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Managing regime stability: The 2018 presidential elections in authoritarian Russia

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ABSTRACT

On 18 March 2018, Vladimir Putin was reelected for a fourth term as president of Russia, receiving 77 per cent of the votes. He will remain in office for another six years, up to 2024. While this result did not come as a surprise, political events in the run-up to the election require more attention. Not only did protests take place in cities all over Russia; liberal elites were also strikingly present in both political and economic discussions, occasionally openly challenging the existing system. At the same time, the regime demonstrated a high level of tolerance vis-à-vis such challengers. These observations appear surprising in the context of Russia's authoritarian political system.

The paper analyzes two cases of political confrontation in the context of the 2018 elections: Xenia Sobchak's presidential campaign and the competition between the economic groupings around the liberal Kudrin and the statist "Stolypin Club". It can be shown that in both cases, the roots of the seemingly independent political debates can be traced back to initiatives of the existing regime. On the basis of this observation, the paper comes to the following two conclusions: First, a certain level of political controversy is regarded as important for legitimizing the regime. This shows, secondly, that the "electoral authoritarian" regime in Russia has to respond to expectations of its citizens, which include the demand for political options. Overall, this paper suggests that despite its turn to increased authoritarianism and repression in the last years, the Russian government attempts to manage political stability by applying a mix of certain freedoms as well as restrictions.

Keywords: political systems; authoritarianism; elections; Russia; presidential elections 2018

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INTRODUCTION

On 6 December 2017, Vladimir Putin announced, at a carefully staged public event held at the automobile factory “GAZ” in Nizhny Novgorod, that he would run for re-election for his fourth presidential term (BBC 2017a). He was elected for the first time in 2000, re-elected for a second four-year term in 2004, and was president again between 2012 and 2018. Only between 2008 and 2012, Putin was forced to leave office due to provisions of the Russian Constitution, which does not allow more than two consecutive terms. During these four years, however, he served as Prime Minister and thus as Head of Government and remained widely considered the most powerful figure in the Russian government. Then-president Dmitri Medvedev was seen only as an interim solution – until Putin could return to office (cf. Black 2015). On 18 March 2018, Putin was once more elected with a clear majority of 77 per cent of the votes, his best result to date. This presidential term will last for another six years, up until 2024.

This short overview over the recent history of presidential elections and the striking continuity in political rule point to the characteristics of the Russian political system. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991/92, there were high expectations that the country would turn into a Western-style liberal democracy with competitive elections, political pluralism, an active civil society, and established rule of law (cf. Fish 1995; Bunce 2002; from a political economy perspective Aslund 2007). However, the initial phase of democratic opening in the 1990s did not last long¹. Even before the year 2000 and especially after the election of Vladimir Putin in that year, the first tendencies towards authoritarian consolidation became visible. Over the years, Russia turned from a democratizing country into a “democracy with adjectives” and later into a full-fledged authoritarian regime (McFaul/Stoner-Weiss 2008; Sakwa 2011).

This trend was mirrored in common democracy indicators such as the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI) or Polity IV. Russia’s BTI Democracy Index score declined

¹ And brought about unintended negative consequences for the Russian population. The simultaneous and rapid introduction of democratic political and market-based economic institutions did not result in a consolidated democratic system but rather in a weak central state on the one and powerful oligarchs on the other hand. Thus, the most democratic period in Russia’s recent political history was also marked by social inequality, lack of security, and economic crisis (Gustafson 1999; Gaddy/Ickes 2002).

from 5.7 out of 10 in 2006 to 4.4 in 2016, moving from the category of “highly defective democracies” to “moderate autocracies”². According to Polity IV, Russia’s score moved from 6 (“Democracy”) to 4 (“Open Anocracy”³) between 2008 and 2016. In both cases, the indicators demonstrated a constant decline over the past ten years.

Today, Russia’s political system can be described as an authoritarian regime. According to the classical definition proposed by Juan Linz (1975: 264), such regimes are characterized by three major attributes: 1) there is only limited pluralism; 2) political participation is limited (de-politization); 3) the system is legitimized through mentalities, psychological predispositions, and shared values (although not through a common and dominant ideology like in totalitarian regimes). These characteristics point to the fact that elections do not play a major role in authoritarian systems. Fair political competition is not possible and important decisions are not taken in a political process but rather through alternative strategies like personal bargaining between powerful individuals and groups. Lastly, elections are not seen as the crucial mechanism to achieve legitimacy of the political regime.

