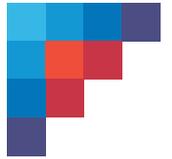




Wilfried  
**Martens Centre**  
for European Studies

**FREE**  
**RUSSIA**



# From Disapproval to Change?

Russia's Population May Surprise  
Putin at the Next Elections

June 2016

Vladimir Milov

## Executive summary

Most of the recent commentary around Russian politics has been focused largely on one issue, the high personal approval ratings of Vladimir Putin. But the Russian political system is complicated, and even the ruling force consists of many elements: government, the ruling 'United Russia' party, Parliament, regional governors, and so forth. There are strong indications that, despite Putin's personal approval rating remaining quite high, approval ratings for all other elements of the system of power are essentially down to pre-Crimea annexation levels and even lower. There are strong and growing signs that the Russian population is deeply unhappy with the current situation, and that discontent has a chance to spill over into the territory of political consequences.

Despite the fact that Putin's overall hold on the country remains largely unchallenged, authorities run a very serious risk of showing weak results at the upcoming Parliamentary elections in September 2016. The weak result of the ruling party at the previous State Duma elections in 2011 sparked a large-scale political crisis in the country, although the party did not even lose a majority in Parliament. It is too early to predict specific results of the September 2016 Parliamentary elections, but the weaker the result for United Russia, the more reason to expect some modification of the current system towards power-sharing deals, softening of the 'vertical of power', emergence of a more dialogue-based environment and calls for some kind of transformation of the Russian political system.

**Keywords** Russia – Crisis – Putin – Elections – Opinion polls – Approval and disapproval ratings – Political change



# Introduction

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The rapidly progressing economic crisis in Russia raises the obvious question about its potential political impact. Although Vladimir Putin's personal popularity seems largely unchallenged, there are strong and growing signs that the Russian population is deeply unhappy with the current situation, and that discontent has a chance of spilling over into the territory of political consequences.

The first part of this study analyses the potential impact of the crisis on Russian politics, based on available public opinion data and what is known of the Russian electorate's behaviour of the past decade.

Most sources show a very clear picture: since the end of 2015, Russians have begun to realise the seriousness and long-lasting nature of the current economic crisis, and the period of relative optimism in mid-2015, supported by regular assurances from the authorities that 'the peak of the crisis is over' and 'the economy will begin rebuilding soon', has come to a conclusive end. Russians are rapidly realising that problems are here to stay.

## The impact of the crisis on approval ratings of the authorities

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As an inevitable result of these developments, approval ratings of the 'United Russia' ruling party went down,

- according to FOM, to 46%–48% in mid-April 2016 vs. 55%–57% at the recent peak in May–June 2015;<sup>1</sup>
- according to WCIOM, to 47%–48% in early April 2016 vs. over 60% at the recent peak in May–June 2015;<sup>2</sup> and

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<sup>1</sup> FOM, *Единая Россия* [United Russia], 3 April 2016, accessed at <http://fom.ru/Politika/10949> on 12 April 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Russian Public Opinion Research Center, *Электоральный рейтинг политических партий* [Electoral ratings of political parties], accessed at [http://wciom.ru/news/ratings/elektoralnyj\\_rejting\\_politicheskix\\_partij/](http://wciom.ru/news/ratings/elektoralnyj_rejting_politicheskix_partij/) on 12 April 2016.



- according to Levada's most recent February 2016 poll, to 39% in February vs. the 47%–49% peak in May–June 2015.<sup>3</sup>

Notably, this sharp plunge occurred just less than nine months ahead of the State Duma elections scheduled for 18 September 2016. In 2011, when United Russia received a modest 49% in State Duma elections, its electoral ratings had been well above 50% just a couple of months before the elections. Factors contributing to this quick collapse of ruling party ratings arguably were

- a deteriorating economic situation (2011 was the first year since 1999 when the population's real disposable income dynamics were negative during the first 11 months of the year, though climbing into yearly positive territory after December);
- reluctance to accept Putin's announced return to power in 2012 (many viewed a second term of Dmitry Medvedev as a more favourable option back then); and
- a general 'political awakening' of the Russian population before each federal election, a phenomenon discussed in more detail later in this paper.

