

AFTER THE ELECTION OF NO ALTERNATIVES:

**THE KREMLIN'S DOMESTIC POLITICAL  
CHALLENGES FROM 2018 ONWARDS**

**Jussi Lassila**

**SUMMARY**

Whereas the presidential election in March 2018 hardly poses any serious challenges to Vladimir Putin, after the election the Kremlin will face at least those domestic political challenges that have become apparent during Putin’s current presidential term. A central context for these problems can be found in the 2011–12 anti-regime protests, while the regime’s response to the protests largely explains Russia’s authoritarian development since 2012. This working paper discusses four political challenges that the Kremlin will face from 2018 onwards.

The first concerns the regime’s great dependency on Vladimir Putin, which has led to the deepening deterioration of formal political institutions. As a result, extremely low turnouts in elections are calling into the question the regime’s electoral authoritarian legitimacy. Second, it is unclear how the Kremlin’s ultrapatriotic course will manage to respond to the people’s everyday problems amid increasing socio-economic difficulties. At the same time, the decreased patriotic euphoria after the Crimean invasion indicates that the state has not managed to build any consensus for identity politics. The third challenge concerns the political potential of corruption for the opposition. Alexei Navalny’s novel anti-corruption populism has demonstrated its potential in mobilizing people throughout Russia, while the regime’s capacity to counter his oppositional populism by means other than coercion is seemingly limited.

Finally, growing expectations for change are apparent in popular opinion. It cannot be ruled out that oppositional anti-corruption mobilization indicates a demand for change that is also fuelling local and sectoral socio-economic protests, which have steadily multiplied throughout Russia.



**JUSSI LASSILA**

*Senior Research Fellow*

*EU’s Eastern Neighbourhood and Russia research programme*

*Finnish Institute of International Affairs*

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## THE KREMLIN'S DOMESTIC POLITICAL CHALLENGES FROM 2018 ONWARDS

### INTRODUCTION

The presidential election will be held in Russia on 18 March 2018. Leaving aside black swans, such as Vladimir Putin's sudden withdrawal from the race, the result is a foregone conclusion. Mr Putin will officially embark on his fourth presidential term in May 2018. However, numerous clouds are casting a shadow over his forthcoming term. This working paper discusses four domestic political challenges that have become apparent and more pronounced over the course of Putin's current presidential term since 2012. Indeed, it is just as obvious as the outcome of the election that Russia's political leadership will face these challenges from 2018 onwards.

The first concerns the regime's great dependency on one man, Putin himself.<sup>1</sup> The Kremlin's political measures since 2012 have increasingly focused on guaranteeing the regime's political survival by curtailing opportunities for any meaningful political competition. At the same time, these measures have radically contravened citizens' constitutional rights. Over the course of Putin's third term, the gap between official constitutional norms and Russia's long legacy of informal practices<sup>2</sup> has become wider, which has led to the deepening deterioration of formal political institutions.<sup>3</sup>

An important aspect of this deterioration is the constant decrease in turnout and creeping de-legitimization of the elections as a whole, both of which are directly linked to the Putin-centred authoritarian trend since 2012. The presidential election in 2018 will not pose any significant problems just yet, but the current situation indicates that further elections will pose serious legitimacy challenges for Russia's centralized

governance. Whereas elections have remained the main indicator by which the regime demonstrates its public approval, the current development is counter-productive for the Kremlin's methods of proving its political legitimacy. The second challenge concerns the Kremlin's neo-imperial and ultrapatriotic course in responding to people's everyday problems in the face of increasing socio-economic difficulties. At the same time, the post-Crimean euphoria indicates that the official state patriotism has not managed to build any consensus for the regime's identity politics. The third challenge that the Kremlin will face was manifested within the anti-corruption protests in 2017, led by Russia's most prominent opposition leader, Alexei Navalny. Navalny's novel anti-corruption populism has demonstrated its potential for mobilizing people throughout Russia, particularly the younger generation, while the regime's capacity to counter Navalny's oppositional populism by other than coercive means is seemingly limited. Finally, creeping socio-economic difficulties are reflected in popular opinion, signalling growing expectations for change. It cannot be ruled out that Navalny-like anti-corruption mobilization could also extend to local and sectoral socio-economic protests, which have steadily multiplied throughout Russia.

Notwithstanding these four, closely intertwined challenges, a central context for ongoing and further problems faced by the Kremlin can be found in the 2011-12 anti-regime protests. These protests were the first blow to the hitherto success of the Kremlin's political status quo since 2000 and reminded the regime that citizens' political demands for formal democratic principles (such as fair elections) might become serious and even pose a threat to the regime's very political survival. The regime's response to these protests largely explains Russia's authoritarian development since 2012. Hence, an analysis of the consequences and limitations of this response is essential in discussing the political challenges that the Kremlin is increasingly up against.

1 Nikolai Petrov, M. Lipman & H. Hale 2014, 'Three Dilemmas of Hybrid Regime Governance: Russia from Putin to Putin', *Post-Soviet Affairs* 30 (1), pp. 1-26.

2 Alena V. Ledeneva 2006, *How Russia Really Works: The Informal Practices That Shaped Post-Soviet Politics and Business*. Cornell University Press.

3 Richard Sakwa has identified this dilemma as Russia's dual-state problematique, the tension between constitutional, democratically oriented citizens' rights and the patrimonial administrative regime. Richard Sakwa 2010, *The Crisis of Russian Democracy: The Dual State, Factionalism and the Medvedev Succession*. Cambridge University Press.

## THE IMPACT OF THE 2011–12 PROTESTS

Putin's public support over the course of the first decade of the 2000s was based on the proliferation of hydrocarbon rents, which facilitated the socio-economic stabilization of the country after the turmoil of the 1990s. The first post-Soviet decade, officially guided by the democratic reforms of Boris Yeltsin's regime, evoked widespread negative feelings among the population. This also dented the liberal opposition's prospects for the early 2000s. Putin's paternalistic role as the nation's long-awaited strong hand amid the improving living standards rendered party politics a meaningless, if not harmful issue for the majority of Russians. Consequently, no serious political alternatives existed to oppose the Kremlin's gradual measures in building the electoral authoritarian regime.<sup>4</sup> A major turning point in this regard was the so-called 'Orange Revolution' in Ukraine in late 2004 followed by the Kremlin's overall trend of curtailing independent civil society activities.<sup>5</sup>

If one were to read Russia's political development under Putin from the Kremlin's viewpoint, the conclusion would be that the favourable state of affairs continued up to the December 2011 parliamentary election. Nonetheless, various danger signals occurred well before that. The first blow was the global economic crisis in 2008–2009, which dramatically disrupted the growing trend in global oil prices. While the consequences of the crisis were immediate for the Russian state budget as well as Russians' future expectations,<sup>6</sup> prices soon recovered and the budget reserves accumulated during the years of growth enabled economic equilibrium.

