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<https://doi.org/10.12797/Politeja.16.2019.62.10>**Leontiy Georgievich BYZOV** 

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## FROM RISE TO FALL

### THE AXIOLOGICAL DIMENSION OF THE PUTIN ERA

**ABSTRACT**

Based on the 2000-2018 comparative studies of the Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences and the Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VTsIOM), the author presents the process of transition of the “Putin era” from the stage of consolidation built upon public consensus achieved at the beginning of the “zero” (*нулевых*) years to the current stage of value crisis that arose in 2012-2014 and lasts to this day. Although the current state of society cannot be unequivocally interpreted as a split, contradictions in the system of values are growing. Implementation of the idea of a strong state is delegated to social groups that are least modernized. Moreover, within the state itself, frustration has been growing among the whole society. The increasing demand for change has not yet been materialized in the form of any political “body”, which makes the inevitable transit of epochs extremely risky for the country and the society.

**Key words:** consolidation, imbalance, social contract, conservative majority, liberal minority, demand for change, legalism, European choice, Putin’s majority

Since 2018, when the last presidential term of Vladimir Putin began, there have been more frequent talks about the already initiated “transit” of the regime and about the end of an era that had lasted almost twenty years. Naturally, no one can predict if this transit will be accompanied by shocks and a crisis of statehood, although such an option cannot be excluded. There is an alarming rate at which problems are revealed and the regime no longer offers positive ideas; thus the shape of the new “Russian project” remains completely unknown. As Mikhail Delyagin observes, without boosting its agenda forward, maintaining stability and Russian statehood in the period until 2024 seems impossible in the light of external and internal tensions<sup>1</sup>. The regime, which seemed firm and lacking any alternative, is focused on activities defending status quo and is deteriorating before our eyes. The demanded “Russian project” has not been formulated, and in practice the situation is even worse – it is being replaced by a pseudo-patriotic imitation. Thus it is good to return to some sources from many years ago and try to find out what direction the era has been following during such a long time of its existence as well as to analyze which of the expected aspects have materialized, and which have not and why; which changes resulted from mistakes and what were caused by objective laws of regime transformation.

## THE BLOOMING PERIOD OF THE REGIME

At the end of 2000, in his article “Первые контуры постпереходной эпохи [The First Contours of the Post-transitional Era]”<sup>2</sup>, the author of the following study attempted to predict the modes of the coming era. Actually, the new regime turned out to be very stable not because of certain personal qualities of the leader (personalist regime), not because of its institutions, which were weak at that time, but because of the social balance and values that have emerged. The regime was perceived as a historical compromise between the objective imperative to undertake market reforms, necessary at that time, and their rejection by a significant part of the society. The first years of its existence formed a two-sector economy, with successfully developing private business and powerful state-owned corporations acting as the locomotives of modernization. The well-known sociologist Sergey Belanovsky called this phenomenon “popular legalism” and distinguished it from “sovereign legalism”. Popular legalism means the idea that a strong ruler is able to eliminate any injustice that he knows about. People know that this task is not easy but they are comforted by their hope that one day it will happen. Sovereign legalism is a phenomenon whose main idea is the cult of military force capable of resisting the whole world, protecting against any aggressor, and even spreading its

<sup>1</sup> М. Деягин, “Стратегические требования к России: пора подумать о своих интересах”, *Свободная мысль*, no. 4 (2018).

<sup>2</sup> Л.Г. Бызов, “Первые контуры постпереходной эпохи”, *Социологические исследования*, no. 4 (2001), pp. 3-15.

geopolitical influence throughout the world.<sup>3</sup> Both of these forms of legalism are not contradictory, since they combine a just internal structure with the global order.

In fact, this article will discuss left- and right-wing populism, each with its roots in the archetypal consciousness of the people. They are based on the centuries-old collective experience which formed the so-called national matrix. In its beginnings, Putin's regime rested more on sovereign legalism although it was never considered fair. This is also claimed by publicists of liberal views. What is characteristic here is the position of the liberal social activist Yuri Samodurov, who said that practices such as the early 1990s unlawful seizure of "factories, newspapers, steamships" by only a small group of people would still be present in politics, regardless of the opposition from those who today call themselves liberals in the area of politics and economy.<sup>4</sup> However, the deficit of social justice was compensated in the 2000s by the rapidly growing income of the middle class, the largest social group. A specific social contract was concluded – you do not interfere in our lives and we earn money in any way we can, and we forget about your fortunes and where they come from.

When Putin gained power, the society perceived it as a long-awaited end of the transition process. "500 days" had ended a long time before, several more years had passed and it all ended in failure in 1998. The transition ("transit") to Western democracy failed, and as an alternative to this dream the society received support from the authorities; however, not from any authorities, but the ones that would correspond to national archetypal ideas about Russian authorities. According to the archetype researcher Nadezhda Matrasova, archetypal consciousness was the pre-consciousness of humanity, a kind of synthesis of the real and the sacred world. It gives rise to stable mental formations – archetypes which preserve the experience of generations. Manifestations of this initial universal form of human consciousness can be different.<sup>5</sup> In these circumstances authority was formed, perceived by society as traditional, as "a necessity". Moreover, it was not so much the adoption of a new order by the majority of the population as the formation of synthesis of national values that determined the temporary suspension or completion of revolutionary processes in the society. However, the society itself remained highly polarized, and the authorities often acted contrary to the interests of the society and the nation, but in favour of one of the factions in the developing public confrontation.