In this sense, it could be argued that the recent presidential elections were of no importance for the Russian society and Russia’s political system. The Russian government and the country’s political and economic elites could have relied on the authoritarian system to prevent any political change and preserve the beneficial status quo, as has already been the case in previous elections. Repressive practices could have prevented opposition and civil society actors from openly voicing their demands, and the lack of political alternatives could have discouraged potential voters from participating in the elections. However, looking at the events and debates in Russia in the last months reveals a striking level of political activity which seems to contradict these expectations.

² Bertelsmann Transformation Index (2016): Russia Country Report, online: <https://www.bti-project.org/en/reports/country-reports/detail/itc/rus/itr/pse/>.

³ Polity IV defines “anocracies” as “countries whose governments are neither fully democratic nor fully autocratic, but rather combine an often incoherent mix of democratic and autocratic traits and practices”, online: <http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity>.

In March 2017, the opposition leader Aleksey Navalny published a video that accused the current political elites – and the Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev personally – of massive corruption⁴. In the following months, mass protests took place in Moscow and Saint Petersburg, but also in many other Russian cities. For the first time since the “Bolotnaya Protests” of 2011-2012, thousands took to the streets, publicly demanding reforms and openly criticizing the current political leadership including Vladimir Putin (BBC 2017b). In October 2017, Xenia Sobchak, a Russian TV anchor, journalist, and actress, announced her candidacy for the presidential elections (The Guardian 2017). Sobchak claimed to be a supporter of Navalny, openly criticized Putin and the political establishment, and represented quite radical liberal and pro-Western positions. Finally, debate and competition of ideas could also be observed in the field of economic policy: From 2016-2017, different groupings both from the more conservative and the liberal camp prepared and publicly presented economic strategies that could be applied during the next presidential term.

The 2018 presidential elections thus present an interesting empirical case. Here, the discrepancy between Russia’s authoritarian regime – that has arguably turned even more oppressive since the last presidential elections in 2012 – and the ongoing and at times outspokenly critical political debates became especially visible. On the basis of this observation, the present paper seeks to answer the following research question:

Given the authoritarian character of Russia’s authoritarian political system, how can the high level of oppositional political activity in the run-up to the 2018 elections be explained?

Chapter 1 presents a closer look at the role of elections in authoritarian systems, including the specifics of the Russian context, and develops a possible theoretical explanation. In Chapter 2, this explanation is discussed in the light of two empirical cases, (1) the presidential candidacy of Xenia Sobchak and (2) the competition between liberal and conservative economic strategists. Drawing on these empirical

⁴ Navalny, Aleksey (2017): Don’t call him Dimon [On vam ne Dimon], online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qrwk7_GF9g.

findings, Chapter 3 provides a summary and discusses what the results may tell us about the functional principles of authoritarianism in today's Russia.

1. ELECTIONS AS A STRATEGY FOR CHANGE OR CONSOLIDATION? ELECTORAL AUTHORITARIANISM IN RUSSIA

Elections in authoritarian regimes

Authoritarian political regimes and elections are not concepts that are intuitively connected. Studies on non-democratic countries rather focus on restrictions of political opposition and repression or co-optation strategies on the part of the authoritarian rulers (Davenport 2007; Gerschewski 2013). However, as von Soest and Grauvogel (2015:5) note, "relying on repression alone is too costly as a means of sustaining authoritarian rule." All types of governments, be it democratic, authoritarian or even totalitarian, must base their rule on legitimacy⁵ claims that are shared by a significant part of the population (cf. Brady 2009).

Von Soest and Grauvogel (2015: 7) identify different types of legitimacy claims that are put forward by authoritarian governments: input-based, output-based, and procedural. Input-based legitimacy claims address ideological beliefs or historical narratives that are shared by large parts of a given society. In this logic, the government is presented as a defender of societal or religious values or as a legitimate successor of previous leaders (cf. Alagappa 1995). Another dimension of input-based legitimacy refers to the personal charisma of the political leader. In the case of the Russian government, historical legitimation strategies do not play a significant role, probably due to the historical rupture caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union and its whole political and societal order. Ideological claims, on the other hand, seem to have gained relevance over the past years, just as personal charisma, which can be clearly observed in a true personality cult around Putin (cf. Smyth 2014).

