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REGIME

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- The recent 2016 Duma elections were planned by the Kremlin to attest to the fact that the period of troubled political development – which began during the previous 2011 Duma elections – is over. Further, the elections served to test Putin’s consolidated authoritarianism on the eve of the forthcoming presidential elections in 2018.
- While successful in terms of preserving full control over the new Duma, the election results nevertheless demonstrated that the patriotic enthusiasm evoked by the annexation of Crimea has largely been exhausted. The pressure on the opposition, new electoral rules and reliance on regions with so-called “administrative voting” secured a victory for the party of power, but in urban regions the turnout was very low and voting for the Kremlin’s party did not differ much from 2011 patterns.
- Although the direct effect of the economic crisis on people’s political attitudes is still moderate, the continued long-term stagnation in the Russian economy that started even before the fall in energy prices remains the major challenge for regime stability.
- Ambiguous election results force the Kremlin to seek new instruments of political consolidation. The Kremlin’s most probable strategy may be to combine toughening authoritarian institutions with maintaining high tension in the international arena in order to prolong the ‘rally around the flag’ effect domestically, by attempting or promising “authoritarian modernization” to gain support in urban regions. As the presidential election date approaches, both Putin’s foreign and economic policies could become even riskier than they have been to date.

The forthcoming 2018 presidential elections are regarded in the Kremlin as a pivotal event of the near political future. Meanwhile, the Duma elections that took place in September 2016 were viewed as a sort of test, gauging both popular attitudes and the reliability of authoritarian political institutions that should provide a victory for the Kremlin candidate in 2018.

While the proportion of people affected by the economic crisis is growing, and the average household income has contracted by more than 10 per cent over the last two years, up to now the economic deterioration in Russia has had a negligible influence on the political stability and regime support. Social unrest and the level of dissatisfaction with the regime remain comparatively low. Meanwhile, the 2016 Duma election results show that whereas Putin's new legitimacy is thus far uncontested, support for the regime and its core institutions is diminishing. The policy of regime toughening launched by Putin in recent years has increased its resilience, but strong symptoms of social frustration pose a new threat against the background of declining resources to co-opt the elites and buy popular support.

This briefing paper takes a look at the recent Duma elections in the context of troubled Russia's political and social development in the last five years (since the previous 2011 Duma elections), pinpointing its main drivers in domestic politics and the economy. It also offers an analysis of what might arguably be people's real attitudes, which could appear partly distorted by the official election results, and discusses the interplay between Putin's aggressive foreign policy, his course of authoritarian consolidation, and the economic challenges Russia is faced with.

The 2016 elections in context: three crises and authoritarian consolidation

The previous parliamentary elections in 2011 sparked the first tangible political crisis of Putin's regime since the start of his leadership in 2000, and ushered in a period of troubled political development in Russia. In December 2011, the Kremlin failed to secure overwhelming electoral domination and to receive more than 49 per cent support for the party of power – United Russia. In many regions, and especially

in big cities, the level of support was much lower (30 – 40 per cent). Moreover, abundant evidence of electoral fraud provoked mass protests in major cities. While focused on the issue of the elections as such at first, these protests quickly turned into an anti-Putin campaign on the eve of the presidential elections, albeit on a scale insufficient to prevent Putin's victory. Nevertheless, the protests firstly revealed the low support for the ruling party, which was regarded as one of the pillars of a new Russian authoritarianism. Secondly, they contested Putin's personal popularity, which seemed to be the other pillar of regime stability and the basis of Putin's indisputable leadership within the elites. Thirdly, they showed the emerging influence of the new urban population and highlighted their demands for social and political modernization as the agenda of a new opposition.

In general, the crisis demonstrated the diminishing popular support for the current political regime (which was also reflected in opinion polls) and challenged the stability of the relatively soft authoritarianism that had emerged in Russia in the 2000s. The crisis challenged the so-called competitive authoritarian regime model – one that uses competitive strategies to maintain its power, which is consolidated with unfair rules and numerous abuses, but is still very limited in using violence and repression.¹

It would not be overstating the issue to say that the 2011 election crisis changed both Putin's political strategies and the trajectory of Russian political development. A series of attempts to reconfigure the Russian political regime over the ensuing few years focused on strengthening authoritarian institutions, which became more reliant on restrictive and repressive policies and on re-assembling a stable majority in favour of Putin's policies.

