



RUSSIAN ELITE OPINION AFTER CRIMEA

Denis Volkov



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About the Author

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Summary

There is a remarkable quantity of data available on Russian public opinion. However, information about the views of the Russian elite, a segment of the population that has grown increasingly guarded and circumspect during the 2000s, is hard to come by. Nevertheless, aggregate data analysis suggests some conclusions about key features of elite opinion following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014.

General Findings

- The views of Russian elites in the post-Crimea era mostly resemble those prevalent among the general public; for example, both groups support the regime of Russian President Vladimir Putin and his foreign policy.
- Members of the military-security establishment, the so-called siloviki, occupy a special place in Russia's political system. Between 2011 and 2012, they largely managed to impose their agenda on the rest of the elite. No Russian elite group appears to be as organized and influential as the siloviki.
- Ukraine's 2014 Euromaidan movement gave the Russian military-security establishment an additional pretext to increase pressure on civil society organizations and independent media and to shore up its own position in the political system.
- The annexation of Crimea satisfied elites and fostered a sense of belonging to a resurgent great power. Elites use public expressions of anti-Americanism and support for the annexation to affirm their loyalty to the regime.
- Approval ratings of the president and the government have increased significantly since the annexation. The political system's legitimacy crisis, of which the mass protests of 2011–2012 were an indication, was finally resolved. Protest leaders and activists do not pose a threat to the regime as of early 2016.

Future Prospects

- While the elite will not yet openly defy the regime, some elite groups and individuals may quietly sabotage official decisions in reaction to stepped-up moves

by the siloviki to increase pressure on dissenting voices, civil society groups, independent media, and members of the nonsystemic political opposition.

- Some elite groups continue to support partnership with the West and steps that would ultimately lead to an end to economic sanctions, but they have so far preferred to remain silent.
- Growing socioeconomic dislocation has ushered in more open discussion of possible economic reforms, but this should not be interpreted as a sign of impending political liberalization.
- Economic problems might interfere with the regime's tactic of compensating elites for their loyalty.
- Long-term economic problems may undermine elites' trust in the government's ability to deal with Russia's challenges, but they have not yet.
- The future of Putin's regime primarily hinges on ensuring the loyalty of the military-security establishment.

Introduction

The annexation of Crimea in early 2014 proved to be a turning point for the regime of Russian President Vladimir Putin. The Kremlin was able to reverse the downward trend in its approval ratings that had persisted for the preceding four to five years. In April–May 2014, Putin’s rating soared to territory in excess of 85 percent. As of February 2016, Putin’s rating was still as high as 81 percent.¹ Ordinary Russians expressed greater satisfaction with their lives and the work of all state institutions. The public also became convinced—for the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union—that Russia was becoming a great power once again.

There was a brief dip in public assessments of the country’s economic situation and future prospects in December 2014, when oil prices and the exchange rate of the ruble decreased dramatically. But by the spring of 2015, public satisfaction with the economy had practically returned to its pre-December 2014 level. Only in late summer 2015 did pessimism begin to rise slowly again. In early 2016, the public’s evaluation of economic performance and prospects for the future came closer to levels observed in late 2014.

No signs of panic are visible. If anything, it appears that people have had time to adjust to a new, far less comfortable situation. All these changes in popular sentiment are reflected clearly in public opinion polls.²

But what about the Russian elite? What can be expected from them in the near future and over the medium term? Although opinions vary to a degree among the elite, the group that continues to have the most influence on Russia’s future trajectory appears to be the political-military establishment.

Defining the Elite

Researchers differ as to what exactly “elite” means in the Russian context and who is included in the category. In the mid-2000s, leading Russian sociologists Yuri Levada, Lev Gudkov, and Boris Dubin wrote about “positional elites” or “ersatz elites” to describe groups of people whose place in the Russian power vertical is determined by their loyalty to higher authorities, not by their professional competence.³ These scholars generally defined the elite as a cluster of figures who wield

significant influence in the political process by virtue of holding government positions or positions of authority among key segments of the population.

