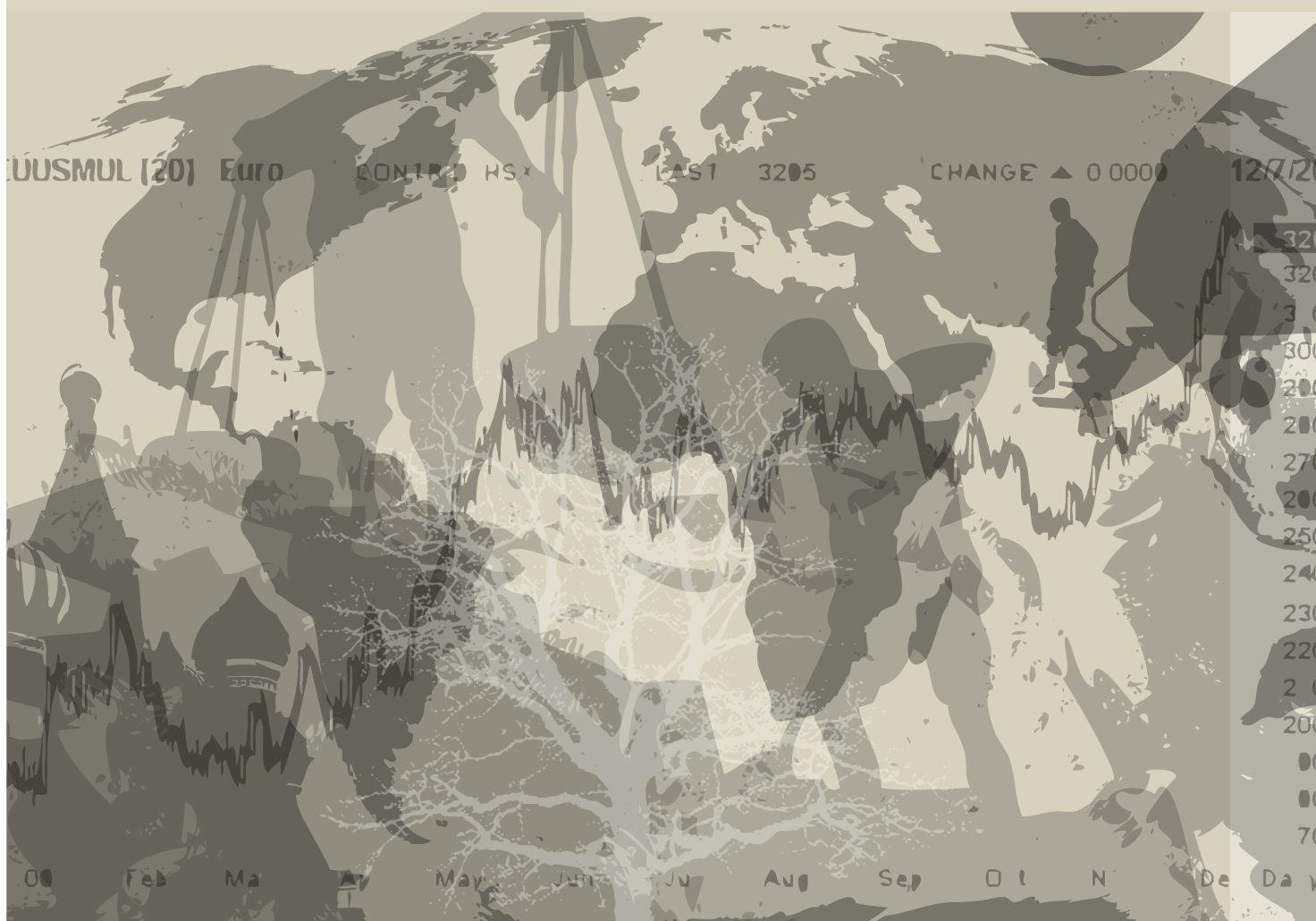


Russian Public Opinion and the Confrontation with the West

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NUPI Working Paper 886

Publisher: Norwegian Institute of International Affairs
Copyright: © Norwegian Institute of International Affairs 2019
ISSN: 1894-650X

