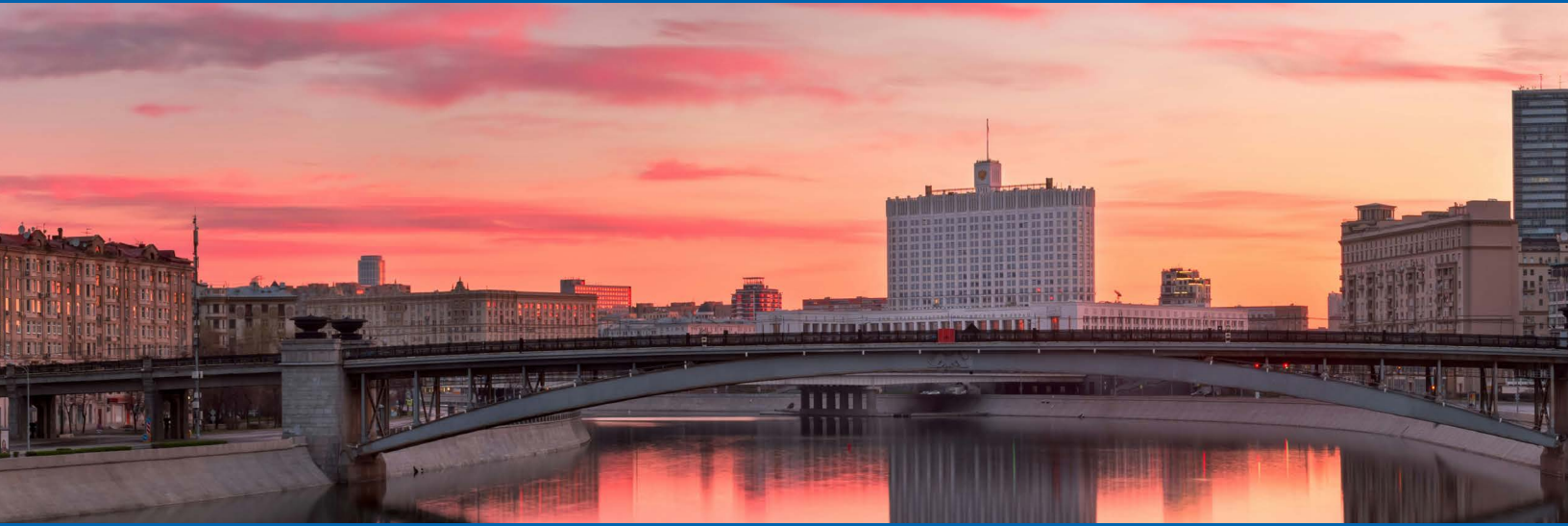


Transition Project



Power Coalitions

Approaches and Likely Composition of
Participants in Russia's Post-Putin Transition



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This chapter considers the likely (and desirable) actors of political change in Russia after Putin and their possible alliances for greater democratization of the country's life. The task at hand is extremely difficult, but we will try to offer a vision of the possible contours of the future based on our own observations of the dynamics of the situation in Russian society and the current elites.

The personalistic regime in Russia that has developed over the last 20+ years can be described as classic plebiscitary dictatorship, where the election procedure is reduced to a mere acclamation (a show of unconditional support) of the ruling leader and his party by universal suffrage. Such a mode of government is also referred to in the literature as Bonapartism—after Emperor Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte III, whose “people's monarchy” in France from 1852—1871 is considered the first example of such a plebiscitary regime¹. Napoleon III's empire ended with a failed foreign policy adventure and an ignominious defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, after which France was declared a republic for the third time in its history.

At first, few believed in the success of this endeavor. The first president of the new French Republic before the adoption of a new constitution was Adolphe Thiers, a historian and politician with the views of a very moderate and secretive liberal. Thiers's career began with corruption scandals related to his participation in the government of the time of Louis-Philippe, continued in the role of a pocket opposition to his majesty Napoleon III and closer to the end marked the brutal suppression of the uprising of the Communards in Paris in 1871. Contemporaries vilified him for coming into government as a penniless church mouse and leaving as a millionaire. Karl Marx called him a “bloody dwarf,” noting, among other things, his extreme arrogance and hubris. Other authors have said that for most of his life Thiers skillfully disguised his liberal views with statesmanlike rhetoric.

Nevertheless, it was that utterly unpleasant man who ensured the transition to the Third Republic, which lasted for 70 years, until the capture of Paris by Hitler's forces in 1940. To this day, the Third Republic remains the longest period of relatively stable, free and competitive political rule in France.

1 Yudin, G. Russia as a plebiscitary democracy // Sociological Review, 2021. T. 20. № 2. PP. 29—34.

According to the logic of history, a defeat in the war against Ukraine should break the back of Putin's regime, just as the failure of previous military adventures drew a line under the existence of similar plebiscitary regimes in Europe. In this tragedy, however, nothing is predetermined, according to British sociologist Theodore Chanin's famous statement, "Other things are always a given."² As the military conflict drags on against the backdrop of relative stability of the Russian economy, Russia's political stagnation and archaization may continue for quite some time. In this regard, one can only [agree](#) with Professor Vladimir Gelman of the University of Helsinki: when evaluating the chances of success of the post-Putin transition, "the time factor is much more important than the depth of the fall". After a decade, there may come a moment of "irretrievable decline," when it will be extremely difficult to find social forces and leaders capable of leading a successful democratic transition.

Whether Russia has a future as a democratic country and as part of the modern world is being determined right now. In formulating an answer to the question about the possible composition of the participants in the post-Putin political transition, it is necessary to agree with the thesis about the "subtraction" of Putin himself as the first necessary condition for the start of any of the scenarios of changes in the country and its relations with the outside world. The war in Ukraine serves as the main source of Putin's power, and this power itself has become virtually the only guarantee for preserving his personal freedom and even his life. Therefore, military action will continue for as long as Putin remains in power. At the same time, his power has long ago acquired a lifelong character.

Thus, the political order in today's Russia rests on the following triad:

- Putin's war that secures his power;
- Putin's power to guarantee his life;
- Putin's life that feeds on his power and war.

The armed forces of Ukraine, with the active support of a Western alliance led by the United States, are trying to break this triad by organizing a counteroffensive on the front. However, events on the battlefield during 2023 have shown significant limitations in countering Putin's aggression and put the prospects of a quick and convincing victory over the Russian army in

² According to the oral recollections of contemporaries, this was T. Shanin's response to his colleague T. Zaslavskaya and other authors of the 1988 collection of journalistic articles in support of Gorbachev's perestroika "No Other Way".

serious question. So far, it looks like as long as Putin is alive, he will be able to maintain his power and continue the war. Is it possible to solve this problem if we approach it from the other end of the indicated triad? The answer to this question lies with the dictator's inner circle and those who have access to his bedroom. The thoughts, feelings and intentions of these people are outside our observable field. They are unlikely to be guided by the same motives that could be followed by the representatives of the Russian opposition in exile.

