Back to normality in Russia's transformation. Demand on strong state and its consequences

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Russia has already been seeking its economic, social and political model for over a century. It has passed through several revolutions, struggled with dysfunctional institutions and practices, suffered the unintended consequences of choices the nation has made, and fallen from time to time into deep political crisis. After the seventy-four-year experiment of state socialism, another experiment started, a hasty transformation to capitalism and a liberal democratic political system from scratch.

The characterisation of Russia's political system has revolved around multiple concepts, from sovereign democracy to authoritarianism, and different descriptions of hybrid systems. Richard Sakwa suggests that it can be denominated as a dual system, the characterising feature of which is a permanent tension between the constitutional matrix and para-constitutional practices of administration. He defines it as a 'peculiar hybrid' or 'dual state model' in which forces favouring normative-constitutional renewal compete with the bureaucratic regime that follows the pragmatic-technocratic rationality of the administrative system. Although liberal 'constitutionalism' has always existed to some extent in Russia, the dominant 'ideological school' has been based around the adherents of the ideas of Russia's exceptionalism, great power and distinct civilization. The significant leverage of partisans for liberal democracy and constitutionalism has so far been temporary phenomena in Russia. Dmitry Medvedev's presidential term in 2008-2012 has been perceived as a last example of that.[1] It was followed Vladimir Putin's third presidential term and a return to 'normality': to the idea of Russia as a great power and strong state. In this chapter, we focus on the population's perception of the strong state.

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[1] The chapter is based on the author's research in the Finnish Centre of Excellence in Russian Studies – Choices of Russian modernisation, Funded by the Academy of Finland for the period 2012-2017.

The purpose is not to discuss whether the Russian regime is a democratic or authoritarian regime or what type of regime the people endorse more. In the past, the assumption has been that Russia's transformation has followed theories of democratisation, which has led us to have misleading expectations of the direction it would follow and consequently of the methods which Russia's regime would use to consolidate its power. This consolidation is common object of all types of regimes, all of them aim to increase the support and consent of their subjects: only the methods vary. In this respect we are not speaking about failed attempts of Russia's regime to promote democracy, but about the instruments it has successfully used to gain popular support for legitimising its rule.

Besides the dual state model, Russia has commonly been defined as an electoral authoritarian regime[2]. In this chapter, however, it is not essential for to precisely define Russia's political system. We are interested in the methods, which Russia's regime uses to legitimise its position. In this respect, the key concept of the chapter is the "strong state". Richard Rose, William Mishler, and Neil Munro remind us that democracy is not the only method used by regimes to gain subjects' consent. They point out that an authoritarian regime is also able to consolidate its power if it 'holds firmly to an undemocratic course and offers appropriate sticks and carrots to induce support, then subjects will learn to support what the new regime supplies'[3]. The concept is easy to apply to Russia's case. The perception of "strong state" includes both symbolic and material supply by the regime on the one hand, and demands by the subjects on the other. This dynamism reproduces conflicting mass perceptions of the strong state, which escape strict definitions. My claim is that the regime's supply of a strong state has often been more symbolic (political) than material, and does not meet the predominant material (welfare state) demands of the population.

The perception of Russia's strong state is usually drawn from an interpretation of Russia's unique history caused by a particular type of state formation. Andrei Tsygankov's definition relies on the civilizational approach of Russia's uniqueness. He sees Russia, on the one hand, as an Orthodox state, the ethos of which is to protect its subjects from the arbitrariness of the upper and privileged

stratums of society. On the other hand, he sees her as a country which has a unique place in the world as a semi-peripheral great power whose rulers easily sacrifice their obligations to the people in order to maintain this status against considered external threats[4].

Although not agreeing with the path dependency approach, it is easy to agree with the assumption that for historical reasons, Russian identity is closely tied to an imperial state identity (not ethnic identity) and to the concept of the strong state. Therefore, the common perception of the state is a significant variable in understanding Russia's development. The essential feature of Russian identity-building has been that it is based on the state's priority over the citizens' rights, which is usually justified by the above-mentioned reasons and the argument about the underdevelopment of civil society. Vera Tolz points out that the Soviet and pre-revolution tradition of Russia was to forge national unity using the strong role of the state. The rulers of the new Russia also followed this after the collapse of the Soviet Union. They soon turned to the idea to give the state the supreme role in the nation-building project. This idea leads back to history and its consequence has been state patriotism, the essence of which is that people's unity has been forged through loyalty to the tsar or president and pride in serving a strong state[5]. In this respect, the idea of the strong state encompasses an emphasis on symbolic markers of state might.