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Published by the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs

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Introduction: Russia and the West

The attitudes of Russian society to the West have changed during the post-Soviet years. In the early years of Yegor Gaidar's reforms, naive ideas prevailed: an era of prosperity would begin as soon as communism had been abandoned and the transition to democracy proclaimed. Indeed, regime support from reformists and opponents of the Communist Party was conditioned on these hopes. However, the severity of the transition period, with a deep economic recession, rising unemployment, inflation, the depreciation of savings, and the collapse of familiar systems for social security, medicine and education, caused disillusionment with the reforms and with the 'democrats' responsible for these pro-Western political policies. By the end of the 1990s, there were high expectations to an authoritarian leader who could bring 'order' to the country, stabilize the economy, increase employment, etc. Vladimir Putin's rise to power drew on this disillusionment. Further, it coincided with the completion of the transition to a market economy and rising oil prices, which allowed the government to increase social spending and thereby partially relieve social tensions: Between 2002 and 2008, real income grew by an average of 7–8% per year, which gave rise to a consumer boom and greater support for the new regime.

From maintaining social stability to mounting a counteroffensive

The establishment of the Putin regime included a complete change of the country's top leadership and mid-level bureaucracy. The new administration was made up of *siloviki* – former employees of the Soviet secret police (KGB), army, intelligence and other special services. These were people from highly conservative social institutions that had changed little since Leonid Brezhnev's time. Their professional consciousness was based, on the one hand, on Cold War ideology and opposition to the West. On the other hand, there was also recognition of the new opportunities for rapid enrichment after the privatization and redistribution of state property, informal control over the economy and interaction with Western business.

The strengthening of Putin's regime was accompanied by a reverse political development in other spheres: the centralization of power led to the elimination of regional self-government, the banning of regional political parties, and the establishment of almost monopolistic control of the presidential administration over the mass media, which were transformed into instruments of total propaganda. The ideological influence of the Russian Orthodox Church increased significantly, with the Church turning into a power base of the regime a channel for restoring the ideology of 'state patriotism' and isolation from the West.

Further, the careful ‘management’ of federal elections over four election cycles has led to changes in the composition and structure of the political class, ensuring complete loyalty of the new *nomenklatura* to the regime and heightened legitimacy of the socio-political order.

During Putin’s first two terms there was a focus on the need for social ‘stability’, and the inadmissibility of shocks and changes, which corresponded with the expectations of a frustrated and disoriented population. In fact, the ideology of ‘sovereign’ or ‘managed’ democracy was meant to discredit the on-going programme of institutional reforms and democratization. When Putin returned to the presidency in 2012 (ending the Putin/Medvedev ‘tandem rule’), ‘democracy’ and the ideology of liberalism and human rights were declared alien to the traditions and spirit of the Russian people, a Trojan horse imposed by the West in order to destroy the powerful Soviet Union. Propaganda depicted the accession of the former Soviet republics of Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania and other countries of the former socialist camp to the EU and NATO as evidence of the successful implementation of such ‘CIA plans’ for the collapse of the Soviet system. Similar intentions on the part of Georgia, and later Ukraine, as well as the emplacement of NATO bases in Eastern Europe, were seen as a growing threat to the security, integrity and existence of Russia itself.

Mobilizing anti-Western sentiments

The widespread dissemination of these ideas gradually led to a change in public attitudes towards the West, primarily regarding the United States and the EU. In the early 1990s, opinion polls had indicated the absence of concern or phobias against the West. Indeed, 25% of those surveyed said they would approve of Russian accession to NATO, and 40% supported the prospect of close partnership and cooperation with the Atlantic alliance. Likewise, 60% hoped that someday Russia would be able to join the EU.¹ The first surge of anti-Western reactions came in the spring of 1999 after the NATO bombing of Serbia and the defeat of Slobodan Milosevic. But this campaign ended quickly, and positive attitudes towards the West re-emerged. However, after the war in Iraq and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, the Rose Revolution in Georgia and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2003/2004, paranoid anti-Western motifs became entrenched in the rhetoric of the Kremlin leadership.