Yet somehow under the rule of Putin it would seem that in that ultimately atomized generation there were greater chances for the Russian citizens to formally acquire the features of a political nation which tasted the overall success of "a corporation called Russia". The Russians, who seemed to be far behind, were overjoyed when at least in some way they took the Western countries down, by winning the tender for organizing

<sup>3</sup> С. Белановский, "Стратегическая альтернатива", *LiveJournal*, 6 August 2018, at <<https://belan.livejournal.com/269083.html>>.

<sup>4</sup> Ю. Самодуров, *Блог "Эхе Москвы"*, at <[echo.msk.ru/Блоги/Юрий\\_Самодуров/archive/2.html](https://echo.msk.ru/Блоги/Юрий_Самодуров/archive/2.html)>.

<sup>5</sup> Н.К. Матросова, "Архетип как форма ориентирующего сознания", *Вестник Санкт-Петербургского университета. Философия и конфликтология*, vol. 32, no. 2 (2016), p. 38.

the Olympic Games, testing modern weapons that these countries “did not have”, and then annexing Crimea and protecting “the Russian world” (русский мир) in the Donbas. All this did not resemble the “gloomy 1990s”, when everything snowballed out of control and everybody tried to “kick the man who was down” rather than offer him a helping hand. However, it became immediately clear that such changes were not permanent enough. The most important elements were absent – there were none or hardly any efficient entities responsible for national development, which had not been officially appointed from the top but had grown organically from the society.

However, substantive assessments of the phenomenon called by its supporters “Putin’s stability” and by the critics “Putin’s neo-stagnation” vary depending on the historical perspective. For those who are oriented towards the general tendency to form a democratic society and economic modernization, Putin’s “Thermidor” means a forced hold-up. For those who prefer their own unique way – a return to Russian “historical self”, to political and socio-cultural identity.

The culmination of the regime in the “zero” years witnessed a new phenomenon known as “Putin’s consensus”, a transition to the market which was a process not reckless but cautious in its nature, with social guarantees for the non-market sectors of the economy. The majority were the supporters of the centrist option, which had certain left-wing features mainly related to the paternalistic concept of the state as the main entity organizing a society; on the other hand, it had some national-patriotic traits related to the actualization of national-statist issues and the return of notions about the external environment as totally hostile to Russia (particularly after 2004).

In the late 1990s, the process of socio-cultural consolidation of the society began after a serious split at the beginning and in the middle of the decade that brought the emergence of a quite impressive middle class, representing consolidated values. Many, including the author of this text, regarded those processes as the “new Russian ethno-genesis” (новорусский этногенез), the birth of the new Russian nation [9]<sup>6</sup>. While the quantitatively shrinking nuclei of the “Westernist” and “traditionalist” segments of mass consciousness still retained the features of “subcultures” strongly polarized in their identification, the groups which belonged to the middle – socialist, nationalist, and centrist – represented a nationwide synthesis. Despite their different adopted labels, those types of consciousness had many features in common, and the powerful centre that emerged synthesized all the previous ideologies. Therefore, the society and the authorities agreed on a secret historical compromise between market reforms and strengthening of the state. At that time, the state was a guarantor of that compromise as the authorities were perceived as the least evil – both by those in favour of market economy (рыночники) (because the movement towards market modernization slowed down but did not stop) and by the statist (государственники), paternalists

<sup>6</sup> Л.Г. Бызов, *Контуры новорусской трансформации. Социокультурные аспекты формирования современной российской нации и эволюция социально-политической системы*, Москва 2013; idem, “Анатомия консервативного большинства”, *Сетевое издание центра исследований и аналитики Фонда исторической перспективы “Перспективы”*, 12 March 2014, at <[http://www.perspektivy.info/rus/gos/anatomija\\_konservativnogo\\_bolshinstva\\_2014-03-12.htm](http://www.perspektivy.info/rus/gos/anatomija_konservativnogo_bolshinstva_2014-03-12.htm)>.

(патерналисты), and national-patriots (национал-патриоты) (because many sectors of public life were removed from the devastating hands of free market and – to quote propaganda slogans – the country began “to rise from its knees”).

In this situation, the authorities did not need public love or their own charisma since the government remained stable thanks to the stable structure based on unification of values. In its ideological dimension, the “Putin era” during its climax was a mixture of various ideological doctrines, in many works called a “consensual metaideology” (консенсусна метаидеология) [9, 10] <sup>7</sup>. As it was expected, in the upcoming era the main task of Putin was to eliminate the neo-feudal system of *kormleniye* (кормления, [feeding]), which ensures equal conditions for citizens, regions, enterprises, the triumph of law and order<sup>8</sup>. However, even then the institutional inefficiency of the regime was obvious. In an effort to increase the administrative management of political and social processes, which involves simplifying the institutional sphere, the stability of these processes can be easily lost as it is based on the institutional complexity and diversity of political and social entities<sup>9</sup>. Nevertheless, one still could see the durability of the system was evident, as well as the absence of any long-term alternative to it.