Political scientist Nikolay Petrov, meanwhile, pointed to the key role that administrative resources play in the formation of the Russian ruling class and preferred to use the term *nomenklatura* to describe Russia's elites.⁴ Given Russian society's heavy dependence on state-sponsored redistribution mechanisms, his colleague Simon Kordonsky has suggested using the term "estates." In Kordonsky's system of classification, the bureaucratic estate (about 5 percent of the population, or 7.7 million people) occupies the most privileged position. The upper echelon of this estate—the bosses (*nachal'niki*) or dignitaries (*perviye litsa*)—comprises around 0.26 percent of the population (roughly 400,000 people).⁵ For her part, sociologist Olga Kryshtanovskaya classified only around 1,000 people as elites. The broader category labeled the "political class" accounts for approximately 0.2 percent.⁶ Political scientist Mikhail Afanasyev has written about the "elites of development," which include the majority of the middle class (that is, 10–15 percent of the population).⁷

There are several different approaches to creating these groups. It is easiest to classify elites by spheres (for example, political, economic, military, and the like) and other subcategories of various sizes. Another approach divides them by function, that is, administrators, legislators, ideologists, diplomats, and so on.⁸ There is also the clan model, or Petrov's "Kremlin towers" model, which emphasizes business, familial, career, and other ties.⁹ The Politburo model first proposed by Kryshtanovskaya and developed by the political consultant Evgeny Minchenko studies shifts in Vladimir Putin's inner circle. According to this approach, the very top section of the elite consists of a few dozen people. Beyond that, the model looks at the roles of the president's inner circle; high-

ranking government officials; heads of state-run corporations; prominent businessmen; leaders of the security and law enforcement agencies; representatives of political, business, and technocratic blocs; opposition party leaders; and regional governors.¹⁰

Empirical research on the opinions and sentiments of Russian elites generally encompasses individuals from the following categories: government officials at the federal and regional levels, members of the military and security services, police, prosecutors, judges and high-profile attorneys,

top private-sector managers and business leaders, religious leaders, prominent journalists, scientists, and analysts. But this does not include the most influential figures.

Most researchers agree that representatives of the military-security establishment (the so-called *siloviki*) occupy key positions in the ruling elite. Olga Kryshtanovskaya was the first to point out the large number of security service veterans in Putin's inner circle. She also talked about the mass recruitment

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of the military personnel for government positions. Nikolay Petrov stressed the fact that the “internal corporate rules and norms characteristic of the military-security sector” have gradually come to characterize the Russian regime as a whole.¹¹

Lev Gudkov believed that many people with a military-security background who were once subordinate to the political leadership became holders of power themselves. While Gudkov’s conclusion was based on a 2006 study of the elite, it remains relevant in 2016. By ridding themselves of Communist Party control and subordinating the legislative branch to the executive, these military-security figures have benefited from unlimited opportunities to cater to their personal, clan, and group interests.¹² More importantly, the executive branch is not accountable to the other branches of government or to other groups and estates in Russian society, such as the media and civil society. This reality continues to hinder the country’s future strategic development. As it is set up today, the ruling class is only able to reproduce itself and to preserve the status quo.¹³

Olga Kryshstanovskaya also noted that the center of strategic decisionmaking has shifted from the “economic bloc” of former Russian president Boris Yeltsin’s era to the “military-security bloc.”¹⁴ She and other researchers readily conclude that the economic elites hold a subordinate place in the hierarchy of Russian elites and are limited largely to serving the interests of the state bureaucracy. Representatives of the liberal economic bloc over time have lost the positions of power that they held in the 1990s and have been suborned gradually by the military-security establishment.

While studying Russian elites, researchers very rarely examine civil society and protest leaders. This is likely because there is practically no overlap between civil society and the political system, and new members of the elite are not recruited from the ranks of civil society. As such, civil society and protest leaders find themselves on the system’s periphery or outside the system altogether. For better or worse, this reality underlines the applicability of the notorious term “nonsystemic opposition.” At the same time, it is precisely these kinds of civil society organizations—for example, former finance minister Alexei Kudrin’s Civil Initiatives Committee, philanthropist Mikhail Khodorkovsky’s Open Russia, activist Alexey Navalny’s Anti-Corruption Foundation, and the December 12 Roundtable—that are now trying to formulate alternative scenarios for Russia’s future social development.

Finally, some researchers have noted that the opinions and sentiments of Russian elites for the most part are in line with those of the general population. For example, in his analysis of a 2007 elite survey, sociologist Mikhail Tarusin wrote that members of the elite “display the same trends as society at large.”¹⁵ Sociologists from the Levada Center came to similar conclusions on the basis of a 2006 study.¹⁶ They believed this phenomenon was a result of weak differentiation among the Russian elite. More specifically, they saw this as the result

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of so-called negative selection in which people are promoted to positions of power based on their loyalty to higher authorities rather than their competence or professional accomplishments. The result is a largely mediocre group of elites, people with so-called average ideas, who have the same fears that average people have.