Output-based legitimacy claims refer to the ability of a government to produce desirable political, social or economic outcomes. High economic growth rates and the improvement of living-conditions for a majority of the Russian population, for

⁵ Following von Soest/Grauvogel 2015, I define legitimacy as the ability to gain support (cf. Weber 1968).

instance, have decisively contributed to the popularity of Putin's regime throughout the 2000s. However, a reliance on this dimension of legitimacy can bear potential dangers. If continued social spending becomes a precondition for political stability (even in times when comprehensive economic reform is needed), economic success can turn into economic populism (cf. Dimitrov 2009).

Lastly, governments can generate public support by referring to the procedural legitimacy of their rule. This category includes all procedures that appear to base the political rule on popular support: elections, the existence of several political parties, parliaments, and constitutional courts – even if these democratic institutions have no real power in the authoritarian setting.

Elections can thus be seen as one tool of authoritarian governments to generate popular support. As described above, the Russian political system has been characterized as authoritarian for many years already, but within this broad category it underwent some important changes. In the 2000s, Russia served as a prominent example of a *competitive authoritarian* regime. Levitsky and Way (2010: 5) define this regime type as follows:

“Competitive authoritarian regimes are civilian regimes in which formal democratic institutions exist and are widely viewed as the primary means of gaining power, but in which incumbents’ abuse of the state places them at a significant advantage vis-à-vis their opponents.”

In the Russian case, for instance, it can be argued that democratic institutions – most prominently elections - were in place, although at times hampered by repression or unequal opportunities during electoral campaigns. Presidential, parliamentary (“Duma”), and regional elections have regularly taken place in accordance to the schedule⁶, and there were widely known opposition candidates and regime critics as well as selective critical media outlets like the newspaper Novaya Gazeta, TV Rain (TV Dozhd’) or the Moscow radio station Echo Moskvy.

However, repression and political pressure continuously increased over the years so that Russia ceased to fit into the definition of competitive authoritarianism

⁶ Although they have been repeatedly criticized by international observers for being neither free nor fair (OSCE 2004; OSCE 2011).

around the year 2012. Reacting to falling approval rates and large-scale public protests – known as the “Bolotnaya Protest” – the Russian government chose a repressive strategy and further curtailed political freedoms (Sakwa 2014: 12). For instance, the critical TV channel Dozhd’ was forced to limit its broadcast in 2014 when major Russian TV providers disconnected the channel after a political controversy⁷. With new legislation like the “Foreign Agents Law” that restricted foreign funding for NGOs, spaces for political opposition and critical debates became increasingly limited. Consequently, after Putin’s return to the presidential office in 2012, the “competitive” was taken out of “competitive authoritarianism”.

Political stability in Russia and the role of elections as legitimacy strategy

In a recent article, Vladimir Gelman (2014) characterizes Russia as an electoral authoritarian regime. Although he claims to use the two terms – *competitive* and *electoral authoritarianism* – interchangeably, it can be argued that the latter is a broader concept in one decisive element. Levitsky and Way stress that for a country to qualify as a competitive authoritarian system there must be “viable channels (...) for opposition to contest legally for executive power” (Levitsky/Way 2010: 7). Distinct from this regime type are the *hegemonic regimes* in which “democratic institutions exist on paper but are reduced to façade status in practice. (...) elections are so marred by repression, candidate restrictions, and/or fraud that there is no uncertainty about their outcome” (ibid.). This can be reasonably argued in the case of Russia.

Gelman’s concept thus includes the possibility of elections being merely an instrument for autocrats to legitimize their rule (Gelman 2014: 504-505; cf. Geddes 2006; Blaydes 2013). The author argues that in the case of Russia, political stability of the regime rests on several pillars, which include “sticks” as well as “carrots”: a certain degree of repression and close control over the population as well as political, economic, and bureaucratic elites on the one hand; elite cooptation and successful economic management with high growth rates and improvement of

⁷ On 26 January 2014, Dozhd’ ran a survey on its website discussing whether Leningrad should have been surrendered to the Nazi army to save its citizens’ lives during World War II. This led to widespread criticism (cf. The Guardian, 30 January 2014, online: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jan/30/russia-independent-tv-channel-censorship-tv-rain-leningrad>).

living conditions on the other hand. Thus, even if the outcome of elections seems to be clear in advance, this does not mean that elections are of no importance. Elections can be more or less successful in terms of securing public support for the regime even if the winners remain the same, so the Russian government closely monitors results and reacts to sinking approval rates by using one of the other strategies at hand (cf. Rose et al. 2011).