It is impossible to predict the exact set of agents of change, even if the transition starts tomorrow. It is all the more impossible to speak about it over a distance of five or more years. Nevertheless, we will try to do the impossible and look into the future we wish for ourselves and our country.

The further the horizon of possible changes moves away from the present day, the lower the probability of accurately predicting specific situations and outcomes. Speaking about the future, we proceed from the current analysis of the situation on the basis of relevant data on political moods and expectations in Russia accumulated over the past few years. These data are presented in opinion polling, in-depth interviews and analytical materials based on them, published in the last few years. Of course, emphasis will be placed on studies and publications that have appeared since the active phase of the war began in February 2022³.

The key trigger for change may be a change in the position of a part of the ruling class in the context of an aggravated struggle for survival and dwindling resources. Hence the natural priority interest in the current disposition within the elites and its possible changes in the foreseeable future.

But true democratization of Russia is impossible without the participation of its people. Its inclusion in the process of political change is necessary not only because, according to the Constitution, it is the multinational Russian people who are the source of power in the country. Democratization is nowhere possible without taking into account the interests and aspirations of broad social strata. As Grigory Golosov, dean of the political science faculty at the European University in St. Petersburg, rightly [noted](#) in connection with the possible first elections after Putin, "if the preferences of the people are not taken into account, they will develop a feeling of deep disappointment" from the results of the elections and the procedures of democracy as such.

The Russian liberal opposition has long been influenced by the myth of

3 Since the preparation of academic publications takes longer than the time that has passed since the beginning of the active phase of the war, the focus of the analysis of relevant research positions is aimed at actual analytical commentaries and expert interviews of leading academics to quality media.

the terrible Russian people, who are by nature conservative, monarchists and pogromists. Out of this demophobia in the late 1990s, the authoritarian regime of today was born. The future democratic transition must learn from this mistake, turning elections from a “political technology” into a moment of common cause for all active citizens. However, the key to this task is today rather in the hands of the elites. Therefore, we will begin our construction of probable power coalitions by analyzing the possibilities of regrouping in the coalition of elites. Next, we will focus on political preferences in Russian society and the possible outcome of the first elections after Putin’s departure. Finally, the third part of the chapter will be devoted to the opposition’s recommendations for interacting with potential agents of change within today’s Russia.

10.1 Regrouping in the ruling coalition of elites

In order to answer the question about the possible contours of the future agreement of the elites, it is necessary to deal with the current features and contradictions within their ruling coalition. Going from a general assessment through the analysis of relevant approaches to describing the structure and composition of the ruling class in Russia, we will try to answer the main question about the possibilities of dialog with the existing groups of elites.

10.1.1 General assessment of the Russian elite, ethics and pragmatics

The moral and ethical approach dominates in the expert assessments of the Russian elite in the literature. This is typical not only for authors from the conventional camp of the liberal opposition, but also for numerous critics of the existing order on the part of opponents of liberalism. On the one hand, and on the pages of this monograph, most representatives of the elite are called “pure opportunists”⁴. On the other hand, representatives of the left-patriotic flank in relatively recent academic publications in Russia make a disappointing diagnosis of the Russian elite. Among its inherent traits are a high degree of corruption, unprincipledness bordering on “villeinage” and “pharisaism” expressed in adherence to double ethical standards⁵. This moral diagnosis, expressed with varying degrees of sharpness, can be considered a generally accepted point of view among experts, opposition politicians, and even representatives of the Russian elite themselves. Hardly anyone today would dare to speak of the ruling

4 For more details, see. Chapter 1.

5 Kochetkov, A., Moiseev, V. Russian political elite as a subject of socio-economic policy // Bulletin of Tomsk State University. Philosophy. Sociology. Political science, 2020. N° 57. PP. 246—248.

class in today's Russia as a collection of the best representatives of society.

Kirill Rogov, director of the Re: Russia project, [notes](#) that Russian elites do not demonstrate “the will to contain Putin”. Therefore, the very need to dialog with them or rely on them in search of opportunities for a post-Putin transit is highly questionable. The Russian elite is ineffectual in political terms and is of no significant interest as a spawning ground for likely agents of change. This point of view is quite popular among Russian political emigrants. It is true that at the same time [there may be assumptions](#) that in conditions of military and economic collapse “the Russian elite can remove Putin from power and start negotiations with the West”.

At the same time, researchers note that the Russian elite is depoliticized no less than society as a whole. Apoliticality has been [the main precondition](#) for “access” to Putin’s elite for decades . Politicization of technocratic elites in today’s Russia seems to be no less of a task than politicization of the people⁶. So far, instead of political views based on a conscious value base, representatives of the Russian elite demonstrate the aforementioned “villeinage”. In the opinion of even those researchers who are quite loyal to the regime, it is expressed in unconditional loyalty to the president and priority adherence to clan and their own vested interests⁷. Thus, the way of thinking and actions of the Russian elite are influenced by three main factors:

- Motivation is dominated by pursuing one’s own or narrow group mercantile interests in complete isolation from an understanding of the public good and related political values;
- Advancement up the career ladder and obtaining new status opportunities for personal enrichment is solely at the expense of the will of the superiors and, first and foremost, of the supreme suzerain—President Putin;
- There is an almost total absence of public control with regard to state power—the current Russian elite is very close to the people culturally and immensely detached from them in terms of the need for common rules and political accountability.

The first consequence of such characteristics of the elite was the extreme degree of inequality in Russia in the 2010s. Back in 2016, Harvard Visiting Professor Thomas Remington stated that material inequality in Russia was

6 The need to repoliticize society as a whole will be discussed further in the relevant section of the chapter.

7 Kochetkov, A., Moiseev, V. Op. cit. P. 247.

the highest in the world⁸. The growth of this inequality is explained by the fact that disproportionately high incomes went to those at the top of the income distribution who were members of the managerial elite. Such trends are due to the resource-based nature of the Russian economy and the corresponding institutional structure of the country.

Recent pre-war studies of the Russian elite show that by the end of the 2010s, the richest 10% of Russian citizens held 83% of all personal wealth in the country⁹ (for comparison, in the USA this figure at the same time amounted to 76%). At the same time, according to pre-war statistics, the number of poor people in the country exceeded 19 million people, and 80% of Russian families had difficulties in purchasing the necessary minimum of goods within the amount of regularly received income¹⁰. In the long term, this level of economic inequality, according to Professor Remington, could play a destabilizing role¹¹. However, so far, the elite in Russia have demonstrated marvels of resilience and survivability.