In 2016 the situation appears to be even worse for the authorities. The economic situation leaves no chance to expect any significant improvement in the remaining months; more likely, the situation will continue to deteriorate further. The approval ratings of key players—United Russia, the government and Premier Dmitry Medvedev (who is supposed to lead the United Russia party list into the election campaign)—are plunging by several percentage points a month, with decline in approval having sharply accelerated in December 2015–January 2016.

Most commentators have recently been focusing mainly on the high personal approval ratings of Vladimir Putin, stressing that, because of Putin's popularity, authorities 'have nothing to worry about'. In reality, though, the Russian political system is far more complex than being centred on just one person, no matter how important. Vladimir Putin's high personal approval ratings cannot be automatically extrapolated

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<sup>3</sup> Levada, *Электоральной рейтинг партий и возможных кандидатов в президенту* [Electoral ratings of parties and potential candidates for president], accessed at <http://www.levada.ru/2016/02/10/elektoralnyj-rejting-partij-i-vozmozhnyh-kandidatov-v-prezidenty/> on 28 April 2016.



to other elements of the Russian power system, which traditionally are much weaker, but which are more exposed to factors directly influencing the outcomes of federal and regional elections (people's daily living standards mostly depend on these other executive elements, and not on Putin, who is considered to be more a leader at the world level and less a practical manager of daily affairs).

For instance, the Levada polling centre reported at the end of April 2016<sup>4</sup> that, while Putin's personal approval rating was still at 82% (although down from its 89% peak in June 2015), at the same time

- Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev's approval rating was 54%, down from a record high of 66% in April 2015, and his disapproval rating was at record highs since early 2014 (44%);
- the government's performance approval rating was just 49%, lower than its disapproval rating (50%), being the worst view of government since early 2014;
- the average performance approval rating of regional governors (mayors for Moscow and St. Petersburg) was just 48%, sharply down from December 2015 (12 percentage points) and lower than the average disapproval rating (50%); and
- the approval of the State Duma (where the ruling United Russia has the majority of seats) was at its lowest—41%, down from above 50% as recently as October 2015, vs. 57% disapproval (up nine percentage points since October).

The conclusion from these dynamics is that, apart from Putin's personal approval rating, the approval levels of all other elements of Russian power—the prime minister, government, regional governors, United Russia—controlled parliament—are down to pre-Crimea annexation levels and lately have been falling sharply, several percentage points a month.

What does this mean for the authorities? Despite the fact that Putin's overall hold on the country remains largely unchallenged, authorities run a serious risk of showing weak results at the upcoming parliamentary elections in September 2016. This outcome is not guaranteed, but it is

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<sup>4</sup> Levada, *Апрельские рейтинги одобрения и доверия* [April approval and trust ratings], 27 April 2016, accessed at <http://www.levada.ru/2016/04/27/aprelskie-rejtingi-odobreniya-i-doveriya-4/> on 28 April 2016.



very possible; moreover, if the authorities are not able to cope with the crisis, but instead try to continue to run the country in a one-party modality, without attempting to move towards a more dialogue-based power-sharing system, this could spark further negativity in the society and may result in serious troubles for Putin in the upcoming presidential election (the election is scheduled for 2018 but may be moved to an earlier date for the same tactical reasons as upcoming State Duma elections were).

The weak result of the ruling party at the previous State Duma elections in 2011 sparked a large-scale political crisis in the country at that time, although the party did not even lose a majority in Parliament (but did lose the two-thirds supermajority it enjoyed in 2003–11). The Russian political system rests on several pillars of popular legitimacy, and the supremacy of the ruling party is one of the very important factors: once lost, it throws into question the whole system based on unilateralism and the ‘vertical of power’.

