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RUSSIA'S FUTURE: STATUS QUO VS. DESTABILISATION FACTORS

**FREE
RUSSIA**

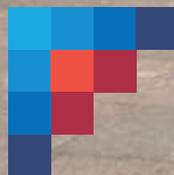


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Introduction

The topic of general forecasting of Russia's future occupies an important place in the works of many experts and analysts¹. Although we quite often come across in-depth and exciting deliberations on various issues or the dynamics of potential changes², the public discourse places a question mark over the possibility of democratic changes, the change of power and its holder, the process of the renewal of the elites, or the nature of Russian reforms in the distant future.

We have repeatedly witnessed unpredictable changes in the Russian agenda. Individual events hardly fit the general paradigm of Russia's future forecasting, and sectorial forecasts often do not coincide with the global trends that influence the dynamics of events.

As authoritarianism intensifies, the political reality in Russia has been gradually becoming a behind-the-scenes, internal and closed-door process. Public life reflects reality to a less and less extent, and more and more often obscures real processes. Anyone's participation in public life may compromise one's safety and undermine trust, the lack of which in today's Russian society has been noted by numerous experts³.

1 See: *Russia 2025 - Scenarios for the Russian Future*, Editors: M. Lipman, N. Petrov, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013 and <https://www.4freerussia.org/russia-scenarios-2030/>

2 *The Russian Economy: Short-Term resilience, Long-Term stagnation* by Sergey Aleksashenko; Atlantic Council. Eurasia Center, August 2018; *Russia's growth problem*, Marek Dambrowski and Antoine Mathieu Collin; Policy Contribution, Is. 4, February 2019.

3 Доверие в нестабильном российском обществе. П.М. Козырев, А.И. Смирнов, Журнал "Полис: Политические исследования", №5, 2019 [Trust in an Unstable Russian Society. P.M. Kozyrev, A.I. Smirnov, Polis: Journal of Political Studies, Is. 5, 2019].

Research methodology

This study combines several methodologies:

1. Review of data from sociological studies carried out in Russia in 2009-2019, that demonstrate overall trends in public sentiment. Based on this part topics and issues for the discussion with experts were identified.
2. Exploratory structured quality interviews with experts. The selection of experts depended on their specialization (foreign or domestic policy, socio-economic situation, behavior of the elites, elections and electoral culture, sociology of social movements, human rights, EU policy towards Russia). Based on this part hypotheses were made and main trends in the development of the situation defined.
3. Unstructured interviews with representatives of various stakeholders (regional elites, regional political strategists, representatives of law enforcement bodies, regional civil society leaders, analysts and officials from the EU countries). This part was necessary to verify hypotheses and clarify development trends in specific sectors.

In total, 20 in-depth interviews were conducted. 5 respondents were interviewed using a structured guide that includes all the topics described in this paper. The respondents included experts on the domestic and foreign policy of Russia, living inside and outside the country and regularly commenting on the situation in Russia.

Another 6 interviews dealt directly with the situation in the regions and were conducted with representatives of civil society from the regions (2 respondents), political strategists working in the regions (2 respondents) and with employees of regional administrations (2 respondents).

2 unstructured interviews concerning the perception of Russia in Europe and Russia's participation in international organizations were conducted with Polish analysts and employees of government agencies involved in relations with Russia.

Two interviews were conducted with representatives of law enforcement bodies: a middle-level officer currently working in one of the Russian regions, and a retired officer who used to work in Moscow.

5 more unstructured interviews were conducted with representatives of various organizations and informal groups working in Moscow and other regions of Russia, i.a. Memorial, Golos, members of Navalny's staff, participants of the campaign in defense of Yegor Zhukov, etc.

Based on the interviews, major trends shaping current Russian political and social spheres were identified as well as motivation and needs of various stakeholders were described.

1. An overview of public opinion and expectations in Russia on the basis of sociological studies carried out over the past 10 years.

An important factor noted by analysts is the high level of pragmatism of the Russian elites. The lack of traditional values, their fragmentation and, in fact, an ongoing search for fundamental values in the Russian society have created a situation when an ad hoc and highly pragmatic attitude towards the current situation in the country and its future development prevails. Under these conditions, in order to assess the behavior of virtually all actors who operate within the institutions of power in Russia, one should have a good understanding, firstly, of economic conditions and prospects, and, secondly, (which is no less important) of how realistically they are viewed by the elites.

Due to omnipresent propaganda, the number of faulty economic assessments is so high that many representatives of elites of various levels are misled as well and cannot see the real picture. At the same time, their publicly expressed opinions and forecasts, obviously, are in line with the official propaganda and are aimed exclusively at maintaining double standards.

The respondents note that while the majority of Russian society has been increasingly challenged by deteriorating economic conditions, and the authorities have been introducing additional restrictions and finding new ways of making up the budget deficit and corruption related losses at the expense of different social groups, the economic discourse and context in Russia more and more start resembling the situation in the USSR, when the society, that at the macro level was informed about prosperity and well-being, relied on that information in its plans and expectations, and perceived existing difficulties and restrictions only as temporary.

However, in the 80ies many Soviet economists became aware that the crisis was imminent and that only radical political reforms could save the economy, as the socialist model of the Soviet economy could not function effectively⁴.

Also, as in the mid-80s, that duality created the illusion

of sound social and political systems and the temporary nature of economic difficulties. In today's Russia, the superficial free market economy creates a dangerous illusion of "normalcy" in general, which makes things even worse. Overall stability and existing financial cushion make their contribution as well. Despite negative economic growth forecasts, all experts agree that in today's Russia the situation of the late 80s - early 90s will not be repeated.