A whole set of paradoxes can be found in the characterization of the Russian elite. The statement that the ruling class is apolitical and lacks subjective influence is dissonant with the expectations of Putin's removal from power and the start of negotiations with Ukraine and the West. The low personal qualities of the collective image of the representatives of the Russian upper classes do not prevent them from holding a colossal share of the country's wealth in their hands. Finally, researchers have [noted](#) an excessive degree of distrust and atomization among the elite while at the same time [observing](#) the enormous role of personal ties and building networks of trust to achieve managerial objectives.

All these paradoxes are explained by the extreme difficulty encountered by researchers in assessing the sealed—off Russian political elite. Since the outbreak of full-scale hostilities in February 2022, this impenetrability has become almost total, with officials and management representatives of large companies refusing to talk to journalists and researchers. The ruling class in Russia resembles a hermetically sealed black box. We can judge what is going on inside this box only by the few signals that are ambiguous in their interpretation. Perhaps the moment of opening this black box will be the beginning of the end of Putin's system.

8 Remington, T. Economic Inequality in Russia: Sources and Consequences // Russian Analytical Digest, 2016. N° 187. PP. 4—9.

9 Kochetkov, A., Moiseev, V. Op. cit. P. 248.

10 Ibid. P. 249—250.

11 Remington, T. Ibid. P. 4.

Among the rare sources that allow us to judge the state of affairs within the Russian elite is a survey of Russian elites conducted from 1993 to 2020 under the direction of University of Michigan professor William Zimmerman. Between 180 and 320 people participated in several tranches of this large-scale survey. A total of 1,909 representatives of the highest echelons of legislative and executive power, security agencies, state corporations, private business, media, and scientific and educational institutions in Russia were interviewed over 27 years. The [last tranche](#) of the survey, covering 245 respondents, took place in February—March 2020. The huge array of collected data allows researchers to consider it as a relevant research base even after the outbreak of hostilities in Ukraine.

Interpretation of this survey data allows us to speak about a rather high, but far from total indoctrination of representatives of the Russian elite with militaristic and great-power ideas. Thus, in 2020, only 46% of high-ranking respondents in Russia verbally agreed with the admissibility of using the army to protect “the interests of Russian citizens in other countries” (for comparison, in 2012 this figure was 42%, and in 2016 it fell to 19%). On the eve of the coronavirus pandemic, 52% of the surveyed Russian elites spoke in favor of the possibility of using the armed forces to protect “the interests of Russians living in the former Soviet republics” (this figure reached its highest value in all years of the survey—65%—in 2012). It turns out that only half of the Russian ruling class on the eve of the war was morally ready to accept it at the level of general reasoning.

From the point of view of a possible attitude to the current war, another indicator may be interesting: in 25 years, from 1995 to 2020, the number of supporters of the idea of Ukraine joining Russia among the elite survey participants has decreased from 65% to 5%. In fact, this means that during the years of post-Soviet transition, the Russian elite has assimilated the mature idea of Ukraine as an independent and separate country from the Russian Federation. Of course, these members of the elite were surveyed prior to any inkling that a “special military operation” would begin on February 24, 2022. Like the rest of the country’s citizens, they are for the time being forced to come to terms with the new reality of war with the neighboring country and the entire Western world.

Toward the end of this section, I would like to briefly touch upon another characteristic of the Russian elite related to its age and generational dynamics. Right before the war in January 2022, the online publication Important Stories published a study of the average age of Putin’s inner circle. The most “aged”

government body in Russia turned out to be the Security Council, which met less than a month after the publication for its memorable meeting to approve the start of the war. Journalists managed to calculate that the median age of the members of the Security Council at that time was 65. At the beginning of 2022, the share of retirees in this power body turned out to be 57%. Similar, albeit slightly lower age limits were demonstrated by all bodies of the highest federal authorities. The authors of the [study](#) stated the obvious: “The closer one gets to the president, the more noticeable is aging and the low incidence of the turnover of power”. Ekaterina Shulmann, a well-known Russian public political scientist now in exile, characterized Putin’s entourage running the country as “pensioners from garages.”

Now these pensioners are dragging the country with them to the other side of the world. It is no coincidence that Prof. Gelman [insists](#) on serious structural changes in the Russian political class, as a result of which the current leaders of the country “at a more than mature age” will have to permanently give way to more modern and educated people. This is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for real change.

During the decade preceding the war, young technocrats with the knowledge and skills of a modern world-class manager managed to join the managerial elite. Many middle-level representatives of the Russian bureaucracy, and even more so in the management of state corporations, have high-quality Western diplomas in their pockets, as well as mastery of modern technologies. These people have possible skeletons in their closets, but they could be part of a future power coalition for change in Russia.

10.1.2 Current approaches to describing elite structure

In the journalistic approach, the Russian elite is usually divided into two basic groups—technocrats (formerly systemic liberals) and siloviki. The latter belong to the “party of forceful redistribution of wealth”. This “party of force” has been steadily increasing its positions throughout Putin’s rule. In the third decade of Putin’s regime, the hegemony of the siloviki [led](#) not only to open aggression against Ukraine and an indirect clash with the West, but also to a “simultaneous attack on the domestic West”. This attack has called into question all the results and achievements of Russia’s internal modernization of the last 30 years, created also with the direct participation of other elite cohorts.

Here it is time to complicate the described picture by adding an academic view of it. Based on Douglass North’s concept, Andrei Yakovlev, a visiting scholar at the Davis Center at Harvard University, identifies three groups in the

ruling coalition of elites formed in Russia in the context of the 1996 presidential election. These [three key groups](#) are the top federal bureaucracy, the politically connected big business executives (oligarchs) and the heads of the security services (siloviki). Initially, the triple alliance that governed post-Soviet Russia was dominated by oligarchs against the backdrop of budget starvation of the civil bureaucracy and the failure of the siloviki during the first Chechen war, but after the worst financial crisis of 1998, big business lost ground. The slow concentration of power in the hands of the siloviki began with the second Chechen war, continued with the Yukos case in 2003, and reached its climax with Putin's return to the presidency in 2012. In the second half of the 2010s, after Sergei Kiriyenko joined the Presidential Administration, the technocrats began to gain ground in the intra-elite coalition. At that time, the ruling coalition was unable to agree on a new distribution of rents and expand access to economic opportunities and political participation for new social groups. As Andrei Yakovlev [wrote back in 2021](#), the elite “missed an opportunity to avoid a deep shock”, which could destroy the existing political order.

