentive to cut costs and to innovate. And if that loss of competitive pressure is the main result of a policy such as Russia's import-substitution, then the policy's net effect is slower growth and faster inflation. But growth and price stability are themselves objectives of the search for economic security.

Import substitution is particularly problematic in an era when IT permeates all economic activity. Russian companies have done well in a number of areas while subject to international competition: anti-virus software and social networks, for example. But in payments systems, e-commerce, and computer hardware and software more generally²⁸ the country is a very long way from technological independence and is having difficulty trying to achieve it. Perhaps the attempt to establish home-made alternatives to the likes of Google and American Express is a costly impediment to domestic prosperity. The rest of the world, if it ever tried, has long since given up. And domestic prosperity, after all, is one of the implicit objectives of "economic security".

The problem of elite interests. Finally, there is the problem of the political acceptability of the different growth proposals. This matters. In the long run, the issue of growth is the most important item on the economic security agenda.

Some of the measures proposed in one or more of the competing draft strategies stand a chance of implementation – at least in part. There will probably be more effort put into the digitalisation and other streamlining of public administration, for example. It would not be too difficult to imagine the pension age being raised – in small steps and after the election. On the perennial subject of the "business environment" there is already an attempt to make the system of control and inspection by regulatory agencies less pervasive than it currently is. And if in the medium term the oil price remains well above \$40/b,

²⁸ Kremlin (2017).

more room might be found for an expansion of public funding of healthcare and education – without an offsetting contraction in spending on security and law-enforcement.

One proposal runs up against the very notion of economic security: the Stolypin Club's stimulus plan. It sets off alarm bells: it carries a risk of higher debt and faster inflation. Does the stimulus look capable of generating enough growth to support additions to budget revenue that would restore the public finances to a healthy condition? No. But even if it did, it would go against the grain of Putin's implied policy preferences.

The most problematic recommendation of all is the one that is common to all the draft strategies: that the environment for business should be improved. This is probably the most important recommendation of all. What would be required to reduce the uncertainty experienced by private companies because of the threat of asset-grabbing and unpredictable bribery demands? (If the "bribe tax" is predictable, it can be planned for, and ceases to be a source of uncertainty). What is needed is almost certainly more than the minor adjustments planned for the control and inspection system. Kudrin and the CSR have called for the establishment of an independent judiciary. Whether that is in their proposal to Putin is unknown, but they have at any rate raised the issue, as have others before them. There have also been proposals to take a number of economic offences out of the criminal code and deal with them under civil law. These two measures, and particularly the first one, would drastically reduce the ability of officials to force targeted businesspeople to surrender all or part of their businesses.

The absence of a rule of law adequately protecting property rights is widely understood in Russia to be a fundamental impediment to investment and innovation. Members of the political elite, or at least the technocrats and pragmatists among them, understand this as well as anyone. The trouble is that this move towards an open-access society would impinge on their own elite interests, for three reasons.

First, lower-level officials are used to “feeding” off those they supervise and regulate. This is part of a set of arrangements to keep them loyal to the system. Indeed, it is part of the system.

Second, this system keeps those lower-level officials in a state of suspended punishment, because bribery and asset-grabbing are illegal and these illegalities can always be used against them by the higher authorities. That underpins obedience. Finally, the members of the political elite themselves would be vulnerable to a proper enforcement of the law.

For these reasons, the establishment of a rule of law remains a distant prospect. If the protection of property rights is a necessary condition for Russia's escape from “stagnation”, the present system is likely to endure, and sluggish growth with it. In the long run, that would be damaging to Russia's economic security.

6. Russia and the West: A Possible Thaw in Relations?

Giancarlo Aragona

An essay on Russia and the West must first examine whether, in the post-Cold War era, the definition of the West as a block of cohesive countries facing Russia is still valid. The answer can only be a qualified yes.

The geopolitical reality in the Euro-Atlantic area has changed drastically since the early Nineties. In parallel, the Euro-American relationship has undergone transformations. As a consequence, also the notion of West *vis à vis* Moscow cannot be immune from an evolutionary process.

The election of Donald Trump to the White House has added a further element of uncertainty to the way western solidarity is interpreted by the country which has always functioned as the undisputed leader of the block.

During the Cold War, the US, through NATO¹ and other channels, set the tone of the relations with Moscow. The allies, facing the massive Soviet threat, paid maximum attention to safeguarding their cohesion and to acting in unison towards the USSR. The existence of some room for *manoeuvre*, especially in trade and industrial areas, should not be overestimated. Italy was a case in point. It never departed from its strong commitment to loyal participation in sharing the burdens of the common defence, but pragmatically entertained active industrial and commercial relations with Moscow.

¹ The North Atlantic Treaty was signed on 4 April 1949 by twelve founding members, and entered into force on 24 August 1949. The Warsaw pact, officially Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance, was signed on 14 May 1955 by the Soviet Union and seven Soviet satellite states of Central and Eastern Europe.