Popular support for the regime did not show any dramatic deterioration in 2009.<sup>7</sup> This seemingly convinced the regime that handling the immediate economic challenges would suffice. Moreover, studies on the approval ratings of Russian presidents (Yeltsin, Putin and Dmitry Medvedev) have shown a general

correlation with economic performance.<sup>8</sup> In this respect, the protests in 2011–12 appeared to be exceptional since they occurred amid relatively stable economic conditions. Yet a more detailed analysis has shown that socio-economic factors eventually explain the decreasing support for the Kremlin before and after the protests.<sup>9</sup> When and how individual socio-economic grievances appear in the approval ratings for the regime, and the kind of political behaviour that is linked to these grievances, is a complex issue. For instance, in 2011, out of those Russians who held very positive views about the USA, 84% supported Putin (who was Prime Minister at that time). At the same time, those Russians who harboured very negative views about the USA also became highly critical towards Putin. In 2010, Putin had 61% support in this segment, but by 2011 the support had plummeted to 37%.<sup>10</sup> It seems that among the lower socio-economic strata, dissatisfaction towards the regime showed a delayed response to the 2008–2009 socio-economic difficulties. To put this result into the overall context of the 2011–12 protests, it appears that many of those who supported Putin in 2011 – better educated citizens of big cities with positive views towards the USA – were ready to join protest rallies against the falsification of the parliamentary election in December 2011. Consequently, among less educated Russians beyond the big cities who viewed the USA more negatively, support for the regime plunged more dramatically in 2010–2011. However, they did not comprise any significant segment of the protest movement.

In light of these results, it appears that the Kremlin interpreted the public mood in too straightforward a manner. The research report by the independent Levada Centre, conducted in late 2010, pointed out that 'emerging conflicts between the public interest and the interests of corrupt officials were to be seen', and added that 'there was a high probability of a further aggravation of the situation', concluding that 'the political system appears unstable'.<sup>11</sup> Among the middle class, support for the 'party of power' was also weakening.

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

5 Robert Horvath 2013, *Putin's Preventive Counter-Revolution: Post-Soviet Authoritarianism and the Spectre of Velvet Revolution*. Routledge.

6 "Sotsial'no-ekonomicheskie indikatory," *Levada-Tsentr*, <https://www.levada.ru/indikatory/sotsialno-ekonomicheskie-indikatory/>, accessed 14 November 2017.

7 "Odobrenie organov vlasti," *Levada-Tsentr*, <https://www.levada.ru/indikatory/odobrenie-organov-vlasti/>, accessed 14 November 2017.

8 Daniel Treisman 2014, 'Putin's popularity since 2010: why did support for the Kremlin plunge, then stabilize?', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 30:5, 370–388.

9 Ibid.

10 Treisman 2014, p. 381.

11 Denis Volkov 2011, 'Rise of public activism in Russia: towards Civil Society or another Deadlock?', *The Public Opinion Herald*, 2(108), April–June, p. 23.

In January 2011 the United Russia rating dropped to 35% within a month, from 45% in December 2010.<sup>12</sup>

The Kremlin's manoeuvres in spring 2011 indicated that steps would need to be taken for the approaching parliamentary election to be held on 4 December 2011. On May 6 2011 Putin, who was prime minister and the leader, albeit not a member, of United Russia at that time, announced the idea of founding a people's front around the party. The goal was to guarantee an unambiguous victory for the party in the forthcoming election by creating a popular front which, according to Putin's announcement, 'follows long-time European conventions' and whose 'candidates must include non-party supporters, members from trade unions, women's organizations, youth movements and other social organizations, initiative and non-indifferent citizens'.<sup>13</sup> As a political vision, Putin's views reiterated those ideas that were pronounced in the Kremlin in early 2005 after the 'Orange Revolution' in Ukraine; the establishment of a pro-governmental civil society initiative Public Chamber,<sup>14</sup> and the Nashi youth movement,<sup>15</sup> which could mobilize progressive citizens in line with the state. All in all, Putin's vision of a people's front within the ruling party aptly illustrates the general preoccupation of rulers under electoral authoritarianism: a constant need to amass large enough popular support for the regime in order to guarantee a hegemonic position in power without abandoning the façade of political competition.<sup>16</sup>

When more than 100,000 citizens poured onto the streets after the election in the winter of 2011–12, it became obvious that the Kremlin had miscalculated the signs of political and social frustration fomenting in society. The role of the All-Russian People's Front as a potential escape hatch for United Russia's image problems did not work; it was immediately identified as an additional fraudulent branch of the mother party,

which was facing an obvious legitimacy crisis.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the role of the federal-level pro-Kremlin youth organizations, particularly the Nashi movement, in controlling and co-opting various oppositional independent youth activities failed completely.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Nashi's partially counter-productive role in serving the regime's cause had already become apparent in 2008.<sup>19</sup>

Throughout Putin's rule, the Kremlin's political guideline has been 'reactive centrism', including the active instrumentalization and co-optation of civic ideas in sustaining its political status quo. Instead of pursuing any clear-cut ideology<sup>20</sup> facilitated by mobilizing the people, the Kremlin's grand strategy vis-à-vis the population has been deliberate de-mobilization. In this respect, the largely discussed 'conservative turn' within Putin's third presidential term since 2012 has entailed the instrumentalization of conservative currents, particularly in line with the Russian Orthodox Church.<sup>21</sup> This occurred precisely as a result of the protests in 2011–12, which appeared in the eyes of the Kremlin and the majority of Russians as protests by the liberal, less or non-conservative and allegedly Western-oriented electorate. Since socio-economic stability has been the Kremlin's major tool in keeping the majority of Russians satisfied and politically de-mobilized, any mobilization of the regime's supporters might appear inflexible and too slow when needed. This is because Russian rulers have traditionally encouraged de-mobilization rather than mobilization of the populace.<sup>22</sup> This distinction became beneficial for

12 'Politicheskie predpochteniya naseleniya: reitingi partii', *Levada-Tsentr* 2 February 2011, <https://www.levada.ru/2011/02/01/politicheskie-predpochteniya-naseleniya-rejtingi-partij/>, accessed 14 November 2017.

13 Anastasiya Savinykh, 'Putin otkryl 'narodnyi front' pod Stalingradom', *Izvestia*, 6 May 2011, <http://izvestia.ru/news/3-74638>, accessed 14 November 2017.

14 James Richter 2009, 'Putin and the Public Chamber', *Post-Soviet Affairs* 25 (1), pp. 39–65.

15 Jussi Lassila 2014, *The Quest for an Ideal Youth in Putin's Russia II: The Search for Distinctive Conformism in the Political Communication of Nashi, 2005–2009*, Second, Revised and Expanded Edition, Stuttgart: Ibidem.