There will quite likely be a similar result at the 2016 State Duma elections. It should be added that the weak 2011 results for United Russia were recorded as a result of a relatively mild economic crisis compared to the current one: in 2008–11, there were no yearly declines in real incomes, living standards still matched those of the 2000s and there were factors contributing positively to the economic situation (growing commodity prices, absence of international financial blockade, etc.), fuelling hopes for recovery. Consumer confidence indexes in 2011 were moving upwards (see above). Not now.

There are, however, certain abilities to manoeuvre on the part of the authorities. They are clearly aiming at lowering the voter turn-out, thus ensuring that the guaranteed incumbent votes by various ‘dependents’ will play a bigger role (this trick has greatly assisted them in regional elections in previous years, assisted by moving the elections closer to the summer vacation period). They are reintroducing (for the first time since 2003) election of 50% of the Duma seats via majority districts, where most of the incumbent candidates will run disguised as ‘independents’, leaving aside the less popular United Russia brand. They may want to allow several competing democratic opposition parties into the race, effectively splitting their supporters and preventing any of them from crossing the 5% threshold.



But one potential tactic that is frequently discussed is the strengthening of the use of foreign policy-related mobilisation to divert public attention away from domestic economic problems. This potential is considered below in a bit more detail, but the conclusion is that it probably is largely expired.

## Can Russian authorities tighten up the foreign policy-related mobilisation?

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The option most frequently proposed as the answer by Russian authorities to growing public discontent over the domestic economic situation is the potential mobilisation and consolidation of the voters around Putin on foreign policy issues. However, opinion polls clearly suggest that the potential for such foreign policy-related mobilisation seems to be largely expired.

The Syrian military exercise apparently failed to capture public interest, and Russians do not support ground involvement there:

- According to Levada's February 2016 poll, around 82% of Russians were not really following the military campaign in Syria,<sup>5</sup> and only about 30% were prepared to approve Russian ground involvement there;<sup>6</sup>
- FOM's December 2015 poll suggested that only 20% of Russians supported ground involvement in Syria, whereas 68% were against.<sup>7</sup>

Levada polls also show a remarkable surge in indifference towards events concerning Ukraine: about two-thirds of Russians currently say

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<sup>5</sup> Levada, *Участие России в сирийском конфликте* [The participation of Russia in the Syrian conflict], 15 February 2016, accessed at <http://www.levada.ru/2016/02/15/uchastie-rossii-v-sirijskom-konflikte-2/> on 28 April 2016.

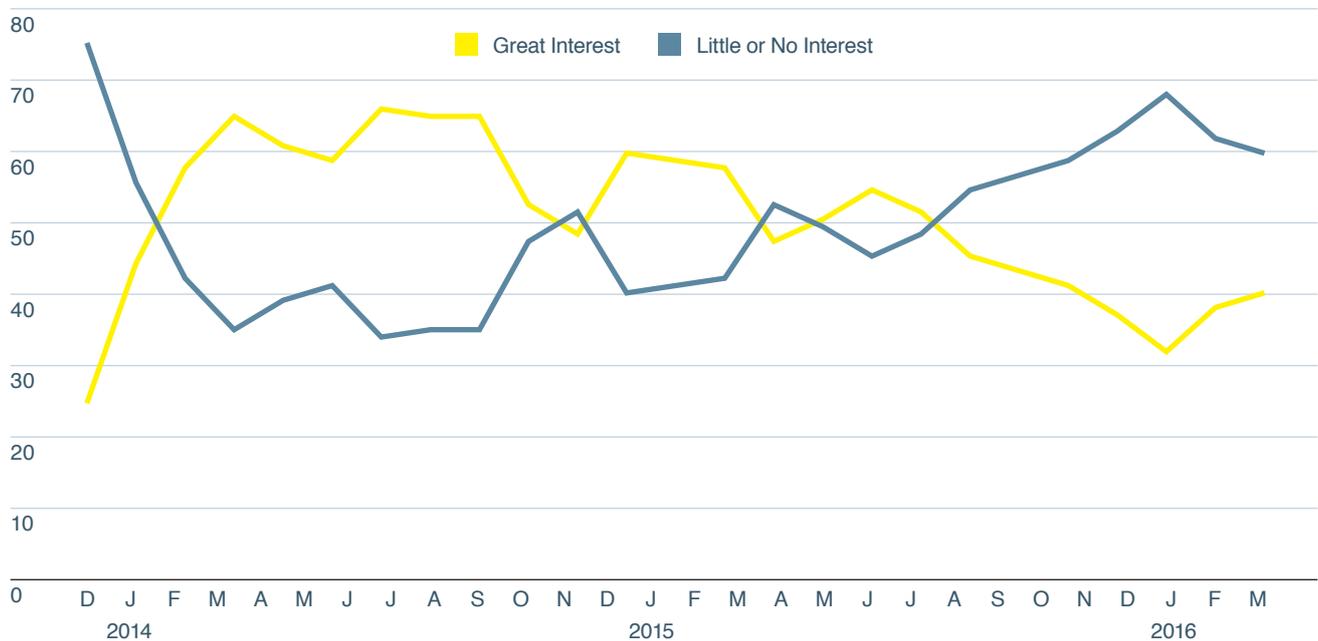
<sup>6</sup> Levada, *Война в Сирии теракте беженцы участие России* [The war in Syria: terrorist attack, refugees, Russian participation], 2 February 2016, accessed at <http://www.levada.ru/2015/12/02/vojna-v-sirii-terakty-bezhentsy-uchastie-rossii/> on 28 April 2016.