Figure 1. Russian attitudes towards the US (Levada Center, N = 1600).

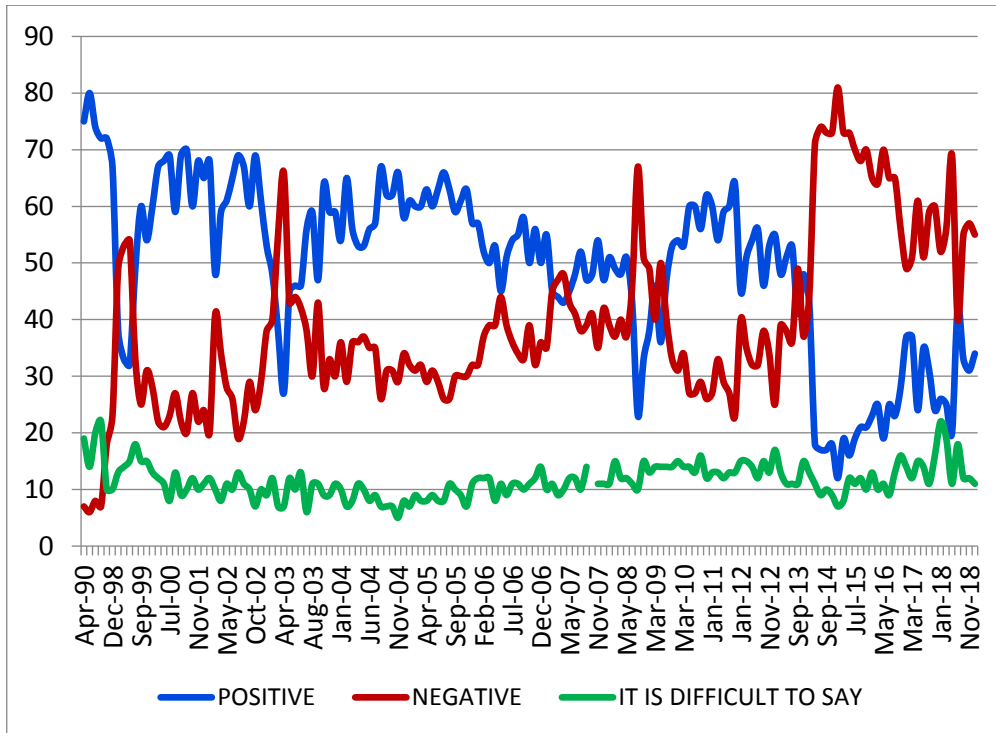
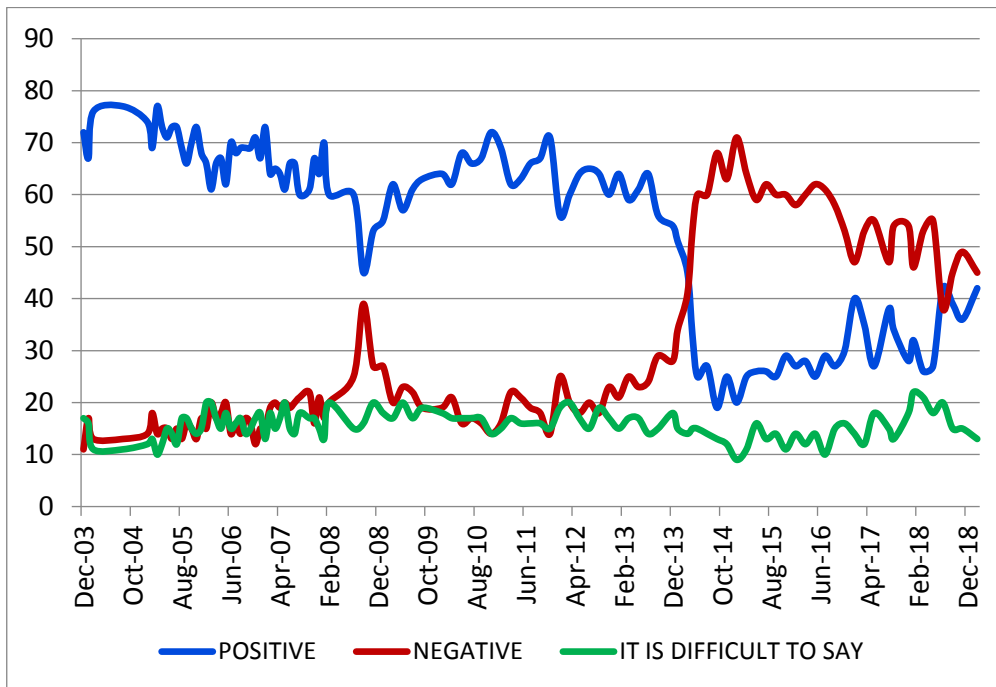