16 Regina Smyth, A. Sobolev & I. Soboleva 2013, 'A Well-Organized Play: Symbolic Politics and the Effect of the Pro-Putin Rallies', *Problems of Post-Communism*, 60, 2, pp. 24–39 and Richard Rose, W. Mishler & N. Munro 2011, *Popular Support for an Undemocratic Regime: Changing Views of Russians*. Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press.

17 Jussi Lassila 2016, 'The Russian People's Front and hybrid governance dilemma', in V. Gel'man, ed, *Authoritarian Modernization in Russia: Ideas, Institutions, and Policies*, London & New York: Routledge, pp. 95–112.

18 Jussi Lassila 2016, 'From Failed Mobilization of Youth to Paternalistic Visualization of Putin: Rocky Road of the Nashi Youth Movement', *Critique & Humanism* 46, 2, pp. 33–50.

19 Jussi Lassila 2011, 'Making Sense of Nashi's Political Style: The Bronze Soldier and the Counter-Orange Community', *Demokratizatsiya*, Vol 19, 3, pp. 253–276.

20 In terms of political ideas, the major component has been patriotism as a past-oriented flagship of optimism and loyalty to the strong state. This so-called 'patriotic centrism' has sought to consolidate society around the regime and neutralize all radical ideas ranging from communism, and liberalism to nationalism. See Marlene Laruelle 2009, 'Rethinking Russian Nationalism: Historical Continuity, Political Diversity, And Doctrinal Fragmentation', in M. Laruelle, ed., *Russian Nationalism and the National Reassertion of Russia*, London: Routledge, pp. 13–48.

21 Veera Laine & Iiris Saarelainen 2017, 'Spirituality as a political instrument: The Church, the Kremlin, and the creation of the 'Russian World'', *FIIA Working Paper* 98, [http://www.fia.fi/fi/publication/706/spirituality\\_as\\_a\\_political\\_instrument/](http://www.fia.fi/fi/publication/706/spirituality_as_a_political_instrument/), accessed 14 November 2017. Regina Smyth & Irina Soboleva 2014, 'Looking beyond the economy: Pussy Riot and the Kremlin's voting coalition', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 30:4, pp. 257–275.

22 Alexander Baunov, 'The Static Regime: Russia's Reversion from Popular Autocracy', *Carnegie Moscow Center*, 28 April 2016, <http://carnegie.ru/commentary/63479>, accessed 14 November 2017.

the protesters and new opposition activists, as pointed out by Denis Volkov:<sup>23</sup>

*Opposition activists were much more willing than supporters of 'the party of power' to defend their point of view in conversations with friends and colleagues, with strangers on the street and public transport and on the Internet. It created the illusion that the opinion of the disgruntled and angry citizens prevailed. Those who were going to vote for the ruling party, and later for Vladimir Putin, were more numerous but they were reluctant to express their views openly and to persuade others.*

The events of 2011–12 were a dramatic eye-opener for the Kremlin's self-sufficient feeling of control over political and civic processes in society. Yet the aftermath of the 2011–12 protests demonstrated the Kremlin's capacity to counter these challenges by mobilizing its core electorate and de-mobilizing opponents of the regime. In particular, various repressive measures have played a central role in diminishing oppositional activities throughout Russia since 2012.<sup>24</sup> In addition, and generally speaking, the core participants in the protests were relatively better off.<sup>25</sup> Denis Volkov points out that regardless of different mottos, flags and demands, 'to the average Russian watching the protests from the outside on television, it must have looked like an event for the rich'.<sup>26</sup>

This popular image of the protests helped the regime to orientate its political efforts towards the majority of Russians before the March 2012 presidential election. The Kremlin realized that it could no longer play the role of the societal avant-garde and conservative patron simultaneously, which appeared to be the case before 2011. The progressive and educated urban middle class had been lost, but those Russians who preferred stable and conservative continuity under the existing rule rather than any changes and uncertainties comprised the clear majority of the

population.<sup>27</sup> The Kremlin's focus on this silent majority was helped by the fact that, for the vast majority of Russians, the president is the sole leader and political authority while public trust in other political institutions, including the state Duma and the government, has been lagging far behind.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, the opposition's own mistakes and mutual disputes facilitated Putin's unanimous victory in the first round of the election.

## PUTIN'S PERSONALISTIC RULE

Since 2012, besides increasing repressions against political and civic freedoms, the Kremlin has increasingly relied on Putin as the guarantor of the regime's legitimacy. By capitalizing on and cultivating conservative and nationalist currents in society for its support, the regime has demonstrated an unparalleled intensification of anti-Westernism and geopolitical adventurism. In terms of the former, the most resonating example internationally was the law on "propaganda against non-traditional sexual relationships" in 2013, which legitimized discrimination against sexual minorities. In terms of geopolitical adventurism, the revolution and crisis ignited in Ukraine in 2014 prompted the Kremlin to make geopolitical moves which led to the worst crisis between Russia and the West since the end of the Cold War.

Constructed as an exceptional national endeavour, the invasion of Crimea shaped Putin as a new-old national leader, reinforcing the regime's reliance on his personalistic legitimacy. As discussed above, the protests in 2011–12, followed by the continuing decline in public approval for the regime,<sup>29</sup> vitiated the role of political organizations in the Kremlin's eyes in building its political legitimacy. In terms of the weakening role of the Kremlin's 'party of power', United Russia, the updated role of the All-Russian People's Front in 2013 serves as an illuminating example. In summer 2013,

23 Denis Volkov 2015, 'The Protest Movement in Russia 2011–2013: Sources, Dynamics and Structures' in C. Ross, ed, *Systemic and Non-Systemic Opposition in the Russian Federation: Civil Society Awakens?* Routledge, p. 39.

24 Vladimir Gel'man 2016, 'The Politics of Fear: How Russia's Rulers Counter their Rivals', *Russian Politics*, 1, pp. 27–45.

25 The protesters were mostly representatives of the urban middle class, not dependent on or employed by the state, and with higher education (approximately 80% of participants), Volkov 2015, 'The Protest Movement in Russia 2011–2013', p. 43; Evgeny Gontmakher, & Cameron Ross 2015, 'The Middle Class and Democratization in Russia', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 67, 2, pp. 269–284.

26 Volkov 2015, p. 44.

27 This division was not solely a generational issue between the young and the elderly. A telling example was an interview with a young female Putin supporter in the 2012 documentary film *Zima, ukhodi!* (Winter, Go Away!). It depicts protest activities in Moscow that winter from a grass-roots perspective. The interviewee justified her support for Putin's regime by pointing out her modest position, and saying that, unlike Putin's opponents, 'whose life is completely perfect', she did not know whether her life might become 'more difficult if there is another president', which is why she could not oppose Putin, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XHKVBCuFzwc>, accessed 14 November 2017.

28 "Odobrenie organov vlasti," *Levada-Tsentr*, <https://www.levada.ru/indikatory/odobrenie-organov-vlasti/>, accessed 14 November 2017.