On the other hand, economic forecasts show that Russia will not return to growth rates of early 2000s, which means that, based on key indicators, it cannot become one of the world economic leaders.⁵ After the last crisis of 2016, Russia remained unprepared for the main challenges: the demographic crisis, the absence of an investment market, and the necessity to overcome the resource-dependent model of the economy. Unless Russia deals successfully with those issues, it won't be able to achieve growth and remain at a low level, further widening the gap with the leading countries. Some of the economic indicators in today's Russia are artificially overestimated due to the disproportionate governmental influence in certain sectors. For example, the growth of investments in the military-industrial complex and "national-significance projects" significantly impacts the indicators, but does not impact the actual development of private business and does not drive the economy.

At the same time, the microeconomic situation continues to deteriorate. Small and medium-sized businesses cannot grow in the framework of real economy and slowly move towards informal "garage" economy, reducing thus the legal labor market, which is also negatively affected by the current retirement and social security policies.⁶

The growing role of the state, which mostly spreads its influence not via formal channels but through informal networks controlled by various types of "siloviki", also contributes to general uncertainty.

About 10 years ago, the Kremlin proclaimed a strategy for becoming an energy superpower, which assumed that by 2020 Russia would turn into a successful high-tech economy, while economic well-being would improve significantly and approach the level of Western

4 Революция Гайдара: история реформ 90-х из первых рук, Петр Авен, Альфред Кох, Москва 2013. [Gaidar's Revolution: The History of the 1990s Reforms From the First Hands, Petr Aven, Alfred Koch, Moscow 2013].

5 The Russian Economy: Short-Term Resilience, Long-Term Stagnation? by Sergey Aleksashenko; Atlantic Council. Eurasia Center, August 2018;

6 Распределенная жизнь. Где искать признаки особого пути. М. Трудолюбков [Distributed life. Where to look for signs of a special path. M. Trudolyubov], <https://republic.ru/posts/90395>



European countries. Unfortunately, the revenues from the sale of energy resources have not been invested in the development of technologies and the economy, hence, economic well-being hasn't improved. In addition, various plans to develop the energy sector haven't materialized, as there was either no funding for the development of new deposits, or the development costs turned to be too high making the whole endeavor unprofitable.⁷ Thus, in the next decade, the sale of energy resources not only won't be able to fund the breakthrough in the economy, but may even become insufficient for supporting the economy in general and the national budget in particular.

At the same time, according to some sources, the structural reforms that have been carried out in Russia for over 10 years, have only worsened the situation in the reformed sectors. In 2016, focus group meetings, that were held in different regions of Russia as part of the electoral campaign of a group of opposition candidates to the State Duma, confirmed highly negative opinions on the reforms of education, healthcare, social security, property rights, as well as reforms fostering the development of the SME sector.

The respondents expressed an opinion that whenever a reform is announced, one should prepare for the failure. At the same time, experts that evaluate results of the reforms identify significant discrepancies between the data provided by the reform beneficiaries and official statistical indicators and reform implementation reports.⁸ Some experts believe that the reforms have been implemented without taking into consideration the peculiarities of the political system and real-life interactions between officials of various levels in the context of the Russia's power vertical, proclaimed in the mid-2000s.

It is obvious that unsuccessful reforms that cause discomfort and worsen the quality of services cause a negative reaction in many people. Mostly the federal government, and local and regional authorities are the ones to blame, while the authority of the "leader" remains intact. From year to year, Vladimir Putin's approval rating remains the highest, while other politicians and institutions are noticeably less popular, although their ratings are most often positively influenced by Putin's rating. If we compare the situation with the 90s, when the approval rating of the country leader was very low and negatively

⁷ <https://www.4freerussia.org/russia-scenarios-2030/>

⁸ Судьба экономических программ и реформ в России. Материалы круглого стола. Журнал "Вопросы экономики", №6, 2017 [The fate of economic programs and reforms in Russia. Round table materials. Journal "Voprosy ekonomiki", Is. 6, 2017].

influenced the ratings of other institutions and politicians, we can assume that Russians first and foremost care about the leader, and his perception by the public influences the perception of politics in general, as well as of others politicians and government institutions.

According to analysts, public's negative attitude of the 90s was primarily associated with the perceived loss of security after radical changes in all aspects of life and the need to change habitual patterns, look for new ones, as well as look for new values as the old ones had brought disappointment or had been debunked. As the situation changed and generally stabilized in the 2000s, the need for safety and security faded into the background, while the need for affiliation and belonging came to a forefront, in addition, the need for self-actualization and the desire for social upgrade emerged.⁹ The simultaneous impact of the global crisis on the country's economy has shown that the social contract does not work: safety and security are not ensured, the country is highly dependent on world markets and has not become a world leader, while the growth of economic wellbeing is not limitless¹⁰... At the same time, by the mid-2000s, the Russian society had overcome the problems of a transitional period, and by 2011 public attitudes to power, democracy, the state and politics in general had shaped. About 80% of society share either liberal-individualistic or social-democratic views¹¹.

The first attempts to consolidate in order to address specific security issues, the emergence of new communication tools and the paradigm of online communities in 2010-2011¹² showed that local communities can satisfy basic needs by themselves, but demand the return of freedoms (in the form of the ability to elect and be elected). Throughout the first half of the 2010s, Vladimir Putin and the groups with the monopoly on power and control in the country could not overcome increasing negative opinions. The psychological image of power

in the beginning of 2014 was negative in case of over 50% of population, versus 35% in 2000-2008. Mass protests of 2011-2012 further confirmed the inability of the federal authorities to respond to the growing need of some social groups to self-organize and self-govern.

The annexation of Crimea and aggressive international politics effectively saved Putin and the ruling elite from the next crisis of legitimacy. They revived the sense of the country's greatness and its significance and influence in the global context, the need for which had already been expressed back in the 90s.¹³

Studies conducted at the end of 2014 showed that while society did not suffer any longer from the post-traumatic syndrome caused by the collapse of the USSR, expansionist and imperial sentiments were not prevalent. Russian society wants to see Russia among the world leaders in terms of well-being and quality of life and guarantees of security for its population. The Russians are in favor of such international cooperation that impacts their economic well-being positively and do not welcome the feeling of being besieged. The next few years showed that public sentiments diverted even to a greater degree from the direction, in which, as the ruling elites assumed, they could have developed by inertia.