In general, symbolic markers have a significant role in all societies, and in Russia they are crucial in constructing the image of a strong state that, in turn, is an essential part of state identity, reproducing citizens' loyalty to the power. In this respect, a common understanding of the state's unique past reproduces the belief in Russia's particularism and distinctiveness. This idea goes back to the Russia's nineteenth-century discussions. In the Soviet Union, the political tendency that promoted Russian nationalism and statism complemented by the conviction of particularism was called *gosudarstvennichestvo*[2] (statism). It also gained strength within the Soviet establishment in the 1960s-1970s[6].

[2] Statist had leverage from the intelligentsia to the higher echelons of the party and state leadership.

Two Dimensions of The Strong State

We are not taking the strong state as the *de facto* existing state but discussing about how people's symbolic and material demands on the strong state frame their perceptions of the state, and how these two levels of expectations interact, interlink and also contradict each other. In 2010, Russians were almost equally divided when responding to the question of whether they perceived Russia as a strong or weak state[7]. This rises the question about how people define the strong state and what qualities they attach to it.

The second question is how symbolic and material demands interact on the level of agency and structure. This allows us to put forward the following question: what are the consequences of symbolic demands for the strong state on the institutional level when state leaders meet citizens' material demands for a strong welfare state? Here the question of the intended and unintended consequences of these demands and the leadership's response to them also comes into the picture. However, in this chapter the question is not analysed in detail, inasmuch as its focus is on the analysis of the Levada-Center's mass surveys concerning respondents' answers (perception) to questions related to the strong state.

Russians' expectation of the strong state's role has been drawn from three major aspects: (1) demand for an overarching welfare state; (2) narration of a glorious state history; and (3) Russia's strong position in the international community. These aspects also establish part of the framework for constructing Russia's state identity. The significance of these factors has gained more weight since the Ukrainian crisis and the government's diminished capacity to meet the material demands of the population. This leads to asking to what extent and how successfully has the regime increased the symbolic supply of a strong state to compensate for its diminished capacity of material supply, and what has been (and is expected to be) citizens' response to that.

The dilemma of the demand for a strong state is analysed within the frame of the four variables presented in the Figure 1 below. It depicts the framework in which the symbolic supply and material demand of the strong state is interlinked with and produced by agents and institutions.

[Figure 1 is here]

My presumption is that Russians' popular perception of the necessity of a strong state evolved during the past two decades has established a normative frame for choices directing the development of society. The reason why this matters is that even the most authoritarian societies have to take into account public opinion and reproduce the consent of the people, at least among a reasonable proportion of the population.[3] In this respect, the prevailing values and norms are important. Until the murder of Boris Nemtsov, Russia was generally perceived as having one of those "electoral authoritarian" regimes which legitimize a regime's power mostly by other means than repression[8], although after the assassination, some analysts reconsidered their assessment and suggested that it was a turning point in the Kremlin's politics towards its rivals[9]. Notwithstanding how do we estimate these events, the essential point in this chapter is that rulers cannot escape from responding to popular demands.

The Welfare State

Russia's dominant feature is the patriarchal welfare model inherited from the Soviet Union. People expect that the state will take care of their life, ranging from decent living standards and housing to health care. The Levada-Center's nationwide surveys from 2001 to 2010 show clearly indicate that. From 64 to 68

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[3] Larry Diamond noted: 'Virtually all hybrid regimes in the world today are quite deliberately pseudodemocratic, in that the existence of formally democratic political institutions, such as multiparty electoral competition, masks (often, in part, to legitimate) the reality of authoritarian domination' (Diamond, 2002: 24).

% answered that society should be built on the idea that power[4] take care of the people instead of a system based on popular demand for fulfilling basic conditions[10]. This is a telling example of the conviction that in the end, the state knows the basic needs of citizens and the state-society relation is constructed accordingly on a top-down basis.