29 The lowest public approval rating for Putin since June 2000 was in November 2013 when it stood at 61%; see Levada Tsentr "Odobrenie organov vlasti."

the Front updated its profile from its previous role as an electoral instrument for United Russia to a supposedly independent 'People's Front', now ceremonially led by President Putin.<sup>30</sup> Any references to United Russia were avoided and the front increasingly strove to profile itself as a proactive watchdog of Putin's 'May Decrees', particularly in the regions. Putin addressed these decrees during the inauguration on May 7, 2012. They included general demands for development in various societal and economic spheres, which regional governors were charged with putting into effect.<sup>31</sup>

The new role of Putin's popular front shows how the regime attempted to convert the idea of popular democracy – democratically elected governors – into the idea of popular will, which is manifested in the large-scale dissatisfaction of the local people with governors in Russia's regions.<sup>32</sup> Here the Kremlin's tactics were principally linked to the concession the Kremlin made to the protest movement by restoring direct governor elections in regions and easing the registration of political parties. At the same time, the authoritarian core of the tactics aimed to pre-empt conditions for oppositional candidates to represent that popular will. Unsurprisingly, the People's Front became particularly active in facilitating the dismissal of seemingly unpopular regional governors (almost exclusively from United Russia) in 2013 and 2014. Regarding the Front's role in the regime-led mobilization after the protests in 2011–12, one can see the Kremlin's additional reactive and ad-hoc formation. The development of the front from an electoral instrument of United Russia to a contrived independent political organization, attacking the governors of United Russia, demonstrates that the regime does not have hegemony over societal and political grievances. Rather than resolving them in the long run, the regime creates new methods for controlling grievances in the short run while maintaining its popular legitimacy. Indeed, the Kremlin's intensive wave of firing regional governors in 2017 by replacing them with younger technocrats has supported this trend.

## THE DILEMMA BETWEEN LOW TURNOUT AND POPULAR SUPPORT

The 2011–12 protests had a major impact on the Kremlin's further approach to the elections by highlighting its unambiguous position. The poor performance of United Russia and other pro-Kremlin actors in preventing the political incentive of the protest movement in December 2011 showed that unpleasant political activation can fester beneath widespread apathy. Moreover, it became clear that protests which revolve around "less important" elections – that is, elections apart from presidential ones – can easily morph into explicit political demands targeted at the top leadership due to overly centralized governance. Indeed, for individuals these elections appear more important since they provide some avenues to influence the results.

In light of these factors, the Kremlin has faced two election-related challenges. First, overt falsification and fraud by the regime cannot be conducted or allowed to continue. As the protests demonstrated, fraud provides an effective platform for unpredictable anti-regime protest coalitions.<sup>33</sup> Second, protesters' demands for the liberalization of party registration and for the return of the direct election of regional governors had to be fulfilled somehow.

In the case of regional elections in October 2012, the situation did not pose any notable challenges because the new party registration rules were yet to be put into effect and the results of elections held in regions that year were highly beneficial for United Russia.<sup>34</sup> The subsequent round of regional elections was held in 2013 under the new rules. In addition to intensified coercion, which was already in evidence in the 2012 elections,<sup>35</sup> the Kremlin had made deliberate attempts to downplay the role and visibility of the elections by diminishing the risk of surprises. The most significant

30 Jussi Lassila 2016, 'The Russian People's Front and hybrid governance dilemma'.

31 There were 11 decrees altogether covering economic policy, social policy, health care, education and science, housing, state governance, interethnic relations, modernization of the military, military service, foreign policy and demographic policy. For more, see Executive orders on 7 May 2012, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/by-date/07.05.2012>, accessed 14 November 2017.

32 Levada Tsentr "Odobrenie organov vlasti."

33 Tomila Lankina & Rodion Skovoroda 2016, 'Regional protest and electoral fraud: evidence from analysis of new data on Russian protest', *East European Politics*, pp. 253–274.

34 These regions were notorious for large-scale falsification, also practised by the so-called systemic opposition parties (that is, parties represented in the state Duma) in the 2011 Duma election. United Russia could use this as an electoral weapon strengthened by Putin's unanimous victory in the presidential election in March. See Alexander Kynev 2015, 'Combating the Opposition: United Russia's Electoral and Party Reforms 2012–13'. In Cameron Ross, ed, *Systemic and Non-Systemic Opposition in the Russian Federation*, Routledge, p. 141.

35 For instance, immediately after the Bolotnaya protest in May 2012 (the last major stand by the 2011–12 protest movement), the regime put into effect legislation which curtailed political and civic freedoms, including harsher penalties for organizing unregistered protests, tightened legislation with regard to the Internet, and control over non-governmental organizations, particularly foreign funded ones, which were labelled 'foreign agents'.

attempt was the establishment of a unified election day, which fell on the second Sunday in September. Due to the holiday season in August when millions of Russians travel away from the cities, coupled with the general distrust citizens have towards politics and political campaigning, the new single election day allegedly reduces the turnout. Whereas a low turnout is often seen as beneficial for incumbents, it can also work against the regime ‘in cases where a strong charismatic leader runs an effective campaign and is able to mobilise their supporters to come out and vote’.<sup>36</sup>

In 2013 this happened in regions with federal-level importance. In the Moscow mayoral election in September 2013 Alexei Navalny, contrary to all polls, won 27% of the votes – more than all of the other oppositional candidates put together – while United Russia’s sitting mayor, Sergei Sobyenin, narrowly avoided a second-round ballot with 51% of the votes. The turnout was as low as 32%. In Russia’s fourth largest city, Ekaterinburg, the opposition’s Evgeny Roizman won the race within the 33.6% turnout. Unsurprisingly, Roizman’s candidacy was excluded from the 2017 election, a fate which probably awaits Navalny as well, who aims to run in the presidential election in 2018.

The low turnout has exposed uncertainties and risks in guaranteeing victories for United Russia. The Duma election in 2016 showed that irrespective of guaranteeing a unanimous victory for the regime with the help of its administrative power,<sup>37</sup> the outcome deepened the overall de-legitimization of formal parliamentary structures. This means that not only the party of power, United Russia, but all parliamentary parties – the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia and A Just Russia party – have gradually lost their credibility as sovereign political actors in the state Duma since 2012.<sup>38</sup>

In Putin’s electoral authoritarianism, elections pose risks but they also factor as the major forum for demonstrating that ‘there are no alternatives to the regime’. In this respect, the de-legitimization of

elections becomes overly problematic for the regime itself, as underlined by Alexander Kynev’s brilliant remark,<sup>39</sup>

*This kind of behaviour, where the regime is constantly attempting to combat the negative side effects of previous legislative reforms, is an inevitable consequence of the victory of political tactics over political strategy where all decisions are made exclusively based on short-term or current needs. Such a system does not involve the modelling of the long-term or even medium-term consequences of these decisions. It acts on the principle that ‘there is only the politics of today, or else there might not be a political tomorrow’.*

In the regional elections in 2017 the decline in the turnout continued<sup>40</sup> and strengthened the impression of the overall neglect of the elections by the authorities. Recently erupted protests throughout the country in 2017, in the year before the presidential election, certainly prompted the Kremlin not to take any corrective measures to improve public interest towards the regional elections in order to minimize potential public defeats. However, in Moscow, the opposition managed to attain a notable victory in several municipal districts. While United Russia increased the number of representatives, the opposition’s victory reminded the regime that even in the case of an extremely low turnout the opposition might benefit from all votes cast.