Today, there is a steady demand for change in society, which was noted already back in 2016, when the author participated in closed focus group studies. At that time, the need was articulated very carefully: the majority of respondents (even in groups with a negative attitude towards the ruling government) indicated that partial changes were impossible because mere cosmetic measures would not improve the situation in the country, while radical changes would have led to revolution and anarchy (and the repetition of the 90s). The respondents mainly wished for the emergence of new leaders, on whom they could rely and the level of trust in whom would be high.

9 Четверть века политических реформ в России с точки зрения психологии. Е.Б. Шестопал, Журнал "Полис: политические исследования", №1, 2015. [A quarter of a century of political reforms in Russia from the psychological point of view]. E.B. Shestopal, Journal "Polis: Political Studies", Is. 1, 2015.

10 Четверть века политических реформ в России с точки зрения психологии. Е.Б. Шестопал, Журнал "Полис: политические исследования", №1, 2015. [A quarter of a century of political reforms in Russia from the psychological point of view]. E.B. Shestopal, Journal "Polis: Political Studies", Is. 1, 2015.

11 Четверть века политических реформ в России с точки зрения психологии. Е.Б. Шестопал, Журнал "Полис: политические исследования", №1, 2015. [A quarter of a century of political reforms in Russia from the psychological point of view]. E.B. Shestopal, Journal "Polis: Political Studies", Is. 1, 2015.

12 We refer mainly to the campaign "Help needed" that took place during the heat wave of 2010 and extensive wildfires, which affected most regions of the country. On the basis of this movement first sustainable volunteer projects emerged, created without the support and not at the initiative of the state.

13 Внешнеполитические ориентации россиян на новом переломе. М.К. Горшков, В.В. Петухов, Журнал "Полис: политические исследования", №2, 2015. [Foreign policy orientations of Russians at a new turning point. M.K. Gorshkov, V.V. Petukhov, Journal "Polis: Political Studies", Is. 2, 2015].

The envisioned leaders can be described as “community-dependent politicians”. On the one hand, they should be respected, knowledgeable people that have proven their leadership and intellectual abilities, but on the other hand, they should maintain close ties with their communities, should be dependent on it and prove over and over again their honesty and altruistic actions.

Studies carried out in 2018¹⁴ show that these expectations have additionally strengthened. Russians have escaped learned helplessness, which, according to Sam Green, characterized them in the 2000s, the consequences of the trauma of the collapse of the USSR have been overcome, some social and age groups have learnt to form communities and build networks of trust¹⁵, meeting thus the need for safety and security and the need for affiliation. Thus, the need for self-actualization has moved to the forefront, unfortunately, the majority of those who declare such a need, will not be able to fulfill it without political changes in the country.

Based on the results of the 2018 studies, we can conclude that the need for changes in society was general, although it was not defined specifically and the actors of these changes were not named. On the whole, people looked forward to the emergence of a social group that would drive these changes. Quite high expectations towards young people were expressed. At the same time, young people (mainly students) actually expressed greater interest in changes than other groups, however, in other social groups, the need for changes also exceeds 50%, i.e. among academics and intellectuals, workers, state employees¹⁶.

At the same time, in case of groups that tend to expect less changes, i.e. retired people, military and law enforcement officials, those employed in finance, services or trade, rural residents, civil servants, at least 1/3 of respondents also express the need for changes¹⁷.

14 Запрос на перемены: причины актуализации, ключевые слагаемые и потенциальные носители. В.В. Петухов, Р.В. Петухов, Журнал “Полис: политические исследования”, №5, 2019; [Request for change: reasons for updating, key components and potential carriers. V.V. Petukhov, R.V. Petukhov, Journal “Polis: Political Studies”, Is. 5, 2019];

15 Доверие в нестабильном российском обществе. П.М. Козырев, А.И. Смирнов, Журнал “Полис: Политические исследования”, №5, 2019; [Trust in an unstable Russian society. P.M. Kozyrev, A.I. Smirnov, Journal “Polis: Political Studies”, Is. 5, 2019];

16 Запрос на перемены: причины актуализации, ключевые слагаемые и потенциальные носители. В.В. Петухов, Р.В. Петухов, Журнал “Полис: политические исследования”, №5, 2019; [Request for change: reasons for updating, key components and potential carriers. V.V. Petukhov, R.V. Petukhov, Journal «Polis: Political Studies», Is. 5, 2019];

17 Запрос на перемены: причины актуализации, ключевые слагаемые и потенциальные носители. В.В. Петухов, Р.В. Петухов, Журнал “Полис: политические исследования”, №5, 2019; [Request for change: reasons for updating, key components and potential carriers. V.V. Petukhov, R.V. Petukhov, Journal «Polis: Political Studies», Is. 5, 2019];

2. Analysis of civil society expectations in the Russian regions.

2.1 General trends

The 2019 Moscow City Duma campaign and subsequent public protests in Moscow showed that:

1. The very “community-dependent politicians” emerged in society, the need for which was articulated during the research in 2018. At least in Moscow there are such politicians who have been quite active on the regional level. In other regions, we observe that there are leaders ready to take this place as soon as the regional campaign for parliament starts.
2. Communities are ready to get mobilized in order to support and defend such leaders and by going out to defend them people, in fact, defend their own interests. Since in the regions such leaders are often concerned with specific social or infrastructural issues even to a greater extent, the connection between leaders and the community there may be even stronger than in Moscow.
3. Young people are expected to be the voice of change, they are supported and approved by people and the public is ready to prevent their persecution (this trend is a new one compared to the previous three years, when there was no consolidated support for protesters in society)¹⁸,
4. Awareness that current political elites do not want and are not able to make the necessary changes is becoming wider, embracing those groups that previously were indifferent,
5. At the same time, awareness is growing that the political elites are mainly striving to maintain their power, often by force, hence delegitimation of power increases.