[Figure 2 is here]

It has been the unchangeable expectation that the state is an integral part of Russians' life and that they cannot live without the state's care[11]. In general, the overwhelming majority supports the idea that the state should use more money for improving people's living standards (67 %) and health care (55 %) and protecting people in a socially vulnerable position (52 %). Innovation and modernization were mentioned by only 14 % of respondents. Symbolic performances to gain international respect and reputation – the Olympics in Sochi, Universiada in Kazan[5] and the coming Football World Cup in 2018 – were unpopular (5 %) and support to similar symbolic events had halved since 2010.[12]

The situation becomes even more contradictory when the discussion turns to budget cuts in order to allocate money to traditional symbolic objects of the strong state. Despite massive state propaganda on the glorious annexation of Crimea, only 16 % of respondents accepted giving more budgetary resources to the development of Crimea and Sevastopol. 60 % opposed budget cuts in health care and education as a whole[13]. Presumably as an inheritance of the Soviet welfare state model, Russians have in general had a strong position against reducing payments to health care services and education all down the line. From 2002 to 2015, support for abandoning free services diminished from 33-35 % to 25 %. Accordingly, support for free health care and education has varied from 60 to 76 %, ending up at 73 % in 2015.

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[4] Here ”power” refers to the state institutions, regime.
[5] In summer 2013 the capital of Tatarstan Kazan (Russia) hosted over 10 400 university athletes in XXVII Summer Universiade, which made the event biggest ever in the history.

Surveys show unequivocally that the main reason for criticism is the government's insufficient care for its expected social responsibilities. Although openly expressed readiness to pressurize the government has diminished from the 37 % peak of 1999, it is still significant that 13 % feel deep dissatisfaction and express readiness to force the government to make better politics in 2012. We have good reason to assume that the ground is fertile for a quick increase in that kind of criticism, taking into account the long-standing general, around 50 % dissatisfaction with the government's response to material demands of population. In March 2015, even during the general national euphoria uniting people to support Vladimir Putin and the government, up to 49 % of respondents answered that the government has given so little to the people that it justifies them demanding more or even releases them from all loyalty towards the government[14]. These results signify a remarkable alienation of the population and pose a considerable challenge to the legitimacy of the regime. Rose and his co-authors point out that the key factor is the extent to which people evaluate that the current and future economy affects their living conditions: 'For each one point change in the evaluation of the economy, political support is likely to go up or down by just less than half a point'[15].

In summary, we can argue that popular demand for a strong state in material terms means a demand for a state-controlled welfare system. From 2000 to 2015, over 50 % of Russians have preferred an economic system that relies on state-led planning, which is characterized also as state paternalism. Accordingly, support for private ownership and a market-based system has not once exceeded one third of respondents[16]. The argument that the welfare state and a strong state are inseparable intertwined is also confirmed by the survey taken in December 2014. 68 % of respondents held that Russia is a superpower and 60 % (the largest group of respondents) answered that a high standard of living is the major feature, which makes a country a superpower[17]. It also seems that the material demand for a welfare state is the most vulnerable part of the regime's policy, and this demand is difficult to replace with any kind of symbolic supply.

Glorious History

The narration of Russian history follows a traditional universal model to emphasize state history and highlight the role of war heroes. War narrations on the sacrifices of the nation to defend strictly defined state borders, the nation's common culture, wealth and leadership have been basic state-building and identity-construction instruments of all European nations. Victory Day (May 9) and the commemoration of the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945) is one illuminating example of that in Russia.

The project to write a common history textbook for Russia is a good example of the state's identity-building. The openly expressed aim has been to overcome the cleavage between history interpretations, leave disputed questions to smaller circle of experts, and encompass all achievements in common history which have strengthened state might, regardless of the political system. As a typical national state building project, the emphasis of the textbook project has been to work out a "standard" state history for schools in the spirit of "love and respect for the motherland". Putin emphasised that it has to give causal interpretations of the periods of Russian state, and explain how they all have been "logically interconnected". He underlined in emotional tone the necessity to resist the falsification of the history of the Great Patriotic War (GPW) and the role of the Soviet Union in the East Europe after the WW II[6] because, as he alleged that contemporary interpretations contain "ideological grab". Putin claimed that "some governments" produce false interpretations for political reasons, and it is "spit in our face".[18] The presidential interpretation of continuum of thousand years state history from Kiev Rus to now and the GPW are nothing new and not connected only to Putin's person. During his presidency also Dmitry Medvedev emphasised the fundamental importance to keep consensus in interpreting the history of the GPW: "it is crucial to have maximum consensus in society and within the political establishment. Otherwise, this may take us in a very wrong direction.[19]

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[6] He refers the interpretations of the Eastern European and Baltic states in which the role of the post-war Soviet Union has been often described as an occupant.