Another important aspect of the consensus of the Putin era is the next red line, the demarcation with the West. The attitude of Russians towards the West – not only towards the US but also towards its traditional allies in Europe – has equalled the historical nadir. The anti-Western, mainly anti-American, sentiments in Russia snowballed, especially after the events in former Yugoslavia in the late 1990s. In the Russian mass consciousness it is the “West” that is becoming a concentrated embodiment of evil, all sorts of fears and threats. The claim that “Russia has its own path, different from the Western countries” was supported in 2000 by almost 70% of respondents. 43% named the US as the main source of serious threats to Russia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The attitude towards Western European countries remained more restrained and neutral. Despite widely circulated “patriotic views”, only slightly less than 5% of the population were ready to support radical national-patriotic politicians during the elections. A substantial decrease in the number of those who identify with the Russian national idea results from the creation of a national-centrist majority, which has absorbed a part of Russian nationalist ideology that is not rejected in this majority.

It can be said that the evolution of the liberal part of the society in the direction of moderate statehood was the most positive aspect in the early years of the Putin era. After all, we are talking about the most active and enlightened social group, which in Russian history demonstrated public discontent most often. Despite the general alignment of the socio-political spectrum and mitigation of extremes, also among the communist electorate, its representatives remained the only group of society whose values, unlike

<sup>7</sup> Idem, *Контурь новорусской трансформации...*; idem, “‘Неоконсервативная волна’ в современной России: фаза очередного цикла или стабильное состояние?”, *Мир России*, no. 1 (2010).

<sup>8</sup> Д. Бельский, “Чего мы ждем от нового Президента”, *Комсомольская Правда*, 16 March 2000; А.Г. Бызов, “Первые контурь...”, pp. 3-15.

<sup>9</sup> А.Г. Бызов, “Первые контурь...”, pp. 3-15.

those of the others, were significantly leaning towards Soviet-style conservatism. In the liberal-democratic part of the society, the evolution of values towards the traditional statist ones was much deeper. If in 1995 the attitude to liberal reforms and to the West strongly divided the society, then at the beginning of the zero years those factors would rather unite it. The strengthening of Russia's position in the international arena was the one value from the arsenal of a "strong state" that all social groups shared.

Such eras are typical not only of Russia. All fast, revolutionary changes of a social system have always ended up with their own "Thermidors" and "restorations" since rapidly changing political and social realities are never accompanied by equally fast changes in consciousness, culture, and values. These areas are much more conservative. If the general tendency towards the formation of a conservative majority emerged not today or yesterday but in the mid-1990s, and intensified only over the last 15 years, then recently it has started its qualitative development. This was reflected in the reconfiguration of the society's system of values. Moreover, the polarization of values was outlined due to the half-decay of the political centre and the increased influence of the regions. If at the beginning of the zero years the phenomenon of the neoconservative<sup>10</sup> wave involved unification of values, overcoming the ideological divisions, and forming a synthesis of values, then what is most significant a decade later is the opposition of the conservative majority to the liberal minority, or perhaps even the overwhelming conservative majority. However, this fact does not change the ideological agenda itself, which was also discussed in the 2018 election campaign. Experts for many years have been referring to Putin as the leader of new conservatives, and in one of his addresses to the Federal Assembly, the president himself highlighted that fact (Putin strongly advocated conservative values, thanks to which Russia would be able to resist the erosion of moral standards from the West and the "chaotic darkness of the Middle Ages"<sup>11</sup>). The idea of building a great power makes many people ignore the inequality in their private lives, high-handedness of officials, crassness of manners, and ineffective institutions. The opinion is growing among some part of the country's intellectual elite that what props the current government is the conservative part of the Russian society, many times larger than its liberal urban core.

According to the research conducted by the Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VTsIOM) in 2011–2012, i.e. even before the Crimean events and the "Russian spring", conservatives (to a greater extent) and liberals (to a lesser extent) were in general loyal to the authorities<sup>12</sup>. Social-conservatives – who are today called the "conservative majority" – constituted 68% (now more than 70%). A third of them had more oppositional views, and two thirds – more loyalist. The liberals constituted 23%, and since then their number has remained virtually unchanged. On one side there were

<sup>10</sup> Idem, "Неоконсервативная волна' в современной России..."

<sup>11</sup> "Послание Президента Федеральному собранию: Путин противопоставил российский консерватизм западному хаосу", *ПутинТВ*, 12 December 2013, at <[http://piter.tv/event/Putin\\_protivopostavil\\_rossijskij\\_konservatizm\\_zapadnomu\\_haosu/](http://piter.tv/event/Putin_protivopostavil_rossijskij_konservatizm_zapadnomu_haosu/)>.