Soviet leaders were keen to consider the White House their counterpart in the then bipolar world. They felt comfortable in this situation. It substantiated the USSR claim of superpower status and guaranteed a high degree of stability and predictability, which were and remain constant objectives of Russian foreign policy. This never discouraged Moscow from taking advantage of opportunities to weaken Western cohesion and drive wedges in the Euro-American link, also by exploiting the presence of strong communist parties in certain European members of NATO². These attempts by and large always failed.

The demise of Soviet communism and the end of the Warsaw Pact³, together with evolutions in the global balance of power, changed the way Western solidarity was intended and enacted. However, despite the transformative impact on the world dynamics of the end of the Cold War, we can safely say that Transatlantic cohesion, and NATO's relevance under the guidance of the US, have been safeguarded.

Is the Trump presidency going to change this consolidated scenario? How will it impact on the very notion of "West", and on its relations with Russia? How will the election to the White House of a President whose interpretation of American interests and approach to the exercise of power differs substantially from the doctrine and practice of all post-war administrations?

It is legitimate to debate how much remains of the shared values and solidarity regarding common security which, at the time, deterred the Soviet Union and successfully confronted its system of domination in central and Eastern Europe, and beyond.

² Two examples being the Parti communiste français and the Partito Comunista Italiano, West European communist parties were similar to their counterparts in the Soviet bloc, as they were subordinated to Moscow and connected both ideologically and doctrinally to the Soviet model of socialism.

³ The Warsaw Pact, officially Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance, was signed on 14 May 1955 by the Soviet Union and seven Soviet satellite states of Central and Eastern Europe.

As yet, there is no definitive evidence that this administration accepts that the meaning of “West” goes beyond a vaguely defined commonality of the values of democracy, rule of law, and free market economy to comprise crucial practical dimensions.

It is worth remembering the President’s initial scathing comments about NATO, comments which he later amended when attending his first alliance summit in Taormina. The iteration of the “America first” principle by Trump, together with his and his electoral base’s isolationist instincts, are additional reasons for concern. It might, therefore, become increasingly complicated to maintain the unity and cohesion of the Western camp, especially since it is still unclear how this administration intends to exercise the leadership of the Euro-American community. This is due to altering Moscow’s perceptions and strategies.

We have entered a phase of great fluidity, concerning both the dynamics within the West and between the West and Russia. To this day, as during the Cold War era, Russia still considers the United States as the decisive global player against which to measure its weight in the world, and the Western allies as Washington’s complement of power in Europe and beyond. This explains why the determining feature of the Western Russian relationship remains the quality of the interaction and dialogue between Moscow and Washington. It might seem an understatement to say that this relationship has become increasingly tense and difficult. As Secretary of State Rex Tillerson stated at the end of his last visit to Moscow, relations between Washington and Moscow are at an unprecedented low.

This paper argues that, in the short-medium term a relaxation of tensions is unlikely between Washington and Moscow and, as a consequence, between Russia and the group of countries defined as the West. To predict future scenarios, and answer the question whether and under what circumstances a thaw would be possible, it is necessary to examine how we have reached the present state of affairs.

Optimism at the birth of post-Soviet Russia

Events in the following decades have shown that, in reality, relations between the West and Moscow have oscillated between phases of apparent understanding and cooperation and periods of mistrust and tension. In the early nineties, many in Russia sincerely hoped that, with Western support, the country, whose Tsarist and Soviet ballast added to its enormous geographical, religious, and ethnic complexities and differences, would in time become a modern and well-functioning democracy and market economy, accepted as an equal by the West.

Although with different views and degrees of conviction, in the United States and Europe there was widespread expectation that Russia could develop into a mature democracy, comfortable in the international community in spite of its diminished power and influence, and, most importantly, a genuine partner of the West⁴. In hindsight, this hope underestimated the frustration of Russian elites and large sections of public opinion for the loss of power, if not of formal status, following the end of the Soviet Union and of the Warsaw Pact, *vis à vis* the consolidation of Western (and American in particular) dominance. This mood fuelled a feeling of profound disappointment with the way the economy had been hurriedly transformed from collectivism into wild capitalism, where corruption and opaque connections dictated the results, to the benefit of the few and the detriment of most of the population.

The serious financial and economic crisis of the late nineties concluded a phase in the still young history of post-Soviet Russia and opened new perspectives in which foreign and domestic policy interplayed, sometimes perversely, in shaping

⁴ As stated by the political economist Francis Fukuyama “The End of History”, *The National Interest*, Summer 1989: “What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalisation of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government”.

the country's future course. Western-Russian frictions reflected clashes of interests but also revealed different readings of the end of the Soviet Union. The West (correctly, from its point of view) saw the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet empire as the triumph of its values and system of government. Russians, understandably from their perspective, interpreted these events, at best, as processes to which they had contributed in order to move towards economic and political freedom. And they expected to be adequately rewarded. At worst, they resented what many saw as a national humiliation, which, in time, fuelled a deeply ingrained nationalism.