Despite serious Kremlin efforts to suppress and marginalize the opposition in 2012–2013, to strengthen control over the media, and to promote conservative Orthodox values, the results were limited. At the end of 2013, Putin's approval rating was again approaching the lowest levels in his presidential

1 On the concept of 'competitive authoritarianism' and its development, see Levitsky S. & Way L. A. (2010): *Competitive authoritarianism. Hybrid regimes after the cold war*. Cambridge University Press.

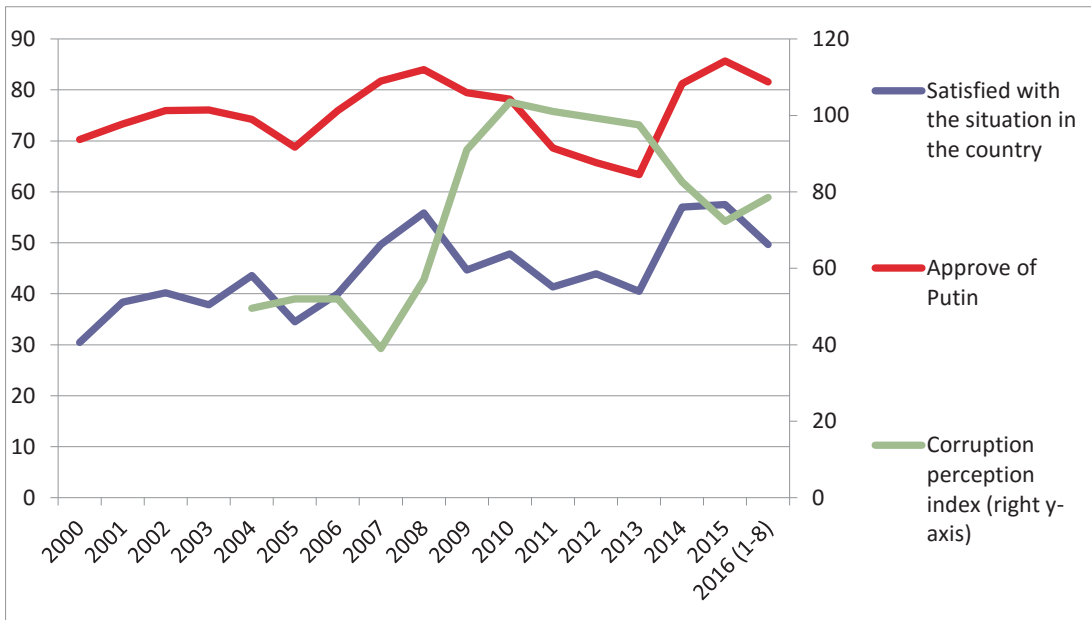


Figure 1. The perception of the political regime in public opinion: approval, satisfaction and perception of corruption. Source: Levada Center.

career (Figure 1). Added to this, some opposition representatives won regional elections in late 2013.²

Putin’s sudden decision to annex Crimea in early 2014 triggered a stylized (and postponed) ‘Yugoslavian scenario’ (a situation whereby the metropolitan nation contests the borders that exist at the moment of a country’s disintegration). The annexation evoked patriotic excitement inside Russia and led to a broadening conflict with Western countries. In general, this scenario radically changed the national political agenda and actualized a new pattern of legitimacy for Putin. Now he is not so much a figure providing political stability and economic recovery as was the case in the 2000s, but rather the defender of national interests recovering national losses (both symbolic and material), and protecting national sovereignty in the face of a hostile Western alliance.

2 The opposition had won mayoral elections in Yaroslavl (2012), Yekaterinburg (population 1.4 million) and Petrozavodsk. One of its leaders, Boris Nemtsov, won a mandate in the Yaroslavl regional legislature. The leader of the 2011–2012 protests, Alexey Navalny, came second in the Moscow mayoral elections with 27% of the votes.