According to the political analyst Dmitry Oreshkin, approximately 10% of the electorate are directly manageable by the Kremlin. These include, for instance, soldiers, military authorities, patients in hospitals and those pensioners who need to vote from home. They can be mobilized during elections to support the regime in any time, for instance in early September.<sup>41</sup> In the 2017 election in Moscow the turnout was as low as 14.8%,<sup>42</sup> which clearly proves that the great majority

36 Alexander Kynev, *Combating the Opposition*, p. 152.

37 These included the introduction of a mixed electoral system (50% from party lists, 50% from single mandate districts), gerrymandering during the establishment of electoral districts, new bans and restrictions on political competition (excluding participation in the election as a whole and excluding access to the state media) as well as minimization of the public inspection of elections. See Alexander Kynev 2017, ‘How the Electoral Policy of the Russian State Predetermined the Results of the 2016 State Duma Elections’, *Russian Politics* 2, pp. 206–226.

38 Ibid, p. 212.

39 Kynev 2015, pp. 150–151.

40 In most Russian regions, the turnout in 2017 was the lowest in Russian election history; see the report by *Committee of Civic Initiatives*, 28 September 2017, <https://komitetgi.ru/analytics/3446/>, accessed 14 November 2017.

41 Dmitri Oreshkin, ‘Politika pryamaya liniya’, *Dozhd television*, 11 September 2017, [https://tvrain.ru/teleshov/politika\\_prjamaja\\_linija/kak\\_gudkov\\_pereigrat\\_navalnogo\\_kakoj\\_podvig-444537/](https://tvrain.ru/teleshov/politika_prjamaja_linija/kak_gudkov_pereigrat_navalnogo_kakoj_podvig-444537/), accessed 14 November 2017.

42 ‘Mosgorizbirkom: yavka na vyborakh v Moskve sostavila 14.8%’, *MK*, 11 September 2017, <http://www.mk.ru/politics/2017/09/11/mosgorizbirkom-yavka-na-vyborakh-v-moskve-sostavila-148.html>, accessed 14 November 2017.

of those who support Putin prefer not to vote at all. It is highly probable that a potential increase in the turnout will be beneficial for the opposition, not for the regime. For the forthcoming presidential election this is not a critical issue, but for further elections, regional and parliamentary, in demonstrating approval for the regime, the low turnout will pose a serious challenge. Due to creeping socio-economic difficulties, the chances of increasing the quota of directly state-dependent voters, to say nothing of politically active pro-regime voters, are limited. Thus, in the current situation, the safer option is to restrict the opposition's access to the elections and to keep their public profile as low as possible. Nonetheless, as discussed above, this decreases the turnout and increases the de-legitimization of the elections as a whole.

### THE LIMITS OF PATRIOTISM AND THE NATIONALIST MOBILIZATION

By the end of 2011, not only were the liberals disappointed with the regime's backward-looking conservatism and empty promises of reforms and modernization, but nationalists of all persuasions had become increasingly frustrated with the regime's 'inefficiency'. While the imperialist segment of the nationalists had become dissatisfied with the Kremlin's 'kowtowing' to the West and domestic liberals, the ethno-nationalists were becoming increasingly disappointed with the official policies regarding nationalities and the situation with the migration from Caucasus and Central Asia.<sup>43</sup> The takeover of Crimea in 2014 seemingly satisfied both grievances in the short run. In imperialist circles, the 'return' of Crimea to Russia was a symbolic as well as a concrete expansion, a long-awaited dream, while ethno-nationalists hailed pro-Russian sentiments in Crimea and South-Eastern Ukraine, supported by the Kremlin.

However, further nationalist expectations engendered by the Crimean case were not realized. Russia's official role in the unfolding war in Eastern Ukraine appeared to be a bitter disappointment to the nationalists. Instead of loudly demanding the establishment of

Novorossia, either in terms of building an enclave for ethnic Russians in South-Eastern Ukraine or in terms of the restoration of the Russian Empire, the Kremlin was not officially engaged in the war. It was not only the outside world that knew the real state of affairs. The majority of Russians also became increasingly aware that the country was at war with its neighbour. This awkward situation became the first sign that the Kremlin had begun to lose its recently recovered reputation for hegemony over political alternatives. Whereas in summer 2014 the liberals participated in relatively visible anti-war marches in the big cities, the most ardent nationalist circles began to criticize the Kremlin overtly, accusing the regime of betrayal over Ukraine.<sup>44</sup>

It is worth mentioning that the regime has certainly intensified its course towards conservatism and patriotism (imperial nationalism) and abandoned the rhetoric of liberalization and "European choice" occasionally heard before 2012. Yet the core of sustaining the regime's statist balance between 'liberals'<sup>45</sup> and 'conservatives' has remained unchanged. In terms of patriotism, symbolic support for the regime has fragmented into various patriotic and pro-Putin groups instead of the large-scale centralized patriotic coordination that was the case before 2012. While such a scattering of funds into various, mutually competing undertakings may be less risky in comparison to one big project which could fail (as the Nashi youth movement did), the tactics illustrate the regime's reluctance to harness patriotism as a means of political legitimacy through clear ideological coordination.<sup>46</sup>

One can also see ramifications of the Yeltsin-era disputes over the state's new symbolic and identity politics in the vacuum of the vanished ideological regime, namely the Kremlin's general attempt, from Yeltsin to Putin, to frame the political legitimacy of the regime in accordance with the Russian Constitution (1993), which prohibits any state ideology.<sup>47</sup> Thus, the regime prefers, besides the vague concept of patriotism,

43 This frustration has been seen in society as a whole. For instance, 66% of Russians agreed with the statement 'Russia for ethnic Russians' in November 2013, <http://www.levada.ru/old/05-11-2013/rossiyane-o-migratsii-i-mezhnatsion-ainoi-napryazhennosti>, accessed 14 November 2017.

44 Robert Horvath (2015) 'The Euromaidan and the crisis of Russian nationalism', *Nationalities Papers*, 43:6, pp. 819–839.

45 For instance, liberal economic technocrats still held many important positions in, and close to, the regime in late 2017.