Russia in front of NATO and UE enlargement

The decisions to enlarge NATO and the European Union, portrayed by their members as a way to extend stability, freedom, and economic growth to a larger circle of countries on the continent, were perceived by Russians as a rollback of their influence and an infringement of what they considered their areas of primary interest. These feelings were accentuated when countries once part of the Soviet empire, such as the Baltic States, became involved in the enlargement processes⁵.

Suspicious and resentment in Moscow were compounded by signals that the US and its allies, stretching the perimeter of the responsibility to protect and bring stability to far away countries or regions in crisis, were determined to claim the right of military intervention without UN endorsement whenever a consensus in the security council proved impossible.

The modalities of NATO intervention in the Yugoslav crisis caused profound resentment in Russia, especially the support to Kosovo's secession from Serbia. Moscow's suspicions grew in the following decade when neoconservatives around President Bush began to theorize unilateralism in international affairs and the export of democracy.

⁵ By April 1999, NATO had already welcomed the three Baltic States into its ranks, while the countries entered the European Community on 1 May 2004.

Facing these trends in US foreign policy, which European allies followed with varying degrees of conviction, Moscow attempted to counter by hardening its obstructionist attitude in the UN Security Council, where it could exercise the right of veto, and by strongly condemning any action which sidelined the United Nations. This behaviour was interpreted and denounced by the United States and other western leaders as confirmation that the Kremlin was not accepting the new rules which, at least in their view, should have presided over the management of the post-Cold War international order.

Many, in the United States and Europe, argued that it was the uncooperative attitude of Russia which sometimes made it necessary to circumvent the United Nations in order to avoid the paralysis of the international community in situations of imminent humanitarian catastrophes, genocides, etc.

The concept of effective multilateralism began to take shape in American and European foreign policy circles as an attempt to reconcile the preservation of multilateral frameworks with the ability by coalitions of countries to take prompt action in the event of a crisis. With their cumbersome procedures and, above all, the need to enlist the consent of the veto powers, Russia and China, for any decision, the United Nations were the obvious target of this innovative approach. In Russia, the combination of economic chaos and national loss of direction ignited a process of progressive centralisation of power, in what came to be later theorised as managed democracy. The gap in values with the West, somehow swept under the carpet in the years of euphoria, began to emerge. As it became gradually more evident, the Russian establishment, with the exception of marginal liberal and westernised circles, started to take pride in the return to old Russian values, rediscovering *inter alia* the religious roots of the motherland, in contrast to a decadent West.

The system of government perfected in the long Putin years⁶ epitomizes this evolution. Significant consequences followed both in terms of domestic and foreign policy. These negative factors in Russian-Western relations did not preclude periods of solidarity, for instance after the Twin Towers attack in New York, or of rapprochement, as at the NATO-Russia Summit in Pratica di Mare⁷. Paradoxically, though, these apparently positive moments paved the way for subsequent frustration and negative developments. Moscow felt that its show of solidarity and signals of goodwill to the United States and its European allies did not elicit the expected rewards. The euphoria following the Pratica di Mare Summit rapidly evaporated as Russia felt that NATO was not adopting the changes in its procedures, postures, and programmes warranted by the spirit, if not the letter, of the summit results.

On the western side, especially in Washington, London, and Eastern European capitals, convictions took hold that Moscow was aiming at weakening NATO or trying to morph it into a security organisation, an OSCE maybe with more teeth – in any case, no more the pillar of Western defence and solidarity, under American leadership.

A new phase of tension started when NATO's Bucharest Summit in 2008⁸ announced that Ukraine and Georgia could in time join the alliance. The ensuing Russian military intervention in Georgia in support of the separatist moves of Abkhazia and South Ossetia caused strong condemnation in Western capitals. With a parallelism which must have sounded suspicious to Moscow, the European Union in 2009 launched the Eastern

⁶ Leader of United Russia: 7 May 2008 - 26 May 2012; Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Union State: 7 May 2008 - 18 July 2012; 34th and 38th Prime Minister of Russia: 16 August 1999 - 7 May 2000 and 8 May 2008 - 7 May 2012; 2nd and 4th President of Russia: 7 May 2000 - 7 May 2008 and 7 May 2012 - today.

⁷ NATO - Russia Council, [Rome Summit 2002](#).

⁸ Official Texts, [Bucharest Summit Declaration](#), NATO, last updated, 8 May 2014.

European partnership⁹ and, as a follow-up, in 2013 it started association negotiations with Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and Armenia.

Russia, firmly under President Putin nationalistic and semi-authoritarian leadership, saw its fears confirmed that the West was encroaching upon what was part of the Tsarist and Soviet empires and what still saw as its traditional and rightful sphere of interest and influence. These steps have progressively heightened Russia-Western tensions whose most immediate causes are well known: the annexation of Crimea by Russia and its destabilising activities in Eastern Ukraine, the divergences of approach over Syria and more generally over a future Middle East settlement, Moscow's interference in the electoral and political processes of the US and European countries.