<sup>12</sup> В. Федоров (ed.), *От плебисцита – к выборам. Как и почему россияне голосовали на выборах 2011–2012 гг.*, Москва 2013.



conservatives (the largest group) and on the other – liberals, both right-wing (supporters of the market) and left-wing (supporters of social priorities) respectively. The conservatives supported the traditional image of Russia – a powerful state with strong and strict authorities capable of ensuring social justice, which oppose the West and Western civilization. At the same time, they dreamed of stable development similar to the one in the last period of the Soviet Union, and not of revolutions and unrest. Liberals, in contrast, strove for minimizing the presence of the state, reducing its influence on business and civil society as well as on the process of forming a rights-based society, in which democratic rights and freedoms were valued higher. At the same time, within the conservative majority, its two sub-groups” – national-statehooders and left-wing statehooders – the latter are gradually becoming dominant. The same situation is observed among the liberal minority, which is rapidly becoming left-wing, i.e. moving towards social-democratic ideology. As a result, the model of socially-oriented capitalism has become more popular. In this model, the state regulates the defining spheres of life and greater economic freedom on its lower levels – in small and medium-sized businesses, trade, and the service sector. As early as in March 2007, 69% of Russians were in favour of revising the results of privatization, restoring the leading position of the public sector; 72% – of restoring the elements of state planning; 54% – of prohibiting free sale of land; 67% – of strengthening state control over business activity. Only 1% was in favour of leaving control over the country's natural resources in the hands of those who became their official owners after the reforms in recent years<sup>13</sup>.

The events of 2014 resulted in some amendments to that informal social agreement. The authorities proposed a mobilization model for the country, offering a dream (or a certain illusion of a dream) of “a great state” in return for the right to increasingly interfere in the sphere of personal life and freedoms of an individual (for example, through the control of social networks) and sharply reduced the level of social guarantees. A substantial part of the middle class, whose standard of life in the zero years rose, found itself again on the brink of poverty. And finally, and perhaps most importantly – the authorities began to identify with certain ideology, and the society was divided into the “right” and “wrong” accordingly. This meant that the red line of the new consensus shifted strongly in one direction and divided the society into two segments of unequal size.

At the same time, the VTsIOM research in March 2018 revealed that generally there was no significant quantitative growth of the most conservative majority; it was rather the “degree” of its moods that changed, becoming more heated and radical. A sense of “one nation” has emerged and strengthened among people (according to the VTsIOM, from 2012 to 2017 the number of those who agreed with the slogan “We are a single nation” grew from 23% to 54%<sup>14</sup>). Regardless of their assessment, the momentous events of 2014 have only just become the subject of professional debate, with

<sup>13</sup> Idem (ed.), *От Ельцина до Путина. Три эпохи в историческом сознании россиян*, Москва 2007.

<sup>14</sup> А.Г. Бызов, “Идейные рубежи крымского консенсуса”, in В.В. Фёдоров (ed.), *Выборы на фоне Крыма. Электоральный цикл 2016-2018 гг. и перспективы политического транзита*, Москва 2018.

regard not only to foreign policy but also their influence on the condition of the Russian society. In practice, we can see an atomized post-traditional society, living according to individual strategies of survival and focused on the values of mass consumption, with largely destroyed family traditions and a low level of solidarity and self-organization. This happens when the matrix of social autostereotype and self-perception of the society as well as the nation clearly contradicts objective assessments of public morality and legal awareness. However, the sphere of political choice – the formation of mass consciousness in the state-political sphere – is in many respects related to the sphere of the “ideal”, the declarative, and as a result, it reproduces in practice archetypal layers of consciousness more than real interests and motivations. Yet at the level of ceremonial values, unity is certainly present. According to the VTsIOM data for 2016, starting from 2014, the number of Russians who are proud of their country increased from around 55-60% to 70%. According to the Levada Center, during the same period the number of those who are proud of the symbols of Russia – its flag, anthem, etc., – increased from 55-58% to 75-78%<sup>15</sup>.

## THE REGIME IS GOING INTO DECLINE

What appears again is the question of the lack of legitimacy of the regime with regard to the model of “popular legalism”. “Sovereign legalism” of the authorities started to be questioned. Social and economic issues are becoming the highest priority for Russians. According to the survey of the Levada Center, 16% of Russians who were polled in July 2018 supported the foreign policy of the Russian president. In 2016, the percentage of respondents who supported the foreign policy of Vladimir Putin and considered it as one of the main advantages of their head of the state was 22%<sup>16</sup>. The veracity of these figures depends on the integrity of the survey interpreters. Apparently, during the survey the questions were asked in an open form, without any hints that would direct only the core part of those who support that foreign policy. However, in this case the figures themselves are of no significance; what is important is the identified trend.

As the results of the survey and materials from other sociological centres revealed, the condition of public opinion in Russia entered a phase of strong turbulence as several multidirectional trends started to grow simultaneously. The first one reflects the creeping sense of tiredness with the authorities and dissatisfaction with the work of state and political institutions. This feeling of tiredness manifested itself even in the winter of 2011–2012, when numerous protests took place in Moscow and in other

<sup>15</sup> Л. Гудков, “Сейчас Россия живет в эпоху безвременья”, *Русская сила*, 2 November 2014, at <<http://rusila.su/2014/11/02/sejchas-rossiya-zhivet-v-epohu-bezvremeniya/>>; idem, “Общество патриотов. Россия удивляет”, *Интервью сетевому изданию Русское ревю*, at <<https://russia-review.ru/index.php?id=92>>.