<sup>7</sup> FOM, *Военная операция в Сирии* [Military operation in Syria], 22 December 2015, accessed at <http://fom.ru/Mir/12450> on 12 April 2016.



that they do not care about these developments, a steady rise since May–June 2015:<sup>8</sup>

Figure 1 The attention accorded by Russians to events in Ukraine (December 2013 to March 2016)



Source: Reproduced by permission from Levada, *Крым два года спустя: внимание, оценки, санкции* [Crimea two years later: attention, evaluation, authorisation], 7 April 2016, accessed at <http://www.levada.ru/2016/04/07/krym-dva-goda-spustya-vnimanie-otsenki-sanktsii/> on 28 April 2016.

Note: The figure has been modified: the Russian text has been replaced with English.

Over 70% of Russians are not following the events around Ukraine attentively, according to an April 2016 FOM poll.

Another poll showed that the number of Russians who ‘definitely support’ the annexation of Crimea had dropped for the first time below 50% (to 48%) in November 2015, and that the number of people who said that Crimea annexation ‘had brought Russia more harm than good’ had dropped to 59% vs. 70% in March 2015.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Levada, *Крым два года спустя: внимание, оценки, санкции* [Crimea two years later: attention, evaluation, authorisation], 7 April 2016, accessed at <http://www.levada.ru/2016/04/07/krym-dva-goda-spustya-vnimanie-otsenki-sanktsii/> on 28 April 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Levada, *События на востоке Украины: внимание и ожидания* [Events in the east of Ukraine: attention and expectations], 14 December 2015, accessed at <http://www.levada.ru/2015/12/14/sobytiya-na-vostoke-ukrainy-vnimanie-i-ozhidaniya/> on 28 April 2016.



The most recent poll on the Crimea issue indicates that, while the overwhelming majority of Russians still believe that 'Crimea should remain Russian', only 4% are ready to 'pay the full economic price' of Crimea annexation, and 10% are ready to 'pay a significant price', whereas 30% are 'totally not ready' to pay any price.<sup>10</sup>

Why do foreign policy issues matter less and less now than before? The answer is simple: their extensive coverage for a period of about two years has exhausted the public, particularly against the background of remarkable state media indifference towards the rapidly worsening domestic economic situation. There's even a rising call for reconciliation with the West, as shown in a December 2015 Levada poll:<sup>11</sup>

- The number of people who say that 'Russia should continue its policies to disregard the Western sanctions' was down from 72% in March 2015 to 65% in November 2015, whereas the number of people saying that 'Russia should seek compromise' had risen from 21% to 26% over the same period;
- The number of people who say that Russia should normalise relations with the West was up from 66% in September 2015 to 75% in November 2015, as the numbers of people who say that Russia should not do so became further marginalised (down to 16%);
- Fifty-four per cent of Russians agree that Russia is finding itself isolated internationally (despite the fact that such rhetoric is never used by official propaganda!), and it looks to be a worrisome development for 58% of those who think that way.