Such a shock for the system and the elites was the beginning of the “special military operation”. How does each of the three groups of the ruling coalition of elites react to the current events? The worst case should be with the law enforcers. They failed the blitzkrieg at the beginning of the war, failing to fulfill their promise to the supreme commander-in-chief to take Kiev in three days. Later they were forced to retreat from Kiev, Kharkiv and Kherson. In 2023 they missed the rebellion of Evgeny Prigozhin, which they managed to stop through negotiations. Their only relative success is that they have managed to hold the front line against the counter-offensive of the AFU and continue to mercilessly bomb Ukrainian cities without serious hopes of claiming anything more. Meanwhile, big business is busy making money on military supplies and transferring the property of Western investors who left Russia under their control. As long as there is money left in the state budget, the oligarchs are doing well. Finally, the civil bureaucracy boasts of keeping the country's economy afloat (the government's economic bloc) and is busy absorbing funds for the “restoration of new territories”. Each of the three groups has its own business and its own rent. As a result, in the first half of 2023 alone, according to Bloomberg, Russian oligarchs [managed to get richer](#) by \$16.5 billion. At such margins, the motivation for anti-war speeches and actions disappears by itself. Only a sharp reduction in rents can remedy the situation, but the government's economic bloc is coping so far.

At the same time, the continuation of the war and the inevitable growth of its costs in the future may cost the elites quite dearly. Tatyana Stanovaya, a senior

fellow at the Carnegie Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies in Berlin, believes that despite the absence of a split in Russia's elites, two approaches to defining current managerial tasks and ways of solving them are becoming increasingly evident. Supporters of the first approach can be labeled "administrators," which includes ministers, governors, and top military officers. Representatives of this group have huge administrative and material resources and are afraid of losing them, so in the current situation of war they are aimed at solving current management tasks with minimal costs for themselves and their industry. Elvira Nabiullina, chairwoman of the Central Bank of the Russian Federation, who is busy ensuring a stable ruble exchange rate, and Valery Gerasimov, chief of the General Staff, who is ensuring the containment of the Ukrainian counteroffensive on the front lines, both belong to this category. Their approach is to mobilize available resources as much as possible without making significant structural changes in the management of their industry.

In the struggle for the president's attention and decisions, the "administrators" are increasingly opposed by those whom Tatiana Stanovaya calls "revisionists". Representatives of this category of the ruling class are not endowed with such significant resources that they are afraid of losing them. At the same time, they insist on a serious restructuring of the entire structure of Russian society, which must be reoriented to meet the needs of the war. In the course of this restructuring, they expect to seize control of resources from the first group, which they suspect of having a "comprador position" and a hidden anti-war agenda. Tension and division in approaches between the "administrators" and the "revisionists" will grow. According to the [expert](#), "the longer the period of uncertainty—neither victory nor defeat—lasts, the louder the voice of the revisionists will be heard". In the medium term, this may create considerable additional risks for the "administrators," who risk losing their positions if the war drags on.

Characteristically, in Tatyana Stanova's descriptive model, there is no place for big business in the ruling coalition of elites. It has been crushed and displaced by the security forces and the top civilian bureaucracy. However, the anticipated clash is not between these two groups, but between the conventional "old boyarchy" of civilians and law enforcers and a certain "new oprichnina".

Right now, the ruling elites find themselves in a challenging situation:

- further sliding of the system down the curve of simplification and archaization, which may cost them their status and even their lives;
- elimination of the source of the shock experienced (Putin and his war) with subsequent reformatting of the system on the terms of broader access

of wider social strata to economic and political opportunities, as Andrei Yakovlev writes.

Thus, possible participants in the coalition of the post-Putin democratic transition should be sought among those representatives of the civil bureaucracy and security forces whom Tatyana Stanovaya refers to as “administrators. Among them, the most promising group are young technocrats, members of the government’s economic bloc, and law enforcers who realize the very limited limits of Russia’s military power. This party of the “supporting model”¹² is more inclined to opportunism in the darkness of the patriotic clouds gathering over them. This approach is partly confirmed by an interview with Ilya Grashchenkov, the president of the Center for Regional Policy Development Foundation associated with the Presidential Administration, who [argues](#) about the need to “complete the state” under conditions of relatively greater democratization and desecuritization of the existing political system. The question is how to build relations with the opportunistic part of the coalition of ruling elites in Russia.

10.1.3 Opportunities for dialog with elites in Russia

Is it possible to break through the wall behind which the Russian managerial class is entrenched today? Not so long ago, they were free to travel to the West, buy real estate there, and take care of their children. Under the sanctions, these opportunities have sharply decreased, although they have not disappeared altogether. In addition to this sanctions wall, erected by the West with the approval of the emigrated part of the Russian opposition, the Russian elite is dominated by banal fear. As Alexandra Prokopenko, a visiting fellow at the Carnegie Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies in Berlin, [notes](#), disloyalty to Putin and his foreign policy is met by deprivation of all assets, freedom and even life for representatives of the highest echelons of power and business. The latter is evidenced by a series of sudden and mysterious deaths of top managers of large state corporations in the first months after the war began. Fear has so far triumphed over the will to act; the elites have neither the time nor the intellectual resources to unite, develop common values and formulate a desired image of the future.

Therefore, the elite chooses the path of inertia. It may be a path to the abyss, but it looks familiar and understandable. This is [proved](#) by the words of an anonymous interlocutor from among high-ranking federal officials:

12 The term is borrowed from authors who criticize the Russian elite for defeatist sentiments. See Kochetkov, Moiseyev. Op. cit. P. 252.

At least for 20 years they have learned to understand at least roughly what to expect from the Boss (one of Putin's nicknames) and his camarilla. And where will I go under sanctions? Neither regulators nor lawyers tell me how to remove them. At least it is clearer here.

An impasse is developing in Russia, says Andrey Yakovlev, a visiting researcher at the Davis Center at Harvard University. On the one hand, Putin's support base is narrowing—both in society and the elites. On the other hand, there is still no alternative to the existing order. By and large, no one, including in the West, is offering a clear exit strategy for the members of the Russian elite that may catalyze changes within the country. As a result, the civil bureaucracy and business do not see a future for themselves either within the existing system, nor in the event of its collapse. Russian elites choose the status quo, remaining loyal to the existing political regime because they don't see alternatives. In search of a way out of this conundrum, Professor Yakovlev suggests developing a consensus “between the thinking part of society and adequate groups in the elites”, which could launch the process of real political changes in Russia.

Given the interests of a part of the elite involved in this possible conversation, the upcoming changes should not imperil the foundations of their position and well-being. At the same time, their understanding of the vision of the future¹³ may turn out to be much closer to the general democratic agenda shared by exiled experts than one might expect. It is no coincidence that billionaire Oleg Deripaska, who made a fortune under Putin, [said](#) at the Krasnoyarsk Economic Forum in March 2023 that the rule of law and predictability are critical to attracting foreign investors necessary for the future of the country's economy. That statement postulates a very important demand of a large Russian business. This request includes clear and understandable rules of the game, based on the continuity of established norms and making people's lives predictable. In general, this corresponds to the ideas of the rule of law existing in modern political science¹⁴.

Given the short timeframe, the image of the future should be simple and understandable to all in the target audience. It does not necessarily correspond exactly to the result obtained as a result, but it should resonate with the reasoning and emotions of the group of actors who choose it. For simplicity, it can be

¹³ In particular, a considerable amount of proposals regarding the upcoming reforms are presented by the [Reforum](#) project and [Free Russia Foundation](#).