While elections have no or almost no effect on the distribution of political power in authoritarian Russia, they are intentionally staged by the government as important public events, receive extensive media coverage and also provoke public debate. Andrey Starodubtsev observes that a certain degree of pluralism in the public opinion can be found in any regime type, including authoritarian systems:

“(...) the authoritarian pattern of governance does not eliminate confrontations between proponents of different policy alternatives. Experts and representatives of target and interest groups continue participating in decision making to legitimize a given policy measure and provide feedback” (Starodubtsev 2017: 149).

However, the whole process remains little more than a “democratic Potemkin village” (Gelman 2014: 506).

This practice is not entirely new. Andrew Wilson provided its description already in 2005 and argued that the Russian regime relies on elaborated “political technologies”, which allow it to create an image of public debate, competition between political parties, and a meaningful opposition without risking any serious challenges to its power (Wilson 2005). Wilson understood “technology” as a strategic application of different instruments like manipulation of public opinion, misuse of administrative power (e.g., legal deregistration of potential opposition candidates) or outright electoral fraud. What is interesting, however, is that the Russian government still seems to rely on these practices, despite the fact that it has undergone a considerable change from almost democratic to openly repressive and authoritarian in the past 15 years. Popular support and domestic and international legitimacy are still viewed as crucial for regime stability, and so elections continue to be important events in Russia’s political life.

The chapter discussed the role of elections in authoritarian regimes in a global perspective as well as in the specific case of Russia. Although elections would be rather associated with democratic regimes and have even been characterized as a key feature of democracy (cf. Dahl 1971), they also play an important role in authoritarian political settings – although this role differs decisively from the democratic idea of elections. Elections in authoritarian regimes are not so much a way in which society can exercise control over political elites and express its majority preferences, but rather an instrument used by authoritarian rulers to ensure public support and stability of their regime. Other strategies include ideology-based claims or output-based strategies, such as successful or even populist economic policy.

These theoretical findings can now be applied to the empirical case of the run-up to the recent presidential elections in March 2018. Through them, it is possible to explain the initially surprising observation that despite the authoritarian character of the Russian political regime, there were broad societal debates, outspoken criticism of the government, and even large-scale political protests. To this end, it is necessary to supply the empirical verification of the hypothesis that these political events were largely staged or at least effectively managed by the current government. The following chapter endeavors to do so by analyzing the cases of 1) Putin's possible competitors for the presidential office as well as 2) the competition of ideas in the field of economic policy.

2. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS 2018

2.1 Political competition: Xenia Sobchak as the ideal opposition candidate

The year 2017 was marked by an unusual level of political activity in Russia. What would be an expectable observation for the pre-election period in a democracy appeared surprising in the context of Russia's consolidated authoritarian regime. In March 2017, the opposition leader and Putin critic Aleksey Navalny published a video in which he accused Russia's ruling elites – specifically Dmitri Medvedev – of large-scale corruption and provided convincing evidence for these claims. Shortly after the publication, Navalny called for demonstrations (*miting*) against corruption in Moscow and many other Russian cities. The protests were the largest display of public dissatisfaction since the demonstrations of 2011 and 2012 and

especially attracted many young people (New York Times 2017). In June, another comparable wave of protests under the anti-corruption slogan could be observed all over Russia.

The government reacted with some degree of repression. For instance, the official permission for the public demonstration in Moscow on 12 July 2017 was first withheld and later issued with an altered route far outside the city center. Also, many protests were violently dissolved by security forces and hundreds of people were arrested (Novaya Gazeta 2017). This reaction again sparked criticism from both Russian civil society and international observers. It can be argued that the Russian government was under considerable stress, especially given the fact that presidential elections were to be held in just a few months.