46 Jussi Lassila 2016, 'From Failed Mobilization of Youth to Paternalistic Visualization of Putin'.

47 Kathleen E. Smith 2002, *Mythmaking in the New Russia: Politics and Memory in the Yeltsin Era*, Cornell University Press and Marlene Laruelle 2009, 'Rethinking Russian Nationalism'.

overall de-mobilization<sup>48</sup> comprising passivity, selective inclusion, and control over society. Despite the current tactics, it manages to cover a relatively wide spectrum of patriotic views – especially after the confrontation with the West since 2014 – which hardly diminishes the informational and institutional uncertainties embedded in authoritarianism;<sup>49</sup> in this case, uncertainty about patriotic commitment in supporting the regime, as well as uncertainty about ideational alternatives to potentially risky patriotism.

As an example, J. Paul Goode's detailed ethnographic study on perceptions of patriotism among Russians in 2014–2015 reveals that Russians perceive patriotism as a curious mix of individualism and conformity.<sup>50</sup> Individualism in showing, for instance, material preference for (foreign) cheese over some abstract ideas, and conformity by constantly viewing patriotism as a positive thing. It follows that the patriotism imposed by the regime is simultaneously a successful symbolic terrain of loyalty as well as ultimately ambiguous regarding its individualized perception. Patriotism as a concept appears to be autonomous and may serve either the purpose of supporting or criticizing the Kremlin, while also shifting the locus of legitimacy unavoidably to the people (or nation).<sup>51</sup>

In terms of the latter, the official euphoria over Crimea and the domestic reputation of Russia's strong international performance as a renowned superpower have become overshadowed by emphatic usage of the Russian tricolor flag by the opposition. First, this indicates the regime's limitations in using the state's official emblems, and patriotism in general, as its exclusive political symbols. A turning point was the commemorative march for Boris Nemtsov on 2 March 2015, two days after his murder in the centre of Moscow. Since then, the Russian flag has become not only the main symbol at the non-sanctioned commemorative site of Nemtsov's murder on the Bolshoy Moskvoretsky Bridge, but a regularly and increasingly seen banner during anti-corruption rallies held in 2017 as a part of Alexei Navalny's presidential campaign.

Second, the rallying of the opposition under the state's flag provides further evidence of the weak link between post-Soviet statehood and national identity since the end of the Soviet Union. In this particular case where the opposition has sensed its right to use the national flag as its political symbol, it symbolically pushes the regime towards the stagnant conservative front where Soviet power ended at the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In those days 'the new Russia' gathered in the streets carrying the national flags of Russia. The symbolic content of Putin's regime within official state emblems has appeared volatile and non-fixed, seemingly open to new political meanings, as we have now seen.

### THE ANTI-CORRUPTION POPULISM OF ALEXEI NAVALNY

After the regime recovered from the December 2011 shock and managed to quell the protests by establishing Vladimir Putin in his third presidential term, one of the leaders of the protest movement, Alexei Navalny, a lawyer and blogger, born in 1976, distinguished himself as the most capable threat to the Kremlin's status quo. Most recently, this occurred during his successful campaign in the Moscow mayoral election in August–September 2013 when he demonstrated his dexterity in combining his highly creative use of the internet with traditional oratory on the streets. Against all expectations, he moved into second place in the race and nearly took it to a second round (see above). The principal danger that Navalny poses to the regime has been his oppositional populism against the Kremlin's eclectic principles of people, patriotism and the rule of law. By demanding integrity in these principles and simplifying the political space between 'us and them' under his anti-corruption activism, Navalny has managed to challenge the regime on its own terms. Moreover, his anti-corruption populism has created a notable difference compared to Russia's opposition, which has been apt to promote abstract and lengthy ideological visions instead of simplicity for the sake of mobilization.<sup>52</sup> The 2017 protest rallies, which were organized by Navalny throughout Russia in March, June, as well as to

48 Kirill Rogov 2016, 'Russia's 2016 Duma Elections: Ambiguous triumph and new challenges for the regime', *FIIA Briefing paper* 205, [http://www.fiaa.fi/en/publication/632/russia\\_s\\_2016\\_duma\\_elections/](http://www.fiaa.fi/en/publication/632/russia_s_2016_duma_elections/), accessed 14 November 2017.

49 Andreas Schedler 2013, *The Politics of Uncertainty: Sustaining and Subverting Electoral Authoritarianism*, Oxford University Press.

50 J. Goode 2016, 'Love for the Motherland (or Why Cheese is More Patriotic than Crimea)', *Russian Politics*, 1, 4, pp. 418–449.

51 Ibid.

52 Activists in Russia, for instance, have been criticized for being too wedded to an 'intelligentsia culture' that values purity and principle over strategy and action. See Ellen Carnaghan 2016, 'From Balcony to Barricade: Nationalism and Popular Mobilisation in Georgia, Ukraine, and Russia', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 68:9, pp. 1579–1607.

a much lesser extent in October, again demonstrated the potential of anti-corruption populism in Russia. Regarding further challenges that Navalny's political activism has posed for the regime, five differences are worth mentioning with regard to the 2011–12 rallies.

First, the reasons for the protests in 2017 centred around a single demand, whereas the protests in 2011–12 comprised a number of different grievances organized around a variety of oppositional and civil society actors. In 2017 the main reason prompting protesters to gather was the corruption of the elite, particularly the corruption of Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev, whose allegedly corrupt lifestyle was revealed in a documentary film produced by Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation. The film received approximately 10,400,000 views on YouTube within three weeks of being released on 2 March 2017.<sup>53</sup> The film also marked the actual starting point for Navalny's would-be presidential campaign as an independent candidate.<sup>54</sup> In sum, the protests became centralized solely around the theme of corruption led by a single oppositional actor.

Second, protesters in 2017 have been distinctively young. By some estimates, the average age has been between 16 and 20,<sup>55</sup> while in 2011–12 the age profile was more heterogeneous, yet generally much older. Third, the geographical scope of the protests has been much larger. Large protests in 2011–12 took place in Moscow and major big cities yet they occurred in smaller population centres as well. However in 2017, especially on June 12, protests occurred in at least 154 towns and cities (on March 26 there were 82 locations) all around Russia.<sup>56</sup> The total number of participants in these protests varied between 50,000 and 100,000. While the number of Navalny's anti-corruption protests appeared to be smaller than in the 2011–12 demonstrations, the 2017 rallies included many towns that had lacked any demonstrations to date.