<sup>16</sup> Д. Кузнецов, “Снизилась поддержка внешней политики Владимира Путина”, *Daily Storm*, 8 August 2018, at <<https://dailystorm.ru/news/v-rossii-snizilas-podderzhka-vneshney-politiki-vladimira-putina>>.



cities of the country. Formally, they were caused by the lack of transparency of the vote count in the Duma elections, but *de facto* the citizens were dissatisfied with Putin's decision to run for the third term in 2012. The assessment of the highest authority, i.e. the Russian president, was continuously lower in 2012–2013. The decrease was not critical and made it possible to carry out short-term mobilization of the peripheral part of Putin's supporters through effective propaganda and due to the lack of any alternative. However, that trend of gentle decline was reversed in the spring of 2014 by the second most important trend – the long-term mobilization of the Russian society around the country's foreign policy followed by Putin and the idea behind the "Russian world", which immediately found many supporters among Russians. The feeling of being "a besieged fortress" and the notion of "a ring of enemies" trying to strangle Russia with sanctions, strengthened the support for the authorities since it shifted attention from the domestic political agenda, where things were far from a success, to foreign policy. It is important to refer here to the situation from the autumn of 2014, when the rouble dropped by more than 50% and, accordingly, there was a rapid increase in prices. However, this practically did not affect the rating of the president in the country. What is more, the majority of Russians supported the counter-sanctions imposed by the government against Western products (American, European), although they even more limited the possibilities of satisfying basic standards of consumer needs.

The long-term mobilization lasted about three years, and after that in 2017 yet again signs of fatigue with the authorities appeared, and more and more Russians began to transfer their attention from foreign policy to domestic and socio-economic problems. However, that tiredness was not so serious as to influence the results of a new short-term mobilization of Russians around the president before the elections in March 2018. Putin won with an unprecedentedly high result. First of all, that was an assessment of his role in the annexation of Crimea. The achieved "Crimean consensus" dominated those elections.

However, just after the elections, the third trend emerged, which resulted from Russians' great dissatisfaction with the social policy pursued by the authorities – particularly, with the changes in retirement legislation, for which Putin himself took responsibility, although not immediately. Yet it was the government and the United Russia party whose image was tarnished the most. Interestingly, that fall from grace did not affect the assessment of regional leaders as they remained relatively stable – a drop from 43% to 36% – and in 2018 even a slight increase was observed. This means that due to the well-known events of September 2018, in many regions of the country where the credit of trust to regional authorities has been exhausted, the phenomenon of "lowering the location of control" begins to emerge – the heads of regions and local self-government are starting to perceive their power as real. This is still a very weak and not too impressive tendency, but it can develop in the future if the centre starts to lose control over the course of events due to economic problems and the ineffective structure of "vertical" management. Apparently, something similar is happening in the Far East, where the observed crisis of confidence is directed towards Moscow, and not a regional leader. This is a kind of "asymmetric response" to the loss of managerial effectiveness.

The political parties, judicial bodies, and trade unions have for long been rated at the very bottom of public trust. The reform of the political system which was initiated at the end of 2011 has clearly stalled. The system itself did everything to separate the spoiler parties represented in the State Duma from “informal small-fry parties” (неформальной мелочевки). At the same time, the reform of the political system clearly abused administrative resources. All the potential new forces met insurmountable administrative barriers. As a result, in the circumstances of dramatic decline in the authority of the “ruling party”, voting becomes more of a protest, following the principle of “anyone but X”. Of course, the blood circulation in the country’s political body has become clogged.

Also the number of those who think that the president protects the country’s interests has decreased. According to the data from October 2018 (IS RAS), 17% of those who participated in the survey thought so, while in March 2018 such an opinion was shared by 25% of the respondents. This all means that the current political regime is more and more legitimized by inertia rather than by the active support of society. This is the fate of all regimes where the authority is personalistic – they last long, reach their climax and then begin to suffer from erosion (which is sometimes slow, sometimes fast). However, “immortal” ratings do not exist. According to the VTsIOM, within several months after the March elections Putin lost almost 10 points in his rating, particularly in large cities<sup>17</sup>. Tensions are growing, even if they are visible not in the streets but in social media, and few people believe in the promises made by the authorities.

Thus the Putin era has reached its climax and is slowly moving towards its end. The regime is becoming more personalistic, and the balance lying at its foundation turns out to have been destroyed. Its inevitable end carries a huge risk for the country and the society as a step leading to nowhere. Nevertheless, as the signs that the system of power built under Putin’s rule will collapse are becoming more visible, an increasingly greater number of Russians want some changes – changes which are often not understood consciously, ill-conceived, and based on a purely emotional rejection of the *status quo*. According to the most observant researchers of public opinion, the importance of the authorities is rapidly declining and will not be restored in the future. The negative attitude will only get intensified and a new economic crisis or a change of the leader will strengthen this process dramatically. The authorities will have to work in new conditions; however, no one is ready for them yet<sup>18</sup>. People are tired of the lack of changes, just like 20 years ago they were tired of too many rapid changes.