The new pattern of Putin’s legitimacy and confrontation with the West, accompanied by the ‘rally around the flag’ effect in public opinion (see Figure 1) and bolstered by an enormous propaganda campaign, became an effective instrument for the continued transition from soft competitive authoritarianism to a consolidated and toughened repressive regime. It also seemed to be an effective Kremlin counter-attack against a civic uprising and demands for modernization, mobilizing revanchist patriotism and anti-Westernism to create a new majority in support of Putin. Meanwhile, the Kremlin passed new electoral laws designed to secure the position of the ruling party and to control independent election observers, and adopted new regulations on public meetings and demonstrations, on NGO activity and Internet freedom – essentially increasing the pressure on the opposition and certain elite groups.³

The policy of authoritarian consolidation seemed to be successful but was challenged by an economic crisis in late 2014. The drop in oil prices led to the deep devaluation of the national currency, a 3.8 per cent GDP contraction in 2015 and about 1 per cent

3 See Gel’man, V. (2016): “The Politics of Fear. How Russia’s Rulers Counter their Rivals.” In *Russian Politics* 1:1, pp. 27–45.

more in the first half of 2016, shrinking people's income by more than 10 per cent and leading to a budget deficit of more than 3 per cent. Nevertheless, by perpetuating confrontation in the international arena, Putin successfully prolonged the rally effect. The new 'emergency legitimacy' bolstered his authoritarian consolidation and demoralized the opposition.

Hence, if the previous Duma elections caused turbulence for Putin's regime and stimulated sharp alterations of course both domestically and internationally, the 2016 parliamentary elections had a role in demonstrating that the regime had coped with these challenges, attained its goals of authoritarian consolidation and was now fully in control of the political space. This evidence was also supposed to serve as an important signal for opposing and elite groups that the regime is strong and stable on the eve of the upcoming presidential elections.

Pearls and thorns of the 'dull election'. Is it post-post-Crimean Russia now?

Most observers characterized the 2016 Duma election campaign as the dullest and most languid in the history of Russian parliamentary elections since the early 1990s. By placing the election day in mid-September – shortly after the holiday 'dead season' and instead of the usual date in December – the Kremlin obviously aimed to have a low turnout. Indeed, pre-election polls indicated participation to be about 20–25 per cent lower than average compared with the Duma elections in the mid-1990s. There were only about three weeks of active campaigning and even in this short race neither United Russia nor its rivals seemed to be battling for votes.

The strategy of voter demobilization seems rather surprising considering the extremely high level of political support for Putin's regime that is consistently reported by pollsters. Yet the reasons for aiming for a low voter turnout are quite obvious to those who know the details of Russia's electoral geography. A lower turnout leads to the greater impact of "administratively managed" voting on the final result.

There is a stable group of Russian regions that report an extremely high election turnout and almost total support for the incumbent and for the party of

power in every vote. These regions include most of the 'national republics' and some Russian regions like Chechnya, Tatarstan, Dagestan, Mordovia, Tyumen and others (about 15 in total). Election outcome here depends not so much on the preferences of voters as on the local authorities that control them almost completely⁴. For example, in the 2016 elections, turnout for this group of regions was about 79 per cent, and United Russia won on average about 78 per cent of the votes, compared with 49 per cent and 54 per cent respectively for Russia in general. As a result, United Russia received more than 8.8 million votes (31 per cent of its total) in regions where only 13 per cent of voters live. Conversely, in highly urbanized regions, the reported turnout was about 38 per cent, and voting for United Russia about 40 per cent. In total, the input of 49 per cent of voters living in these areas into United Russia's victory was about 7.8 million votes (29 per cent of its total). So the tactics of voter demobilization reduce turnout in 'advanced Russia', while mobilization in regions of 'controlled voting' depends not on people's inclination to vote but on arbitrary decisions taken by local authorities.

The calm election scenario (or 'sterile', as characterized by its Kremlin architect Vyacheslav Volodin, who later became the speaker of the newly-elected Duma) implies that the Kremlin could have been expecting a much higher level of social tension and a much stronger challenge from the opposition when the elections were planned in 2015. So the strategy was to reduce the mobilization of less loyal and less predictable urban voters.