There is little reliable information on opinions among the elite as of 2016 because the sphere has become extremely closed. The last openly conducted quantitative surveys of Russian elites date back to the beginning of Dmitry Medvedev's presidency.¹⁷ Therefore, only indirect assessments of elite opinion are possible by analyzing public statements or research interviews with government officials and experts, as well as by extrapolating from the results of earlier surveys and applying them to the current situation.

Empty Talk of Liberalization

The 2008 Nikkolo M survey is one of the last available surveys of the Russian elite. Based on its results, Mikhail Afanasyev identified several points on which elites expressed consensus: the need for state investment in human capital, for political competition, for the separation of powers, for the liberalization of the party system, for the selection of regional leaders via elections rather than direct appointment, and for the development of local self-government. Thus, Afanasyev concluded that almost half of Russia's elites held liberal views. Representatives of the security sector were the only ones who advocated more conservative policy shifts.¹⁸ However, the majority of respondents believed that strengthening the power vertical had failed to yield more effective governance and that the security sector was unable to offer a guiding idea that could consolidate Russian society.¹⁹

How can these polling data be reconciled with the current situation, in which almost none of the above tenets has been implemented? Perhaps elites are simply ready to support the dominant ideology of the time, whatever it may be. After all, at the time this particular study was conducted in early 2008, Medvedev famously proclaimed that "freedom is better than unfreedom."²⁰ A poll conducted the Russian Public Opinion Research Center a year later revealed the elite's general support for "sovereign democracy," as it was termed in the survey.²¹ To be fair, though, a significant number of the respondents by their own admission had only a very vague understanding of this concept.²² To borrow a line from a Soviet joke, they seemed to be ready to "waver along with the party line." Thus, it appears that elites treat the separation of powers, liberalization, and political competition as slogans devoid of any substance.

A small fraction of elites did in fact support the gradual liberalization of the Russian regime during the Medvedev era. They rallied around ideas propagated by the Institute of Contemporary Development, which was close to Dmitry Medvedev and led by Igor Yurgens. The institute's development program, *Strategy 2020*,²³ was widely discussed and warmly received by key elements of the elite.

But there were plenty of figures who merely paid lip service to Medvedev's tenets of liberalization. It is conceivable that the views Mikhail Afanasyev portrayed as the liberal opinions of elites were simply their expression of a general preference for a relaxed and carefree existence that would allow them to escape from the pressures of the power vertical.

If such hopes indeed existed in the late 2000s, they were eventually dashed. In 2016, both public officials and human rights activists who work with government employees regularly reported in interviews that government officials, judges, and other public sector employees were intimidated by prosecutors, special committees, the security services, and their superiors.²⁴ "They really are afraid," respondents said. Campaigns to expose the corrupt practices of local mayors and governors in various regions of the country can be interpreted as an effort to keep elites outside Moscow under constant pressure. Such tactics do little to increase these officials' love for the federal center, but they appear to demonstrate how effective the relatively small military-security establishment is in forcing its agenda on Russian elites. It is striking that throughout the Putin era, elites have failed to form groups or lobbying bodies that are as organized and influential as the siloviki.

The Nonexistent Split Within the Elite

Putin's return to the Kremlin in 2012 and the increased assertiveness of the siloviki are often attributed to reverberations from the Arab Spring and the fall of authoritarian regimes in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia. The real or imaginary role that Western countries played in these events and the behavior of the local elites, some of whom sided with the protesters, must have alarmed Russia's rulers. Nor was it lost on the Kremlin that in many cases Middle Eastern government officials and top brass switched their allegiance at just the right moment and captured key government positions.

Similar processes unfolded during the color revolutions of the mid-2000s and Ukraine's Euromaidan revolution in early 2014. These waves of popular protest in other countries prompted the Russian leadership to increase its pressure on the public. First, the color revolutions drove the Russian government to unleash an assault on international foundations and nongovernmental organizations and to establish pro-Kremlin youth organizations. Subsequently, the events of the Arab Spring and the 2011–2012 street protests in Russia influenced Putin's decision to return to the presidency and the adoption of reactionary policies aimed at pacifying and intimidating society. The collapse of Viktor Yanukovich's regime in Ukraine provided the impetus for a new round of government pressure on society, which included a massive television propaganda campaign, the closure of independent media outlets, an ongoing campaign against so-called foreign agents, and the creation of aggressive pro-Kremlin, anti-Euromaidan political movements.

