

With a struggling economy and elections looming, why do so many Russians still back their government?

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*Russia is due to hold parliamentary elections on 18 September. To coincide with the elections, we will be running a number of articles on Russian politics and society. In this contribution, **Evgeny Gontmakher** writes on why Russian citizens still continue to show strong support for the current government despite a faltering economy. He notes that part of the explanation lies in the strong economic performance of Russia between 2000 and 2014, while the lack of a genuinely effective opposition that can inspire Russians to voice discontent has also played a role.*



Over the last few decades, Russia has repeatedly experienced severe economic difficulties. In the early 1990s, Russia's economy stopped growing and started to shrink. This process accelerated after the start of radical reforms in 1992. A slight recovery was observed immediately before the default of 1998, which once again reduced the country's GDP. Sustainable growth, which lasted until 2008, only began in the year 2000.

During these years the Russian population suffered greatly. In comparison with the situation in 1990, real incomes fell by almost half and due to chronic underfunding there were significant problems in the provision of public healthcare and education. By the late 1990s, there were even mounting debts of several months' worth of pension and public sector salary payments.

The social effects of this situation were evident in a greatly decreased birth rate and higher mortality rates, particularly among middle-aged men. But at the same time it should be noted that the 1990s were not accompanied by large scale social protests. The only exceptions to this were the mining strikes between 1997 and 1998. Nevertheless, these protests did not lead to any major changes in social policy. The changes that did occur in the composition of the Russian government instead reflected conflicts between Russia's political elite.

This raises the question of why, despite the major deterioration in conditions within the country, the Russian population did not articulate a greater level of discontent at the decisions made by their political leaders. The first step in answering this question is to recognise the legacy of the Soviet-era, where an essentially totalitarian regime had to some extent managed to alter the perceptions and wider outlook of a majority of its population. In [the words](#) of Yuri Levada and his colleagues, the effect of this was to create *homo soveticus*: fully socialised men and women who were strongly adapted to the given and inevitable social reality.

As they state, 'at the individual level inherent in the Soviet system the whole system of transactions with the government inevitably resulted in moral corruption... [with] cronyism, bribery and doublethinking a necessary condition for the functioning of the economy and society.' The collapse of the Soviet system did not bring this to an end, but 'only eliminated the social and institutional regulators that had limited the effect of the corrupting mechanisms'.

Given this context, there is nothing surprising in the fact that Russia lacked political actors who could take the lead in organising protests, as well as individuals who were able and willing to become involved in an opposition movement. In contrast in Poland, for instance, where the Soviet regime had only lasted 40 years and was not as rigid as it was in the Soviet Union, this situation quickly gave way to 'Solidarity'.

The new Russian government, despite its democratic and economic reforms in the 1990s, showed complete inflexibility in dealing with the country's opposition. Vladimir Putin, who came to power in 2000, appeared a welcome sign of change. But this change of leadership had a short-term stabilising effect, not least because it occurred at a

time of rapid growth in world oil prices. This provided an opportunity for the government to quickly resolve the debts on pension and salary payments, before beginning to increase social programmes.



By 2008, using the inflation adjusted official figures, household incomes and average pension payments were 2.2 times higher than they had been in 2000, while the average salary was 2.8 times higher. A broadly similar increase occurred in the health and education budgets. People began to buy cars, take out loans to buy houses, and go on vacation at increased rates, while the number of births also significantly increased as it appeared this level of social progress would continue for the foreseeable future.

Such was the strength of this belief that the economic crisis of 2008-10 did little to dampen the new sense of optimism in Russian society. The state acted to prevent a decline in social conditions – in many respects conditions even continued to improve until 2014. But this picture did not last and for almost two years now, Russians have been experiencing declining real income and wages in real terms, and a health care system that is becoming less affordable.

With this stated, the scale of this process is still relatively small. For instance, in 2014-15, the decline in the population's real income levels was only 5 percent. This is much smaller than the radical growth experienced since 2000. But there is also another reason why social protest has proven unpopular among Russians: the lack of a genuine opposition movement that could inspire citizens to voice their discontent. This partly reflects the transformation the authorities have managed to bring about in the nature of the country's political system.

Finally, the Russian government has waged a successful information and propaganda campaign to convince citizens that most of the current social difficulties being experienced are temporary. Putin has been presented to the population as a charismatic leader of the nation, capable of finding a way forward, in spite of the current challenges. And the combination of these factors ensures that it is likely there will be no large-scale protests in Russia any time soon.

All macroeconomic projections, including the official ones produced in Russia, indicate that in the next 10-15 years economic growth will barely exceed 1.5 percent per year. This means that at best the long stagnation of living standards will continue for the majority of people. If the government decides to deepen its reforms, not only in an economic sense but also those aimed at reforming the country's political institutions, the picture may be more positive.

But these reforms are also likely to be socially painful, for example the closing of inefficient workplaces, which employ a large number of people. It is an open question whether under these conditions the current regime will continue to enjoy public support long-term, or whether it may ultimately be replaced in the Ukrainian manner. The answer to this question will not be found in the upcoming elections on 18 September, but rather in the coming years.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics. Featured image: Dmitry Medvedev and Vladimir Putin at a rally on Moscow's Manezh Square / credits: kremlin.ru.

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