During the first stage of the expert discussion, the current situation after August 2019 was discussed as well as the logic of behavior of various social groups (political and economic elites of various levels, leaders and activists of protest movements, law enforcement officials of various levels), understanding and perception of what

is happening in Russia by the international community, communication between members of Russian ruling elites and other countries, as well as possible scenarios for the development of the situation in the next 5 years.

As a result, the following issues relevant for forecasting were identified:

1. Issue 2024 (with the intermediate milestone in 2021, when the elections to the State Duma take place);
2. Strengthening of the repressive politics aimed at retaining power, followed by its decreasing legitimacy;
3. Scenarios for regional and local development in the conditions of the worsening economic situation;
4. Business behavior models (small, medium, large) in the situation of legitimacy crisis, deteriorating economic conditions and market restrictions (counter-sanctions, artificial barriers to imports and competition in certain industries, security level, etc.);
5. Mechanisms for expanding or curtailing activism due to repressions or frustration with the general situation;
6. Mechanisms for maintaining the legitimacy and stability of the political regime in the eyes of external observers;
7. The need for membership in international organizations and confirmation of the importance of Russia as a full partner of the leading countries of the world.

Further interviews were conducted with the specific purpose of clarifying and analyzing these issues as well as assessing the motivation and needs of various actors.

An additional important factor noted by several respondents is an increasing readiness to migrate abroad and noticeable increase in the number of people leaving the country over the past 5 years. Although this factor is not considered further in the study, it was noted that the social group “new migrants from Russia” can provide influence both inside (due to constant communication), and outside of Russia (after it integrates and starts influencing the public opinion in the countries of residence).

¹⁸ One respondent mentioned that it may be explained by the fact that, unlike in case of Navalny’s campaign, there were many leaders (i.e. candidates) during the Moscow events, and the motivation was clear: “I went out in defense of my signature and my voting rights”. Thus, the situation resembled 2011 to a greater extent. At the same time, another respondent noted that the main difference was between Moscow and other regions. And if the protests were not in Moscow, but in the regions, the public would be inclined to think: “the children were taken out into the streets by bad leaders”.

2.2 Issue 2024

According to the respondents, this matter is relevant for all stakeholders in all spheres of life. The study had been conducted before the amendment resetting Vladimir Putin's presidential terms was introduced, and the respondents at that time came up with three possible options:

- amendment of the Constitution and an attempt to be re-elected for 3 terms;
- introduction of a new position with efficient mechanisms for ruling the country;
- transfer of power to a successor.

Amendments to the Constitution and V. Putin's running for office in 2024

Today, there are practically no obstacles to such a solution: the Russian Parliament is totally dependent on the Presidential Administration, just as the legislative assemblies in the regions are loyal to the federal authorities.

Periodically a public discussion on the possibility of canceling the two-term limit is initiated, to see what percent of the public favors the idea.

Data published in the summer of 2019 demonstrated that about 40% of Russians do not want Putin to be the head of state after 2024 (<https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2019/07/30/807570-pochti-rossiyan>). At the same time, 43% believe that Russians support Putin because there is no one else to whom they could trust. And only 24% (in 2016 this figure was 39%) believe that public trusts Putin because he can successfully resolve problematic issues in the country.

Thus, currently Putin's credibility rating has fallen to a new low, he enjoys the highest distrust ever, and the public have obviously grown tired of his leadership.

If this trend does not change dramatically, Constitutional amendments introducing the third term will not ensure the success of Vladimir Putin's political future. It is obvious that only significant changes in the country can turn the tide. In previous years, the belief that Putin could solve the country's problems strengthened during periods characterized by the diminishing sense of security and emerging external threats. Thus, a prerequisite for the implementation of this strategy is the existence of a serious external security threat, which will either arise on its own or be provoked by the Kremlin.

Introduction of a new position with efficient mechanisms for ruling the country

This scenario was actively discussed throughout 2019.

The respondents connected it to the scenario of expanding the actual territory of the country, i.e. by annexing neighboring former Soviet republics. The experience of the "Crimean campaign" has shown that, firstly, such expansion can give a quick "injection" of optimism into public opinion, secondly, it is moderately expensive if carried out without direct violence and military actions, and thirdly, it signifies a development which becomes highly necessary when stability turns into stagnation.

Currently there are two countries that can be considered potential "new territories" within the framework of a special partnership, i.e. Belarus and Kazakhstan. Obviously, none of these states will merge with Russia, as it happened in case of the Crimea. However, the unification scenario assumes the creation of a confederation-like union, which in turn would create the desirable position of the "Head of the Confederation".

There are three main factors, though, that may impact the final decision: public opinion and opinion of elites in Russia, public opinion and opinion of elites in Belarus / Kazakhstan, as well as the opinion of political elites in Europe.

Transfer of power to a successor

This scenario was perceived as the most inconvenient for the Kremlin. Firstly, this is a repetition of the situation of 2008, which many people would immediately associate with the shuffles of 2011 and perceive negatively. Secondly, it is not easy to find a successor who on the one hand would be an authority figure and on the other hand would be easy to control. Thirdly, despite the general consensus among the elites that stability and power should be maintained at any cost, there are constant contradictions between the "silos". Today, these contradictions are contained through the ongoing maintenance of parity between the camps and its rapid restoration immediately after conflict exacerbations. Maintaining such a balance after the transfer of power to someone else would be quite difficult. In addition, low ratings make the transfer of power to a successor even more risky.

Recent experience has shown that both at the local and regional levels people may vote for dummy candidates

in the absence of worthy and popular government-backed candidates; the demand for new faces in politics is much higher than in 2007-2008, and in general the situation gradually starts to resemble the one in 1999, when the role of a successor was played by Putin.

