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SOURCES OF THE LEGITIMACY OF VLADIMIR PUTIN'S POWER IN TODAY'S RUSSIA

ABSTRACT The aim of this article is to present the legitimacy of power in Russia. The special emphasis is placed on the correlations between Russian political culture and the legitimacy of the power of Vladimir Putin. Taking into consideration that social acceptance and support given to the authorities are the result of the relationship between the values pursued by the government and the values recognized by the society, the author presents the example of this mechanism in Russia. As many theorists note, investigation of the degree of legitimacy of the authorities should be determined by the compatibility of arguments that are used by the rulers and values and attitudes approved by the society. Therefore, this paper will present the relations between the authorities and society as well as the perception of Vladimir Putin's domestic and foreign policy by residents of the Russian Federation.

Key words: legitimacy, Vladimir Putin, political system

Słowa kluczowe: legitymizacja, Władimir Putin, system polityczny

Today legitimacy¹ is one of the key concepts which allow us to understand the phenomenon of a stable power elite in a given political system, and often the phenomenon of a stable political system as well. Legitimacy as a property of the system, or of those elements of it which are recognised as legally valid by society, is the outcome of legitimation, or the process which results in legal validity. This term is derived from the Latin word *legitimus* which means ‘conforming to the law’ and thus ‘authorised to take action’.²

Seymour Martin Lipset believes that legitimation is *efforts undertaken in order to bring about and maintain opinions, and that existing political institutions are the most appropriate and proper ones for society*. Robert Dahl looks at the question of legitimacy in a similar way. He believes that it concerns *bringing about convictions, that structures, procedures, actions, decisions, policies, officials and leaders possess the quality ‘rightness’, moral properties and values and that they should be accepted on the basis of these properties*.³

David Easton, focussing on the empirical criteria for the legitimation of power, distinguishes three dimensions:

- the legitimation of ideological power, which is based on the acceptance of the main principles of the organisation of society: the prevailing system of values as well as the generally accepted ways of interpreting the future;
- the legitimation of structural power – this involves accepting both the norms of the political regime, an acceptance which results from the conviction that these norms are lawful and legal, and all the legal and institutional norms that result from them.
- the legitimisation of personal power – this arises from respect for those in power. It is particularly helpful when those changes to which the system is subject become stabilised.

These three forms of legitimisation are not mutually exclusive. The cohesion of these elements ensures the stability of a political system. David Beetham suggests a type of amalgamation of Weber’s normative conception and Easton’s empirical theory.

¹ In the literature on the subject there is a distinction between the terms *legitimacy* (legal validity), which denotes the authorities’ ability to shape socio-political order which is accepted by society, even if only passively. *Legitimation* (validation) is the means by which legitimacy is achieved. See K. Przybyszewski, “Kultura polityczna w kontekście procesu legitymizującego władzę polityczną”, *Władza Sądzenia*, no. 4 (2014), p. 53, at <<http://wladzasadzenia.pl/2014/4/wladza-sadzenia-2014-4.pdf>>, 11 December 2015.

² According to various definitions, the object of legitimisation is the system (B. Horvat: *the ability of the state to bring about and maintain faith in the notion that existing institutions are the most appropriate for society*), the social system (W. Lamentowicz), the political institutions (S. Lipset) or finally *structures, procedures, actions, decisions, policies, officials and leaders* (R. Dahl). Further definitions refer to governmental power, the regime, positions held and authority exercised, see J. Tarkowski, “Legitymizacja władzy. Zagadnienia teoretyczne i opinie oficjalne”, in idem, *Socjologia świata polityki*, vol. 1: *Władza i społeczeństwo w systemie autorytarnym*, Warszawa 1994, p. 46; cf. J. Tarkowski, “Legitymizacja władzy. Zagadnienia teoretyczne i opinie oficjalne”, in F. Ryszka (ed.), *Kultura polityczna społeczeństwa polskiego (1983-1985)*, vol. 1: *Zagadnienia ogólne, teoretyczne i metodologiczne*, Warszawa 1987, pp. 77-125.

³ S. Gebethner, “Legitymizacja systemu politycznego a koncepcja ładu porozumień”, in A. Rychard, A. Sułek (eds.), *Legitymizacja. Klasyczne teorie i polskie doświadczenia*, Warszawa 1988, p. 42.