According to the most recent Levada poll, of February 2016, 54% of respondents say that 'Russia should strengthen ties with the West', up from a historic low of 40% two years ago, in April 2014.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Levada, *Крым два года спустя* [Crimea two years later].

<sup>11</sup> Levada, *Страны запада: восприятие, санкции, готовность к сотрудничеству* [Western countries: perceptions, sanctions, readiness to cooperate], 2 December 2015, accessed at <http://www.levada.ru/2015/12/02/strany-zapada-voSPIriatie-sanktsii-gotovnost-k-sotrudnichestvu/> on 28 April 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Levada, *Мониторинг восприятия других стран. Россия и запад* [Monitoring the perception of other countries. Russia and the West], 4 February 2016, accessed at <http://www.levada.ru/2016/02/04/monitoring-voSPIriatiya-drugih-stran-rossiya-i-zapad/> on 28 April 2016.



According to FOM's February 2016 poll, 60% of Russians say that Russian leaders 'must take steps to normalise relations with the United States', up from 49% in mid-2015.<sup>13</sup>

It is quite clear that the crisis is creating a strong demand from the Russian society for normalisation of relations with the West—even despite the fact that the West itself is not seen in a positive way. These developments can be directly attributed to the progressing economic crisis.

## Crisis and the Russians' political behaviour: key focus on elections, not street protests

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One of the popular points of debate is focused on Russians' reluctance to participate in mass-scale street protests and other acts of resistance as a response to economic difficulties. To some experts, this is enough to conclude that the current downgrade of people's living standards will not lead to political changes in Russia and that people would choose *adaptation* as their main individual strategy as opposed to participation in street protests (see, for instance, Inozemtsev<sup>14</sup> or Zubarevich<sup>15</sup>).

While this is a legitimate point in itself (there is a lot of evidence suggesting that the majority of Russians are reluctant to take part in active political protests—see, for instance, a recent Levada poll which shows quite limited numbers of people ready to participate in street protests<sup>16</sup>), such an assumption excludes one important fact that has been vital for determining the Russian political process in the past decade: Russians are inclined to disciplined attending of federal elections, and may easily

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<sup>13</sup> FOM, *Россия и Америка: характер отношений* [Russia and America: the nature of the relationship], 16 February 2016, accessed at <http://fom.ru/Mir/12524> on 27 April 2016.

<sup>14</sup> V. Baryshnikov, 'До конца жизни' ['Until the end of life'], Radio Svoboda, 1 January 2016, accessed at <http://www.svoboda.org/content/article/27458803.html> on 12 April 2016.

<sup>15</sup> N. Zubarevich, 'Свиньи молока не дают' ['Pigs do not give milk'], Economy Times, 14 December 2015, accessed at <http://economymtimes.ru/kurs-rulya/natalya-zubarevich-svini-moloka-ne-dayut> on 12 April 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Levada, Протесты дальнoбойщиков и готовность протестовать среди населения [Protesting truckers and willingness to protest among the population], accessed at <http://www.levada.ru/2015/12/30/protesty-dalnobojshhikov-i-gotovnost-protestovat-sredi-naseleniya/> on 28 April 2016.



transform their discontent with the situation in the country into protest voting, sparking a full-scale political crisis.

Moreover, there is reason to believe that the very idea of Russians taking to the streets and overthrowing the current regime, as suggested for years by many commentators, was not very viable from the beginning and should not be counted on in serious analysis. Another scenario is more likely: modification (probably serious) of the current system towards power-sharing deals previously not experienced, as a result of political crisis caused by weak performance of the authorities at nationwide elections.