4 Independent observers have almost no access to polling stations in these regions, but where they do, there is evidence of major fraud and falsification. Jack Stubbs, a Reuters reporter, succeeded in observing the voting in one station in Bashkirya, where the verified turnout was 23 per cent, whereas in all other stations a turnout of about 65–70 per cent was reported (Phantom voters, smuggled ballots hint at foul play in Russian vote, Reuters: <http://reut.rs/2dggJaB>; see also Russian newspaper *Kommersant*: <http://kommersant.ru/doc/3095180>. A similar picture was reported by volunteers observing a sample of voting stations in Dagestan, see <http://dagestan2016.ru>. As a result, it is assumed that election results are mostly fabricated in these regions. All links last accessed 8 Nov 2016.

	Official turnout, %	Corrected turnout, %	Share of Duma mandates, %
	47.88	36.85	
United Russia	54.2	40.47	76
CPRF and other left-wing parties (Communists of Russia, Russian Party of Pensioners)	17.34	22.53	9
LDPR	13.14	17.07	9
Yabloko and other liberals (PARNAS, Party of Growth)	4.01	5.22	
“A Just Russia”	6.22	8.08	5
Patriots (Motherland, Patriots of Russia)	2.1	2.73	

Table 1. Official, corrected and actual 2016 Duma election outcomes.

In contrast to these fears, in reality the opposition looked weak and disorganized during the campaign. Despite continuous economic decline, the actual level of dissatisfaction with the current situation in Russia is still comparatively moderate, while the opposition remains demoralized in the face of the post-Crimea patriotism spike and intense pressure from the Kremlin. Alexey Navalny, the key figure of the 2011 election protests and the runner-up in Moscow’s 2013 mayoral election, was banned from participation in the race together with most of his colleagues from the Party of Progress, which was not even registered by Russian officials.

In the end, however, the 2016 Duma election results seem to be rather ambiguous for the Kremlin. On the one hand, United Russia gained a huge majority in the Duma and no new party (not present in the previous Duma) won seats through federal-level party voting. Nor did any representatives of the ‘new’ opposition win in any single-mandate districts either. On the other hand, if one excludes the ‘administrative turnout and voting’, the level of real participation and United Russia’s results do not look very impressive.

The official turnout and United Russia result of 54 per cent were contested by independent observers, who suspect that both the real turnout and the votes for United Russia were a little less than 40% (Table 1). There are two reasons for such a position. The first concerns the independent observers themselves. About 1000 polling stations were covered by the ‘People’s Election Committee’ project in several

regions. The figures for turnout reported and verified by independent observers at these polling stations are between 34 per cent and 41 per cent, and votes cast for United Russia between 35 per cent and 38 per cent.⁵ The sample is not fully representative but is indicative nevertheless. Besides, there was no observation in regions of ‘administrative voting’. The other source for the real turnout and voting outcomes is a special statistical method that measures abnormal voting.⁶

The outcome corrected through this statistical method supposes that United Russia would not even have had a simple majority were it not for fraud and ‘administrative voting’. Moreover, these results seem to be very close to the ‘real’ outcomes of the 2011 Duma voting adjusted for fraud and

5 See ‘Narodnyi Izbirkom’: <http://www.narizbir.com>. Last accessed 8 Nov 2016.

6 Several methods of detecting statistical anomalies in voting results are described in Koback D., Shpilkin S., Pshenichnikov M.: “Statistical anomalies in 2011–2012 Russian elections revealed by 2D correlation analysis”, <https://arxiv.org/pdf/1205.0741v2.pdf>; the most significant is the analysis of distribution of the number of ballots in favour of parties/candidates as a function of the turnout and respective vote share at each polling station. On anomalies in the 2016 voting results and estimates of the supposed real turnout and voting results used in Table 1, see Shpilkin S., Dvugorbaya Rossiya / Troitsky Variant. 04. 10. 2016. N214, <http://trv-science.ru/2016/10/04/dvugorbaya-rossiya>; in Russian). Links last accessed 8 Nov 2016.