When evaluating the legitimation of power, he includes, in addition to a level of rules and convictions, a level of behaviours, i.e. active acquiescence on the part of subordinate groups to being ruled. This manifests itself, for example, in participation in free elections, referenda and public declarations of support. On this level, there exists certainty that subordinate groups identify with their rulers.⁴

According to Weber's conception, legitimacy results from a specific psychological relationship based on trust in public authorities, between rulers and the ruled. This relationship denotes a state of affairs in which both parties have a common symbolic understanding of social reality and accept a specific vision of social order which arises from the relationship of supremacy and subordination.⁵ This thesis harmonises with the views of Seymour Martin Lipset, who in his book *Political Men* points out that legitimacy must be based not so much on the functionality of the system as on the consummatory values which originate from outside the system and which concern people's convictions regarding the legal validity of the system.⁶

Using Jacek Tarkowski's typology, it is possible to distinguish various elements, for which legitimacy is given⁷:

- the political system, i.e. the rules of the game, in reference to which the actions of members of the system are accepted and recognised as legal. We call these fundamental rules constitutional principles;
- structure – society's main political institutions;
- the programmes and decisions which influence the economic, political and social spheres;
- international alliances;
- leaders.

In Russia, support for Vladimir Putin translates, so to speak, into acceptance of the political system of which he is a symbol. The famous slogan 'there is no Russia without Putin' is a consequence of the way of thinking in which the current president plays the role of stabiliser, guardian and defender of the current political order.

THE RUSSIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

At this juncture, it would be opportune to describe briefly the Russian political system. Western political scientists define the Russian system as hegemonic electoral authoritarianism, i.e. an authoritarian system in which democratic institutions function formally, but in practice play a decorative role.

⁴ D. Beetham, "Legitymizacja władzy", in J. Szczupaczyński (ed.), *Władza i społeczeństwo. Antologia tekstów z zakresu socjologii polityki*, Warszawa 1995, pp. 288-303; T. Biernat, *Legitymizacja władzy politycznej. Elementy teorii*, Toruń 2000, p. 82.

⁵ S. Gebethner, "Legitymizacja systemu politycznego...", p. 99.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ J. Tarkowski, "Legitymizacja władzy..." (1994), p. 46.

Russian experts also emphasise the authoritarian nature of the Russian system. Aleksey Zudin and Kiril Kholodkovski speak of a monocentric system which manifests itself in the existence of a single decision centre.⁸ The common denominator in the views of many Russian political scientists and experts on the political regime in Russia is the conviction that power is of a personified nature, that administration is organised vertically, that it is impossible to change the Russian authorities through elections and that control on the part of the political elite is increasing.⁹

It is true that this is a system in which technically elections do exist, but it is not possible to change governments by way of elections. The political scientist Andreas Schedler says that *By organizing periodic elections (authoritarian regimes) try to obtain at least a semblance of democratic legitimacy, hoping to satisfy external as well as internal actors. At the same time, by placing those elections under tight authoritarian controls they try to cement their continued hold on power. Their dream is to reap the fruits of electoral legitimacy without running the risks of democratic uncertainty.*¹⁰

Admittedly, in authoritarian systems authority often limits the need for legitimation only to the circle of its closest associates and in doing so it assumes – according to Bertrand Russell – the guise of naked power. *Power is naked when its subjects respect it solely because it is power, and not for any other reason.*¹¹ Such power involves no acquiescence on the part of the subject. *Such is the power of the butcher over the sheep, or of an invading army over a vanquished nation, and of the police over detected conspirators.*¹²

However, the concept of naked power cannot be applied to Russian standards. In the question of legitimacy, the current power in Russia is not limited solely to the small circle of the Kremlin elite, but it rather aims to convince the citizens of Russia that it alone is in a position to realise the interests of society.

IDEOLOGY AS A SOURCE OF THE LEGITIMACY

We said earlier that an essential element of legitimacy is ideological consensus, a specific vision of reality which is shared by the ruled and rulers. An alternative term for legitimacy, and one which at the same time makes it easier to understand, is the concept of a collective purpose, i.e. the set of values which steer the actions of society and serve society's acceptance (passive or active) of authority. In the light of the above, the collective purpose determines the sphere of consensus shared by authority and society, a consensus which arises from an agreement in which authority undertakes to provide

⁸ M. Słowikowski, "Rozważania nad naturą reżimu politycznego współczesnej Rosji", in S. Bieleń, A. Skrzypek (eds.), *Rosja. Refleksje o transformacji*, Warszawa 2010, p. 42.