Before the 2014 annexation of Crimea, Russia's economic doldrums had led to a gradual increase in public discontent with the regime. This sentiment intensified following Putin's decision to return to the Kremlin in 2012. Between 2008 and 2011, Putin lost almost one-third of his support. A series of political scandals and the unexpected swapping of posts (*rokirovka*) between Putin and Medvedev fed the protest vote in the December 2011 parliamentary election, a sentiment that soon morphed into mass street protests. The ruling United Russia party saw its popular support dwindle and lost roughly one-quarter of its seats in the State Duma, the lower house of parliament. The election results provoked vigorous debate in the Just Russia party, and various members joined the protest movement. Oligarchs, government officials, prominent writers, and journalists all participated in the first few protests, leading to speculation about a possible split in the elite.

The protest movement was quickly crushed by the authorities, sending a none-too-subtle message to the general population and elites that there could be no alternative to Putin's rule. Discipline in the Just Russia party was restored, and the unruly members Gennady Gudkov and Ilya Ponomarev lost their seats in the State Duma. Prominent bloggers and political activists were forced to leave the country to avoid criminal prosecution. They were soon followed by hundreds of members of what was dubbed the creative elite who had lost hope for democratic change in the country.

Elites who may have sympathized with the protest movement or sought to exploit it to earn political capital had learned their lesson. However, it was not until the annexation of Crimea that popular and elite support for the regime was fully restored.

The annexation was a speedy, bloodless affair. It qualified as one of those small, victorious wars that have so often eluded Russia in the past. The Crimea operation also boosted the morale and prestige of the army and security services. As an added benefit, it helped solidify these groups' loyalty to the regime. The majority of Russia's population and elites saw the annexation as a signal that the country's great power status had been restored.

The ruling class and the general population seemed to link arms in the months that followed the annexation. The self-satisfaction and self-importance of elites who gathered at the Grand Kremlin Palace on March 18, 2014, for the formal ceremony to commemorate the annexation was readily apparent.²⁵ Ordinary people who discussed the event in focus groups conducted by the Levada Center expressed similar feelings.²⁶

Of course, not all elites were happy with the annexation—especially those who could anticipate the reaction of the international community. For instance, one Russian official complained in a private conversation on the sidelines of an international conference in which the author was taking part that the Crimean referendum had been rushed and sloppy. However, neither the authorities nor

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elite members of their inner circle made a single public comment criticizing the annexation. Russia's enormous bureaucracy has so far functioned as a unified machine when it comes to Crimea—from the special military operation through to the provision of additional funds for the peninsula to rebuild its infrastructure.

The authorities' previous moves to crack down on dissenting voices in the government probably played some role in fostering consolidation (for example, Alexey Kudrin's dismissal from the post of finance minister and Sergey Belyakov's removal from his position as deputy minister of economic development after they disagreed publicly with some government decisions). Nevertheless, the fact that the steps to integrate Crimea into the Russian Federation have been relatively effective points to a high degree of unity among elites on this issue. Apparently, the violation of international norms has only reinforced the belief in Russia's resurgent power among elites, as well as the general population.

Anti-Western Sentiments Among Elites

Anti-Western sentiments are endemic in the military-security establishment and among the country's top leaders (although one can speculate that many of their children living in Western countries probably do not share these feelings). These opinions also permeate the lower levels of the elite. In one Levada Center interview, a Russian official said that his co-workers had been using the term "rival" (*konkurent*) for many years when discussing their European partners.²⁷ "The feeling is that any progress for them in any area is a bad thing [for us], and that whatever the Europeans are doing, they must be plotting against Russia." Common attitudes toward the West were summed up by the following quotes: "They are constantly lecturing us on something"; "They don't want to treat us as equals"; and "They don't respect our legitimate interests."²⁸

After the annexation of Crimea, these sentiments burst into the open. In the words of the late Boris Dubin, who was the first to observe this phenomenon, "Everyone was greatly relieved to part with their notions about the West; that includes Putin, the groups that back him, and the Russian elite. . . . But this sentiment is even more prevalent among the masses."²⁹ Finally, everyone could stop pretending and just be themselves. Public statements that would have previously been considered improper became permissible and were even encouraged. Members of the Russian elite had felt particularly uneasy about living in a world where they had to take their partners' opinions into account, let alone acknowledge their own inferiority or backwardness in many areas. Representatives of the elite were more uncomfortable about this position than the general population. Because of Crimea, these tensions were lifted in the most primitive of ways.