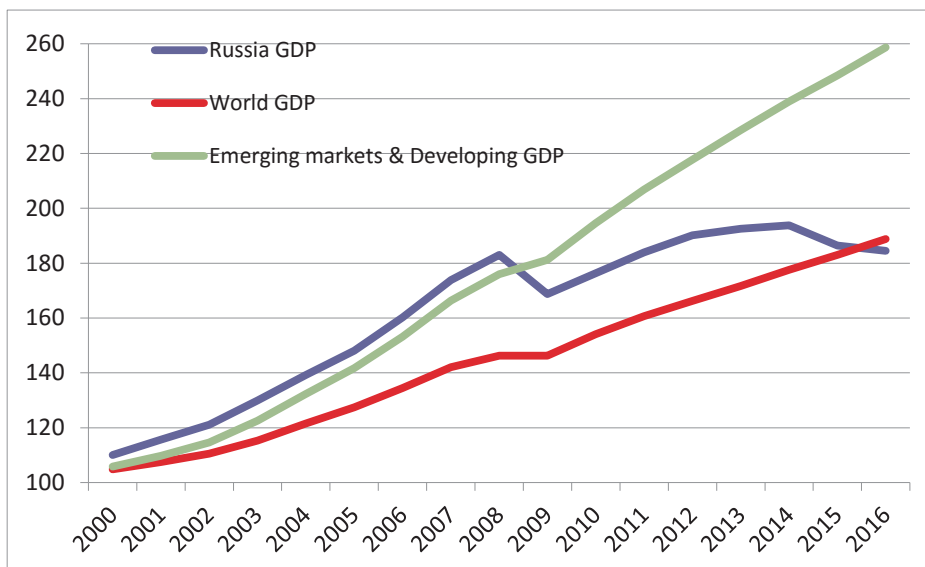


Figure 2. Growth decoupling: comparison of Russian, emerging market countries and global GDP growth. 1999=100. Source: IMF Outlook database.

falsifications with the same method. The outcome for United Russia may be just a few per cent higher now than in 2011, but this is mostly the result of a lower turnout in urban Russia, which increased the impact of ‘administrative voting’. So, taking account of fraud and rigging, and analyzed as evidence of the real public mood, the 2016 elections demonstrate almost no improvement in the support for the Kremlin’s party.

While the opposition was found to be weak in these elections, the pro-government voting was also weak and revealed signs of mounting dejection among voters. This means that the effect of the post-Crimea political mobilization is dwindling. The gradual decline in support for the political regime and its core institutions is also indicated in recent polls (conducted after the election).⁷ Considering the continuing economic recession and uncertain outlook for stabilization and recovery, it highlights new risks for the upcoming 2018 presidential campaign.

Is it the economy again? Authoritarian consolidation and long-term stagnation in Russia in the 2010s

The economy obviously remains the key challenge for Putin’s authoritarian consolidation and future presidential campaign. While most analysts focus

on the current economic performance and the consequences of a double shock in the form of low oil prices and Western sanctions, the main problems of the Russian economy seem to be even more profound and challenging. Even before the double shock in 2014, the Russian economy was heading towards long-term stagnation.

Between 2003 and 2008, Russian GDP grew 51 per cent, while in the following six years (2009 – 2014), growth was only 6 per cent. In 2016, Russian GDP will exceed the 2008 level by no more than 1.6 per cent. By way of comparison, global GDP growth for the same period was about 18 per cent, with emerging market countries growing 30 per cent on average.⁸ Despite the fact that oil prices were at absolute historic highs and total Russian exports in 2009–2014 exceeded those of 2003–2008 by 60 per cent, the Russian economy did not respond to these enormous revenues in the same way that it had in 2003–2008. As a result, Russia diverged from the emerging markets growth trajectory it had maintained in the previous period (Figure 2). Figure 2 also highlights the causes of Russia’s troubled political development in the 2010s, as discussed above.

The 2008–2009 crisis that led to the collapse of the Russian economy by 7.8 per cent didn’t have immediate political consequences for Putin’s regime. The

7 Data from the Levada Center: <http://www.levada.ru/2016/10/14/doverie-k-vlastnym-institutam-posle-vyborov-snizilos/>. Last accessed 8 Nov 2016.

8 IMF World Economic outlook database: <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2016/01/weodata/index.aspx>. Last accessed 8 Nov 2016.