Consequently the symbolic importance of the Victory Day (VD) is evident since it merges competing interpretations of past experiences of the GPW and two dominant conflicting interpretations of the future of Russia. On the one hand, Russia's future is seen to be associated with other great European powers (without the Stalinist "black history") as a continuity of the anti-Hitler coalition and the liberation of Europe; on the other, Russia is seen as a unique Eurasian imperial power continuing its unique historical form of state and political system. Within the later frame, Stalin is understood as a historical necessity, comparable to Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great.

The message that the regime has supplied to the public in commemorating VD has always been connected to the changes in the domestic and international situation. During recent years, the emphasis has turned from grief for the fallen people to celebration of the victory of war. In 2015, the first impression of VD is less than before (2010) a commemoration day for millions of fallen people (26% - 18%) but increasingly an official state celebration (26% - 31%). The second feature is that VD is in general respectively perceived less than before as a day for war veterans (23% - 16%), and the way in which it should be commemorated is less connected than before with taking care of war veterans (56% - 49%)[20]. The symbolic significance of VD is increasingly important, and it is assessed as equal to one's own birthday (42%) in 2015. Only the New Year (80%) and the birthdays of family members and close friends (44%) are rated higher than VD. All other traditional feasts and celebrations come far behind[21].

The interpretation of Stalin's role in the GPW and in Soviet history has deeply divided Russia. This is clearly seen from surveys as well as public discussion. Statists, both Westernizers[7] and Eurasianists, attempt to distinguish themselves from the Stalinist socialist ideology and terror but echo at least to some extent the idea of the strong state as synonym of strong leadership as a prerequisite of the Victory in the war. At the same time, anti-Stalinist liberals advocating a more

[7] In 1840s Russian discourse divided to two parties in which dividing line crystallized in different position on Europe. The common denomination for the Romantic nationalists was Slavophiles. Westernisers looked at Europe as political and economic model.

decentralized state model are pushed into the corner as protagonists of a weak state and at worst as an unpatriotic “fifth column”.

When asking about citizens’ attitudes towards Stalin, surveys show that from 2001 to March 2015, a significant proportion (38-39 %) of respondents have had a permanently positive attitude to him. It is worth noting that the positive attitude dropped to its lowest level (31-32%) during Medvedev’s presidency and his cautious but consistent attempts to reinterpret the history of the Great Patriotic War and Stalin. The proportion of those who agree that the ‘sacrifices of the Soviet people during Stalin’s reign are justified by the great goals and results achieved during that time’ has increased considerably from 2011-2012 to March 2015, from 25-30 % to 46 %. Disagreement slumped from 60 % to 41 % respectively. When the questions concerns Stalin’s role beyond the war, the picture changes. Russians do not want to return to a Stalinist society and usually over 50 % of respondents connect his name with repression and crimes against people. However, between 2013 and 2015 an apparent turn in perceptions occurred, and the share of those who see Stalin’s role in a negative light decreased from 55 to 46 %[22].

The change is statistically significant and we can expect that it reflects the general atmosphere in Russia, which has substantially turned towards harder and more authoritarian attitudes during the Ukrainian crisis. There is also evidence that the politics of history pursued by the state leadership have influenced changes in public opinion. Negative attitudes towards Stalin were at their highest level during the first five years after the presidential term of Boris Yeltsin. During Dmitri Medvedev’s presidency the proportion of indifferent attitudes peaked, ending up at 38 % in 2010. It is still worth noting that negative or positive attitudes did not change significantly during his term. The beginning of Vladimir Putin’s third term was the significant turn although it is hard to say to what extent Putin’s politics of history and to what extent the Ukrainian crisis have influenced this turn. But drawing on the general change of attitudes shown by surveys, one might assume that conflict with the West and the Ukrainian crisis have been the decisive factor in recent changes.