First, it shall be noted that Russians have a good record of high attendance at federal elections (as opposed to regional and local elections, which routinely pass with very low voter turn-out). Elections of the State Duma in 2007 and 2011 showed 63% and 60% turn-out, respectively, and the presidential elections of 2008 and 2012 70% and 65%, respectively. Although measures are being taken by the incumbent authorities to lower the voter turn-out at the upcoming State Duma elections (like receiving the approval of the Constitutional Court to move the elections from December 2016 to September, closer to the vacation season, and the announced postponing of the mandatory beginning of the academic year in schools and universities beyond 1 September, for the first time ever), it is reasonable to expect that the voter turn-out at State Duma elections will still be very high. With high turn-out, authorities would have fewer instruments to falsify the election outcome, and it is more likely that the election would turn into a nationwide 'referendum of trust' on the incumbent ruling party.

Second, weak results for the ruling party at federal elections are a factor sufficient to trigger a nationwide political crisis with broad consequences, as happened in 2011–12. Changes to the political system introduced after the 2011–12 crisis were remarkable:

- It became possible, for the first time since 2004, for new opposition parties to be registered, run for local elections, win seats and gain the right to run for State Duma without the mandatory voter signature collection barrier (which had been used to completely block undesired parties from running);



- Regional governor elections were restored for the first time since 2004, and United Russia has already suffered at least one loss in some of these elections (in Irkutsk region in 2015), while in others, the opposition was able to present itself as a viable force (Alexey Navalny winning 27% of the vote in Moscow mayoral elections in 2013);
- At least for the short period of 2011–12, government-controlled federal television channels started covering opposition activities in much more detail compared to previous years.

Although these gains were limited, the 2011 State Duma elections still delivered a powerful example of how Russian protest voting might trigger a major political crisis of the current system. Protest voting was also accompanied by street protests, although these were not too massive in scale: only a few tens of thousands of people on the streets of Moscow in December–March of 2011–12, and just a few thousand in December 2011 in the regions. However, the synergy of protest voting and demonstrations, which were the biggest since the 1990s, has already produced an effect which should not be underestimated.

To understand the impact that the economic crisis had on this, one has simply to look at voting patterns in certain Russian cities to see how electoral support for United Russia began to vanish around 2010, culminating in the December 2011 State Duma elections (see tables below).

**Table 1 Electoral results of the ruling party in the city of Novosibirsk, 2007–15**

<b>Result for United Russia (or other incumbent otherwise indicated), %</b>	
<b>2007</b> State Duma elections	<b>55.3%</b>
<b>2008</b> presidential elections (results for Dmitry Medvedev)	<b>60.0%</b>
<b>2009</b> Novosibirsk mayoral elections (results for United Russia candidate)	<b>73.2%</b>
<b>2010</b> Novosibirsk regional legislature elections	<b>39.5%</b>
<b>2011</b> State Duma elections	<b>27.2%</b>
<b>2012</b> presidential elections (results for Vladimir Putin)	<b>51.8%</b>
<b>2014</b> Novosibirsk mayoral elections (results for United Russia candidate)	<b>39.6%</b>
<b>2015</b> Novosibirsk regional legislature elections	<b>36.5%</b>
<b>2015</b> Novosibirsk city council elections	<b>34.3%</b>

*Sources:* Items 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 in Appendix.



**Table 2 Electoral results of the ruling party in the city of Yekaterinburg, 2007–15**

<b>Result for United Russia (or other incumbent otherwise indicated), %</b>	
<b>2007</b> State Duma elections	<b>55.7%</b>
<b>2008</b> presidential elections (results for Dmitry Medvedev)	<b>68.7%</b>
<b>2010</b> Sverdlovsk regional Duma elections	<b>36.7%</b>
<b>2011</b> State Duma elections	<b>25.7%</b>
<b>2012</b> presidential elections (results for Vladimir Putin)	<b>56.7%</b>
<b>2013</b> Yekaterinburg mayoral elections (April, results for United Russia candidate)	<b>29.7%</b>
<b>2013</b> Yekaterinburg city Duma elections	<b>28.1%</b>

*Sources:* Items 2, 4, 5, 9, 10 and 11 in Appendix.