What kind of strategies did the regime apply in order to resolve this situation? Firstly, it was careful to not exert too much pressure on the protesters. Although the gatherings were quickly dissolved by the police and many participants arrested, the legal consequences were rather mild⁸. One Russian observer noted:

“The government’s reaction was not as repressive as one could have expected. Yes, many people got arrested, but most of them were released after just a couple of days or were sentenced to minor fines. It seemed more like a warning than a punishment.”⁹

A second problem for the Russian government were the upcoming presidential elections of 2018 themselves. Aleksey Navalny did not only call for public protests, but also announced his presidential candidacy. Given his popularity and media presence he seemed to have the potential to become a real challenge for the regime. A look at the previous presidential elections in Russia reveals that there never were any serious alternatives to the candidate of United Russia, Putin’s support base. In 2008, Dmitri Medvedev was elected with over 70 percent, while Gennadiy Zyuganov (from the Communist Party) and Vladimir Zhirinovskiy (from the nationalist Liberal-Democratic Party) came second and third with 17.7% and

⁸ Unlike the cases related to the Bolotnaya protests, whose main initiators received prison sentences of up to four years.

⁹ Interview by the author with a Russian academic, 14 June 2017 (anonymized).

9.4%, respectively. In the presidential elections of 2012, Zyuganov achieved almost the same result (17,2%), and Mikhail Prokhorov (Civil Platform) won the third place with 8%¹⁰. As the Communists have a considerable but stable and limited group of supporters in Russia due to its history (mostly older people socialized in the Soviet Union), no candidate was ever close to Putin's or Medvedev's results.

In the case of Navalny, one strategy of the current political elites was to prevent his candidacy by administrative-legalistic means. He was repeatedly arrested during the protests and received a 20-day jail sentence in October 2017. Additionally, in December 2017, the Central Election Commission finally rejected his registration as a presidential candidate (Washington Post 2017). The official explanation referred to previous embezzlement charges against Aleksey Navalny and his brother Oleg, with Russian electoral law barring persons with pending criminal charges from running for presidential office. Navalny himself called the allegations and his conviction in 2013 constructed and politically motivated (Tagesschau 2017).

However, a parallel development is also worth noting. In September 2017, an information leak from the Kremlin appeared in the Russian media. On 1 September, Vedomosti reported that the Kremlin "is looking for a worthy competitor for Putin", and that this competitor could be a woman (Vedomosti 2017). A couple weeks later, on 18 October, the Russian TV anchor, journalist, and actress – and also daughter of Anatoly Sobchak, former mayor of Saint Petersburg and Putin's mentor at the time he started his political career in the 1990s – Xenia Sobchak announced her candidacy.

While her motivations cannot be directly observed, the timing of events could suggest a deal between her and the regime. Even if this is not the case, Sobchak can be regarded as the ideal competitor from the Kremlin's point of view. Her sharp criticism of the current government and its domestic and foreign policies did not make her a real option for a broad majority of voters. For instance, she stated in an interview that she regards Crimea as Ukrainian by the criteria of international law –

¹⁰ All data for different years from the Central Electoral Commission of the Russian Federation, online: <http://www.vybory.izbirkom.ru/region/izbirkom>.

a position that does not receive much support in Russian society (lenta.ru 2017). One could argue that Sobchak was Navalny's, not Putin's competitor. She received support from the same liberal opposition groups but – contrary to Navalny with his anti-corruption topic – represented an agenda that was too specific to allow her to become a serious threat to Putin. Indeed, the election results speak for themselves: Sobchak received only 1.7 per cent of the votes (Central Electoral Commission 2018).

On election day, Xenia Sobchak visited Navalny and suggested a joint live press conference, during which they would outline future cooperation options. Navalny agreed, but their debate, which was broadcasted online, escalated into a dispute and mutual accusations. For instance, Navalny described how shortly before the public announcement of her candidacy, Sobchak allegedly told him that she was offered "a lot of money" for running for president and did not know what to do (Radio Free Europe 2018). Sobchak reacted by calling Navalny a liar and rejecting the accusations. This further contributed to the impression which the election results already suggested: The Russian liberal opposition presented itself as extremely weak, unpopular among the voters, and rife with internal quarrelling.

Even though Sobchak's real motivation for running her presidential campaign cannot be assessed at the moment, available evidence indeed suggests that the Kremlin might have encouraged or at least supported her candidacy. In any case, the existing regime can be satisfied with the course of the pre-election period and the outcome of the election: the political challenger turned out to be utterly unpopular, the opposition is weak and divided, and Putin's popularity was publicly demonstrated once again.