⁹ Władimir Gelman, Jelena Szestopał, Kiril Chołodkowskij, Aleksiej Zudin, Aleksander Łukin.

¹⁰ A. Schedler, "Elections Without Democracy: The Menu of Manipulation", *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 13, no. 2 (2002), p. 37.

¹¹ B. Russell, *Power. A New Social Analysis*, London 2004, p. 75.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 63.

and defend a specific social order in return for which society submits to it.¹³ The result of the interdependence between the values realised by authority and those recognised by society is social acceptance and support for the rulers. These values will be notions about the ideal social system and are associated with culture, the interests emphasise the significance of the mechanisms of authority.

At this point reference could be made to the views of Juan Linz who believes that a basic characteristic of non-democratic systems is that they appeal to the mentality of a society or a specific ideology in order to create a pretence of legal validity.

Appealing to mentality is typical of authoritarian regimes and can be defined as a non-codified way of thinking which is based on existing structures and the convictions of the masses, which can be strengthened as required. Mentality is characterised by a strong emotional charge, few problems to which it is capable of providing solutions, and little clarity in the solutions provided. It is important for the authorities to skilfully uphold and shape the existing convictions of society. The researchers Jan Holzer and Stanislaw Balík emphasise that *one cannot ignore the fact that for an authoritarian regime to establish itself successfully two factors are required: the at least hidden presence of specific mentality structures in society, and authoritarian rulers must be in tune with these values.*¹⁴

Ideology typically forms the foundation of totalitarian regimes; it has a pejorative tinge and is associated with thought based on a specific world view, or *Weltanschauung*. In this sense it concerns closed thought systems which exclude world-view based pluralism and resemble 'secular religion' or, in the words of Eric Voegelin, political gnosis. Russian authority, in seeking legal validity, appeals both to mentality and ideology, understood in this case precisely as political gnosis. Yuri Afanasyev makes some interesting points about this: *The most recent initiatives, which are intended to immortalise a falsified vision of history, lay the foundations of an ideocratic state: defending the 'single correct' version of the nation's history is intended to consolidate the overwhelming power of Putin and his aspirations to total dominion, not only through material resources and bodies but also through people's minds. In this sense the ideological conquest of the past transforms the strength of ideas into the strength of power. The contemporary state is becoming a theocratic one. The process of the state becoming identified with the Church is coming to an end. The expression 'symphony' of the two, which is characteristic of the whole of Russian history, referred not only to the most important people in the state praying publicly, but also to the state striving towards a reformulation of fundamental socio-moral orientations according to a religious model.*¹⁵ Of course the appeal to mentality, which becomes the building material of the new political gnosis, is also important. As the Italian

¹³ W. Sokół, *Legitymizacja systemów politycznych*, Lublin 1997, p. 23. See A. Chmielak, "Przesłanki legitymizacji państwa w warunkach zmian systemowych", *Annales. Etyka w Życiu Gospodarczym*, vol. 10, no. 1 (2007), p. 360.

¹⁴ J. Holzer, S. Balík, *Postkomunistyczne reżimy niedemokratyczne. Badania nad przemianami teorii politycznej w okresie po transformacji ustrojowej*, transl. by V. Petrilak, Kraków–Nowy Sącz 2009, p. 135.

¹⁵ J. Afanasjew, "Jurij Afanasjew: Chciałbym odczarować Rosję. [ADAM MICHNIK żegna przyjaciele]", 19 September 2015, *Wyborcza.pl*, at <<http://wyborcza.pl/magazyn/1,148049,18850836,jurij-afanasjew-chcialbym-odczarowac-rosje-adam-michnik-zegna.html>>, 11 November 2015.

sociologist Vilfredo Pareto correctly writes, *The art of ruling consists in finding a way to derive benefit from [...] the feelings of others and not in wasting one's own energy in order to destroy them. A person who is capable of liberating himself from the blind control of his own feelings is also capable of exploiting the feelings of others for his own purposes.*¹⁶