**Table 3 Electoral results of the ruling party in the city of Irkutsk, 2007–15**

<b>Result for United Russia (or other incumbent otherwise indicated), %</b>	
<b>2007</b> State Duma elections	<b>51.7%</b>
<b>2008</b> presidential elections (results for Dmitry Medvedev)	<b>58.3%</b>
<b>2010</b> Irkutsk mayoral elections (results for United Russia candidate)	<b>27.2%</b>
<b>2011</b> State Duma elections	<b>25.6%</b>
<b>2012</b> presidential elections (results for Vladimir Putin)	<b>50.4%</b>
<b>2013</b> Irkutsk regional Duma elections	<b>30.6%</b>
<b>2015</b> Irkutsk regional governor elections (first round)	<b>30.2%</b>

*Sources:* Items 2, 4, 5, 9, 12, 13 and 14 in Appendix.

**Table 4 Electoral results of the ruling party in the city of Nizhny Novgorod, 2007–15**

<b>Result for United Russia (or other incumbent otherwise indicated), %</b>	
<b>2007</b> State Duma elections	<b>54.5%</b>
<b>2008</b> presidential elections (results for Dmitry Medvedev)	<b>60.7%</b>
<b>2010</b> Nizhny Novgorod city Duma elections	<b>58.4%</b>
<b>2011</b> Nizhny Novgorod regional Duma elections	<b>35.3%</b>
<b>2011</b> State Duma elections	<b>35.0%</b>
<b>2012</b> presidential elections (results for Vladimir Putin)	<b>60.3%</b>
<b>2015</b> Nizhny Novgorod city Duma elections	<b>40.4%</b>

*Sources:* Items 2, 4, 5, 9, 15, 16 and 17 in Appendix.



The experience of these four sample cities makes it possible to draw several conclusions:

- A sharp drop in previously unchallenged popularity of the authorities, who have previously enjoyed electoral support in the 60%–70% range, has occurred since 2010, when the 2008–9 financial crisis began to take a toll on population living standards;
- The relatively weak results of the ruling United Russia party at the December 2011 State Duma elections were not a sudden development, but rather a continuation of a systemic sharp drop of the party's electoral support, already visible during the 2010–11 regional elections;
- Vladimir Putin regained momentum during his presidential campaign in 2012, bringing the support of the ruling elite to above 50%, but his results were still up to 10 percentage points weaker than those of Dmitry Medvedev in 2008, at the peak of popularity of the authorities (despite the obvious fact that Putin is far more popular personally than Medvedev is);
- The downward trend for United Russia at regional elections in the above-analysed cities continued well into 2014–15, despite the effects of the Crimea annexation and the patriotic upsurge;
- As the tables above show, the surge in Putin's approval ratings after the Crimea annexation changed little in the electoral popularity of United Russia, which emphasises once more that the Russian political system is complex and consists of many components, and the extrapolation of high opinion poll numbers of support for just one component (Putin) to other elements of the system (the much weaker United Russia in this case) is methodologically incorrect;
- In the light of the 2016 State Duma elections and continuing downward trend for United Russia, it is easy to foresee that the ruling party may face serious protest voting in September 2016, given further deterioration of the economic situation and popular perceptions;
- The results displayed above also show that the widespread assertion that 'Russian elections are totally falsified, and the authorities will be able to draw any results they want' is wrong—despite a large element of fraud involved, the authorities are still not able to contain large-scale protest voting once it occurs.