A series of interviews on current challenges in Russian-European relations conducted in 2015 by the Levada Center with Russian government officials, journalists, and experts revealed that the main source of tensions has nothing to do

with opposing attitudes toward gay rights or other social issues.³⁰ Instead, conflict arises when official representatives of Western countries go over the heads of government officials and talk about values directly with the Russian people. The regime is less disturbed by differences of opinion than it is by the sense that outsiders are encroaching on what it considers its exclusive purview. This same aversion is apparent in Russia's approach to international relations. The Kremlin will not tolerate foreign influence in territories that it sees as its zone of vital interests, such as the former Soviet republics.

Anti-U.S. sentiments displayed by Russian elites are not merely the product of populist pandering. These opinions are deeply entrenched in the upper echelon of the Russian ruling class, which suffers from the same phobias, myths, and complexes as the general population. Many of these complexes stem from the traumatic collapse of the Soviet Union. They reflect the pain of a phantom limb caused by Moscow's loss of great power status. Expressions of anti-Americanism and support for the annexation of Crimea also serve as a ritual through which many members of the elite affirm their loyalty to the regime. These people demonstrate that in the game of Us vs. Them, they are firmly on the right side of Us.

The ongoing confrontation with the West, the regime of mutual economic sanctions between Russia and the West, and Russian support for the Donbas separatist republics in Ukraine have increased the power of the siloviki, allowing them to justify the use of force. External confrontation has spurred a hunt for enemies within the country, be they dubbed foreign agents, national traitors, or members of the fifth column.

The Crisis of the Nonsystemic Opposition

The annexation of Crimea had a distinct impact on the nonsystemic opposition. In large cities, particularly in Moscow and St. Petersburg, the creative elite formed the nucleus of the protest movement that peaked in 2011–2012. At the movement's high point, this core included several thousand people. Yet the protests never managed to articulate an alternative political agenda that might appeal to broad segments of the population. The regime then launched a series of propaganda campaigns that largely succeeded in discrediting the protests, isolating their leaders, and driving a wedge between them and Russian society as a whole.

The role of civil society and opposition leaders in these protests was limited to ensuring that marches remained peaceful. The protest vote in the December 2011 State Duma elections and the street demonstrations that followed were a reflection of general dissatisfaction with the authorities. Support for the regime had plummeted by the end of 2011, with at least one-third of the population voicing disapproval for its policies and behavior.³¹ The opposition and a significant part of the population simply happened to share the same views for a brief period of time, after which they parted ways once again.

The annexation of Crimea drastically increased popular support for the regime. The extent of that change should be a source of major concern for the leaders of the protest movement. Public opinion research shows that the regime's approval ratings are a better indicator of the likelihood of protests than direct questions about whether people are ready to take to the streets. So long as those approval ratings remain high, it is probable that only isolated protests will take place. No matter what tactics opposition leaders might opt to pursue, mass protests are unlikely to occur unless discontent with the regime crosses a certain threshold.³²

The Crimean operation and the war in Ukraine were also an effective tool for splitting the nucleus of the protest movement from within. Writer Eduard Limonov's National Bolshevik Party and nationalists of various stripes were among the groups that left the movement. The liberal camp and the creative elite also became polarized. In a sense, they have been divided into *vatniks* (a reference to the cotton-padded jackets worn by members of the Soviet-era working class—and a derogatory term for supporters of the Donbas separatists) and fifth columnists. For a time, this split stood in the way of any feeling of solidarity between protest leaders and the majority of the population. This level of animosity is only slowly beginning to subside.

Although it is the author's impression that the overwhelming majority of the population does not care about the regime's approval ratings and is not interested in politics, these ratings have a pronounced, almost hypnotic effect on the elite from across the political spectrum. Many members of the Russian elite are certainly among the 7–8 percent of the population that is the “most informed” about current affairs, relying on multiple sources of information, including online publications.³³ Any significant fluctuation in the regime's approval ratings is bound to have a pronounced effect mainly on this stratum of society.

The Levada Center has received a barrage of criticism from Russian liberals for regularly publishing polling results showing high levels of support for the Putin regime. These data, the critics have said, help sustain the regime and demoralize decent members of the public. If the regime's high post-Crimea ratings indeed demoralize one segment of the Russian elite, the converse is also happening—that is, the polls help consolidate the other segment of the elite. As long as the vast majority of the population supports the president, elites are unlikely to rebel. A precipitous drop in the regime's ratings will embolden elites, but as of 2016, protest leaders and activists simply do not pose a serious threat to the political system.

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Economic Problems and Elite Opinion

The effects of the economic crisis and Western sanctions could influence the attitudes of the elites. And in the long term, they probably will. But it is not the case for now. Some representatives of the elites are already showing some anxiety, but others are benefiting from the new situation.