According to many thinkers, both western and Russian, the president of Russia Vladimir Putin has mastered this art perfectly. *Today's Russian authorities – again quoting Afanasyev – appeal to ancient notions which have been preserved in the Russian consciousness about boundless God-given Russian lands which are owing to us, about the hostile forces of Darkness, Evil and Immorality which surround us and about Russian authority which represents the only chance of survival for the whole of society.*¹⁷

Interpretations by political scientists and journalists of Russian polls regarding support for the authorities usually end with the observation that the Russians completely support the policies of the current authorities and agree with the practice of distancing themselves from the West and with their course of political reaction. The policies of the authorities seem to correspond to the expectations of society. Nevertheless, one should look at the factors involved in this support in greater detail.

The ideological basis of the Russian regime is conservatism. It ensures stability of the regime and the possibility of opposing liberal currents from overtly oppositional circles or from those who insist that the system should be democratised and that the range of civil liberties and freedoms in Russia should be broadened.

The conservative world view and the necessity to defend it serve also as the basis for arguments in favour of confronting the 'rotten West' and opposing ideological currents which originate there.

The conservative programme is also used as an instrument which confirms the legitimacy of accepting various solutions which strengthen the position of the Kremlin and which marginalise the influence of those groups which oppose the policies of the current authorities. At the same time, the so-called conservative ideology encompasses everything which serves to authorise the decisions of the authorities on the level of both internal and foreign policy.

Styepan Goncharov indicates that for the ordinary Russians conservatism is presented as a set of rules which require them to conform to the government's standards and societal norms. These principles focus on revealing the differences between Russia and the West while making reference to historical circumstances. The formula 'conservatism is the special path of Russia' is constantly repeated in all state mass media and finds support by relying on general dissatisfaction with post-Soviet reality. According to research carried out by the Levada Center, 'the special way' formula does not convey a specific ideological image of the country and is intended solely to justify the current difficult situation of the country. The thought of a special separate path and of being different from the rest of the world is appealing for the Russian public. If the Russians

¹⁶ V. Pareto, *The Mind and Society*, vol. 3, New York 1935, §1843, as cited in J.H. Hallowell, *Moralne podstawy demokracji*, transl. by J. Marcinkowski, Warszawa 1993, p. 13.

¹⁷ J. Afanasjew, "Jurij Afanasjew: Chciałbym odczarować Rosję..."

were given the choice of whether to develop according to the western model or the Russian separate path, four fifths would choose the second option.

At the same time, Russian conservatism has nothing apart from ostentatious patriotism and an imperative to be loyal to the authorities. Polls from 2013 show that 42% of the Russians have noticed that state officials are speaking about patriotism more often. The state stimulates public debates on patriotism, and Russia's geopolitical situation (because of sanctions, the annexation of Crimea and the war in Ukraine) only strengthens the society's consent for the development of state programmes which support patriotic attitudes. When the Russians were asked about prosperity or their vision for an ideal future, the majority of answers concentrated on the conviction that *in today's world geopolitics wins and not the naïve debate about democracy*. According to the majority, it is possible to achieve prosperity in the country but only as a result of controlling the zones of influence. The strong will always defeat the weak. Thus, in the world of this logic, the majority supports the state conducting the politics of power.¹⁸

Another essential element of convincing the society of the legal validity of the current authorities is the construction by the Kremlin elite of an image of the president as the father of the nation, the defender of the national interests of Russia and of order in the state.

According to analyses by the Levada Center, what the Russians value most in Vladimir Putin's policies is his successes achieved 'by force'. Describing the situation in 2014 in the context of the events in Ukraine, the Russians say that Putin acted like a hero in defending the country against enemies. One distinction made by the Russians is interesting – Putin is responsible for the successes of the country whilst the responsibility for all the country's economic problems lies with the government and government officials.¹⁹

A very interesting socio-technical measure which is applied by the Kremlin elite is the attempt to convince the society that anyone who is not a supporter of Putin is not a patriot. Therefore, one is not surprised by the results of a poll in which 80% of the respondents said that first and foremost the president is worthy of the trust of the people, with the army in the second place with 64% and the Church in the third place with 53%.

ATTITUDES TOWARD THE POLITICAL SYSTEM

This analysis of the phenomenon of legitimation will benefit from a description of the attitudes that are held towards the political system.