2.2 Economic strategy: liberal and conservative advisors and public debate

A new conservatism in Russia

The topic of the right economic strategy for Russia has been widely discussed throughout the last years and even decades. In the light of the traumatic experiences of the 1990s with deep recession and economic hardships for a majority of the Russian population, it has remained a sensitive topic demanding careful handling on the part of the government. In the 2000s, historically high oil

and gas prices allowed significant improvements in living conditions and secured public support and political stability for the regime (cf. Malle 2013). The fact that Russia was heavily affected by the international economic crisis in 2008/2009, however, clearly demonstrated the dangers of simply relying on energy exports and pointed to the need for a more comprehensive strategy.

Especially during the presidential term of Dmitri Medvedev (2008 to 2012), economic reforms were extensively discussed in politics, academia, and society. Under the prominent catchword of “modernization”, concrete measures for structural reforms, the reduction of energy export dependency, the diversification of the Russian economy as well as its further international integration were suggested and in parts also introduced (cf. Lo/Shevtsova 2012; Ledeneva 2013). During that period, positions of liberal, Western-oriented economists were at the center of attention (Medvedev 2009; Yurgens/Gontmakher 2010).

After Putin’s return to the presidential office in 2012, however, conservative positions gained prominence and seriously challenged the established liberal consensus. Different conservative groupings, such as the “Seraphim Club”, social-conservative factions within the government party United Russia or the “Russkiy Mir” foundation associated with the Russia Orthodox Church, had already propagated their positions throughout the 2000s (Bluhm 2016: 12-18). However, it was only in the context of increasing authoritarianism and especially in the aftermath of the 2014 conflict with the US and EU over Ukraine that Russian conservatism gained momentum. In September 2012, the radical-conservative “Izborsk Club” was established by the Russian ultranationalist Alexander Prokhanov as a political think tank combining “socialism, Soviet patriotism, monarchism and orthodox religious conservatism”¹¹. In 2014, the “Stolypin Club” was established as a discussion platform for economic policies and strategies. Its name goes back to Pyotr Stolypin, Minister of Internal Affairs of the Russian Empire (1906-1911), monarchist, and initiator of major state-led agrarian reforms¹².

¹¹ This disturbing self-description can be found on the official homepage of the Izborsk Club, online: <https://izborsk-club.ru/about>.

¹² Online: <http://stolypinsky.club/>.

While the two organizations cannot be regarded as entirely comparable, they represent a trend in Russian society and political life which points towards conservatism and the search for alternatives to the Western-liberal model. Furthermore, there is some degree of overlap in the persons representing the two organizations. For instance, Sergey Glazyev was listed on the board of directors for both institutions for several years while at the same serving as advisor to the president on regional economic integration. In general, Russian observers regard both think tanks as close to the Kremlin (Kommersant 2013).

Alternative economic strategies for the next president: Center for Strategic Research and Stolypin Club

Already in 2016, the first suggestions concerning the future economic policy for the presidential term 2018-2024 were made by different experts. A prominent example is a proposal prepared by the economic think tank “Center of Strategic Research” (CSR) known for its liberal position. This publication appeared shortly after the former Minister of Finance (2000-2011) Aleksey Kudrin had been appointed as head of this organization and personally endorsed by Vladimir Putin, who at a press conference stated that Kudrin had been invited to actively support the presidential expert council on economic development (RBK 2016). In the following months, a group of experts prepared a draft program which was presented to Putin but initially kept secret from the public (RBK 2017). The economist Andrei Kolesnikov from Carnegie Center Moscow, who participated in the writing process, reported that even the authors of different sections did not know the full text of the document¹³. Although the complete version of the program is not available up until today, different parts and main lines of arguments were published over the course of 2017 or presented at public events. In September 2017, Kudrin co-authored a paper in the Russian academic journal *Voprosy Ekonomiki*, which seemed to be a summary of the draft program (Kudrin/Sokolov 2017).

Alternatives to the liberal positions of the CSR appeared in public debates shortly after. In July 2016, Russian media reported that Putin himself had asked the

¹³ Interview by the author, 29 June 2017, Moscow.