¹⁴ See Maravall, J., Przeworski, A. *Democracy and the Rule of Law*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

described in terms of the past, which is associated with the positive personal experience of a representative of the target group. “The Russian Tsar Alexander I began his reign with these words addressed to the nobles of St. Petersburg after his father was murdered by court conspirators. The idea of returning to one’s own recent past as a lost norm may well become a working version of an image of the future that will prompt some elites to oust the incumbent president. At the same time, Putin, thanks to his considerable length of time in power, risks turning out to be both Paul I and that “grandmother” in one person.

Nikita Savin, a lecturer at the Moscow Higher School of Social and Economic Sciences (Shaninka), [agrees](#) that the radicalism of the opposition in exile forces Russian elites inside the country to rally around Putin. But at the same time, in his opinion, a public mood that could be called “Putinism without Putin” is emerging inside Russia. In case of possible growing fatigue from the “special military operation” and strengthening of anti-war sentiments as the conflict in Ukraine drags on, the desire to normalize the regime from within by returning to the state of affairs before February 24, 2022 will grow in Russian elites.

The blame for the outbreak of the war in this case will be entirely on Vladimir Putin personally, because the war is his brainchild. However, since the basic principles of his rule are of obvious value to Putin’s elites, they may well persist after his departure. These include a market economy and low taxes, authoritarianism combined with natural rents, and conservative values.

Such “neo-putinism,” similar to neo-peronism in Argentina, may prove to be an important factor in Russian political life in the coming years, becoming one of the promising alternatives to Putin’s current personalist regime. In order to overcome the current catastrophic situation, Nikita Savin believes that the radical opposition needs to expand its base inside the country, including by establishing a dialog with the elites and broader layers of society, who are quite satisfied with the option of maintaining the status quo in the economy, politics, and social sphere after Putin’s departure and the end of the war he started. The exchange of the incumbent head of state for the preservation of the social and economic policy priorities established under him may allow the war to be ended and open up opportunities for a softening of the regime inside the country.

A similar platform is the position of Ilya Grashchenkov, who [considers](#) the current situation to be a deviation from the path of building a state in Russia. To “complete” this state means to abandon emergency and forceful methods of governance and to share responsibility for decisions with society. Roughly speaking, an advanced system of electronic public services is quite compatible with a model of democratic self-government and broader political participation.

Existing elites would largely retain their positions, while expanding access to economic and political opportunities for the wider public.

At the same time, “neoputinism” can only serve as a temporary companion on the road to change. As a variant of right-wing populism, this movement, if successful, poses a threat of preserving and re-enforcing authoritarianism in Russia in the long term. This, according to Nikita Savin, is [the main danger](#) of the “Putinism without Putin” agenda. The political ambitions of elite representatives, if they appear, must necessarily be counterbalanced by the democratic institutions.

Without the active political participation of the people and their leaders, democratization of the country is impossible in principle. Actually, it is time to move from the situation in the elites to the Russian society as a whole. And here the main thing that the leaders of public opinion, including those in the Russian opposition, have to do is to overcome their fear of the Russian people.

10.2 Political preferences of the Russian society

The problem of ideological preferences of Russians seems to be insufficiently studied. As a result, political strategies are built on the basis of myths about Russian society, supported by traumatic memories of past events. One of the key such myths—about the conservatism of the Russian people—needs to be addressed and criticized first of all. Next, it is necessary to answer the questions of what is really the main obstacle to mobilizing protest sentiments in society and what mass demand should be met by those political forces that will one day be able to gain broad popular support. Let us continue to deal with all these questions in order.

10.2.1 The Myth of Conservatism

Russia’s current authoritarian regime is largely rooted in the trauma of liberal reformers in the 1990s. The liberal intelligentsia at that time almost unanimously, and even with some ecstasy, supported the Kremlin in its brutal suppression of the mass street protests held under red flags. The issue of the threat of fascism in Russia became one of the key issues on the agenda of liberal columnists. As a result, fascism came not from below, but from above—from the bowels of Russian power.

Since Yeltsin’s time, demophobia has been one of the most powerful emotions of the ruling elite in Russia and, at the same time, a method of controlling public sentiment. Around the events of 1996, elections finally turned

into a sum of technologies for the ruling elite to retain power. After the 2004 presidential elections, the function of voters in Russia was completely reduced to acclamation of the ruling regime. The Kremlin authorities' need for an alliance with the liberal intelligentsia had also disappeared by that time. Thus, the processes set in motion in the early 1990s led to the depoliticization of society, the ousting of liberals from power, and Russian authoritarianism, which is constantly hardening in its ironclad indestructibility.

What about the people, are they really so conservative? Surprisingly, the very concept of “conservatism” is not popular even among traditionalist-minded Russians. As research by the Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences shows, in 2018 only 11% of respondents expressed their positive attitude to this value concept. Exactly twice as many survey participants (22%) said that conservatism evokes in them a rather negative attitude. More than half (51%) of those surveyed have a negative view of nationalism with 8% supporting it. Looking at the data in Table 1, it is easy to find that the arrangement of the first ten value priorities of Russians is far from being in favor of conservatism. Only faith (63%), spirituality (63%) and partly Soviet man (56%) look more or less conservative in this list. At the same time, such quite liberal concepts as justice (84%), freedom (78%) and human rights (73%) occupy the top of the list along with Russia (79%).

Table 1

Associations arising among respondents in relation to a number of concepts that make up the ideological and political palette of modern Russian society, %, 2018¹⁵

Concepts	Rather positive	Neutral	More of a negative	I don't understand the meaning of the word
Justice	84	13	2	1
Russia	79	18	2	1
Freedom	76	21	2	1
Human rights	73	24	2	1
Property	68	29	3	1
Equality	65	30	4	1

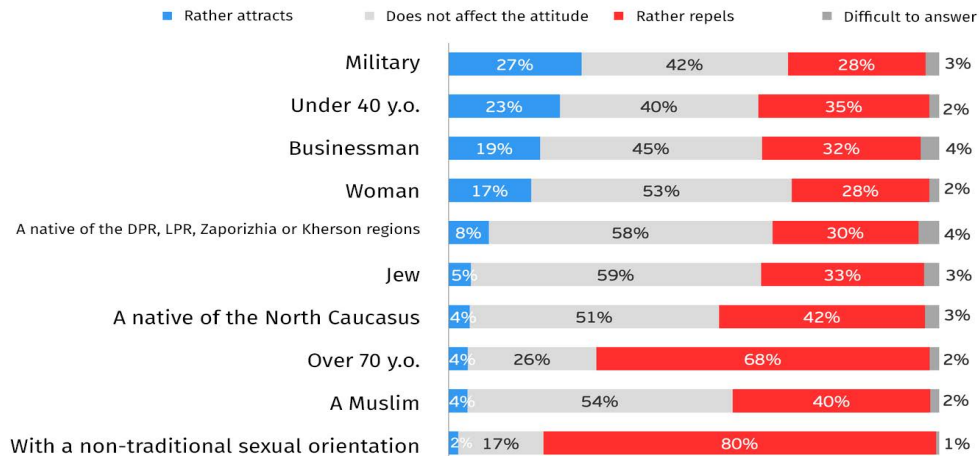
15 For the full table see: Petukhov, V. Ideological and political preferences of Russians: change of discourse // Sociological science and social practice, 2020. Vol. 8. N° 4. P. 29.