Moreover, at recent regional elections, Russian authorities, despite widely advertised high-scale public support for Vladimir Putin, have been struggling to keep control, particularly in the medium-sized and large cities. In addition to noting the loss of the mayoral elections in Novosibirsk in April 2014 and the loss of gubernatorial elections in Irkutsk in September 2015, it should be said that United Russia was showing decent results in regional and local elections only due to very low voter turn-out, in the 15%–30% range in most cases. Historical experience proves that higher voter turn-out mostly results in lower support of the authorities, as their potential for mobilisation of 15%–20% of their solid supporters or dependents becomes insufficient for sustaining a majority (that was the case in the State Duma elections of 2011). Even under relatively low turn-out, United Russia struggled to win a significant portion of the gubernatorial elections in September 2015: in one region (Irkutsk) it lost, as mentioned above, and in four others (Amur, Arkhangelsk, Mariy El, Omsk) incumbent gubernatorial candidates either lost regional capital cities to competing candidates or were not capable of winning a 50%-plus-one majority there. And this happened despite the fact that gubernatorial elections are heavily ‘filtered’, with real opposition candidates having no chance of breaking into the race; only a milder ‘systemic’ type of opposition candidates was represented.

The analysis of these electoral behaviour patterns suggests that things are not going very well for the current Russian authorities ahead of the 2016–18 federal elections, and it’s well to expect some turbulence in connections with these elections.

More data can be derived from carrying out detailed focus groups in the Russian regions—such an approach in 2011 helped some scholars to accurately predict upcoming political turbulence, while others were resting on a ‘business as usual scenario’.<sup>17</sup> However, carrying out such focus groups is beyond the scope of this report.

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<sup>17</sup> M. Dmitriev and S. Belanovsky of the Center for Strategic Research, as cited by M. Lipman, ‘In Russia, Growing Rumbblings of Discontent’, *Washington Post*, 8 April 2011, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/in-russia-growing-rumblings-of-discontent/2011/04/06/AF1KFy3C\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/in-russia-growing-rumblings-of-discontent/2011/04/06/AF1KFy3C_story.html), accessed at <http://carnegie.ru/2011/04/08/in-russia-growing-rumblings-of-discontent> on 12 April 2016.



# Conclusions

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The following conclusions can be drawn from what has been said about the impact of the current crisis on the Russian population and business elites:

1. Since Q4 2015, the economic crisis has taken a very serious toll on the political perceptions of Russians. The credibility of major state institutions is falling sharply. More discontent is fuelled by the fact that the government's assurances of the previous months about 'passing the peak of the crisis' have proven untrue. The realisation of the depth and long-term nature of the current crisis is beginning to come as a shock to large numbers of Russians, who try to adapt to these developments but seem to be unprepared for them and very much disillusioned about the state's policies.
2. Although Vladimir Putin still enjoys high personal popularity ratings, there are many more elements in the Russian power system, all of which are not doing too well in terms of public approval now. United Russia and Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, who is supposed to lead his party's list in the September 2016 State Duma elections, are on the frontline of public discontent and disillusionment—their popularity is now essentially down to pre-Crimea annexation levels.
3. Russians' electoral behaviour and the electoral experiences of 2007–15 strongly suggest that (a) Russians will show disciplined attendance at upcoming federal elections, and (b) significant protest voting is the likely outcome. It is too early to predict specific results, but the weaker the result for United Russia, the more reason to expect some kind of modification of the current system towards power-sharing deals, softening of 'power vertical', emergence of a more dialogue-based environment and so forth.
4. Scenarios as described in point 3 above should be considered as far more likely developments than any kind of mass-scale public riots, protest rallies or other turbulent events causing the 'overthrow of the regime', which does not seem a likely option for the time being.
5. Although anti-Western sentiment among the Russian population remains strong, it is relatively rapidly being replaced by a visible call for



reconciliation and normalisation of relations with the West. Overall, foreign policy issues seem to be quickly falling out of the public eye, being overshadowed by domestic economy–related developments.

## About the author

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**Vladimir Milov** is Chairman of the Democratic Choice Party in Russia and Director of the Institute of Energy Policy. He is the former Deputy Minister of Energy of Russia.

## Appendix

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Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies  
Rue du Commerce 20  
Brussels, BE 1000

For more information please visit: [www.martenscentre.eu](http://www.martenscentre.eu)

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The Ronald Reagan Building  
1300 Pennsylvania Ave NW, Suite 700,  
Washington DC 20004

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Editors: Ingrid Habets, Research Officer, Martens Centre  
Grigory Frolov, Development Director, Free Russia Foundation  
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