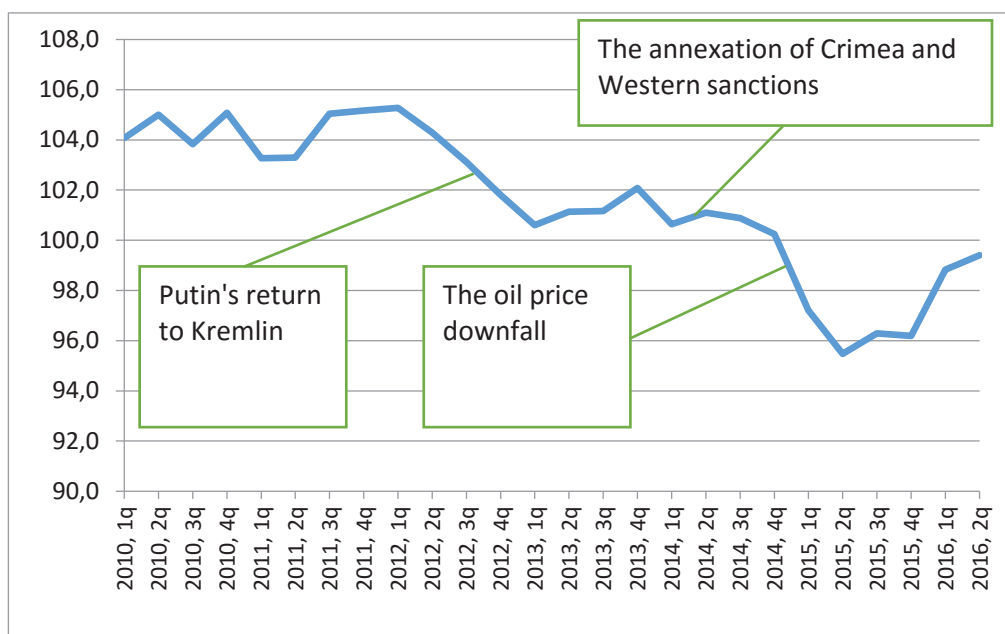


Figure 3. The decline in Russian economic growth rates (quarter to quarter compared to the previous year). Source: Rosstat.

level of popular support remained comparatively high in 2009, but started to decrease at the end of 2010 and continued in 2011. The proportion of those who perceived an increase in corruption jumped (see Figure 1), while the proportion of supporters of Putin's political model ('the centralization of power') was shrinking. Despite the fact that the economy started to recover, with oil prices surging again, people's expectations about the future and the prospects for the Russian economy remained subdued. It seems that the 2008–2009 crisis had undermined the enormous levels of trust in Putin's political system that Russians had built up during the period of miraculous growth in the 2000s.

In 2012, after his return to the Kremlin, Putin was faced with the task of restoring political control, marginalizing the opposition and rallying his supportive majority. While he met little resistance in the implementation of his conservative policies, the success was somewhat hollow: Putin's popularity was not growing. Simultaneously, in late 2012 and early 2013, the economy began slowing until it reached almost zero per cent growth (Figure 3).

Stagnation undermined the Kremlin's intention to restore the 'authoritarian consensus' that existed before 2009, and which underpinned a soft competitive authoritarianism. The evidence of long-term economic stagnation sheds new light on Putin's decision to annex Crimea in response to Yanukovich's fall in early 2014. The agenda of

confrontation with Ukraine and the West around the issues of Russia's 'lost territories' and 'Russians abroad' formed a new basis for Putin's popular support and provided a new 'emergency legitimacy', while the economic foundations of legitimacy and support were crumbling.

Hence, the worsening economic performance manifested in the 2009 crisis and long-term stagnation in the early 2010s seem to be the main cause of Russia's troubled political development in this period, leading to the limited political crisis of 2011–2012 and to the radicalization of Russian foreign policy in 2014. It also forced the Kremlin to consolidate authoritarian institutions while the economic foundations of the soft competitive authoritarian regime were undermined by the stagnating economy. On the other hand, evidence of long-term stagnation implies that a recovery of growth is unlikely as a result of economic 'adaptation' to new levels of domestic and international prices and calls for essential structural changes. This, in turn, raises key questions about Russia's political future in the medium term.