Some time ago, Sergey Belanovsky, who has already been quoted in this work, organized focus groups in Moscow, Vladimir, and in the depressive Gus-Khrustalny. According to the author, these studies revealed almost complete depletion of the society’s support for the regime, although people are not ready for any protest activities. However, the inertia is still massive. As Belanovsky notes, this utopia of omnipotent ruling with an iron fist (“legitivist” utopia) – which at the beginning of 2000s ensured

<sup>17</sup> Л.Г. Бызов, “Идейные рубежи...”

<sup>18</sup> С. Белановский, “Опрос показал отношение россиян к власти”, *МК*, 17 June 2018.

popular love for Putin and later partially sustained his rating – is a thing of the past. The authorities did not fulfill the promise to restore order in the country. Although “order” is understood differently, the nationwide consensus is that there is no order in the country – there is only lawlessness. As a result, legalism lost its appeal and its moral foundation. Why are strong authorities necessary if they are unable to restore order? Lack of order leads to injustice in various fields, and Russians perceive it as something extremely painful. To solve this problem, legal institutions must exist; however, it is not possible to create them quickly – this is such a difficult task that it will take years to complete it.

It seems that the past one and a half decade (from the insolvency in 1998 to the annexation of Crimea in March 2014) made many experts and even ordinary citizens say that the country finally overcame centuries of political turmoil. It is no coincidence that the majority of surveys during that period showed the priority of stability over the value of development associated with risk (65% vs 35% in 2014 and 54% vs 46% in October 2017). According to the Monitoring data of the Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences (Мониторинг Института социологии, *РАН*)<sup>19</sup>, now the number of those who support stability and those in favour of changes are not just practically equal – the latter is even slightly dominant. In the last 18 months, their share has grown by 13% – from 39% to 52%. In the most “advanced” social group, including young people, this figure has exceeded 60%. According to the VTsIOM, as early as in April 2017, the group in favour of changes was supported by more than 50% of Russians. The VTsIOM noted this trend saying that the society’s need for stability in Russia reached the periphery and was replaced by demands for changes<sup>20</sup>.

So far, as it results from all the data collected by all polls, most probably the left vector is winning. According to the data from March 2018, 45% of respondents believe that the country needs quick, decisive changes, 43% – that they should be slow and gradual; and only 8% are convinced that serious changes are not necessary. The survey conducted by the IS RAS in April 2018 showed that this main trend had been rising. As many as 55% of respondents opted for changes<sup>21</sup>.

The demand for changes is mainly related to the mass social sentiment regarding the basic principles of social justice (“left-wing populism”), and under no circumstances should it be interpreted as a desire to return to the era of the 1990s, to continue liberal economic and political reforms. According to the same survey conducted by the IS RAS, the society strives for social justice, fight with corruption, as well as for overcoming oil and gas dependence (51% and 41%, respectively), for strengthening the country’s defence capability (28%), and to a much lesser extent, for strengthening

<sup>19</sup> А.Г. Бызов, “Анатомия...”

<sup>20</sup> Idem, “Идейные рубежи...”; *Половина страны хочет перемен. Институт социологии РАН опросил россиян*, at <<http://profculturarb.ru/novosti/257-pоловина-strany-khochet-peremen-institut-sotsiologii-ran-oprosil-rossiyan>>.

<sup>21</sup> А.Г. Бызов, “Взгляд в будущее и прошлое через призму современных общественных противоречий”, *Общественные науки и современность*, по. 3 (2018), pp. 66-80; А. Гудков, “Сейчас Россия...”; idem, “Общество патриотов...”

economic and political freedoms and rapprochement with Western countries (10% each), and for a change of the authorities (12%). It can be clearly seen that with a “soft rating” of these problems, the left component of the “Putin majority” – social justice – is approximately two times higher than the right component – power, traditions and order. The future of Russians depends on restoring the principal rules of social justice; the demand for change is getting increasingly related to the left-wing populist dream of social justice. After many years, for the first time, the demand for human rights, democracy, and freedom was rated second at 37%, creating together with the demand for social justice a left-democratic vector resembling the situation of the 1980s in the USSR.

### DEFICIT OF “POPULAR LEGALISM” AND THE LEFTIST IMAGE OF THE FUTURE

What are the basic reasons for the left-wing direction of the “image of the future? Despite the years of stability and relative prosperity, the Russian society has not accepted the situation of deep social inequality caused by the reforms of the early 1990s, which has not yet been overcome. Surveys show a picture of a class society that is highly stratified, filled with deep-seated aggression, perhaps fragmented more than ever in its recent history. There is complete distrust of Russian citizens towards each other and towards the authorities. Today’s main demand for socialism is in its nature clearly socio-national (or, if this term evokes bad associations, socio-patriotic). Yet this is a demand of the older generation, which is definitely less supported by the younger generations.

It is possible to express an opinion that the above data does not suggest any “left turn” or “left alternative”. “Left turn” is a certain reassessment of the reality. To talk about such a turn among the voters, at least the demand for solidarity should be fulfilled – the willingness to take collective action in upholding the rights to work and decent remuneration for labour. This demand involves an activist attitude – an impulse looking for a way out in collective protest actions. And it is not just about a rush, but a spontaneous organization in the form of trade unions and committees for direct action. Does something like this exist? The answer is: no. Only certain protest actions are recorded, mainly those organized by disadvantaged private entrepreneurs (small businesses) and employees dependent on them. Nevertheless, the sentiments of many voters show clearly negative attitude to the situation in the country. However, this negative attitude and the demand built around it do not mean “a left turn”.