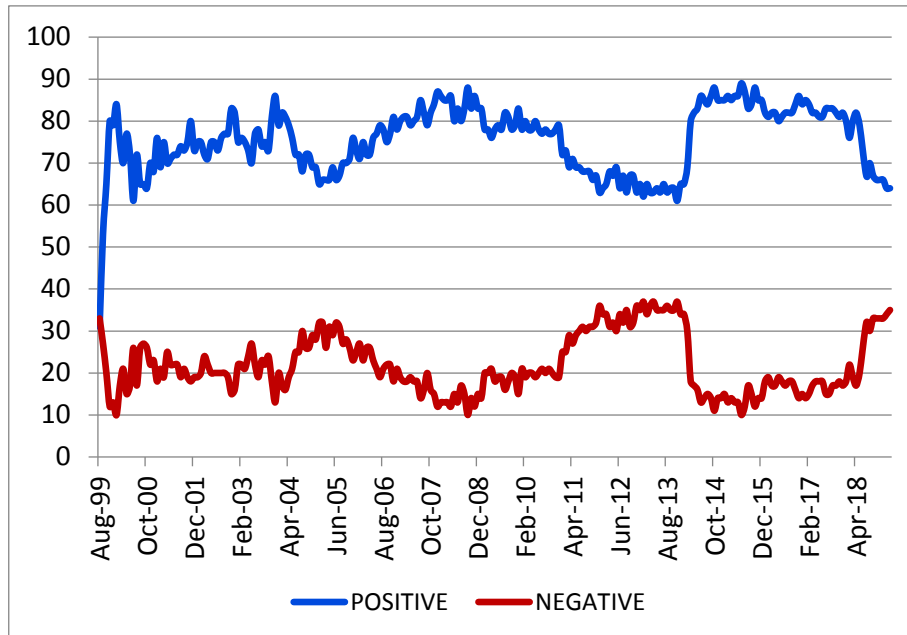
Figure 2. Russian attitudes towards the EU (Levada Center, N = 1600).



Speculations about the USA and its allies pursuing a policy of forcible regime change (through the export of 'colour revolutions') became the basis of state propaganda and internal war against the opposition and civil society organizations, branded as 'agents of external influence'. The first time that these ideas were openly articulated was in Putin's speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2007. The speech marked the beginning of open confrontation with the West and the rejection of democracy as a programme of nation-state development and a free market economy. Final ideological justification for this policy has come only in the past six or seven years, though, after the mass protests in 2011/2012. The introduction of numerous legislative changes between 2012 and 2016 served to curb the practical effect of the Constitution of the Russian Federation, depriving citizens of their rights and freedoms. At the same time, there began the fight against the 'falsification of history', with criticism of liberalism and human rights, and the forcible introduction of Orthodox culture and patriotic education programmes in schools and universities.