For some senior regime figures with business interests that they do not want to sacrifice, the threat of sanctions is a tangible issue. The summer 2014 publication in *Novaya Gazeta* of an alleged transcript of a meeting of the Russian Football Union, whose members are among the wealthiest people in the country, pointed to some of these fears.³⁴

However, precious few individuals are willing to risk challenging the party line. Moreover, the sanctions regime has actually created a number of opportunities for profiteering or accessing state budgetary support for certain well-positioned members of the elite. Thus, Agrokompleks, which is affiliated with Agriculture Minister Alexander Tkachev, became the top domestic milk producer in 2014. The company benefited directly from the food embargo that the Kremlin imposed on European producers.³⁵ A firm controlled by businessman Arkady Rotenberg was commissioned to build a bridge that will connect Russia's Krasnodar region to Crimea.³⁶ The firm owned by Igor Rotenberg (Arkady's brother) became the operator of the newly introduced Platon electronic toll collection system for heavy trucks that will be paid for with reportedly more than 10 billion rubles (more than \$140 million) from the Russian budget.³⁷ And these cases are only the most obvious examples.

Public statements by key government ministers—for instance, their speeches and interviews at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum—also shed some light on elite opinion. Research interviews with representatives of Russian officialdom provide additional insight.³⁸ They suggest that government technocrats and members of the economic elite (the leaders of state-backed funds, state banks, and so on) are generally reasonably familiar with the current economic situation, including the negative consequences of sanctions. Had they not been constrained by their leadership, these parts of the elite could have perhaps come up with a strategy to deal with or prevent the current crisis. At the same time, the deepening economic crisis has encouraged a tougher and more open debate among the elite about the country's economic performance and possible economic reforms.³⁹

But as a rule, high-level policy is aimed at maintaining social stability, fulfilling leaders' geopolitical ambitions, and helping them stay in power for as long as possible. This gives the impression that economic decisions are delayed until the very last possible minute. Aside from pointing to the ineffectiveness of the political system, this suggests that the regime is willing to compromise on various principles for the sake of self-preservation. Thus, the fact that the regime is forced to accept certain economic recommendations should not be

read as a sign of openness to democratic reforms. All in all, the system shows no signs of openness to making fundamental changes to the status quo.

The outlook of today's technocrats is similar to views held by the so-called bourgeois specialists during the early days of the Bolshevik regime. They realize that they cannot change the government's course and are ready to do their job as directed in order to minimize risk to themselves. In other words, they feel like paid servants of the state—and, as it happens, they receive competitive salaries that help them overcome numerous moral dilemmas.⁴⁰ While the feelings expressed by technocrats are important in their own right, there is no reason to assume that they are making key political decisions.

Countrywide polls carried out on a regular basis by the Levada Center can offer a rough idea of the opinions held by the ruling elite—with the exception of those people at the very highest levels. The group that can be identified as the decisionmakers (*rukovoditeli*) includes managers, directors, and officials. They make up one of the most successful, affluent, and information-savvy segments of society. They read newspapers and online news sources twice as often as the general population, and they watch independent television channels—even though media that promote the official agenda are still their primary source of information.

This group supports the regime and its key decisions as much as the general population. And like the average respondent, it also holds Putin accountable for both successes and failures. As for this group's behavior during elections, it is more likely to vote for the ruling United Russia than any other party. Members of the *rukovoditeli* segment of the elite are slightly more favorably inclined toward such opposition figures as Alexey Navalny, Mikhail Kasyanov, and Mikhail Khodorkovsky than the general public, but on the whole, *rukovoditeli* are even more hostile to the opposition than the rest of the population. As in other well-informed groups, opinions among the *rukovoditeli* are quite polarized.

Members of the *rukovoditeli* are primarily concerned with economic issues, such as inflation, unemployment, and the devaluation of the ruble—they mention this panoply of issues twice as often as other respondents. On the whole, these people are better informed than the general population and are thus able to assess problems more accurately. They are rather skeptical about the state of Russia's economy, politics, and international achievements. But despite their understanding of the present situation, they are not particularly concerned about it.

While this group has no illusions about the current state of affairs and does not believe that the situation will improve, its members also feel that they will be able to adjust to declining living standards better than others, thanks to their social status, connections, and savings. They still appear to believe firmly that Russia is heading in the right direction and that the country's leadership has the situation under control and will be able to weather the storm.

It should also be noted that the regime uses various monetary incentives to buy the loyalty of a significant part of the elite. It does this through salary increases,

state contracts, various subsidies, and other forms of financial assistance—both at the very top of the pyramid and at the very bottom.