All these factors have brought relations between Moscow and the United States to the level eloquently described by Secretary of State Tillerson. The same applies to the relations with EU countries, although among the latter group views and sensitivities concerning Russia differ, even significantly. Against this background, in the short-medium term, a thaw between Russia and the West is highly unlikely.

Several things would need to take place in order to make it happen, even without taking into account the complications represented by the Trump presidency and the implacable scrutiny to which any of its moves concerning Russia is submitted. It is a fair assessment that the White House is to all practical effects paralyzed where Moscow is concerned.

This might sound paradoxical since the President is suspected of being over favourably disposed towards the Kremlin, and for opaque reasons, while evidence is mounting of the latter's meddling in the US presidential elections in order to damage Hillary Clinton.

The turn of events in Washington, where Congress and a special counsel are looking into this matter, leading to the

⁹ European Commission, European Neighbourhood Policy And Enlargement Negotiations, *Eastern Partnership What is it?*.

indictment of people dangerously close to Trump, has created a situation whereby any policy initiative aimed at engaging Moscow in dialogue would raise the worst suspicions and be labelled as a sell-out of the US and allies security. This presidency is still very young, its shortcomings in the foreign policy sector (and not only concerning Russia), are not being repaired, and the polarisation of the American political debate is not abating. Barring the impeachment of the President, a perspective pursued by his opponents but complicated to achieve, the Trump factor in constraining a thaw with Russia seems therefore destined to stay with the US for some time. Besides, it is an open question whether President Putin, with Russian presidential elections approaching and the Trump presidency under siege, would be interested in changing Moscow's attitude towards Washington, and the West in general, or in making compromises.

In any case, the premature termination of the current presidential mandate would produce a trauma in the orderly functioning of the government in Washington. The return to normal would not be immediate, and the foreign policy views of Vice President Mike Pence are not clear. In the meantime, the American international role would be diminished.

The Ukrainian crisis

Despite this unpromising background, it is useful to highlight what in principle would be needed, from both sides, to move towards a thaw between the West and Russia. The most urgent requirement, particularly from a European perspective, is progress on the Ukrainian crisis, with the implementation of the Minsk agreements by all sides. In this respect, the main responsibilities fall on Russia, because of its encouragement and support to the secessionist movement in South-eastern Ukraine, as well as of its annexation of Crimea. In Moscow, the events in Ukraine are read, and genuinely believed by many in the population, in terms radically different from the way they are perceived by Kiev, the United States, and the European Union.

Fundamentally, the Kremlin's version represents what happened in Ukraine as the result of manoeuvres by Washington's and its more anti-Russian allies aimed at installing a subservient regime in Kiev, severing Moscow's deep-rooted links to Ukraine with blood and family connections going back for centuries, and putting in jeopardy the Russian naval base in the Crimean city of Sebastopol. Hence, the reaction of the people of Southern Ukraine and the population of Crimea, where pro-Russian sentiments are dominant, which Moscow could not ignore. This reading of the events is self-serving and distorts reality.

The way in which the then European Commission managed the negotiations of the association agreement is open to serious criticism. Brussels underestimated the deep divisions and emotions in Ukraine over relations with Russia, as well as Moscow's deep apprehension about the geopolitical and strategic positioning of a country so meaningful to Russian identity and once vital component of the Tsarist and Soviet empires. However, Moscow's intervention can in no way be represented as a necessitated response to those events.

Russia must accept that history cannot be reversed and that, in respect to Ukraine, as to other countries which have emerged from the disintegration of the Soviet Union, it has no right nor possibility to constrain their sovereign choices. This acknowledgement would not cancel long-standing family and cultural links or imply the infringement of Russian interests. It would demand the building of fruitful relations on a different basis from the past.

The end of Russia's interference in Ukraine and unequivocal respect for the country's sovereignty, territorial integrity, as well as autonomy in determining its domestic and foreign affairs, are essential prerequisites to starting a process of detente. It is worth noting that the latter term was used during the Cold War but has re-emerged in discussions of current Russian-Western relations.

It may sound cynical, but decisive pressure on the secessionists to implement their part of the Minsk agreements, so that

the Southern-Eastern regions can revert to Kiev's control, might also help the Kremlin to divert the international community's immediate attention from the issue of Crimea.

To underline Moscow's evident responsibilities and call upon Russia to act, does not underestimate that the Ukrainian government, given the deep divisions and the prevailing emotions in the country, is facing difficulties in playing its part in the implementation process. However, even a government with a more solid support base would meet enormous obstacles in enacting and obtaining domestic acceptance of such significant changes in the constitutional structure of the country while facing heavy military, economic, and political pressure from a dominant neighbour.

A cooperative approach by Moscow would gradually relax the apprehensions of those sections of the Ukrainian population more hostile to Russia, and facilitate Kiev's task in selling the agreement domestically, thus nearing the end of a protracted and highly destabilising conflict in the heart of Europe.

The electoral results in France and, partly, Germany, have run against Russian hopes. In France, the election to the *Élysée* of Emmanuel Macron has frustrated Moscow's explicit support for the populist and anti-European campaign of Marine Le Pen. Not surprisingly, the French President has taken a very firm stance regarding Russia.