On the one hand, complete legitimation is associated with the concept of conformity, introduced into the literature by Robert King Merton.²⁰ This concept refers

¹⁸ S. Goncharov, "Russia's 'Special' Conservatism", 22 June 2015, Intersection Project, at <<http://intersectionproject.eu/article/society/russia%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%9Cspecial%E2%80%9D-conservatism>>, 9 July 2015.

¹⁹ "Сила есть", 10 September 2015, Левада-Центр, at <<http://www.levada.ru/10-09-2015/sila-est>>, 9 November 2015.

²⁰ R.K. Merton, "Struktura społeczna i anomia", in idem, *Teoria socjologiczna i struktura społeczna*, transl. by E. Morawska, J. Wertenstein-Żuławski, Warszawa 2002, p. 198.

to cases where the individual accepts culturally defined goals and uses socially accepted means to achieve these goals. This type of relationship corresponds to Charles W. Mills' phenomenon of welfare, or the sense that the individual's values are in keeping with those which prevail in the political system, thanks to which the individual does not feel discomfort as a result of the actions of the system.²¹

At the opposite extreme is a lack of legitimation. This phenomenon corresponds to Merton's category of rebellion. The individual rejects cultural models and goals and suggests his own values and models for action.

These two diametrically opposed situations enact indirect attitudes, namely indifference and alienation. In the case of the first one (indifference), people officially accept authorities whilst at the same time refusing to participate actively. In this case, power may be maintained not through acceptance but through fatalistic beliefs. This is the so-called passive validation. Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba used the term 'apathy' to describe this attitude. It occurs when the cognitive component (knowledge of politics) in attitudes towards the political system has positive high intensity but the evaluative and affective component has zero intensity.

Another type of attitude, which has more in common with delegitimation of the system, is alienation. In this case the values of the system and the means of realising the goals it has set are rejected. Alienation is understood by Almond and Verba as an attitude in which the cognitive component is characterised by positive high intensity while the affective and evaluative components are characterised by negative intensity.²²

The sense of alienation is often associated with game theory, where the balance of costs and gains influences a social group's decision not to undertake political action. The high costs and the belief that the expected gains are unattainable give rise to a negative attitude towards the norms and values of the system. However, this raises the justified question as to whether or not this type of participation in conditions which are conducive to (exogenous or endogenous; social, political or economic) destabilisation of the system will turn into active delegitimation of the given political system.²³

LEGITIMACY AND POLITICAL CULTURE

In defining the types of attitude held towards authority by society, reference should be made to the concept of political culture.

Political culture can be defined broadly as the totality of attitudes, views and political behaviours of society, together with the ideas, values and models for activity which form and express them as well as the institutions, organisations and regulations which

²¹ C.W. Mills, *Wyobrażenia socjologiczne*, transl. by M. Bucholc, ed. by J. Mucha, Warszawa 2007, pp. 59-60.

²² G.A. Almond, S. Verba, *The Civic Culture. Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*, Boston-Toronto 1965, pp. 20-21.

²³ D. Mider, "Partycypacja polityczna a legitymizacja systemu politycznego", *Studia Politologiczne*, vol. 18 (2010), p. 34.

create, within the borders of a given state, the political framework which allows them to be put into practice.²⁴ It is also worth making reference to the definition of the Polish sociologist Jerzy Wiatr, who stresses that political culture determines the attitudes and behaviour models which concern the reciprocal relationship between authority and society.²⁵ A detailed description of political culture understood in this way should include in the first place knowledge of politics, familiarity with the facts and interest in them. In the second place, it should include an evaluation of political phenomena and value judgements regarding how authority should be exercised in the state. Thirdly, the emotional aspect of political attitudes such as love for one's fatherland or hatred for one's enemies should be included and, fourthly, such a description should cover the models for political behaviour which are accepted by society and which indicate how one can and how one should act in political life.