Faith	63	33	3	1
Spirituality	63	32	4	1
Soviet man	56	36	7	1
Wealth	53	40	7	1

A more recent 2023 poll by the independent research group Russian Field, “[180 Days to the Presidential Election](#),” also shows respondents’ uneven attitudes toward traditionalism and nationalist attitudes. More than half of respondents would be neutral toward a female candidate, a Jew, a Muslim or a native of the North Caucasus. Negative attitudes towards these positions range from 29% (women) to 33% (Caucasians). A possible candidate with non-traditional sexual orientation repels 80% of respondents and evokes a neutral attitude of only 17%. The second place of the negative rating is occupied by a candidate over 70 years old, repulsed by 68% of the survey participants.

Graph 1

Which of the following characteristics of a candidate for President of Russia will attract you more, which ones will repel you more, and which ones will not affect your attitude?



There is an important nuance here: only 43% of those surveyed by Russian Field were definitely going to vote for Putin, while the same number would be ready to support an alternative candidate. The polling report emphasizes that representatives of the half of respondents who would prefer an alternative candidate more often express neutral or positive attitudes toward a female candidate, a candidate under 40, a businessman, or a Jew. At the same time, unambiguous conservatism is demonstrated by only half of Putin’s ironclad

supporters. Among those who are ready to vote for the incumbent Kremlin boss, 49% would do so even if abortion were banned in Russia. Half of the 40-plus percent of supporters of the current regime—this is the approximate size of the conservative tendency in Russia.

Thus, there are traditionalists in Russia, but they do not constitute the majority and absolutely do not determine the entire political agenda. Stable traditionalist views are held by about one fifth of all those who agreed to take part in sociological surveys. The comments to the pollsters show that conservative views are more common among people over 45 years of age, belonging to socially disadvantaged and poorly educated strata of society. Younger, urbanized and educated respondents demonstrate greater tolerance towards minorities and openness to modern lifestyles.

These conclusions are partially confirmed by a study by Lev Gudkov, research director of the Levada Center, devoted to the state of mass anti-Semitism and xenophobia in the context of Russia's military actions in Ukraine¹⁶. In his conclusions, he emphasizes that the situation with ethnic tension and xenophobia in Russia looks “calmer” compared to the data of surveys conducted ten years ago. The war has not yet led to an increase in tensions and conflicts between Russians and other ethnic groups in Russian society. For example, 88% of respondents have a positive attitude toward Jews. This demonstrates a “trend towards improvement”, which the author attributes to the arrival of a younger generation that did not survive the times of state anti-Semitism in the USSR and is therefore much less susceptible to ideological and everyday Judophobia¹⁷.

Commitment to traditionalism and xenophobia does not seem to be the key problem of Russian society. All the fears of the liberal reformers of the 1990s, associated with the expectation of Black Hundred pogroms and the victory of “Russian fascism” from below, never fully corresponded to reality, and are now completely outdated. The real problems of Russian society lie not in its alleged inherent conservatism, but in something else entirely.

16 Gudkov, L. The state of mass anti-Semitism and xenophobia in the conditions of Russia's military actions in Ukraine // Bulletin of Public Opinion, 2023. N° 1—2 (134). PP. 94—107.

17 Gudkov, L. Op. cit. P. 106.

10.2.2 Anomie and learned helplessness

Poorly structured political space, discordant perceptions of politics, and a state of political apathy—this is how Sergei Medvedev, that time a professor at the Department of Applied Political Science at the Higher School of Economics, described the state of political anomie in Russia in 2012¹⁸. This political anomie emerged in the 1990s against the backdrop of the collapse of values, norms and institutions of the collapsed Soviet society. It worsened in the 2000s due to public fatigue from radical change and mass immersion in consumerism during the oil and gas boom of the “noughties”. In 2012, Russia passed another important fork in its history, moving to the bottom of today’s personalist regime. Anomie continued to dominate Russian politics for 30 years and has now become a familiar context and general background of public life in the country.

The defeat of the mass protests in Moscow in the winter/spring of 2011—2012 generated an additional extremely negative effect in the part of society that then spontaneously rushed into political participation. Rallies on Bolotnaya Square and Sakharov Avenue, spring walks with writers on boulevards, and the youth “Occupy Abay”—all of this did not bring the desired results. As a result, hope for changes for the better was killed in the most promising social strata in terms of possible political changes. In psychology, this state is called “learned helplessness”, when a person has no opportunity to influence something (in our case, politics) and refuses to try to change anything. Even before the war, this term began to be frequently used in relation to the political (non)activity of Russian society. This phenomenon [is still talked about](#) now, including trying to find ways to [overcome](#) learned helplessness. However, so far, experts have mostly attempted small fixes for the problem, with little or no suggestion of ways to solve it.

Grigory Yudin, a visiting researcher at Princeton University, characterizes the state of mind in 21st century Russia in terms of depoliticization. Under Putin’s authoritarianism, society and voters fulfill the function of “people on demand. Its destiny is private life, making money and consumption; any collective action looks suspicious in the eyes of the authorities, and therefore is condemned and sooner or later punished. At the same time, at the first request from above, people must go to the polling stations to vote for the government and thus confirm its legitimacy time after time. After that, they can go back to their private lives. The introduction of electronic voting in recent years has perfected this system.

¹⁸ Medvedev, S., Tomashov, I. Political anomie in modern Russia. Moscow: Higher School of Economics, 2012. PP. 275—276.

Citizens may not even see each other at the polling station: it is enough to press a button, [and that's it](#)— your duty is done, you can go on weeding the beds”. In 2018, sociologists noticed the beginning of a trend towards repoliticization from above, but it seems that the authorities have decided to abandon these attempts as unpromising and harmful to themselves.

The negative identity that dominates Russian society (“we are worse than others”) destroys the foundations of civic solidarity, empathy and trust¹⁹. It is this sad circumstance that constitutes the main obstacle to Russia’s democratization and significantly weakens its prospects.