President Medvedev's interview in *Izvestiya* on May 7, 2010 just before the 65th anniversary Victory Day celebrations can be seen as the Westernizer-statists' last attempt to solve the dilemma of celebrating the Great Patriotic War and utilising it for the idea of a strong state without Stalin's politically counterproductive reputation in the domestic and international arenas[23]. For the first time since Khrushchev, Russia's head unreservedly questioned Stalin's role as a war hero. Medvedev stressed that Victory Day did not commemorate the victory of Stalin, his totalitarian regime and his generals, but the victory of the people. He also explicitly denounced Stalin's crimes: 'So despite the fact that he worked hard, despite the fact that under his leadership the country flourished in certain respects, what was done to our own people cannot be forgiven'. At that time, common opinion endorsed Medvedev's statement, since approximately 60 % of respondents shared this view in 2008-2012[24]. Medvedev attempted to distance victory from the Soviet Union – a "totalitarian regime" which pursued its own interests after the War in Eastern Europe – and shifted the credit for the victory to the people and the Red Army, as he worded it. However, Medvedev made a concession to people who still admired Stalin as a war leader, saying that 'admiration and respect is understandable and their right'. This can be seen as a typical example of Statists' attempts to balance Russians' divided popular opinion on Stalin and the Great Patriotic War.

After Medvedev's short "de-Stalinization" period a significant return to the traditional began. From 2012 to 2015, those who agreed with the claim that the sacrifices made during Stalin's reign were justified by the great goals and results achieved during that time jumped from 25 to 46 %. This definitely says something essential about the prevailing atmosphere in Russia. Putin and the government have trumpeted the demand that people have to sacrifice and suffer from the hardships of Russia's economy before redemption from their troubles will come. This type of view is consistent with public perceptions on state-society relations regardless of their views on history. Furthermore, the surveys also demonstrate a high public demand for the "strong hand" in present-day Russia.

[Figure 3 is here]

However, all surveys show that the majority of Russians do not want to return to a Stalinist or even late Soviet type of society: 38% of respondents supported these ideas in 2015. At the same time, in 2014-2015 only 12-15 % of respondents believed that Russia is developing towards authoritarianism or a dictatorship. A large proportion of respondents (36-38%) answered in 2014-2015 in a politically correct way that the best characterization of the prevailing political situation in Russia is 'development of democracy'. It is noteworthy that the proportion of unsure respondents who could not or did not want to answer shot up from 21 % in 2014 to 30 % in 2015[25].

A Great Power

The Ukrainian crisis is an illuminating example of how significantly and quickly changes in international relations affect Russia's domestic developments. As Andrei Tsygankov points out, 'the Ukrainian crisis increased the basis of internal support for the state and created conditions for a new consolidation of power'. He also puts forward the common claim in Russia that 'a strong state is necessary in order to improve the quality of Russia's elite and its political system'. The strong state must have a strong role in planning the economy in order to develop Russia's international competitiveness[26]. His claim is partly based on the assumption of Russia's distinct and unique development path to modernity, although the other part of the explanation draws from theories connected to Russia's semi-peripheral position in the world economy.

Tsygankov, among others, has defined the current divide in Russian thinking between different orientations (Slavophiles – Westernizers) in which Westernizers have been divided into two groups. One is Liberal (European-orientated) Westernizers and the other Statists (*derzhavniki*), who see Russia's future as a Eurasian state comprising the former Soviet space, including its Asian part. In this respect, the Russian strong state must keep a distance from both

Europe and Asia, combining them as a special civilizational world culture, Eurasian Russia. In Russian thinking, the Statists represent a tendency that is closely linked with the "realist school". For realists, international relations are power politics in which a state's might is seen in terms of military and economic capacity, state borders and political leverage. In this worldview, political anarchy is the dominant feature of international relations, which should be resisted by the strong Russian state. With reference to several surveys, this perception seems to be shared widely in Russian society.

In international relations, the perception of strong state appears through symbolic actions accompanying some real political achievements. During recent years, beyond the Crimea annexation, a prominent feature of Putin's policy has been endeavours to gain international recognition for Russia's great power status, symbolic victories and respect. In this vein, one of Russia's largest successes has been the Olympic Games in Sochi. Although Russians appreciated Sochi as the most important event, even more important than the collapse of the rouble in 2014[27] a small minority, 10 % in 2014 and only 5 % in 2015, wanted to allocate budget money to any symbolic mega-events which aim to increase the state's international reputation[28].