And even if the scenario starts resembling the one of 1999, the main issue would be the safety and security not only of Putin and his family (as it was at that time), but of the entire architecture of the current regime. Therefore, the likelihood of losing control over the situation in the country is very high and such a scenario can be assessed as risky not only for Putin personally, but for the "Kremlin" as a whole.

The elections to the State Duma in 2021 can be viewed as an interim assessment of the situation. Both the Kremlin and the opposition would take them into account when searching for solutions to Issue 2024.

Every autumn for the past two years the Kremlin underwent a regional legitimacy test. While the control over local elections has been handed by the Kremlin over to the regions (with the general expectation of reduced number of public conflicts), regional elections remain important due to the Kremlin's desire to keep control over the regional elites. In 2018 it became clear that the usage of various "filters" to manage governors' elections does not prevent the delegitimation of regional elections. When the "Kremlin candidate" is not backed by regional and local elites, the elections can be won by dummy candidates.

Thus, there are two contradictory tasks that the Kremlin obviously needs to fulfill in 2021:

- to increase (or simply maintain) the legitimacy of authority at the regional and federal levels;
- to have a loyal majority in the Federal Assembly after 2021.

While the first task requires demonstrating that the elections are free and the opposition is allowed to participate, the second requires preventing the opposition from winning any seats. Results of the elections to the Moscow City Duma in 2019 have shown that even several members independent of the executive power (and dependent on civil society) can undermine the legitimacy of the entire system, e.g. the infamous budget discussion, a round table on the territory of the Moscow City Duma with the participation of Navalny and etc., confirming thus the loss of absolute control and a change in the political landscape.

In 2016, both tasks were successfully accomplished, when candidates from the Yabloko and Parnas parties were also allowed to participate in the elections. Both candidates who positioned themselves as opposition and those who openly associated themselves with the Open Russia brand were registered without hindrance. On the other hand, authorities used underhanded tactics to ensure that candidates associated with Navalny and FBK could not participate.

An important reason for the Kremlin's success was the lack of signature protection methods in 2016, which were tested by independent candidates in 2019 in Moscow. Thus, it was enough to underhandedly cut off "superfluous" candidates from the nominating bodies and later disqualify them at the stage of signature verification. After the Moscow events of 2019 such strategy for the Kremlin is more risky, since it requires further intensification of repression during the campaign, that may further undermine its legitimacy.

Hence, the only acceptable way to fight the opposition and the growing number of independent leaders, is to blatantly discredit them. Nowadays the easiest way to discredit is to accuse of working for foreign powers or to block prospective candidates by falsifying criminal charges and limiting thus their rights and opportunities to participate in elections.

Time will show whether such a strategy can be successful.

The scenario of limiting the powers of the State Duma and turning it into a decorative organ with advisory status was also mentioned. The respondents noted that in that case an opposition fraction could exist in the State Duma, creating thus an illusion of democracy and debate. According to the respondents, this scenario would be favorable from the point of view of marrying the interests of various regional stakeholders. The transformation of the State Duma into an analogue of the Civic Chamber for different stakeholders from the regions, which will have a public platform and access to Vladimir Putin, directly meets the needs of small players, who are at the greatest disadvantage currently.

The election campaign will show whether the latest amendments to the Constitution pertaining to the reform of the State Duma follow this model. If the Kremlin provides more opportunities for the opposition to consolidate its supporters and participate in the elections, this would mean that this particular scenario has been approved.

2.3 Intensification and expected modes of repression aimed at retaining power but decreasing its legitimacy

Like all other elements of the regime, repression in Russia is a complex combination of stakeholders' actions, characterized by the collision of interests of various security agencies and groups of Kremlin political managers. In the long term, it limits the possibilities for the development of civil society, but does not eradicate them. Therefore, the situation allows leaders and civil society activists to find new ways to interact and work.

Within the next few years, one should not expect significant changes though. On the one hand, all experts agree that a dramatic intensification of repression is impossible, on the other hand, it is doubtful that the current political elites will either forfeit such tactics, or stop to increase the pressure gradually.

The events of the summer of 2019 showed that even a slight increase in pressure on protesters causes a negative reaction in society. One expert pointed out that, unlike the case of the rallies for Navalny's nomination in 2017-2018, currently there is stronger support for the protesters, and the state's violence is perceived as unnecessary and violent. If back in 2017-2018 many passive citizens stated that "Navalny has misled the kids, but let them learn a lesson", now the popular sentiment is that "Moscovites went out to defend their interests, but are being imprisoned for that." People express greater interest in the topic of political repression and political prisoners. Many have just realized that some of their peers can be now called "political prisoners". Before that, they were convinced that there were no political prisoners in modern Russia.

Several experts mentioned that they were surprised by the popularity of a single person picketing (so-called "metropickets") that turned out to be quite useful. This way activists engage in regular activities and come out en masse with no need to organize large scale actions; such protests are difficult to suppress and are a good way of informing a greater number of people.

On the other hand, most successful repressive measures undertaken by the authorities are aimed at tightening the legislation and limiting the freedom of association and assembly. First, such measures are difficult to block at the lawmaking stage. Despite being viewed negatively, laws are adopted without taking the views of civil society into account. Paradoxically, vague legal interpretation does not hinder the application, but sometimes becomes the very reason for the popularity of those laws.

Undoubtedly, their entry into force has been delayed: several experts noted that, on average, a new law enters into force between 1.5 to 2 years after its adoption. Those laws can be to a certain degree counteracted by large campaigns in support of those who are targeted by those laws, especially when such campaigns spill over the borders of Russia. However, they cannot be blocked completely. For example, the attack on the Memorial happened in several stages. Initially the repressions ceased as soon as the public both inside and outside of Russia started paying attention to the matter. Nowadays, though, even being the center of public attention might not help.