Depoliticization, which is based on anomie and learned helplessness, is well confirmed by empirical data. If we look at a study conducted by the Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences on the dynamics of Russians’ political preferences during Putin’s rule, the picture is impressive. 42% of respondents in 2019 admitted that they do not consider themselves supporters of any ideological trends, another 12% found it difficult to answer, and 17% vaguely spoke in favor of “a combination of different ideas.”²⁰ 71% of Russian respondents either openly admit their apolitical nature or hide it behind vague formulations. It seems that we have found the main problem of the Russian voter.

Table 2

Dynamics of ideological and political preferences of Russians, %, 2001–2019²¹

Ideological positions	2001	2011	2017	2019
Identify themselves as liberals, supporters of market economy	7	5	5	6
To communist supporters	12	12	8	11
To supporters of a renewed, reformed socialism (e.g., social democrats)	4	6	6	7
Stand for a mix of different ideas, avoiding extreme and radical ones	16	17	14	17
Are not supporters of any ideological trends	39	41	43	42
Difficult to answer	16	13	20	12

19 Gudkov, L. Negative Identity. Sentiments of the Russian population in the situation of crises and war // Bulletin of Public Opinion, 2023. N° 1–2 (134). PP. 169–170.

20 Petukhov, V. Op. cit. P. 27.

21 Ibid.

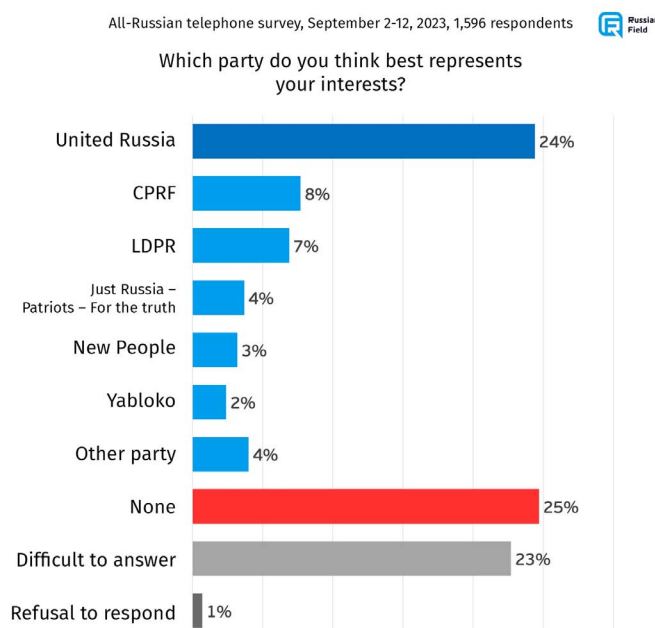
If we look at Table 2, it will become clear that the problem of the apolitical character of Russian citizens is not new at all. At the same time, the number of supporters of liberal, social-democratic and communist views is equally insignificant and represents a marginal group of politically active citizens. The authors of the study believe that “the overall ratio of conditionally ideologized and ideologically indifferent Russians” is 60% versus 40%²². However, the arithmetic mean of the sum of the three “ideology-free” answers for the first two decades of the XXI century is 72.5%. In total, almost **three quarters of Russians have no political position or express it very vaguely**. Indeed, this figure sheds light on the true nature and scale of the catastrophe Russian society has experienced throughout Putin’s regime.

The above data generally correlate with the results of a survey of political attitudes and expectations among young people conducted by the Levada Center in 2020. At that time, only 19% of the surveyed Russians aged 14 to 29 answered that they were interested in politics. 57% admitted that they were not interested in politics. Only 7% of young respondents [said](#) they were ready to take part in political activity, and 66% would not want to do so. It turns out that in the youth environment the rate of enthusiasm for politics is even slightly lower than in the country as a whole. The presence of political views in one way or another is demonstrated by 20—25% of Russians, while less than 10% are ready for political participation.

The picture looks no less sad if we ask the question about representation of interests. The majority of the participants in the last [poll](#) says that their interests are not represented by any of the existing parties (25%), another 23% find it difficult to answer. That is, half of the citizens either openly admit that no one represents their interests or avoid answering the question.

22 Petukhov, V. Op. cit. P. 32.

Graph 2



Thus, at best, only a quarter of Russian citizens are interested in politics and demonstrate any strong political views. At the same time, half of Russian voters believe that their interests are not represented by any of the existing political forces. There is a political vacuum in which Putin’s weak and non-alternative power, which uses simulacra, reigns supreme.

10.2.3 Request for social justice

The political vacuum in Russia today is not a result of the neoliberal experiment of the past three decades. Over 30 years have passed since the shelling of the House of Soviets (“White House”) on Krasnopresnenskaya Embankment, when the Russian state put an end to such notions as equality of opportunity for all, social guarantees for the weak, and social responsibility for the strong. If Soviet society turned out to be a pipe dream of equality, the “savage capitalism” that replaced it finally threw justice on the dustbin of history. The state of Yeltsin and Putin openly recognized the impossibility of and lack of need for justice in the public agenda, thus abolishing politics as such.

Aristotle defines politics as “cooperation for the highest good”²³. He reveals the notion of the highest good as justice, representing some form of equality.

23 Aristotle. *Politics*. London: William Heinemann LTD; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1932. P. 3.

By abolishing justice in the early 1990s, the post-Soviet regime destroyed the main purpose of political communication. What followed was a transformation of politics from a common cause of the nation into a set of technologies for the ruling coalition of elites to retain power. Putin has managed to keep this system afloat for 24 years of his rule through manipulation and targeted terror.

But despite 30 years of political vacuum, the possibility of genuine repoliticization remains in Russia. The return of the political is only possible if the justice agenda is rethought and restarted. This is exactly the point at which today's Russian elites will sooner or later have to give in to the demands of society. The return of justice to the public agenda will become the basis not only for repoliticization, but also for the expansion of democratic freedoms in the country.

Putting the issue of justice (and, as a consequence, equality) at the center of the political agenda does not mean a return to the Soviet Union. Such a return is neither possible nor necessary, and this is well understood in today's Russia. The fact that sociological surveys constantly appeal to the experience of Stalin and the Soviet way of life does not mean that there is any real nostalgia for the USSR or a desire to return there. Behind this resentment lies something else—an unsatisfied “need for solidarity in social relations, in a society with a minimum of social risks and with a high level of social guarantees”²⁴. In all likelihood, the “longing for a strong hand” is in fact nothing more than a desire for institutions capable of guaranteeing order and predictability in human relations. “A strong hand” on closer inspection turns from the shadow of the generalissimo to the idea of the rule of law. It's just that in the absence of a relevant political language, people use clichés imposed on them by several unscrupulous Kremlin spoilers like the CPRF, LDPR, and Just Russia at once.