In fact, such a course should not have come as a total surprise: the first signs of anti-Westernism could be noted already under the Yeltsin government, when criticism of human rights violations during the first war in Chechnya were neutralized by counter-accusations of 'traditional Russophobia' and 'double standards' in assessing the actions of the Russian leadership by European countries. There is a connection between relapses into militarism, the use of force to suppress internal opponents of the regime and foreign policy 'demonstrations of force', on the one hand, and the rise of power politics on the other. Putin's authority rose during the 'anti-terrorism campaign' and the second Chechen war, reaching a high point already during the war with Georgia in the summer of 2008. A second peak came after the Maidan events in Kiev and subsequent annexation of Crimea. Central to both ideological campaigns was the assertion that these conflicts had been provoked by the USA in an attempt to oust Russia from its 'traditional zones of influence'.

Figure 3. ‘Do you approve of Vladimir Putin’s actions as the President (Prime Minister) of Russia?’ (Levada Center, N = 1600).



The increasingly authoritarian Moscow regime lashed out against the aspirations of the former Soviet republics and Eastern European states to seek integration into the structures of the EU and NATO. The accession of the Baltic countries to the EU (after Poland, the Czech Republic and others) was intended to make irreversible the institutional reforms and formation of a legal, democratic state in these countries. Georgia’s desire to follow this path, and the appearance of similar plans among the Ukrainian leadership, caused deep concern in the Kremlin, resulting in massive campaigns and actions aimed at discrediting these countries. Since 2004, Latvia, Lithuania, the USA, Georgia, Poland, and then Ukraine have topped Russia’s list of ‘enemies’.²

Enemy perceptions

The defeat of Georgia in 2008 led to the establishment of a Russian protectorate over a significant part of Georgian territory (Abkhazia, South Ossetia), making it impossible for Georgia to join NATO or the EU.³ Immediately thereafter, anti-Georgian propaganda in Russia weakened and later almost completely ceased (perceptions of Georgia as an enemy of Russia decreased from 62% in 2009 to 8% in 2018) (see Table 1). A similar trend cannot be detected for the Baltic republics. Here perceptions of hostility – although decreasing – remain widespread (Latvia: from 46% in 2006 to 26% in 2018; Lithuania – from 42% to 23%; and Estonia – from 60% in 2007 to 15% in 2018).

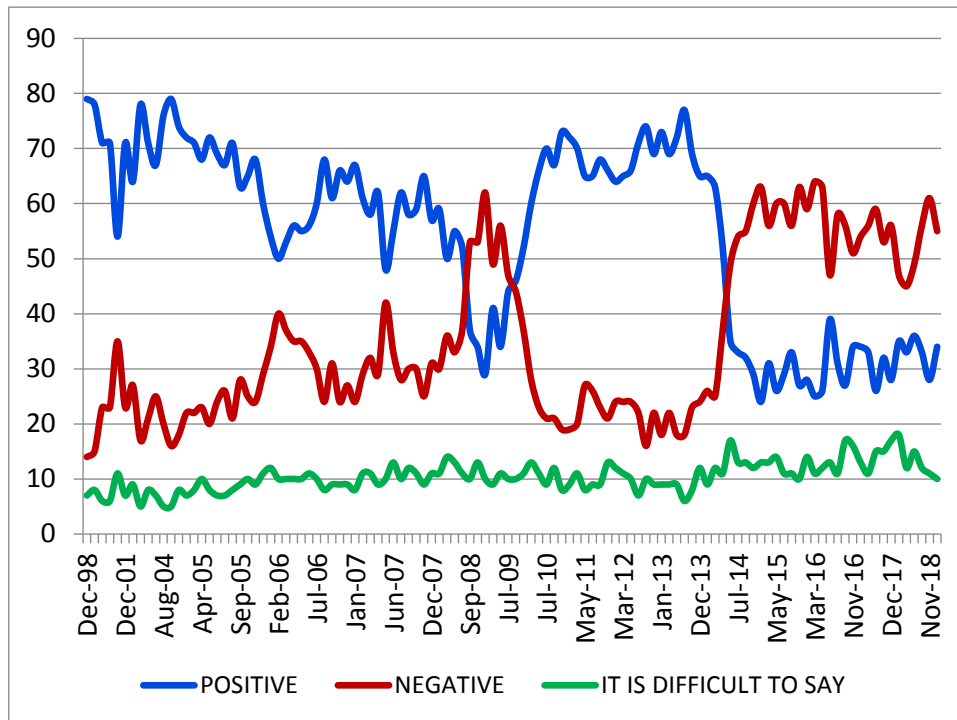
Table 1 Which five countries would you say are the most hostile towards Russia? (In % of number of respondents, N = 1600).