Also, one of the experts notes that tighter regulations may be introduced limiting the ability of individuals to establish informal organizations, since it is already virtually impossible to establish a formal organization.

Most experts who follow international politics stress that the international opinion is of crucial importance for constraining repression. Ultimately, it is important for the Russian political elite at least to keep the current status quo in relations with European countries, and at most to return to the situation before 2014. The Russian authorities traditionally count on the support of Southern European countries and France, rational approach of Germany, Holland and Scandinavian countries and hope to ignore the negative opinion of Central and Eastern European countries.

Several experts state that changes in local public attitudes to Russia are more important for the political elites of European countries. So, for example, Moscow summer events of 2019 were broadly covered by media in various European countries and showed the Europeans at what cost the legitimacy of the current government is ensured. The more voters in European countries will demand from their political elites to adhere to clear values in their relations with the Kremlin, the more difficult it will be for the Russian authorities to maintain the status quo in international relations without limiting their repressive policies.

Drawing attention to political cases, the specifics of investigations and court proceedings, pressure on activists, recent legislative changes, wide dissemination of this information and increased pressure on European politicians from their voters will put the Russian authorities in a difficult position.

When repression is reduced, in order to keep the external status quo, new opportunities for the civil sector will emerge so that it may find its strength and involve

new groups of activists and covert supporters, creating thus the foundation for future mass protests. If repression stays the primary instrument for maintaining domestic legitimacy, it will weaken the external status quo and, thus, will increase the general dissatisfaction of Russian society with the position of Russia in the world, which will lead to a decrease in legitimacy and an increase in mass discontent, in the absence of channels for its public expression.

2.4 Scenarios for regional and local development in the conditions of the worsening economic situation

Assessments of the current situation and forecasts vary greatly depending on the position of experts. Therefore, to answer this question, the author conducted additional completely anonymous interviews with representatives of regional elites in several regions and political strategists participating in regional campaigns.

The following questions were asked:

- To what extent regional and local elites are embedded in the “vertical structure” and aligned with the federal elites?
- How do regional elites see the development of their regions in the next 10 years?
- To what extent are regional elites interested in the development or destruction of civil society, free media, political parties, etc.?
- To what extent do regional elites depend on public opinion?

Regional elites rely less on long-term planning and budgetary commitments than they did 3-5 years ago. This largely determines individual strategies of regional and local officials. At the same time, a “weak point” in the vertical structure has been revealed. Technocratic governors, who seemed to be a convenient tool for the federal government, got dominated by regional elites. Their success (being the lightweights they are) totally depends on regional and local elites, and regional elites have already learned to substitute less accommodating governors with such governors that are opened to negotiations. Moreover, they have learned quite successfully to use the tactic of protest voting, as a result of which a quite accidental but dependent on the regional elites representative of the spoiler party becomes the head of the regional authorities. It is known

that regional political strategists, inspired by the first successes of the “smart voting” strategy, have already started discussing with their clients the possibility of using it for their own purposes. By selecting the “right” candidates from spoiler parties and quietly helping civic activists to promote “smart voting” during the campaign, they will help their candidates to become members of the Russian regional parliaments and even governors.

This, in turn, improves the status and provides greater opportunities to the regional branches of satellite parties. Being in charge of a regional branch of even a non-parliamentary party (including Yabloko and Parnas) made it possible to participate in regional elections in the fall of 2020 and in the parliamentary elections of 2021. At the same time, the possibility of registration of PARNAS candidates in regional elections on the basis of collected signatures becomes possible in those regions where local and regional elites allow it.

Thus, if at least one deputy from the PARNAS party is elected in at least in one region in the regional elections of 2020, this greatly expands the possibilities of coalition building in the parliamentary elections of 2021. The so-called “non-systemic” opposition may negotiate its nominations with Yabloko and PARNAS. To some extent the scenario of 2016 may be repeated, although public sentiments are quite different now, and new opposition leaders have many new tools at their disposal.

The regional respondents describe in an interesting way the perception of civil society, free media, and activists of new movements. Most often regional elites pay attention to them only in situations when they can be used for their own purposes (for example, to fight against an undesirable governor or to back their own candidates for a local council or regional parliament). On the other hand, the civil sector frightens the elite with its lack of control and unpredictability, as well as its “disorganization”. One of the respondents admitted that “he naturally supports democracy, but there must be some kind of structure, otherwise it is not clear with whom to negotiate.” In fact, it is necessary to rebuild public communication platforms in the regions, introduce new leaders and social mediation tools. One of the respondents stated: “Everyone was sure that if we got rid of the surplus, we could develop our region faster, it would be easier to get bonuses from Moscow, so many actively joined the fight against the revolutionaries. Only now it turns out that those revolutionaries were much less radical and more integrated into the system than what we have now. So, what happens now? Should we kill our fellow citizens

to restore order? Even Moscow wouldn't be able to save us then: we would be thrown to the wolves. So for now we are just trying to maneuver."

At the same time, many civic activists and opposition leaders in the regions are very pessimistic. They do not feel powerful or perceive themselves as part of a large movement, and not always feel that their organizations express their solidarity or support them: "Until nothing happens, everything is fine, but when they come to search your place, they won't even help you to find a lawyer. What you can expect is at most a line or two in the media".

In general, opposition activists in the regions can be divided into two groups. The first group are those who have learned to mobilize and support the community within the region. They have become a focal point of an active community, and this inspires and motivates them. The second group consists of individual activists surrounded by a passive community that quickly burn out, do not feel supported, and feel the futility of their efforts, regardless of past successes and experience.

2.5 Business behavior models in the situation of legitimacy crisis, deteriorating economic conditions and market restrictions

In case of this topic, most of the respondents tried to avoid generalizations and focus on specific cases. It seems that this social group is the most difficult to analyze and evaluate.