Quality media in Russia wrote about the growing demand for a new left-wing party in Russia back in 2018. At that time, experts close to the Presidential Administration [recognized](#) that “the demand for justice and truth is traditional in Russia”. However, Kremlin political technologists made no secret of the fact that they saw this as a threat and were building manipulative strategies to combat the “dragon of populism.” Kremlin structures continue to closely monitor the demand for social justice even after the outbreak of war. This is evidenced by a VTsIOM poll on Russians' attitudes toward social justice, conducted shortly after Yevgeny Prigozhin's revolt. According to the [officially published data](#), 36% of

24 Petukhov, V. Op. cit. P. 35.

respondents see social justice in the equality of all before the law, 20% call the social order in which “everyone’s position is determined by the results of his or her labor” fair, and another 19% see justice in economic equality, understood as the absence of a strongly pronounced difference in income. All this is generally in line with the general European ideas of social justice.

Putin’s state is doing everything possible to block Russian society’s demand for social justice. Writer and publicist Aleksey Tsvetkov in this connection directly [said](#) that the CPRF serves as a “political plug” on the way to the realization of leftist ideas in Russia. To this we can add the [words](#) of Kremlin political technologist Yevgeny Minchenko about the need for many “little dragons”, capable of atomizing the voices of protest voters and/or discouraging them from political participation. By bringing neo-Stalinist discourse and other archaic themes to the forefront, they purposefully scare away and demotivate a significant portion of potential voters. This technology forces the protest electorate to refuse political participation and stay at home during elections: no one is ready to satisfy their demand for a modern socially responsible state.

A paradoxical situation has emerged: Russia as a whole remains a society with great leftist potential and a demand to change the existing order on the principles of social justice, but this leftist agenda is not properly reflected in the programs of the existing political parties. Neither the Kremlin spoilers nor the extra-systemic opposition offer an adequate social justice agenda. The position of the latter is strongly influenced by the ideological descendants of the liberal reformers of the 1990s, who fear the return of communism and Russian fascism at the same time, while the government and its spoilers simulate leftist ideas under the guise of nostalgia. As a result, the people have retreated into private life, where they are busy surviving separately from the state—in fact, in what Hobbes called the natural state. The fact that human life in this state is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short”²⁵, is more or less known to 80% of Russians.

The right answer to the latent demand for social justice formulated in today’s Russia is the way to bring millions of citizens back into politics. This should not be about populism, but about the fulfillment of the social responsibility that a modern democratic state should bear. This is what Russians want most of all, for the sake of the idea of justice they will sooner or later return to politics to defend their own social rights. The task of the opposition is to understand the people’s desire and give an adequate response to it.

25 Hobbes, T. Leviathan. M: RIPOL Classic, 2016. P. 182.

10.3 Necessary partnerships for change

So, the main task of the upcoming transition is to democratize the existing regime. This task can only be accomplished if politics is brought back into the lives of the broader society. Since politics is a partnership for the common good, the most important condition for this common good is the return of the social justice agenda. Its provision implies, first of all, the creation and observance of clear and equal rules of the game for all. This will make the life of elites and society as a whole more predictable and stable. Justice presupposes the rule of law, which should become the “strong hand” that Russia has been dreaming of for the last 30 years. Not the “invisible hand of the market” or the hand of the next “great helmsman”, but the power of law and institutions should govern people’s lives in the interests of their development and prosperity. Without consensus on this issue, no coalition of powers capable of ensuring a successful democratic transition is possible.

10.3.2 Possible point of consensus in elites and society

The Russian political elite, as was shown in the relevant section of the chapter, would most like to return to the status quo that existed until the end of February 2022. However, the longer the war lasts, the more elusive this possibility looks. In order to preserve its remaining positions, the notional court party of “Putinists without Putin” may decide to lay all the blame on the boss and try to return to the norm that suited them and is rapidly losing ground. This could trigger processes that could cause a coup d’etat at the top and the sudden removal of the current head of state.

The opposition, either in exile or deeply hidden inside the country, needs to be prepared for this course of events. ***At the moment of the fall of Putin’s power, the winner will be the one who will be able to offer the masses an image of the desired social order and a concrete plan to achieve it.*** The elites and society will accept this image of the future only if it does not involve the fundamental destruction of existing norms, rules and institutions, but at the same time contains clear parameters of a just order.

Elites, out of a sense of rationality, must accept the need for a return to social justice, involving greater public access to economic goods and political participation. Power cannot be held without responsibility, political and social. When this responsibility is recognized by the state and the coalition of ruling elites, what some authors call “state building” in Russia will take place.

10.3.2 Potential Composition of Political Actors of Post-Putin Transit

Returning to the figure of the first president of the Third Republic, who stood at the head of France until the adoption of a new constitution, it should be noted that despite his servility to the regime of Napoleon III, a member of the legislature from the pocket opposition Adolphe Thiers allowed himself to condemn the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War. His public statement labeled him a national traitor for a while, but later Thiers proved to be the man capable of taking over the reins of a suddenly collapsing empire.

Looking at today's political space in Russia, we can find few potential figures capable of playing the role of Thiers after one way or another of removing Putin from political action. It is unlikely that the option of handing over the Kremlin scepter to any successor can be seriously considered today. Most likely, the departure of the incumbent will be sudden, which in itself will cause shock and collapse, first of all, in the ruling elite itself. None of the top officials of today's Putin vertical will want to be responsible for the retired patron; the entire top of the power pyramid could be demolished in a matter of days or even hours. And then will come the main test for the remaining legitimate institutions of power.

What sequence of events may lead to Russia's transition to democracy?

The head of state disappears (the reasons are death, serious illness, flight or arrest), the Prime Minister and the head of the Federation Council refuse to perform their duties. The new Speaker of the Federation Council takes office as Acting President and signs three decrees:

- Ending hostilities in Ukraine, withdrawing troops and beginning peace negotiations;
- Releasing all political prisoners;
- Declaring state of emergency in Russia for a period of six months.

A prominent "systemic liberal" operating in the private sector is appointed head of the transitional government. The new Prime Minister is responsible for organizing a round table of the country's political and public stakeholders on the basis of the reanimated All-Russian Civil Society Forum and the Center for Strategic Research.

The new Chairman of the Constitutional Court, a respected public figure and human rights defender, declares the amendments to the Constitution as illegal and strikes them down, along with other unconstitutional laws.

Over about half a year, the temporary authorities are able to shepherd the transit of power without electing a new president, suppress armed protests of radicals, rebuild the party structure and political system and provide a sense of security to the broad strata of society.

Concurrently, the reformatting of the party system is underway. The surviving major

parties are forced to negotiate a coalition with liberal politicians freed from prison and returned from exile. Supporters of the United Russia “party of power” either leave the stage or join such coalitions.

Young politicians from the Communist Party are quite capable of creating a new party of “democratic socialism” on the basis of its preexisting structures. A small segment on the right is dominated by the “patriots of Russia”.

The State Duma welcomes popular video bloggers, political prisoners, and old party functionaries. Once the newly-elected Duma convenes into Session, it immediately launches the procedure for the adoption of a new Constitution, according to which Russia will be declared a parliamentary republic.