In Germany, where Russian behaviour has been more cautious, the results, although they have weakened Chancellor Angela Merkel and complicated her efforts to form a new government, anticipate continuity in foreign policy by the next government.

Confronted with this situation, the Kremlin would be better advised to make some adjustments to its handling of the Ukrainian dossier. The proposal, floated by President Putin, to deploy a peace keeping force in Ukraine, though impracticable in its original form (it would crystallize the separation of the secessionist regions), might offer the opportunity to test his willingness to work towards a solution. If, however, Vladimir

Putin, as expected, stands for re-election, he is likely to run an electoral campaign where nationalism and Russian exceptionalism will weigh significantly. Therefore, we cannot expect compromises soon nor can we know when and if Moscow will begin to exert serious pressure on the secessionists to facilitate a settlement coherent with the Minsk agreements.

Russia and Middle East

Syria is proving to be another area of friction between Russia, the US, and European powers.

With regard to the Arab awakenings, Moscow's historical diffidence concerning popular protest and equally established reflex to suspect adversarial forces of denting Russian interests were in evidence.

Amid the Middle Eastern turmoil, Moscow did not conceal its anxiety and suspicion of any change in the *status quo*, fearing instability above all else and exposing itself to the accusation of insensitivity towards democratic progress and the violations of human rights. Russia's diplomacy has tactically adapted to circumstances as the uprisings in the Arab countries unfolded, sceptical of the evolving events.

When France and the UK, with American consent, interpreted the UN Security Council resolution, approved by Moscow, to intervene in Libya and eliminate Ghaddafi, the Kremlin's worst fears were confirmed. This moment represented another watershed in shaping its attitude towards Western motivations, and not only in the Middle East.

It is plausible that initially, Russia's intervention in Syria was in reaction to two concerns. First, the prospect that a post-Assad settlement would be organised and dominated by the US and its allies, paving the way for the further consolidation of American influence in the region. Second, intertwined with the previous one, the fear that the collapse of the Alawite regime would carry the loss of its important foothold in the Middle East and of its only naval base in the Mediterranean.

In fact, according to rumours echoed in the international press, within the Obama administration and maybe in some European capitals, the idea was being nurtured that the rebellion against Assad in Syria offered the opportunity to simultaneously eliminate a tyrannical regime in Damascus, close to Iran, and the historical Russian presence in the country, thus diminishing its projection in the Middle East and the Mediterranean. Such a plan, had it ever existed, would have been overambitious and misguided: the fight against Isis in Syria, an American and Western priority, needed, in the light of the realities on the ground, the concourse of the factions aligned with Assad, helped and supplied by Iran and Russia.

Russian (and Iranian) support for the regime has changed the course of the Syrian crisis and statements by Western leaders that, in order to pacify the country, Assad must go, sound now perfunctory or projected into an undefined future. At the moment, Putin has a strong hand in the Syrian game. Russia's position on the ground is more solid now than it was at the beginning of the war. A settlement in Syria is nowhere near and, should it materialize, it is likely to carry the imprint of Russia, Iran, and Turkey rather than of the United States and other Western powers. Moscow will encourage a solution only when and if a political process, independently of Assad's destiny, will guarantee continued Russian influence in the country and the region.

It is worth noting that signals of the consolidation of Russian regional status and influence are already emerging. King Salman of Saudi Arabia's state visit to Moscow at the beginning of October was not only a significant diplomatic gesture. The two parties also announced agreements in the field of military-industrial cooperation.

However, while Moscow at the moment seems to have the upper hand, its actions have produced consequences which will not be easy to manage in the longer term, and not necessarily in the Russian interest. As becomes more evident by the day, they have facilitated Iranian penetration in Syria and beyond, and

raised the alarm of the Sunni Arab powers. It is doubtful that Russian and Iranian fundamental objectives and interests will continue to coincide, also taking into account that Israel will not sit idle while Teheran and the Hezbollah consolidate their positions in its proximity. The Israeli dimension in Russian-Middle Eastern policy should not be underestimated. Moscow will have to reckon with Tel Aviv's views and possible reactions.

Moscow has prevented an immediate damage to its interests by intervening in Syria, but it has started a very complicated and uncertain military and diplomatic venture with a number of contradictory variables.

Furthermore, the war in Syria is only one of the problems in the Middle East, the entire area being an arc of crisis. Libya, a country where Italian interests are exposed and vulnerable, represents another difficult open issue. There too Russian moves raise concerns in so far as they do not appear coherent with the national reconciliation efforts led by the United Nations.

The Middle East contains innumerable contradictions and to reconcile them into a compatible framework would prove arduous for anyone. The crisis of the international global order is epitomised by events in that region. The multiple conflicts of interest and the juxtaposition of competition among global and regional powers, together with delicate religious fault lines, make the Middle East an area where, for an indefinite time, Russia and the West are likely to find themselves on different sides. Russia stated readiness to cooperate with Washington and the Western powers in the fight against the Islamic state is marred by ambiguities and mental reservations.