If we use the classification of Almond and Verba, who distinguish and describe three types of political culture²⁶: parochial culture, subject culture (culture of submission) and participant culture,²⁷ we can consider Russia a culture of submission. For this type of political culture is typical of monocentric systems in which, according to Stanisław Ossowski, the life of a society is regulated by central decision centres, bureaucracy is strongly hierarchical and interference in decision making is (theoretically) completely impossible.²⁸ In this culture, legitimation is linked to a society's belief that the authorities are omnipotent while society remains passive and apathetic. Authority exercises its power thanks to an imposed right (or a specific interpretation of this right), coercive measures and corresponding policies which are aimed at excluding political opponents. The interests of society are not taken into account in the decision-making process. Those in power do not conduct a civic dialogue in order to create laws which are justifiable from the point of view of the members of society. The charisma of the leader will be strengthened not only by the belief that there is no alternative to the current authorities but also by the conviction that the current authorities guarantee both stability of the system and social order.

²⁴ M. Sikora-Gaca, R. Herba, "Kultura polityczna jako wyznacznik społeczeństwa obywatelskiego w państwach wschodnioeuropejskich", in L. Kacprzak, B. Koszel, A. Marcinkowski (eds.), *Spółeczeństwo obywatelskie jako wspólne dobro*, Piła 2012, p. 139.

²⁵ J.J. Wiatr, *Socjologia polityki*, Warszawa 1999, p. 189. Cf. I. Kamińska-Szmaj, "Co to jest kultura polityczna?", in J. Ansiewicz, B. Siciński (eds.), *Język polski a współczesna kultura polityczna*, Wrocław, pp. 9-47.

²⁶ G.A. Almond, S. Verba, *The Civic Culture...*

²⁷ Parochial culture is characteristic of societies which have little interest in political issues and a low level of political activity. Such a society does not see a role for itself in shaping the state's policies. A culture of submission is characteristic of societies which, despite having a certain knowledge and awareness of political processes, do not involve themselves in the political life of the state. A participant culture is characteristic of states which can be distinguished by a high level of activity among society, which results from society's awareness of the role it plays in shaping the political processes of the state.

²⁸ S. Ossowski, "Koncepcje ładu społecznego i typy przewidywań", in idem, *O osobliwościach nauk społecznych*, Warszawa 1983, p. 82.

Returning to the question of the attitude of Russian society towards the system and referring to the above analysis of the type of political culture that prevails in Russia, we can state that this attitude is similar to indifference and results from the phenomenon in which consent to govern is obtained through depoliticising the people and subsequently governing through apathy.²⁹ Certain social groups are depoliticised by denying them the possibility of participating politically and banning the creation of independent institutions which could voice and aggregate the interests of society and its specific groups. This phenomenon is supported by a monopoly on information and corresponding propaganda, and often also by the isolation of society from external influences.³⁰ In this way, power achieves the status of being irreplaceable. The Polish sociologist Jacek Tarkowski has shown that this lack of alternatives can take two forms. The first presupposes that there are no optional ideologies or programmes for shaping national order because the process whereby corresponding independent organisational structures appear which express alternative ideas is inhibited.

In a deeper sense, this lack of alternatives consists in the fact that it is impossible for society to imagine alternative solutions to socio-political problems. In this case, we are dealing with the widespread belief that the current socio-political order is not only natural, but also the most desirable.

Looking at Russian public opinion polls, we see that both these ways of understanding the lack of alternatives occur in Russian society.

According to research carried out by the Levada Center in October 2015, 36% of Russian citizens are convinced that people trust Putin because he believes that he can deal with the country's problems. However, 26% believe that people have no alternative and do not think there is anyone else who could be entrusted with the affairs of the country.³¹

Nevertheless, the support that Vladimir Putin receives does not necessarily result from full acceptance of his policies. Research conducted by the Levada Center between November 2014 and May 2015 shows that the society is becoming more reluctant to hold the authorities accountable for the decisions they have taken. This may be the result of the authorities discrediting social protests (presenting them as activities which harm the social order) and also non-profit organisations (presenting them as foreign agents). In relation to elections, the belief that they are dishonest and worthless is prevalent as well as the belief that elections are incapable of changing life for the better. There is a growing sense of a lack of any protection against authority which acts arbitrarily, and this situation is perceived as acceptable, though unfair.³²

²⁹ Charles Kadushin and Jean Blondel write about this phenomenon of achieving legitimacy through depoliticisation, see J. Blondel, *Political Leadership. Towards a General Analysis*, London 1987.

³⁰ J. Tarkowski, "Legitymizacja władzy..." (1994), p. 40.