	2006	2007	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
USA	37	35	45	26	33	35	38	69	73	72	69	78
Ukraine	27	23	41	13	20	15	11	30	37	48	50	49
UK	5	3	8	6	8	7	9	18	21	18	15	38
Latvia	46	36	35	36	35	26	21	23	25	23	24	26
Poland	7	20	10	14	20	8	8	12	22	24	21	21
Lithuania	42	32	35	35	34	25	17	24	25	23	24	23
Germany	2	2	3	1	4	3	3	18	19	19	24	17
Estonia	28	60	30	28	30	23	16	21	19	16	16	15
Georgia	44	46	62	57	50	41	33	19	11	10	9	8

Note: Respondents were offered a card with a list of countries and could name several countries; answers are ranked descending to 2018.

The main danger for Putin in this regard was Ukraine, the second largest of the former Soviet republics in population. Successful reform of Ukraine's institutional system, even protected by the EU, could serve as a model for the Russian opposition. That is why discrediting the democratic movement in Ukraine as ultranationalist or fascist and initiated by the USA has become a major goal of the Kremlin propaganda. Waves of anti-Ukrainian sentiment rose in Russia during and/or after each electoral cycle in Ukraine: the first wave (in 2001) was rather weak and subsided quickly; the next one (during the Orange Revolution) was stronger; then 'gas wars' followed, with blackmail attempts and a sharp response to the position of the Ukrainian leadership, which criticized Russia in the Russo-Georgian war and threatened to terminate the lease agreement for the naval base in Sevastopol; and, finally, the anti-Maidan war, which has continued up to the present.

Figure 4. 'In general, what is your attitude towards Ukraine?' (Levada Center, N = 1600).



Confrontation with the West

The confrontation with the West and the anti-Western policies have reduced the public's perception of the need for control over power, its support for ideas about rule of law and democracy, as well as its opposition to authoritarian rule in the Russian, while also denigrating European values and models of social organization. The rhetoric of the enemy, and a threat of war coming from Western countries, helps to consolidate Russian society around power, while also spurring the revival of Russian militarism, glorification of the heroism of the Russian soldier, the greatness of the Empire, and the justification of its colonial wars.

In 1989 only 13% of respondents surveyed by the Levada Center stated 'our country has enemies' (listing them as separatists, communists, party mafia, CIA, Islamists, etc.). Then in 1994, at the beginning of the first Chechen war, already 41% of respondents expressed agreement with this opinion. After Putin returned to power, there was a second wave of anti-Americanism: in the spring of 2014, after the annexation of Crimea, no less than 84% agreed to the statement about Russia having enemies.⁴ The image of the 'enemy' is the most important tool for securing integration and public support for an

authoritarian leader – in turn, a precondition for informational and cultural isolation from the external world. Instead of a society open to the world, as Russia was in the 1990s, today the Kremlin has proclaimed the policy of ‘returning to the traditional values’ of the Russian people, to ‘spiritual bonds’, which are understood as fundamentalist Orthodoxy, and to an authoritarian state. Maintaining the population in a state of chronic arousal and mobilization contributes to ousting liberal ideas about rule of law from the mass consciousness. Anti-Western rhetoric, in combination with defensive self-isolationism (ours is a ‘special way’, ‘Russia is a special civilization’, even superior to the West in spirituality and morality, etc.), has helped producing today’s situation where most Russians share the same views – and thereby strengthened Putin’s regime.