The situation is not made any easier by the fact that so far, the Trump administration, beyond its declared commitment to fight Isis and to energize the pursuit of a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, has not manifested a comprehensive approach to the Middle East. Instead, it conveys the impression of oscillating between confusion about its strategy and disengagement from the decisive role which the United States have traditionally played in shaping the equilibria in the region. A

diminished contribution by America to Middle Eastern dynamics would create a vacuum susceptible to increasing instability.

Moscow's adversarial posture concerning the US and its disregard for the human rights violations¹⁰ by Assad, its recurrent use of the veto in the security council to protect the Syrian regime (most recently to obstruct the extension of the activity of the commission investigating the use of chemical weapons), have expanded the distance with the West, which goes beyond conflicting aims to touch upon values and general visions.

But, as important as Ukraine, Syria, and the Middle East are, in order to improve Russian-Western relations progress hangs on issues of a wider nature.

Cooperation despite different visions

Since Putin's advent to power and subsequent transformation of the political landscape in Russia, Moscow's approach to the way the international order should be organised, especially in the Euro-Atlantic region, became progressively more divergent from the Western vision. Realpolitik methods stretched to the extreme, and a perverse combination of managed democracy at home and assertiveness abroad seemed to become the determining factors in the Kremlin's diplomacy.

International liberalism and promotion of democracy and human rights were, albeit with nuances, the declared guiding references for the West. From these divergent philosophies, against a growing gap in understanding the respective moves, concrete consequences in policies ensued. Putin's Russia, in Western eyes, seems engaged in attempts to recuperate an outdated concept of foreign policy, based on spheres of influence and zero-sum games, thus trying to reverse the results of the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

From the Russian perspective, fuelled by the Kremlin nationalistic propaganda, the US and Europe are engaged in an

¹⁰ [Syria. Events of 2016](#), World Report 2017, Human Rights Watch, 2017.

unrelenting effort to deny Moscow its role of great power and its right to protect its interests in Europe and beyond. The Russian expectation that the US and its European allies recognize Moscow's claim to a sphere of influence in its near abroad (however defined) and probably in wider areas has become the core disagreement. In the Kremlin interpretation, spheres of influence carry heavy practical consequences and imply the right to interfere in the sovereign choices, including in the foreign policy and economic fields of a country.

Can such an acknowledgment from the West be forthcoming? It cannot be excluded that President Trump, given his transactional approach to foreign policy, might have proven sympathetic to this expectation, at least up to a certain point and in so far as not in direct contrast to US interests.

However, given the turmoil and deep polarisation surrounding his tenure of office, he lacks the political capital and authority to make acceptable to the mainstream establishment and public opinion a dramatic departure from what have become founding principles of the US foreign policy. A departure made more traumatic because it would concern a country accused of having worked for his election and would substantiate the accusations that the President is indifferent to the interests of allied countries exposed to Russian claims of a right of scrutiny and intervention in their affairs.

During Yeltsin's presidency (July 1991 - December 1999) and also in the initial phase of Putin's tenure of power, many experts were inclined to consider Moscow's foreign policy as essentially reactive and aimed at containing further erosions of Russian power. As time went by, the Kremlin seems to have concluded that to put Russia on an equal footing with the United States, and launch signals to China, it must act more aggressively on the international stage, adopting destabilising tactics whenever deemed useful.

Therefore, we should not expect significant progress in the relationship between Washington and Moscow: rather, in the short term, if anything, an increase in recriminations and

accusations is more likely as the investigation on Russian interferences in the presidential election goes ahead.

All these factors combined lead to the conclusion that we are faced with conflicting narratives of the post-Cold War era and divergent philosophies of international relations.

A real thaw between the West and Russia can only happen when and if the gap in the narratives of the post-Cold War period begins to narrow, the principle of equal sovereignty and rule of law is accepted and respected, and Russia does not feel marginalised: conditions which are clearly not within reach in the immediate future. For now, we can realistically expect only limited cooperation on urgent matters like nuclear safety and proliferation, arms control, or some acute aspects of regional crises. The fight against Isis, as we have seen, represents in principle a priority area for cooperation. However, being closely connected with wider geopolitical factors, concerted efforts meet with considerable obstacles.

It is an indisputable fact that, in shaping the Russian-Western relationship, the weight of the European Union appears relatively marginal. Only some member countries of the Union play a significant role in this respect. It is worth asking why the EU as a group cannot make their impact adequately felt.

Divisions along different lines fracture Europe in formulating its Russian policy. The first, and most obvious, is between the old members and those from Eastern and Central Europe. The latter look at Moscow with profound diffidence, if not hostility. They have suffered greatly under Soviet domination, and their struggle against the overwhelming eastern neighbour in some instances goes back to Tsarist times. Western EU members do not have such historical ballast and grievances, or at least not of a comparable nature. It is a difference which also exists in NATO, where the paramount US influence until now has been able to facilitate and maintain common positions.