Here are just a few ideas that have been expressed repeatedly by various respondents:

1. Small businesses slowly move towards informal "garage" economy that is expanding in two directions. On the one hand, individual entrepreneurs close their businesses and start freelancing, continuing the same activities but without reporting for tax purposes. On the other hand, more and more young people start their business without registering as an individual entrepreneur and eventually come to the conclusion that it is a better option in the long run. For example: "My daughter sells gift baskets on Instagram. When she began to receive income, she wanted to rent an office, register and pay taxes, but she did the calculations and ended up renting an apartment as a warehouse and a workshop and continues to work without registration."

2. Medium independent businesses are the most vulnerable group, more than others affected by the decline in demand and the deterioration of the economy. They are the most independent in their views and look for new sources of income and inspiration. ("We have an entrepreneur in our region. His income is counted in millions of dollars, and he is the owner of several businesses. He keeps his distance from the authorities and he is the only one to openly support any opposition. Recently he began to gather small entrepreneurs from his city and conduct classes and consultations for them, helping them to develop. He says this is what interests him, because they are the target audience for his business, and he also thinks that it may be turned into a business school.")
3. The majority of entrepreneurs are not ready to openly support the opposition or back their own candidates to regional parliaments, but as part of the community they participate in campaigns in support of independent candidates to local self-government bodies. Some help confidentially, but for charity reasons, not because they consider it an investment in their future business interests. "I proposed to one entrepreneur with a fairly stable business to form a political fraction by supporting a group of candidates from different parties. He said it was too dangerous. And then he offered some money, but under the condition that no one would know about it, even the candidates that would get his financial support."

2.6 Mechanisms for expanding or curtailing activism due to repressions or frustration with the general situation

The main conclusion for today is that currently in Russia there is no serious political movement aiming at changing the regime in the country and involved in regular fight for liberation. In general, there is a complex network of individual organizations, groups, movements, parties, communities, public organizations, displaying a common dissatisfaction with the current situation and trying to create an infrastructure for survival in a hostile environment. According to experts, the situation is unlikely to change significantly over the next 4-5 years. Rather, all these groups are waiting for a serious trigger event that would lead to mass discontent, that in turn could be channeled into active protest actions based on

the already existing infrastructure for communication, actions and mutual assistance.

At the same time, political elites do not plan to change the political regime (in any direction), unless there is a serious trigger: repressive politics intensifies only in response to expanding protest actions, while democratization is only of decorative nature, to the extent required for a short-term reduction in discontent or improvement of the external image of the regime.

Such status quo, according to several experts, strongly influences the nature of activists and leaders' involvement. On the one hand, leaders adapt to the situation and start favoring everyday struggle over the seizure of power and subsequent democratization, on the other hand, many of them burn out or radicalize, in the opinion of those who surround them.

Activists either join the community to solve their specific issues, or remain latent, participating only in individual events but regularly funding the activities. Many are planning to emigrate, not perceiving their activist involvement as strategic in any way.

In general, everyone confirms that there is a consensus within the Russian society about the need for change, but no mainstream understanding of how to initiate the change. Thus, experts mostly agree that the changes will not start without some significant trigger.

Based on previous experience, many respondents assume that when Issue 2024 will be discussed and some decisions taken, either during the parliamentary elections of 2021 or the presidential elections of 2024, it may become such a trigger. Socio-economic conditions, security issues, further reduction of freedoms and restriction of rights can only be secondary elements that may additionally increase the frustration, that would originally be caused by political decisions.

At the same time, all respondents note that the existing civil sector will not disappear or become significantly weaker, unless political elites initiate mass repression. As mentioned above, all experts agree that this is quite unrealistic: repression may intensify but on a limited and gradual basis, allowing the civil society to prepare, restructure and identify new defense mechanisms and actions.

One expert stressed an important point: "Today, in fact, there are a lot of different "sleeping" activists and supporters of changes. They silently sympathize with the activists, some quietly support, but they will not speak

openly until they are convinced that the authorities have no resources to suppress them and that no one is listening to the authorities any longer. And this will only happen either when budgets start collapsing, or when law enforcement and security agencies ("siloviki") stop persecuting dissidents."

"Siloviki" in general have been mentioned a lot in different contexts, but it has not been possible to identify a single model of behavior for this group. Everyone notes that the "siloviki" group is a very complex mechanism of relations and contradictions, that there is no single model of their behavior, that each element within the structure actually pursues its own interests and observes corporate ethics insofar as it is beneficial for it. This complexity, in fact, makes it possible for them to exert certain pressure and persecute civil society, regional and local elites, journalists, entrepreneurs, officials, etc. In a complex and contradictory structure, there will always be some element that will benefit from acting in a repressive way.

Due to the actions of the siloviki, according to many experts, middle-level management can sympathize with the protesters to their heart's content, but will continue following orders obediently, because "agency loyalty" for them is more important than being part of the local community. Moreover, their dissatisfaction with their agency's internal situation, unfair remuneration, long working hours, etc. does not become a valid reason to "betray agency's interests".

2.7 Mechanisms for maintaining the legitimacy and stability of the political regime in the eyes of external observers

According to some experts, one of the Kremlin's tasks is to make European and American public opinion believe in the stability of the regime. At certain point in time, poll results confirming the inviolable nature of Putin's approval rating became important not only from the point of view of domestic but also foreign policy. It is important to demonstrate the support and stability of the regime as a whole, both when discussing the political agenda and economic projects.

The Kremlin is trying to minimize any uncontrolled communication of civil society leaders as much as possible. In case of any international event, in which NGOs may participate, official delegations are comprised of very particular people, and the actual participation of civil society representatives is limited.