The efforts of Kremlin political consultants and propagandists have been crowned with success. Public opinion, at least verbally (and perhaps only temporarily), agrees that ‘Russia is not a European country’, and that ‘Western culture is alien to Russia’ or has a malign influence on it. Such distancing and alienation from developed countries is facilitated by the imposition of the view that the West (that is, the developed countries of democracy) treats Russia with contempt and fear, allegedly caused by ‘the growing power of Russia’. Propaganda has uncovered older layers of stereotypes and myths deeply rooted in Russian culture: ideas about Russia’s backwardness compared to Europe, barbarism, and serfdom. Moreover, it has now transposed these into positive meanings – ‘we are moral, spiritual, faithful to our traditions of love for the Fatherland and its glory’.

The patriotic mobilization of 2014–2016, triggered by the annexation of Crimea and confrontation with the West, returned a sense of pride and self-esteem to the Russian people. These events made it possible for them to feel significant again, weakening the national inferiority complex that had emerged after the collapse of the USSR.

How durable is the anti-Westernism?

Taking a longer-term perspective, we may assume that the current wave of anti-Westernism does not mean the total annihilation of values associated with Western culture, civilization, and democracy – only their temporary weakening. In the mass consciousness, there exist no other values available for the development of the country and the desired state of Russian society, except for the utopia of the West. Therefore, most Russians still have an internal yearning for ‘normalized’ relations with Western countries, and a willingness to endorse any steps necessary to ease antagonism and tensions between Russia and the

USA/the EU. Neither China nor Iran can serve as development alternatives. Herein lie the limitations of Putin's policy. Traditionalist myths and ideologemes cannot eliminate the attractiveness of Western culture and social order. The current system in Russia is sustained by ideological and repressive pressure on society, balanced by cynicism and non-execution or conditional implementation of orders from the Kremlin.

The growth of social discontent, recorded in opinion polls since the end of 2017, halted with the start of the campaign for Putin's re-election to the presidency. However, this was only a brief respite: in April 2018, all social indicators plunged after the announcement of the increase in retirement age, accompanied by rising prices and new taxes. The Kremlin hoped that, against the background of a welcoming and festive atmosphere during the FIFA World Cup, implementing these reforms would be relatively easy: however, by July/August, the protest mood reached a new peak. Almost 90% of Russians spoke out against the new pension system.⁵ Putin's ratings dropped to the level of the period of mass anti-regime demonstrations. At the same time, however, and somewhat unexpectedly, attitudes to the West changed, becoming more positive for the first time after the annexation of the Crimea. In essence, what people were saying was: we are not against Putin's foreign policy, we are for Great Russia – but why should we sacrifice our retirement pensions and our own wellbeing for the war in Syria, which we do not understand, for the war in Donbass, for confrontation with the West?

In countries with authoritarian and repressive forms of government, dissatisfaction with the policy of the national leadership typically results not in open forms of opposition to the authorities, but in refusal to demonstrate support and participate in public affairs, as well as a general alienation from politics. During the regional elections in September 2018, voter turnout was officially about 30%, but in view of falsifications and according to polls, it was probably even lower. This means that most voters simply ignored these rituals of ostentatious loyalty. And even in a situation of fully managed elections, when no real opposition candidates were allowed to participate in the election campaign, the ruling party lost in four out of twenty-two gubernatorial campaigns. Such bursts of discontent may not threaten the existence of the regime – but they do indicate its internal instability.

Notes

1. See Levada Center *Obshchestvennoe mnenie-2004*. Available at <https://www.levada.ru/sbornik-obshchestvennoe-mnenie/>.
2. See Levada Center press release “Druz’ia” i “vrage” Rossii”, 14 June 2018. Available at <https://www.levada.ru/2018/06/14/druzya-i-vrage-rossii-3/>.
3. The unresolved territorial problems of candidate-states to these organizations are blocking their accession. Under Yeltsin, this tactic was tested in Moldova, which was split into territories controlled by Chisinau and the breakaway region of Transnistria, the latter dependent on Russia.
4. See note 1.
5. See Levada Center press release ‘Pensionnaya reforma’, 27 September 2018. Available at <https://www.levada.ru/2018/09/27/pensionnaya-reforma-4/>.



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