The current demand concerns a passive model – someone, but not the subject voicing the demand, must come and fix the unpleasant situation. Someone, but not the subject itself, should take responsibility for actions aimed at improving the situation. The absence of massive collective protest actions, although the negative attitude in the country is indeed strong, suggests that the atomization of voters has not disappeared. On the contrary, it is the atomization that determines the logic of behaviour. The majority of people want someone to come and solve their problems, and they are ready to

hold on to this strong hand since the survival with a passive model is possible mainly by searching for an entity which people consent to obey.

It is no coincidence that the “left-wing front”, and particularly trade unions, does not enjoy massive support in contemporary Russia, and the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, at least under the quarter-century-long leadership of “eternal” Zyuganov, presented more statist and even clerical ideas than the right-wing ones. However, the political crisis caused by the alleged and unusually unpopular in society retirement reform may give a second wind to the Communist Party, particularly if there is a generational change within this organization and the politicians who are ready to engage in political struggle, – not merely imitate it – become its leaders. The society is truly worried about the state of affairs in the social area and economy, but to a lesser extent about democracy, elections, and human rights. Well, the army and defence are developing very nicely, as was clearly stated by Putin in his last presidential address before the election.

In the context of the above, the following data speaks for itself: justice, equality, and the Soviet mentality combined with freedom – this is the main vector of the current public mainstream. To some extent, this vector can be described as social-democratic, of course in its specifically Russian variety, and not at all similar to European social democracy, since the attitude towards the “Western way” remains extremely negative in Russia. But they enjoy justice, equality, freedom, and Soviet mentality.

**Table 1.** Attitude of Russians to certain social concepts

Which of the following words (concepts) awake in you positive feelings, and which – negative ones?

| Concepts   | Rather positive | Neutral | Rather negative | I do not understand the meaning of the word |
|------------|-----------------|---------|-----------------|---------------------------------------------|
| Capitalism | 10              | 52      | 33              | 3                                           |
| Soviet man | 55              | 36      | 7               | 0                                           |
| Equality   | 64              | 30      | 4               | 1                                           |
| Justice    | 83              | 13      | 2               | 0                                           |
| Freedom    | 76              | 20      | 2               | 1                                           |
| The West   | 18              | 55      | 24              | 1                                           |

Source: own work based on the IS RAN data, October 2018.

## RIGHT-WING LEGALISM AS THE BASIS OF POST-CRIMEAN CONSENSUS AND ITS DECLINE

The issue of development of the Russian economy and the growth of the welfare of its citizens are becoming central to Russians’ ideas about the future of their country. When asked what Russia should do to again become a great power, a vast majority (67%) of

respondents mention a developed modern economy and 66% point to the high standard of living of the citizens, which is similar to the answer about the economy. Quite a lot, but still only 41% believe that powerful armed forces can ensure the status of global power. For example, an issue so popular in 2014 about the importance of Russia gaining control over former USSR territories was marked by only 7% of respondents (however, that was in a soft rating, which offers the choice of up to 3 answers). This confirms the earlier conclusion that the focus of Russians has shifted from foreign policy to domestic issues, and the idea of Russia as a power is undergoing a significant transformation. An economically prosperous power with powerful armed forces is now the dream of the new generation of Russian citizens.

Another important indicator of change, or rather a certain transformation of Russian attitudes towards foreign policy were their opinions on the events in Crimea, Ukraine and Syria. So, the Crimean consensus remains in force. As before, the vast majority of Russians see more advantages in the incorporation of Crimea. Russians have always considered Crimea as a truly Russian land, while the Russian inhabitants of Crimea always perceived themselves as Russians who found themselves living in Ukraine due to a political misunderstanding. Positive attitude to the annexation of Crimea is by no means a proof of imperial ambitions of Russians – if we talk about the majority of the population and not about the subscribers to the ideology of the Izborisk Club. Most likely, the Crimean consensus will become a fixed element of foreign policy, no matter who will rule the country. However, the attitude towards the events in Donbas has changed significantly in the last year. While 51% citizens support Russia's involvement in the conflict, about 30% currently are against it. The Russians no longer see any point in continuing the military confrontation that does not make anyone happy. The Donetsk People's Republic and the Lugansk People's Republic attract now much less sympathy. Constant changes in power, violent crime and devastation occurring there – all discredit these enclave-republics in the eyes of Russians. Besides, the constant flow of humanitarian aid Russia is sending to Donbas causes annoyance as this help should be directed rather to Khakassia or Tuva. While Russian's attitude to Western sanctions remains consistently negative (67%), the number of people supporting the countersanctions imposed by Russia on Western goods and products has decreased by a third, from almost 80% to 47%. The citizens show less understanding as they watch cheese and fruit crushed under bulldozer tracks, while due to countersanctions the prices of similar Russian delicacies have risen despite their subpar quality. Finally, the support for Russia's activity in Syria has decreased threefold – from 63% when Russia was successfully destroying the Islamic State to 26% when the IS had already been vanquished and Russia undertook to provide military and economic support to maintain Bashar Asad's regime in Damascus. The war, which many times appeared to be over (at least on Russia's side), still continues. Russia builds roads and kindergartens and distributes humanitarian aid in the country, which causes growing irritation among the inhabitants of the poor Russian countryside.