Fourth, protests occurred in much more difficult circumstances for the opposition and civic activism in general. Since 2012 the regime has increasingly curtailed opportunities for any political dissent. Numerous deterrents, restrictions, selective repressions and intensive propaganda against the 'fifth column' had made any oppositional activity not only difficult but in many cases dangerous, strengthened by the regime's overall 'politics of fear'.<sup>57</sup> However, the prevailing atmosphere notwithstanding, significant protest mobilization occurred, which has led to the rapid radicalization of any protests. The authorities are now increasingly forced to put deterrents into place by using police violence instead of simply making the police presence felt. Whilst protesters face numerous personal risks ranging from financial consequences to lost career opportunities when participating in rallies, the regime has faced the risk of consequences related to the usage, or non-usage of violence. In the first case, the risk is that the protests will grow by becoming solidarity protests against police violence – which is what actually happened in Ukraine in 2013–14 – while in the latter case, the de-mobilizing effect of deterrents disappears, which can motivate new participants to join the protests.

Finally, the timing of the protests differed from 2011–12, which complicates the regime's calculations on potential flashpoints for further protests. The 2011–12 protests were triggered by the election day fraud, which eventually mobilized people to take to the streets. It was a public reaction after the election which also served as an important lesson for the authoritarian regime. The Kremlin became more cautious about conducting and manipulating elections in the future knowing that protests might erupt if the elections appeared to be fraudulent (see section above). 2017 has been marked by remarkable protest mobilization well before the event, the presidential election in March 2018, the main trigger being a professionally produced documentary on a top-level politician. Nonetheless, regarding Navalny's familiar trademark and popularity for publishing revelations about corrupt, top-level authorities and politicians, the film on Medvedev was anything but exceptional. What stood out was the scale of the mobilization, which certainly took the regime by surprise, not to mention political analysts.

53 'Vam ne Dimon' (2017), Documentary by Anti-Corruption Foundation of Alexei Navalny, published 2 March 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qrwk7\\_GF9g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qrwk7_GF9g), accessed 14 November 2017.

54 Navalny publicly announced his candidacy in December 2016.

55 'Pochemu na aktsii protesta vyshlo stol'ko podrostkov?', *Meduza*, 27 March 2017, <https://meduza.io/feature/2017/03/27/pochemu-na-aktsii-protesta-vyshlo-stolko-podrostkov-i-chego-oni-hotyat>, accessed 14 November 2017.

56 '12 iyunia na ulitsy vyshlo bol'she lyudei, chem 26 marta', *Meduza*, 13 June 2017, <https://meduza.io/feature/2017/06/13/skolko-lyudey-protestovali-12-iyunya-i-skolko-zaderzhali>, accessed 14 November 2017.

57 Vladimir Gel'man (2016), 'The Politics of Fear'.

## LOCAL PROTESTS AND EXPECTATIONS IN SOCIETY

Navalny's anti-corruption protests captured the lion's share of public and media interest in Russia's protest activities in 2017. These protests were significant because of their scope, intensity, as well as their political organization. No other political force in Russia – including the regime regardless of its resources – has organized a similar political campaign in Russia before. Nevertheless, there are different kinds of protest activities in Russia beyond public attention to Navalny's anti-corruption protests, which have become more active recently and which pose further challenges to the Kremlin's political status quo.

For instance, according to the Centre for Economic and Political Reforms (CEPR), an NGO, the number of labour protests as well as their sectoral and geographical scope have grown significantly since 2014.<sup>58</sup> In 2017, almost all labour sectors<sup>59</sup> have faced protests and hardly any region has been exempt from some kind of protest activities. Consequently, the protests have become partially trans-regional in that they are not limited to single regions. The key role in their trans-regionalization has been played by truck drivers, who have actively protested against new road taxes.<sup>60</sup> In the greater scheme of things, the reasons for protesting have become increasingly primitive, the most common being the non-payment of wages, which comprised 56% of the reasons for protesting between January and June 2017.<sup>61</sup>

Following these indicators, the most challenging for the regime are the geographical scope of the protest activities and their distribution in the labour sphere as a whole. Trade unions have traditionally been an important regulatory mechanism for industrial protests, but since 2014 their role has become secondary. This development increases the level of spontaneity and diminishes the administrative control over protests. Following the CEPR's analysis, along with the growing geographical and sectoral scope, labour protests are increasingly populated by non-organized workers, with no involvement by the unions. When this

development goes hand in hand with the major reason for protesting, namely the non-payment of wages for public sector workers for instance,<sup>62</sup> there is significant potential for the further radicalization of the protest movement. Moreover, socio-economic protests are not restricted to the labour sphere but figure here as an important indicator of socio-economic challenges. In addition to labour protests, multiple socio-economically motivated local protests are taking place throughout Russia.<sup>63</sup>

An identifiable link between politically motivated protests and socio-economic ones has thus far been missing. The key issue here is whether their political potential becomes organized and coordinated according to certain political goals, such as anti-corruption protests against the regime. Russia's overall economic situation characterized by poor institutions does not bode well for any substantial and sustainable assuaging of the grievances that currently pertain to the country and to society as a whole. Given the current situation, an important political consequence is related to the Kremlin's prospects for using administrative resources, such as corporate voting in the future. Following the CEPR's analysis, the weakening role of the labour unions might increase the reluctance of non-organized workers to follow voting orders from their supposed labour union. This decreases the regime's political control over the labour sector. In particular, protests among public sector workers, who have formed a crucial segment in the Kremlin's electorate, is a critical issue for the regime.

It is worth discussing this latter point concerning grievances among those who have traditionally been loyal to Putin (such as the budget-dependent middle class in the 2012 presidential election<sup>64</sup>). During 2017, the head of the Russian Public Opinion Research Center, Valery Fedorov, announced that results showed that more and more Russians want change instead of the previously appreciated stability.<sup>65</sup> According to sociologist Denis Volkov from

58 'Trudovye protest v pervoi polovine 2017 g.', *Tsentr Sotsial'no-trudovykh prav*, 16 August 2017, <http://trudprava.ru/expert/analytics/protestanalit/1900>, accessed 14 November 2017.

59 Namely industry, agriculture, transport, construction, trade, communal work, healthcare, public education, culture and art, science, administration, other sectors and the inter-sectoral.

60 'Protest na prikole', *Novaya gazeta*, 10 April 2017, <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2017/04/08/72084-protest-na-prikole>, accessed 14 November 2017.

61 'Trudovye protest v pervoi polovine 2017 g.'

62 Non-payment of wages in the budget sector (in schools, hospitals, etc.) is the direct result of serious corruption or of much deeper economic challenges.

63 See the recent report by the *Committee of Civic Initiatives*, <https://komitetgi.ru/analytics/3493/>, accessed 14 November 2017.