In the Union, despite all the talk and, in some instances, fear of German dominance, a similar leadership cannot be exercised. This is particularly true in the field of the Common

Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). The consensus rule, which is unavoidable when vital national interests are at stake, leads to the formulation of policy platforms normally representing minimum common denominators among the members' positions. The room for manoeuvre of the high representative is heavily constrained. In this situation, the EU appears split between some members' excessive apprehension (and overreaction) in the face of any Russian move and underestimation of the risks in some of Moscow's initiatives, by others.

Equally, among the old EU members, differences towards Russia exist and are not easy to reconcile. The United Kingdom, the recipient of considerable Russian investment in particular in the field of real estate, has nevertheless traditionally promoted, both in NATO and the EU, a policy of firmness towards Moscow in all matters of security and international affairs. The Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries follow a similar pattern. The crucial German position has always been nuanced. In addition to economic cooperation, Berlin must endeavour to entertain an overall relationship with Russia which is cooperative to the maximum possible extent. In this, Moscow has a specular interest since stability in Europe depends in large part on Russian-German constructive dialogue.

At the same time, Berlin cannot neglect the attitudes and expectations of its partners to the East, situated as they are in the uncomfortable space between Germany and Russia. It is an uneasy balancing act which the crisis in Ukraine has further complicated, causing growing unease in the personal rapport between President Putin and Chancellor Merkel. The German electoral results are not likely to alter these fundamental data. France under President Macron has hardened its position *vis à vis* Moscow. The southern countries seem to sponsor a softer line towards Russia, although with limited impact on overall EU policies.

These constraints and the leading American role in orienting the Western course towards Moscow, generate in turn marginal Russian interest in considering the Union a credible interlocutor in geopolitical or strategic matters.

In the eyes of Russia, the EU shadows US and NATO's policies.

Hence Russia's preference to deal with individual EU countries, either because of their particular relevance or because they are deemed amenable to Moscow's aspirations. Moscow should realize that this game in the long-term is not in its interest and prevents full cooperation with a vital partner.

It is a worrisome situation, particularly when uncertainty reigns concerning the diplomacy of the United States. It also makes the search for a thaw in Western-Russian relations more problematic.

In order for the EU to strengthen its profile and make a more significant contribution to the formulation of the Atlantic strategy towards Russia, it must agree on a united and balanced policy platform. This means, on the one hand, upholding European values and being responsive to the understandable concerns of the eastern partners about Russian moves and intentions. On the other hand, the 28, soon 27 with Brexit, should also exercise the supreme virtue of diplomacy, i.e. realism, and acknowledge that in certain areas, in its near abroad and beyond, Russia has played a historical role and still has interests which cannot be disregarded.

So far, this balanced approach has proven elusive, and it is a meagre consolation that also NATO faces similar issues.

Policy Recommendations for the EU

Aldo Ferrari, Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti

In 2017, the critical state of the relations between Russia and the EU was confirmed. At the end of June, the EU decided to renew its economic sanctions on Russia for another six months, while Moscow kept its counter-sanctions on many imports from Europe. In an attempt to isolate the country internationally, the West did not reinstate Russia's G8 membership. Moscow's military intervention in Syria supporting Bashar al-Assad did not make things better: as in the case of the Ukrainian crisis, different narratives regarding both the specificities of the Syrian crisis and, ultimately, the founding principles of global governance, emerged.

2018 does not look any more promising. The continuity in Putin's rule is likely and so is the persistence of the many points of frictions between Moscow and Brussels, chiefly over Ukraine. Yet, while the deadlock in the relations seems a plausible scenario, it does not need to be the only one. Against all odds, Russia and the EU can resume dialogue on several issues, including the most difficult ones, provided that both put aside the wait-and-see approach that dominated in 2017, and engage in an active dialogue on the crucial issues that would allow restoring relations.

The growing drift in values between Russia and the EU is here to stay; the EU should learn how to deal with it

Over the last few years, the security and political divergences between Russia and the EU have been growing in terms of

values, too. In 2013, Putin asserted in his annual state of the nation a morally conservatives world-view in opposition to the West's liberal one, exposing Russia's willingness to fight against what it considers to be the West's normative imperialism. Since then, Russian officials made numerous references to a "post-West" world order, in which each country's sovereignty should be preserved not only from military and political interference but also from what is perceived as the imposition of Western values.

Is this a top-down conservatism that the Kremlin is merely trying to advance domestically and exploit internationally as a way to fight the West? It does not seem so. Despite the nuanced image of Russia's conservatism offered by Ferrari in his chapter, it is undeniable that conservative views are more and more widespread within Russian society and beyond. Not only do Eastern Partnership countries, new EU members from Central and Eastern Europe and segments of old EU members' societies share conservative views, but they also increasingly see the EU as imposing liberal values threatening the very essence of their populations. While divisive factors such as the so-called "migration crisis" contributed to consolidate and amplify the fears of these countries, Russia appears as a relatively stable model for the defence of traditional values. For the EU, which has based both its integration and foreign policies on the defence of liberal democratic values, this is a problematic issue not only in terms of Putin's possible political gains, but also in light of the erosion of the popular consensus to the European project. The EU cannot and should not step back from the defence of liberal democratic values, so enrooted in its very nature. However, it should strive to mediate between the most progressive and most conservative streams within its own societies, while looking for new languages that are not perceived as patronising by non-EU societies, including the Russian one.