"Conversation with Dmitry Medvedev", 2019. Source: government.ru

Most often, the same persons every year repeat the same message, all-to-familiar to European participants. The Kremlin does not oppose those speeches, as they seem to prove that opposing views exist, debate and criticism at the international level are allowed, and at the same time an illusion is being created that such opinions are limited and only a small minority is dissatisfied with the situation in the country.

As a result, politicians and international experts are under the impression that the society in general is satisfied with the situation in the country, the current regime is unshakable and stable, and only few individuals with no prospects for the future oppose it.

The picture gets distorted by reports of mass protests that appear in the European media from time to time. However, since the information is fragmentary and does not demonstrate regular trends, the events are often considered to be separate outbreaks caused by private reasons.

During the Moscow summer events of 2019, the trend was broken due to the fact that the protests were long-term and ongoing, hence they attracted greater than usual attention of journalists. Publications of an analytical nature appeared, describing the situation as a whole.

Thus, it is obvious that the attention of the European media can be drawn to the situation in Russia only by long-term and mass protests and intensified and

deepened work with European journalists, familiarizing them with the situation in Russia.

A number of experts paid attention to how political repressions are covered in the world media. In general, the coverage of political repressions is very specific, e.g. the information about the persecution of minorities is provided, with a clear indication of the "traditional" values which they oppose: anti-LGBT persecution in the North Caucasus, persecution of religious minorities, mass detentions at rallies during clashes with the police, etc.

According to experts, such "dotted" coverage of repressions in Russia suits the political elites of most European countries. Rational interaction with Russia and Putin is considered an adequate approach, despite the conflict in Ukraine and the policy of sanctions. Moreover, diminished Russian-Ukrainian conflict has enabled Russia's full return to all international structures and is perceived as something acceptable by public opinion. The group of countries that actively object to Russia being a full-fledged partner are the countries of Eastern and Central Europe that have experienced the post-communist transition, and their position is described as follows: "Poles and Lithuanians are always perceived as opponents of Russia, for historical reasons. It is always assumed that we are exaggerating and criticizing not just Putin's current policy, but the possibility of any cooperation with Russia, regardless of who holds the power".

Is it possible to change the attitude of loyal European political and economic elites towards the Kremlin? Experts were divided. Some experts believe that as long as the Kremlin does not commit aggressive actions against any European country or corporation, nothing will change: the elites with the positive attitude towards the Kremlin will continue to be positive and lobby Putin's interests; the number of the elite members with extremely negative attitude will not increase significantly, and their arguments will continue to be abstract and non-evidence-based. The majority, though, is indifferent and favors rational approach, stating that it is better to strive to maintain peace and partnership than aggressively express one's opinions.

Other experts are convinced that changes in the public opinion of European countries may change the mood of the political elites. For example, in 2014, the public supported Ukraine and as a result European politicians were forced to take action and impose sanctions against the Kremlin. Thus, as long as the European public does not perceive the partnership with the official Russia as toxic and inconsistent with European values, the attitude of the elites will stay the same.

At the same time, it is important to mention that many activists in the Russian regions believe that the "West" has a negative attitude towards the Kremlin and therefore actively supports the opposition. The topic of financing from Western funds is a painful one. Although, everyone understands that no one pays participants for their participation in rallies and public campaigns, nevertheless, it is acknowledged that many non-governmental organizations receive such funding and live off of it. Also, it is believed that opposition activists are welcomed abroad when they decide to emigrate.

As mentioned above, recent public opinion polls in Russia show that "the Crimean effect" has diminished, making Russians realize that the perception of Russia as a great country is closely connected to its participation in all significant events and processes in the world. The respondents agreed that this is the only mechanism that can influence the international (and to some extent domestic) policy of the Kremlin. After Russia's return to the Council of Europe, for example, the Kremlin will try not to escalate the situation in such a way that it may lead again to the suspension of its membership.

According to some respondents, greater involvement of civil society representatives and the opposition into the international agenda will force the Kremlin to behave more carefully both within and outside the country.

Conclusion

Respondents agree that all parties favor the moderate scenario over all other potential scenarios, as it strives at all costs to maintain stability, while any fluctuations are counteracted by the other side. We witnessed such swing movements many times, i.e. after the assassination of Boris Nemtsov in 2015, in 2017 during the presidential campaign of Alexei Navalny, in 2019 during the elections to the Moscow State Duma, etc.

At the same time, overall political tendencies move in the direction of authoritarian practices, activist community gradually becomes more radical and welcomes new members (while some older activists burn out and leave the country), and the institutional structure of the state is being eroded.

Everyone stresses that although such a situation may continue for a long time, at any moment it can be disturbed by a random unexpected event that will destroy the balance of power and change the orientation towards stability at least in case of one of the groups of interest.

Some respondents assume that the death of Vladimir Putin will be such a trigger, while others believe that it will happen when the quality of life of some social group dramatically deteriorates.

The respondents agree that in case of the first scenario the changes will start from the top, and in case of the second scenario from the bottom.

Also, all respondents state that in the coming years confrontation will increase during the periods of regional elections, elections to the State Duma and presidential elections.

At the same time, all respondents admit that it is unlikely that 2024 will mark the beginning of a new democratization, although it can witness the beginning of increased authoritarian practices.

Several respondents shared their ideas on what can make a difference and facilitate the democratization:

To promote greater involvement of young people into social and political life by providing them with support and opportunities in the civil sector (youth initiatives and platforms in the regions, scholarships and study tours for young people, including internships in various NGOs in Russia);

Since many civil society leaders do not know how to interact with young activists, they need to be taught how to do it, hence, training events and discussion meetings are needed;

To provide to Russian activists from the regions opportunities to travel to other countries (including European countries, Georgia, Ukraine, and the United States) regardless of imposed restrictions and Kremlin's attempts to discredit such programs;

To actively disseminate information on the situation in Russia at different levels in European countries (especially Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Denmark, Spain) in order to change the perception of the Kremlin as a "reliable, although somewhat problematic, partner" by the public opinion of these countries.



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