64 Evgeny Gontmakher & Cameron Ross 2015, 'The Middle Class and Democratization in Russia'.

65 'Glava VTSIOMa rasskazal ob opasnom "zaprose na peremeny" u rossiyan', *RBK*, 8 August 2017, Glava VTSIOMa rasskazal ob opasnom "zaprose na peremeny" u rossiyan. <https://www.rbk.ru/society/08/08/2017/59897e-829a79478857e79e6b>, accessed 20 November 2017.

the independent Levada Centre, at least 53% of Russians desired a change from the current situation, while questions posed in different formulations indicated that the number of those in favour of change could be as high as two-thirds of the population.<sup>66</sup> In all socio-economic groups, expectations did not fall below 40%. Nevertheless, as Volkov continues, it would be oversimplifying matters to interpret this shift in Russian preferences from stability to change in accordance with specific oppositional political views. 'Among the broader groups of the population, there is no coherent understanding of the desired course to be set and (t)here are only very murky, scattered, and often contradictory ideas'.<sup>67</sup> In any case, the result indicates mounting challenges for the Kremlin in responding to these changing expectations, particularly from the standpoint of the regime's 'grand narrative' of stability.

The most resonating result in this regard is the particularly high expectations for change found among the poorest (approximately 60% of those who are barely subsisting on their income), while among those who feel privileged, expectations ranged between 40 and 50%. Similarly, among those who were communist voters, approximately 75% favoured change (mostly the elderly population), while among Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's LDPR voters, approximately 80% hoped for change. Unsurprisingly, democratic party supporters and Alexei Navalny followers were ardently in favour of change, while the politically indifferent and United Russia supporters favoured stability more than change.

It is the socio-economic dimension of the Russian expectations for change that points to the important difference with regard to the protests in 2011–12. As discussed at the beginning of this paper, political actions and political views create a complex relationship. Growing expectations for change do not automatically transform into concrete political demands, to say nothing about views criticizing the regime. Moreover, even those who hold negative views against the regime might remain passive, while those who are relatively better off might become active protesters, as we saw in 2011–12. Nonetheless, a clear correlation between the current and relatively long-standing economic

difficulties and expectations for change among poorer socio-economic groups pose a serious challenge to the Kremlin. These people have been a loyal and stable political resource for the regime and particularly prone to conform to Putin's course of socio-economic and political stability. If the regime is incapable of redeeming these expectations for change to its own benefit, the risks of cumulating political challenges will be immediate. The Kremlin's capacity to mobilize and de-mobilize its frustrated electoral resource will become more fraught in the absence of meaningful carrots, while the systemic political parties, hitherto loyal to the regime, may become more active in attempting to restore their lost political integrity.

## CONCLUSIONS

The presidential election in March 2018 will hardly pose any threats to the Kremlin. The domestic political challenges that this paper has discussed are those one can expect to see in Russia after March 2018. These can be summarized as follows:

It is unclear how the regime will be able to sustain its position with its extensive reliance on Putin's personalistic governance, while simultaneously following the letter of the constitution. Despite the unparalleled popular support that Putin had already garnered by the end of his second presidential term in 2007, and the constitutional majority that Putin's 'party of power', United Russia, received in the parliamentary election that same year,<sup>68</sup> the clause in the constitution which limits the number of presidential terms to two in a row, was left intact. Instead, so-called *castling* – the changing of chairs between Dmitry Medvedev and Putin in 2008 and 2012 – was used, which was a good example of adjusting the regime's informal networks of loyalty to the constitutional norms. Moreover, Putin did not curtail the presidential prerogatives before switching to the post of Prime Minister in 2008, which, in principle, risked his position under the new president. Medvedev could have expelled the Prime Minister at any moment according to the constitution. Obvious loyalty and informal agreements between Putin and Medvedev notwithstanding, the history of

66 Denis Volkov, 'Russian Society Wants Change—But of What Nature?', *Carnegie*, 29 August 2017, <http://carnegie.ru/commentary/72933>, accessed 20 November 2017.

67 Ibid.

68 'United Russia "wins" a constitutional majority in the state duma', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume: 4 Issue: 223, 3 December 2007, <https://jamestown.org/program/united-russia-wins-a-constitutional-majority-in-the-state-duma/>, accessed 20 November 2017.

authoritarian regimes is rife with disrupted loyalties and palace coups. In the 2016 parliamentary election, United Russia renewed the constitutional majority that was lost in 2011, but no changes to presidential terms were made prior to the 2018 election. It is possible that these changes will be seen after the presidential election in 2018 before the next parliamentary election, which will be held in 2021. However, taking into account Putin's previous, formally legal approach to the Russian Constitution, it is highly probable that he is not willing to make dramatic changes to the main law. Moreover, although the Russian Constitution allows a new 'change of chairs' after the forthcoming six-year presidential period in 2024, this would mean that Putin's energetic image will be overshadowed by his age (he will be 71 in 2024). Whilst 71 is not an exceptional age for the president, 24 years as the head of the state will prompt growing demands for his political renewal, as well as expectations from the surrounding elite and the populace.

The protest activities and growing uncertainties vis-à-vis societal expectations in 2017 imply that prospects for the regime's stability narrative, crystallized in Putin's public approval, are weakening. Likewise, it can be expected that this trend will strengthen unless the regime is able to renew its public image and respond to the unfolding socio-economic problems. There are no signs that the Kremlin will cardinally change its reactive and technocratic approach to the political and societal challenges. Hence, it is expected that delayed responses to the opposition's undertakings and other social and political risks, along with the Kremlin's overall aptitude for de-mobilization rather than any popular mobilization, will be in evidence. If socio-economic grievances and political pressure against the Kremlin intensify, the regime's relationship to its administrative deterrents in blocking social and political unrest will become a serious challenge. Too extensive usage of violence against protesters might lead to growing solidarity protests against police violence, while abandoning the systemic implementation of deterrents might motivate new participants to join the protests.

The overall activation and increase in protests notwithstanding, there are as yet no signs of protest coalitions forming under specific political claims. This is largely explained by Russia's poor institutions which, on the one hand, prevent the conflation of

socio-economic and political grievances. On the other hand, the poor state of the institutions facilitates spontaneous forms of activism. There are no established political frameworks – such as the democratic turnover of leaders – to which representatives of local protesters could attach their demands for whatever reasons. In accordance with sociological polls, it can be assumed that many representatives of socio-economic protests are indifferent with regard to politics, most of them support Putin in the face of non-reasonable alternatives and, for many, Alexei Navalny belongs to this 'non-reasonable' category.

However, the anti-corruption protests instigated by Navalny, whose major representatives were drawn from among the Russian youth, pinpoint perhaps the most acute and irrevocable political challenge faced by the Kremlin, which is generational. The unavoidable counterweight to the regime's stability narrative – the nightmare of the 1990s – is too distant for this generation. Their politically active contingent is no longer indifferent to the regime's methods for sustaining its rule, comprising political manipulation, corruption, state propaganda and overall social injustice. The regime's information efforts via traditional media and educational institutes face obvious challenges vis-à-vis young people, who are better adjusted to the Internet's fragmented information environment than the older generations. There are no signs that this tension will decrease in the future. By the same token, attempts to improve and sharpen the government's online presence have shown mixed results since 2012. In 2017 it became obvious that the regime had failed in its important task of de-mobilizing young people in accordance with the regime's patriotic conformism.