Such changes in the public opinion seem very significant. It is not a coincidence that after the presidential election of March 2018, the public opinion began to cross



the red line of the previous consensus, and the foreign policy of the Russian government was rated worse and worse. The ratings of Sergey Lavrov, Dmitry Rogozin, and Sergey Shoygu dropped, as reported numerous times by the VTsIOM and the Levada Center. These changes are a sign that Russians are growing tired of Ukraine and Syria, and are increasingly irritated by endless waste of money and resources in these “bottomless barrels”.

Contemporary patriotism also demonstrates its dangerous features, as pointed out by Alexandr Tsipko; he claimed that he is afraid not only of the return of the issue of nuclear war and the death of human civilization but also of the fact that a large part of contemporary Russian population reacts calmly to the mention of the inevitable death of humanity. This suggests that over the last four years they have become accustomed to living in a besieged fortress, which undermines their already weak self-preservation instinct. Without a deeper analysis of the issue raised by Tsipko, it should be noted that in the last four years' exaltation became a typical mood of a part of the Russian population, which contrasts with the quiet era of the 1990s when Russians enjoyed their first forays into the consumer paradise and made plans for their private lives. Evaluations of President Putin's third term and related events are by no means unequivocal: some focus on political stability and economic success while others on the authoritarian features of the political regime.

## FUTURE IN THE MIST

Political transition in Russia has already started. It is taking place in the situation of exacerbated division in the society, reaching the level of mutual hate. “All of them are one gang!” many Russians think, according to Professor Valery Solovey of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations. According to above-quoted Belanovsky and Dmitryev, in Russia a shaky balance has developed, which can last for a very long time. This balance involves a very simple thing: the Russians have forsaken the future. They do not see it, nor do they want to. It is commonly agreed that life will become even worse, but this does not imply any practical group actions.

It turns out that far-sighted Putin acted wisely for nineteen years by offering the nation no distinct vision of the future whatsoever. Parity has thus developed: the Russians do not look for such a vision and the authorities do not offer it. The above-mentioned information about networks and changes in mass consciousness will match a typical model of growing anti-elite populism in mass consciousness. The main reason here is the longest crisis encountered during the entire period of transition to market economy, which negatively influences standards of living, and gradually increases dissatisfaction with the current situation in the country. The shift towards internal focus of control in this context is a sign of strengthening of anti-elite attitudes, possible weakening of the government's influence on mass consciousness – particularly with the help of the central TV channels – as well as limiting the demands for more competitive electoral policy, offering the possibility to vote for candidates from outside the system, not

supported by the government. Readiness for changes, even ones that are fast, untested and risky and may have doubtful benefits, points to the willingness to find a quicker way out of this situation – even if it is an illusory solution that will worsen the situation. The project of the pension system reform, rough and hasty, resembling rather a gamble, is a vivid example of the above.

The text consciously avoids dealing with social aspects of the transformation processes of this era as it is a topic for a large, separate study, for example on how the new middle class emerged in the 1990s and how it began to lose steam in the 2000s. Neither does the article touch upon the purely political aspects of the increasingly blatant destruction of the party-political system; its only objective was to demonstrate how destruction of the national consensus and shifting the red line in a specific direction under the most specious pretext (incorporation of Crimea) can negatively influence the regime's political stability. And the chance for successful self-organization of the society, united in the zero years by the unspoken agreement with the government, was wasted not only in the sphere of politics but also economy. The country is facing an uncertain future, again lacking change-appropriate institutions or other social instruments. More and more voices are heard prophesying future disasters and upheavals. In his essay commemorating Alexander Solshenitsyn, sociologist Leonid Blekher suggests for example that a time will come when the Russian state will weaken so much that its very existence on this Earth in a centralized form will be questionable. In his personal opinion, this can be confirmed by certain sociological symptoms. For example, it became noticeable in the zero years that people prefer to identify first with a specific region and only then with Russia. So, when this time comes, the state will have to re-organize itself and decide how to be both itself and all of its citizens. There are justifications for such prophecies, as such situation is characteristic of the twilight stages of historical eras. The society in the state of post-mobilization breakdown yet again enters its much travelled circles of Russian turmoil. Post-mobilization breakdown is very dangerous, particularly in the situation when no political force and no group within the society has any specific vision of the future. We see a society without a future; all its resources are shovelled into the furnace of surviving today, while surviving itself becomes increasingly difficult. With all the talk about "ties", no internal ties have emerged yet. The evident dissatisfaction of distant peripheries with the policies of the centre, as demonstrated by the autumn election in the Far East, is fraught with emerging political gangrene; it is difficult to imagine how this may end. As the authorities are making sharp U-turns, passionate individuals, excited by the spirit of the "Russian spring" may become the most dangerous and intractable opponents of the government. *Zugzwang*, as chess players would call it. A modern Russian nation has not developed yet and, unfortunately, we are further from this goal than ten years ago.

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