Stolypin Club to develop an alternative economic strategy (Vedomosti 2016). The “Strategy of Growth” was published in February 2017 and presented at several events such as the prominent Saint Petersburg International Economic Forum. A systematic comparison of the two programs – or at least what is known so far about their content – demonstrates significant differences in approaches, instruments, and goals. While Kudrin and his team stress the importance of private initiative and structural reform, experts from the Stolypin Club on the contrary call for a stronger engagement of the state and an industrial growth model. Accordingly, the two groups differ in their recommendations on fiscal and monetary policy. While the CSR proposes fiscal consolidation and inflation targeting, the competing approach allows for a budget deficit of up to 5 per cent and propagates higher borrowing to ensure sufficient financial means for large-scale investment programs. Finally, both strategies suggest tax cuts but differ in the addressees of this reform. While the grouping around Kudrin prefers a reduction of taxes for entrepreneurs to foster economic activity, the more socially-conservative oriented Stolypin Club insists on a progressive tax scheme for productive jobs (cf. Shapenko 2016).

Experts from other organizations also participated in the public debate on the topic and commented on CSR’s proposal. Thus, Mikhail Delyagin from the Izborsk Club stated in an interview that “Kudrin’s strategy could lead to a ‘Maidan’ worse than that in Ukraine” (Delyagin 2017). These observations show that the question of the right economic strategy for the next years has provoked significant public and academic debate, which has been and continues to be led on the highest levels of government, including the president himself.

Returning to the initial research question, what do these findings tell us about the characteristics of political debate in Russia? The hypothesis that the surprisingly active and controversial discussions were initiated by the ruling elites themselves and thus cannot be considered a real challenge to the regime seems to hold true in the case of economic policy. All persons prominently engaged in the debate have for a long time cooperated with the regime in one form or another. Moreover, Putin himself actively supported or even initiated the drafting process of alternative economic strategies and encouraged public discussions on the topic. Finally, the way in which especially Kudrin’s program was presented could be seen

as a skillful way of applying “political technologies” as described earlier. By keeping the whole document secret and only leaking bits and pieces from time to time, the regime could be sure to generate maximum public interest for the topic and present itself as actively looking for the best strategies for economic growth.

3. APPARENT POLITICAL PLURALISM AND REGIME STABILITY: A CONCLUSION

In the run-up to the presidential elections of 2018, Russia demonstrated a high level of political activity and societal debate which appeared striking given the authoritarian character of the Russian regime. The theoretical approaches of electoral authoritarianism and the role of elections in authoritarian regimes can provide a possible explanation for this phenomenon. From this point of view, elections above all serve as a legitimizing strategy for non-democratic governments and are thus carefully staged in order to ensure public support and regime stability. They cover the procedural dimension of legitimacy claims as they signal that democratic procedures are respected and that the voters get to decide on their future – even if this is not the case.

The paper examined two empirical cases: the presidential candidacy of Xenia Sobchak and the extensive public and academic debate on a possible economic strategy for the period 2018-2024. For both cases, it can be argued that the current Russian government actively supported or even initiated political competition and discussions – as long as these remained limited and did not pose a serious threat to regime stability. The procedural legitimacy claim of political pluralism was at the same time complemented by repressive strategies whenever any meaningful opposition could be identified.

In theoretical terms, the paper demonstrated that procedural legitimacy seems to be relevant for governments throughout the spectrum of regime types, including full-fledged authoritarian regimes. Wilson’s findings on “political technologies” from the early 2000s, when Russia was considered (almost) democratic by both domestic and international observers, still hold true today despite the considerable change in the country’s political system. The Russian government continues to put a lot of energy and financial resources into conducting elections superficially

democratic, free, and fair elections and is even willing to take some risks by allowing open criticism and political challengers.

In recent years, procedural legitimacy might even have gained relevance. It can be argued that the political stability of the 2000s was above all based on output legitimacy: The regime provided security, high economic growth rates, and feasible improvements in living conditions, and in exchange the Russian population was willing to give up certain political freedoms and guarantee support for the government. However, already in 2013, first signs of economic stagnation became visible when the GDP growth rate dropped below 2 percent (World Bank 2018). In the context of the 2014 Ukraine conflict, the resulting crisis in Western-Russian relations with mutual economic sanctions, and a sharp drop in global oil prices, this stagnation soon turned into a veritable economic crisis. As a result, the compromise between society and political elites seemed endangered.

In order to prevent political instability, the Russian regime strengthened the other two available sources of legitimacy: its input-based (ideological) and procedural dimensions. The first was achieved through a stronger focus on foreign policy and the creation of a “besieged fortress” narrative. For the latter, the presidential elections of 2018 served as an ideal opportunity to demonstrate broad popular support.

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