At the same time, the annexation of Crimea is perceived as proof that Russia has returned to the superpower class. In twenty years, from 1994 to 2014, those who perceive Russia as a superpower has increased from 14 % to 68 %. In 2008 and 2012, slightly less than half held Russia as a superpower, which means that the post-Crimea jump has been about 20 %[29].

There is a contradiction in the fact that the perception of Russia's drastically improved international position refers strongly to the Crimea effect, but the annexation of Crimea is still mainly perceived as a symbolic upgrade of superpower status. The definitions how people characterize a superpower do not meet reality in Russia. Approximately 60 % of respondents attach superpower status to a high standard of living, social equality and economic and industrial capacity. Military might (44%) comes closest to the Crimea case as a

proof of traditional superpower status, but it meets only weakly people's readiness to improve military capacity (20%). It is not a priority for respondents if the alternative is an improvement in living standards (73%)[30].

The only aspect in surveys, which refers to Russia's superpower status, is rather symbolic than material. From 2000 to November 2014, approximately 65 % of respondents have answered that they prefer to live in 'a large country that is respected and sometimes feared by other countries' rather than a 'small, comfortable and non-threatening country'[31]. This shows the extent of cleavage between demand for the material features of a strong state and the regime's mainly symbolic supply, which has given a boost to the general perception that Russia is a strong state.

Conclusions

In many respects under the surface of the regime's public performance can be found several weaknesses, inabilities to reproduce its capacities, dysfunctional performances of institutions and unintended results of policy. Inconsistency is visible between citizens' essential material expectations of the strong state and the regime's tendency to rely on a symbolic supply of the strong state.

So far, however, the symbolic supply of the strong state has sufficiently substituted for a material supply; the regime's diminished capacity to respond to the population's demands for better living standards. Up until now, it has also strengthened the equation of the strong state with the strong leader (strong hand), and the conviction that order and control are more important than democracy and that on an institutional level, the parliament and parties are less trustworthy and supported than the president – namely, Putin[32]. During Putin's presidency, almost 70 % of respondents have considered that it is beneficial to Russia that 'power is concentrated almost entirely in the hands of Vladimir Putin'. Only 15 % answered that this promises bad things for Russia. The demand for a "strong hand" is not only a symbolic demand but one taken literally on the institutional level. Furthermore, although half of respondents agree that

Putin is tough enough, as many as 38 % think that he should be tougher. The 3 % proportion that thinks that he is too tough is within the statistical error.[33].

After the annexation of Crimea, about half of Russians hold Putin's biggest merit accomplishment to be to 'return Russia to its status as a great and respected world power'. Securing the country's stability comes behind that, and raising salaries, pensions, stipends and allowances is perceived as only the fourth most important achievement (by 29 %)[34]. In the same vein, direct anti-democratic sentiments hold strong. Between 1998 and March 2015, a large majority of respondents have held order to be more important than democracy. The fluctuation range of those who prefer order over democracy has been from 56 % during the opposition's protests in 2010 to 85 % in 2000 after Yeltsin's term. Some of the strongest support for democracy in this survey was measured in 2015: 21 % answered that democracy is more important than order. It is characteristic, however, that 61 % of respondents preferred order over democracy[35].

Parallel to trust in a strong hand, trust in democratic institutions and law enforcement agencies is at a very low level. Besides the performance of the State Duma being perceived as the worst of all elected institutions (president, government, governors), about half of respondents do not believe that the law protects them. People name three main reasons for this: corruption and unfair and non-objective consideration (45 %); citizens are not equal before the law because those in power think that they are above the law and the laws are not written for everyone (44 %); and laws are loosely and arbitrary interpreted by those in power (37 %)[36].

The simultaneous distrust in democratic institutions and law enforcement agencies and belief in the necessity of a strong state has significant consequences. The first is the conviction that it is necessary for the regime to draw its legitimacy from a strong leader rather than a democratic system and organized collective interest groups. On the one hand, distrust in institutions and alienation from society leads to cynicism and passivity, and on the other, support