What's next? Putin's legitimacy triangle

There are several reasons why economic deterioration has had a very moderate influence on the political situation in Russia up to now. The first is the 'rally around the flag' effect on public opinion,

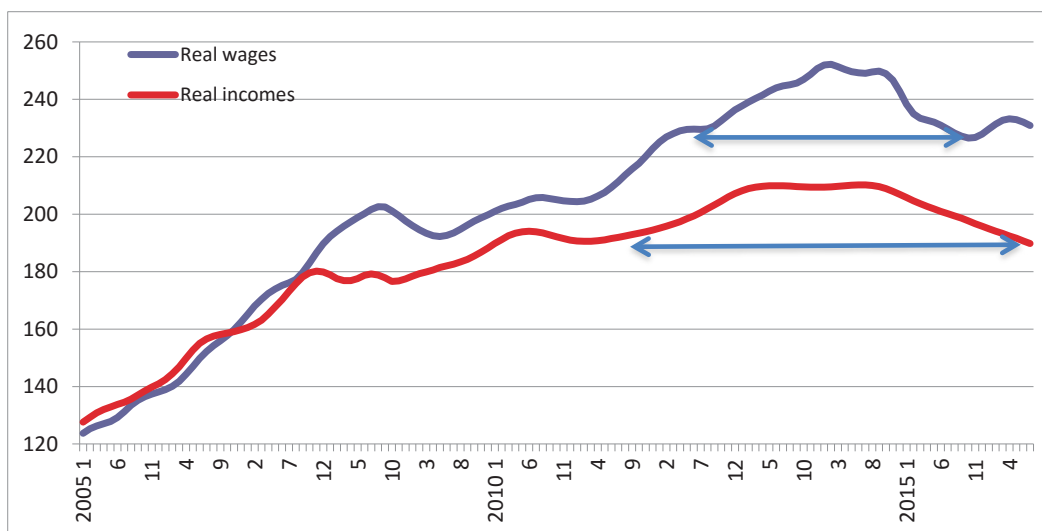


Figure 4. Average real income and real wages, 2005–2016. Sources: Rosstat; National Research University – Higher School of Economics, Department of Statistics and Data Analysis, Moscow.

which normally eases criticism of governments facing external conflicts. The rally effect is inseparably linked to the second reason: the effect of propaganda that intentionally underestimates economic deterioration. The third reason is that while the economy was slowing down in 2012–2014, the government’s redistributive policies provided continued income growth. Now, even after income contraction of 10 per cent, incomes are still close to the levels of 2011 (Figure 4) and much higher than they were in the mid-2000s.

In keeping with the experience of the 2008–2009 crisis and with comparative data, authoritarian regimes in oil-dependent countries are resilient enough when it comes to external shocks. The people in these countries are not inclined to blame the government for such shocks at first. But at the same time, the 2008–2009 crisis tells us that the reaction to such a crisis can be delayed. The more the population is used to relying on governmental redistributive policies, the more likely is the loss of confidence in the regime and growing indignation in the event of a prolonged crisis.

The results of the 2016 Duma elections indicate the weakening of the “Crimea effect” in Putin’s regime support and imply that he needs a new manoeuvre to prepare and secure his next presidential campaign.

Authoritarian consolidation, namely toughening authoritarian institutions and raising the cost of contesting the leadership, economic performance, and high tension in the international

arena (confrontation with the West) form Putin’s “legitimacy triangle” – the three main factors of his political domination, credibility among the elites and popularity among the Russian people. While economic performance remains poor with no perspective for recovery and stable growth, the probability that the other two trump cards will be taken off the table is very low.

At the same time, the continuous acceleration of international tension set against a background of continuous economic deterioration could transform public opinion from the patriotic enthusiasm of 2014–2015 into social and political frustration, signs of which were evident in recent election and opinion polls. This will force the Kremlin to find a way to present some evidence of economic improvement in the next two years.

The main problem with Putin’s legitimacy triangle is that the toughening of authoritarian institutions coupled with external conflicts helps to maintain political control during the period of economy deterioration. At the same time, they hamper sustainable economic improvement, which requires more challenging structural reforms. It seems highly likely that the Kremlin will try to combine the high but controlled tension in the international arena with the aim of prolonging the rally around the flag effect by attempting or promising some kind of ‘authoritarian modernization’ – economic liberalization under tough authoritarian control. But while the success of this strategy is extremely dubious, the other strategies – further acceleration of international conflicts and the weakening of monetary and

budget policies – should be within easy access. Both Putin’s economic and foreign policies could become even riskier.

So while the parliamentary elections seem to be successful for the Kremlin in terms of political control over the new Duma, the period of troubled development that started in 2011 and was supposed to be over after the elections is still ongoing, and could soon morph into a new period of turbulence.

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