What Comes Next?

As the federal budget grows leaner, the regime risks losing the support of entire segments of its base over the long term, among both the elite and the broader public. Inter-elite conflicts are likely to multiply if the economic slump continues.

As the crisis plays out, the government's main strategy will likely be to reduce spending in areas where it feels it can afford to do so and to pay for things that it thinks matter the most. The security services and state sector employees (*budzhethniki*) will probably be among those least affected by spending cuts, because the government cannot afford to lose the support of these groups. In one research interview, the head of a local regional government structure explained in detail that United Russia is targeting financial assistance at figures at his level who are capable of drumming up the necessary support at the ballot box.⁴¹ It also appears that if the regime is unable to stem discontent among and fragmentation of the elite, it will try to make sure that any dissatisfied elements are those who pose the least danger to its survival.

Additionally, there is a great deal of speculation whether the sanctions and economic decline could conceivably lead to some form of regime change—or, to be more precise, whether members of the elite could possibly conspire against the regime or even stage a coup d'état. This issue has been actively debated for the last few years, and President Putin even found it necessary to address the prospect at one of his press conferences.⁴²

The military-security establishment appears to be the most organized force in the Russian political system. Theoretically speaking, members of this group are the ones most capable of carrying out a coup. Yet recent developments—for example, the confrontation with the West, the endless information warfare, and the lukewarm conflict in eastern Ukraine—have provided the siloviki with additional power and clout. That means they are effectively in the driver's seat already, and presumably have little interest in making radical changes. As long as Putin's popularity ratings remain high, significant cross-sections of the Russian elite will likely continue to see him as a suitable arbiter who can balance various interest groups.

It is possible that the siloviki will choose to increase a host of repressive measures aimed at independent media, civil society, and independent political organizations. Yet further attempts by the state to impose such repressive policies could encounter resistance from the majority of elites, who prefer quiet and comfort over confrontation. Few if any of them will voice their discontent openly, even if some end up quietly sabotaging the government's decisions.

As far as the liberal sections of the elite are concerned, the events from 2008 to 2011 demonstrated they are no match for the resurgent military-security establishment. While most liberal elites are agitated about the state of the economy and connect their personal well-being and financial interests with the outside world, they are wary of jeopardizing their positions in the system through public shows of discontent. Moreover, this group merely constitutes a minority today. Its members neither make key decisions nor have the ability to act in unison. They are well aware that dissidents will likely be purged from the government. Their memories are all too fresh when it comes to the political defeat that was dealt to those who supported the 2011–2012 protests.

Only a protracted economic crisis might conceivably change the political situation in Russia if it managed to undermine elites' faith in the government's ability to deal with outside factors such as sanctions. Deteriorating living standards and a lack of confidence in the future will inevitably reduce popular support for the regime and increase the likelihood of protests. Under these circumstances, elites will likely feel freer to express their views, but it is unlikely that they will lead to pressures favoring regime change from within the system in the near future. What is more probable, especially under the circumstances of a protracted economic crisis and diminishing resources, is that elites will become less and less governable, triggering the decay of Russia's administrative apparatus. But even then, the military-security establishment will remain decisive. The future of Putin's regime will primarily hinge on the establishment's loyalty.

Notes

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- 3 Lev Gudkov, Boris Dubin, and Yuri Levada, *Problema “elity” v segodnyashney Rossii* [The problem of the elite in today’s Russia] (Moscow: Liberal Mission Foundation, 2007).
- 4 Nikolay Petrov, “The Nomenklatura and the Elite” in *Russia in 2020: Scenarios for the Future*, eds. Maria Lipman and Nikolay Petrov (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2011).
- 5 Dmitri Dekhant, Olga Molyarenko, and Simon Kordonsky, “Soslovnye komponenty sotsial’noy struktury Rossii” [The estate components of Russia’s social structure], *Otechestvennye zapiski* 1 (2012).
- 6 Olga Kryshтанovskaya, *Anatomiya rossiyskoy elity* [The anatomy of the Russian elite] (Moscow: Zakharov, 2005), 18.
- 7 Mikhail Afanasyev, *Rossiyskiye elity razvitiya: zapros na noviy kurs* [The Russian elites of development: demand for a new direction] (Moscow: Liberal Mission Foundation, 2009), 21–22.
- 8 Olga Kryshтанovskaya, “Sovremennye kontseptsii politicheskoy elity i rossiyskaya praktika” [Modern concepts of the political elite and Russian practice], *The World of Russia* 13, no. 4 (2004), 29.
- 9 Petrov, “The Nomenklatura and the Elite.”
- 10 See Minchenko Consulting, “*Politbyuro 2.0*” i postkrymskaya Rossiya [“Politburo 2.0” and post-Crimean Russia] (Moscow: Minchenko Consulting, October 2014), http://www.minchenko.ru/analitika/analitika_42.html.
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- 12 Lev Gudkov, “Priroda putinizma” [The nature of Putinism], Memorial Human Rights Center, December 8, 2009, <http://www.memo.ru/2009/12/12/gudkov.htm>.
- 13 Gudkov, Dubin, and Levada, *Problema “elity” v segodnyashney Rossii*.
- 14 For more details on the role of former military-security personnel in Russia’s elite, see Olga Kryshтанovskaya, *Anatomiya rossiyskoy elity*.