³¹ "Владимир Путин: доверие и оценка деятельности", 7 October 2015, Левада-Центр, at <<http://www.levada.ru/07-10-2015/vladimir-putin-doverie-i-otsenka-deyatelnosti>>, 11 December 2015.

³² Д. Волков, С. Гончаров, "Демократия в России: установки населения", 11 August 2015, Левада-Центр, at <<http://www.levada.ru/11-08-2015/demokratiya-v-rossii-ustanovki-naseleniya>>, 11 December 2015.

The political scientist Aleksey Makarkin believes that the Russians are falling into a state of depression, and that means fatigue, a lack of willingness to do anything and a lack of hope for change. *Depressed people are inactive, they try to solve their problems in some way, and they believe that they should patiently put up with a bad situation, and not protest.*³³

The people's main strategy in their relations with the authorities is to avoid unnecessary contact although almost half the population relies heavily on support from the state. For, according to many experts, the support for the authority in Russia stems from an unwritten agreement between the authority and the society, an agreement which ultimately ensures both that the citizens are provided with essential material security by the authorities and that there is stability in the country in return for loyalty and non-interference in political matters.

In the opinion of the authors of the study – Denis Volkov and Styepan Goncharov – this leads to cynicism and enmity in relations with the authorities. *One can suppose that the lack of respect for the current authorities and the belief that the relations between the government and society are unjust will lead, should the economic situation deteriorate, to increased dissatisfaction in society and delegitimation of the political system.*³⁴ According to the research carried out by the Levada Center at the beginning of October 2015, in response to the question *Do you agree with the opinion that Russian citizens are already tired of waiting for Vladimir Putin to make positive changes to our lives?*, 50% of the respondents said they did not agree with this, and also that they had confidence in the president. Nevertheless, no fewer than 40% of the people surveyed answered affirmatively and agreed with the thesis, formulated in this way.³⁵ The question arises as to how long the belief that positive changes to the lives of the Russians are possible will last in Russian society, especially in the face of the economic crisis.

The journalist and analyst Konstantin von Eggert claims that the Kremlin elite wield their power by means of two methods: fear and bribery.³⁶ If he is right, then the long-term prospects of the regime depend primarily on how long it will be in a position to buy support.

It seems that the authorities are aware of how this mechanism works and are searching for ways to convince the society that material goods are not the most important. The journalist Maksim Trudolyubov writes in the newspaper *Vyedomosti* that *during the crisis the challenge for the Kremlin is to ensure that Russians will come to like the reduction in their incomes in the same way that previously they liked to see them increasing.* Previously, the Kremlin discouraged people from politics, promising that they (the Kremlin) will meet all their needs. Now they will have to explain that they can neither allow participation in state affairs nor guarantee that there will be a stable supply of food.

³³ “Сила есть”...

³⁴ Д. Волков, С. Гончаров, “Демократия в России...”

³⁵ “Владимир Путин: доверие...”

³⁶ Ibid.

In Trudolyubov's opinion, the Kremlin elite is trying to draw the Russians' attention to values other than welfare. They are helped in this by Patriarch Kirill, who teaches the society that a person passes into eternal life not with a bag of money but with spiritual luggage. Maksim Trudolyubov also quotes the Russian and American Sociologist Pitirim Sorokin, who points out that if the number of expectations and needs does not exceed the number of opportunities, then a person feels free and satisfied. Therefore a dissatisfied society has two ways out: it can either obtain more money or limit its needs. In order to achieve the first, the authorities would have to carry out structural reforms, which they avoid like the plague.³⁷

Because of economic incentives, the reduced potential to gain supporters will result in the Kremlin redirecting its efforts towards strengthening the so-called patriotic message and building the cult of the president. In 2014, the president ratified the document "The Basis of State Cultural Policy" which covers many aspects of society. A national curriculum for patriotic education up to the year 2020 is being prepared. In 2015, a seminar for regional governments was held, with lectures on the ideology of conservatism and contemporary history. The Kremlin also supports the social activity of the Russian Orthodox Church. It has received money to extend the network of spiritual information centres throughout the country. The authorities also give financial support to NGOs which work to defend traditional values, promote knowledge of the history of Crimea and fight extremism.³⁸