The EU should pursue a resilient Russia policy

Resilience is the catchword for the new EU Foreign policy. Highly mentioned in many official documents, such as the 2016 “EU global strategy”, resilience is a principle defining the EU’s ability to deal with an increasingly changing and more complex global environment in a flexible manner. With a tailored approach and a pronounced focus on local specificities, resilient strategies in EU foreign policy seem to mark the end of the inward-looking and “one-size-fits-all” approaches that local partners have often accused the EU of.

The EU has long acknowledged – at least formally – the need to adopt a tailored approach in its relations with Russia; now, it needs to make it truly resilient. In our view, this does not only entail measures to strengthen the EU’s ability to respond to possible Russia-related threats, in particular regarding energy security, hybrid warfare and strategic communication; it also requires a more active search for a thaw in the relations with Russia. The last official attempts by Brussels and Moscow to improve the strained state of relations date back to 2016. 2018 should be the time when both the EU and Russia demonstrate more creativity and audacity, starting from a genuine attempt to understand each other’s point of view and interests. The growing lack of trust between Russia and the EU may provoke a sort of “frozen conflict” that both should try to avoid, in light of the high political and economic costs entailed. As Giancarlo Aragona puts it, the EU “must agree on a united and balanced policy platform” acknowledging Russia’s historical role and interests in certain areas. Russia, in turn, needs to make concessions especially on Ukraine, where it should guarantee the full implementation of the Minsk peace agreements on the Donbass.

Do not take Russia’s implosion for granted

In the past year, the EU has shown the ability to adjust and resist to destabilising factors. Does Russia have state and societal

resilience, too? Several chapters in this report tackle the huge political, social and economic challenges facing Russia. Sakwa and Vitale highlight the political pitfalls of the Russian system, still overly reliant on Putin and with little space for a true and independent political opposition. Hanson maintains that it is also due to these political shortcomings that the Russian economy fails to implement the required measures to improve GDP growth. The Western sanctions overlapped with a situation of falling global oil prices, contributing to magnify Russia's existing problems and pointing at dramatic scenarios where an implosion of Russia's institutions and economy seemed imminent.

Despite all these challenges, though, Moscow has demonstrated considerable political, economic, and social stability. For instance, Malashenko gives a (perhaps, over-)optimistic view of how Russia manages and guarantees the peaceful co-existence of Muslim minorities in Russia, be it migrants from the Caucasus and Central Asia or Russian citizens of Muslim origins. Russia is proving that not only it can keep muddling through the turmoil without collapsing, but it can also intensify its international presence to assert its foreign policy interests. Some very recent economic trends, such as the rise of global oil prices (exceeding the price of \$70 per barrel in January 2018) may contribute to renew Russia's confidence and push doomed scenarios away. Western sanctions fostered stagnation but, so far, they have failed to put Russian economy on its knees. Russia's future, especially economy-wise, continues to look gloomy, but the EU should carefully keep tracking the evolution of recent trends such as the rise in global oil prices carefully and avoid taking Russia's implosion for granted. Not to mention the fact that an imploded, hence destabilised Russia (both economically and politically) would not be a desirable scenario.

Critical review of all the possible instruments in dealing with Russia (including sanctions)

Consistency in upholding European principles must be preserved, but this does not mean that an automatic and perpetual roll-over of sanctions is inescapable. The effectiveness of the sanctions is questionable. Not only did Russia maintain its position towards Ukraine but, over the last few years, it has also increasingly drifted away from the EU and the West at large both at the political and economic level. This constitutes a problem both for the West and for Russia. Pursuing a dialogue with Russia, whatever path it will take after the elections, is still in the EU's best interest. Perhaps, the flexible and dialogue-prone approach of Italy could inspire the general EU approach towards Moscow and show a way out from this impasse we are currently in.

Against a general backdrop of confrontation, Russia and the EU can and should still work on areas where they have shared interests. "Selective engagement with Russia on foreign-policy issues" indeed one of the EU's Russia policy "Five guiding principles" that were agreed at the EU Foreign Affairs Council in March 2016 and that remain the main framework for the EU's policy towards Russia. One of the recent and fundamental issues where Moscow and Brussels could cooperate on is the full implementation of the Nuclear Deal with Iran, currently threatened by Trump's hostile approach. Hopefully, the defence of the Deal could offer a possible EU-Russia cooperation path, possibly reviving the optimism that the current state of the relations lacks and badly needs. As redundant as it may seem, overcoming differences and the mutual lack of trust is the first, difficult step to restart a necessary cooperation.

The Authors

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