- 15 Mikhail Tarusin et al., *Summa ideologii: mirovozzreniye i ideologiya sovremennoy rossiyskoy elity* [The sum of ideologies: the worldview and ideology of the contemporary Russian elite] (Moscow: Institute of Public Projects, 2008), 5.
- 16 Gudkov, Dubin, and Levada, *Problema "elity" v segodnyashney Rossii*.
- 17 This work cites the results of three surveys of the Russian elite. For the results of the 2006 Levada Center survey (568 respondents), see Gudkov, Dubin, and Levada, *Problema "elity" v segodnyashney Rossii*. For the results of the 2007 Russian Public Opinion Research Center and *Expert* journal survey (325 respondents), see Tarusin et al., *Summa ideologii*. For the results of the 2008 Nikkolo M survey (1,003 respondents), see Afanasyev, *Rossiyskiye elity razvitiya*. Most of the research on the Russian elite (for instance, most of Olga Kryshatanovskaya's work) is based on expert polls.
- 18 Mikhail Afanasyev et al., "Rossiyskaya elita: zapros na noviy kurs" [The Russian elite: demand for a new direction], transcript, Liberal Mission Foundation, October 28, 2008, <http://www.liberal.ru/articles/1454>.
- 19 Afanasyev, *Rossiyskiye elity razvitiya*, 96–98.
- 20 Dmitry Medvedev, "Svoboda luchshe, chem nesvoboda" [Freedom is better than unfreedom], *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, February 21, 2008, <http://www.rg.ru/2008/02/21/svoboda.html>.
- 21 Tarusin et al., *Summa ideologii*.
- 22 Tarusin et al., *Summa ideologii*, 46–51.
- 23 For more details on Strategy 2020, see <http://2020strategy.ru>.
- 24 Interviews conducted by the Levada Center, unpublished, 2016.
- 25 See the video from the accession ceremony on the *Komsomolskaya Pravda* website, <http://www.kp.ru/daily/26207/3092784>.
- 26 Focus group sessions conducted by the Levada Center, 2014–2015. Some results were published in: Denis Volkov, "Supporting a War That Isn't: Russian Public Opinion and the Ukraine Conflict," *Carnegie.ru*, September 9, 2015, <http://carnegie.ru/2015/09/09/supporting-war-that-isn-t-russian-public-opinion-and-ukraine-conflict/ijt1>.
- 27 Author's interview conducted for the Levada Center, unpublished, 2015.
- 28 Focus group sessions conducted by the Levada Center, 2014–2015.
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- 33 Denis Volkov and Stepan Goncharov, *Rossiyskiy media-landshaft: televidenie, pressa, internet* [Russian media landscape: television, press, Internet] (Moscow: Levada Center, June 2014), <http://www.levada.ru/2014/07/08/rossijskiy-media-landshaft-televidenie-pressa-internet-3/>.

- 34 Andrey Sukhotin, “Prezidenta ostavlyayem na Brustvere . . .’: Kak prisoyedinyali k Rossii futbol poluostrova Krym [“We will leave the president at the parapet . . .’: how Crimean football was annexed to Russia], *Novaya Gazeta*, August 11, 2014, <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/politics/64784.html>.
- 35 For instance, see Marina Kruglikova, “Svyazannaya s sem’oy Tkachyova kompaniya stala liderom na rynke moloka” [Company tied to the Tkachev family becomes leader of the dairy market], RBC, September 14, 2015, <http://top.rbc.ru/business/14/09/2015/55f6cd2f9a7947abbd95bfca>.
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- 41 Interview conducted by the Levada Center, unpublished, 2010.
- 42 President of Russia, “Bol’shaia press-konferentsiia Vladimira Putina” [Vladimir Putin’s big press conference], December 18, 2014, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47250>.

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