The above analysis is consistent with the opinion of the social scientist Aleksey Makarkin. In his opinion, the Russians believe in the idea of a besieged fortress. It is true that the 'refrigerator' – says Makarkin – draws their attention more and more, but television continues to remind them that the country is surrounded by enemies. In his opinion, the *Russians are not very demanding, they understand that their situation is getting worse, that criticism is increasing, but there is also a sense of relief, which is summarised in the words in our country things are not like in Ukraine, in our country there are no fascists.*³⁹

However, an important element of Vladimir Putin's support is the society's belief, which is not becoming weaker but is in fact growing, that Putin genuinely wants to raise the standard of living of the citizens and that his words are not simply empty promises of the type which politicians usually make. In October 2015, 49% of the respondents said that the main obstacle to realising Putin's plans to improve the lives of the citizens is bureaucracy and the lack of a suitable team of aides to help him. However, a quarter of the respondents said that Putin would be able to fulfil his promises over the course of the next six years. 15% believed that Putin's words were empty promises

³⁷ М. Трудолюбов, "Как заставить граждан полюбить бедность", Ведомости, 30 August 2015, at <<https://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2015/08/30/606773-kak-zastavit-grazhdan-polyubit-bednost>>, 11 September 2015.

³⁸ S. Secieru, "Trzy przewencyjne uderzenia Kremla w opozycję pozasystemową", *Biuletyn PISM*, no. 28 (2015), at <http://www.pism.pl/files/?id_plik=19395>, 11 December 2015.

³⁹ "Сила есть ..."

while 6% believed that Putin was focussed on remaining in power and maintaining his own standard of living.⁴⁰

Returning to the significance of the phenomenon of lack of alternatives in the process of obtaining legitimacy, one of its most important varieties is the so-called geopolitical lack of alternatives. This is based not so much on blind acceptance of the system as on awareness of geographic and political facts, which imposes as a consequence some degree of support for the existing authorities.⁴¹ At this juncture, one could mention all those views which support authoritarianism in Russia in view of geographical factors, in particular the size of the country, the ethnic diversity of Russia and unsuccessful attempts to introduce democracy in the 1990s which ended in chaos and the downgrading of Russia in the international arena.

According to Volkov and Goncharov, around 30% of the respondents throughout the country have access to independent media, and in Moscow and the larger cities this figure is about 60%. Therefore, these people have the opportunity to learn about sceptical attitudes towards Putin's policies and understand that there are alternative views regarding the actions of the president, but they do not want to hear about them and they ignore these voices. The explanation for this may be the Russians' sense that as a result of the annexation of Crimea, thus thanks to President Vladimir Putin, Russia has again achieved the status of a super power. Taking note of alternative assessments of the president's policies means casting doubt on this feeling.⁴²

CONCLUSIONS

In summary, we can say that the undeniable legitimacy of Vladimir Putin's power in the society is the outcome of several factors. We are dealing with the Kremlin's monopoly on information which stops the media from broadcasting alternative ideas concerning possible directions for Russia's development. Russian policymakers also try to devalue liberal ideas, presenting them as harmful to Russia, and in doing so they call supporters of liberalism traitors of Russia.

By the same token, the majority of Russians equate the patriotic mind-set with support for Vladimir Putin and his conservative vision for the development of Russia. A significant role is also played by the Russian culture of submission, a term which refers to the society's lack of faith that it can influence political life in the country and can oppose unpopular decisions of the authorities.

Taking these conditions into account, it is difficult to envisage a situation in the near future where there will be no support in the society for Vladimir Putin's current power. It is true that according to some researchers a key element in the legitimacy of the system is not so much support on the part of society as, above all, the legitimacy

⁴⁰ "Владимир Путин: доверие..."

⁴¹ J. Tarkowski, "Legitymizacja władzy..." (1994), p. 41.

⁴² Д. Волков, С. Гончаров, "Демократия в России..."

with which the power elite endows the system and itself. *Critical delegitimation of the regime begins together with the moral and psychological escape of the elite* – writes Jacek Tarkowski. – *The very fact of this escape or the loss of the sense that one's own dominant position is legitimate unveils the germ of the general crisis to the masses.*⁴³

Maybe of the circumstances which will provide the conditions for the possible delegitimation of Vladimir Putin's government, it is precisely the split in the Kremlin elite that will start the process of the decay of the system.

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⁴³ J. Tarkowski, "Legitymizacja władzy..." (1994), p. 43.

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