for a paternalist system in which the state, its leader and collective institutions have priority over citizens' rights. The concept does not create a favourable environment for the development of western-type modern citizenship and civil society. It endorses the continuum of para-constitutional practice of regime. The second consequence is that Russia is apt to orientate towards narrow modernization, focusing on the material basis of the physical infrastructure, production forces, and efficiency of institutions, which is often understood as obedience to superiors. Citizens do not have a means of influencing societal development and the regime has difficulty getting the necessary feedback and response from the citizens. In this context, Dieter Segert links both distrust in institutions and citizens not being capable of influencing societal development to the transformation period. He emphasises that the transformation in the 1990s caused great social insecurity for the majority of the population in the post-socialist world, which diminished their chances to control the political elite. In the 1990s, during the Yeltsin's shock therapy Russia experienced an exceptional drastic collapse of the major elements of citizens' welfare and social policy[8]. As Segert argues, this explains partly Russians' political indifference: without effective social policies and a fair distribution of wealth citizens are constrained in participating in political affairs[37]. Furthermore, high social insecurity also explains the steady popular demand for a strong welfare state.

Citizens' material demands, in particular concerning the welfare state, are responded to asymmetrically: the regime is unable to increase material investments in people's well-being and attempts to replace the deficit with a higher-profile symbolic supply. The annexation of Crimea has served that purpose well, since it has been used by the regime and perceived by the people as the most important achievement of Russia as a great power. For the general public, it has been a real achievement of defending Russia's geopolitical interests and the 'Russian world' (Russkiy Mir) – Russians beyond Russian territory. Symbolically it has translated as Putin's manoeuvre to restore Russia's national pride internationally, its recognition as a great power and as a defence of Russian

[8] Demographic catastrophe of these years has still significant consequences in contemporary Russia.

culture and history. Putin's speech on Crimea to the deputies of Duma on March 18, 2014, was fully loaded of meanings referring explicitly to these symbolic markers starting from the first sentences: "Everything in Crimea speaks of our shared history and pride". In the same chapter Putin mentioned Russian spirituality, how they were baptised as Christians in Crimea, Orthodox civilizational unity of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, and military glory and "graves of Russian soldiers whose bravery brought Crimea into the Russian empire" and Sevastopole as the birthplace of Russian Black Sea Fleet.[38]

The conclusion of the crucial symbolic role of Crimea in replacing material demands so far can be confirmed by referring to a couple of recent surveys. Although taking into account the political and social pressure to support the state leadership and its policies, the results show the main tendency without question. In March 2015, the survey shows that the 'accession of Crimea to Russia' was supported by 88 % of respondents. The share of those who answered definitely yes was 55 % and probably yes 33 %. The numbers have been stable from March 2014, even though people have a quite realistic understanding of the EU's attitude. Although 64 % believe that the EU will extend sanctions against Russia, the support has not diminished into early 2015. By that time, 72 % of respondents answered that instead of finding a compromise with and making concessions to the West in order to get the sanctions lifted, Russia should continue its current approach towards Ukraine[39].

It also seems that the weight of the statists' idea has greatly increased during the Ukrainian crisis. In the survey made in April 2015 as many as 50 % hold the opinion that Russia should 'expand its territories to include regions of concentrated Russian-speaking populations'. Only 23 % are against and 19 % cannot answer. Majority of Russians have turned their backs on Europe, looking more inward and to increasing extent to the East. Only 21 % wanted Russia to join the EU in the foreseeable future, and 20 % wanted to become EU citizens. Nonetheless, an increased anti-western mood is not the only possible interpretation of these results. The second plausible conclusion is that the survey reflects citizens' general understanding of Russia's relation with the West and

the EU. Furthermore, surveys show that people are quite confused about Russia's orientation and consequently also her state identity. In a referendum on joining the EU or the Customs Union with Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, 9 % would vote for the EU, 20 % did not know, 28 % would not vote and 43 % were for the Customs Union[40].

It seems clear that the Western European path, catching up with the European route of broad modernization is out of the question in the near future. Support for the state-led economy and current electoral authoritarian Russian or Soviet type of political system is strong, at 60 %. The western type of democracy has never been favoured much, but in 2015 its support slumped to 11 %, compared with 32 % in 1998[41]. This refers to the assumption that the legitimacy of the regime is still quite strong in spite of all commonly criticized deficits. Since there is no public demand for broad modernization, the Russian leadership does not have any incentive to promote it, particularly if the conflict with the West continues. The question of regime's capacity to meet material demands of the population and its ability to compensate deficits by symbolic supply remain unclear. Without doubt the contradiction have potential to cause unpredictable consequences to the political development in the future.

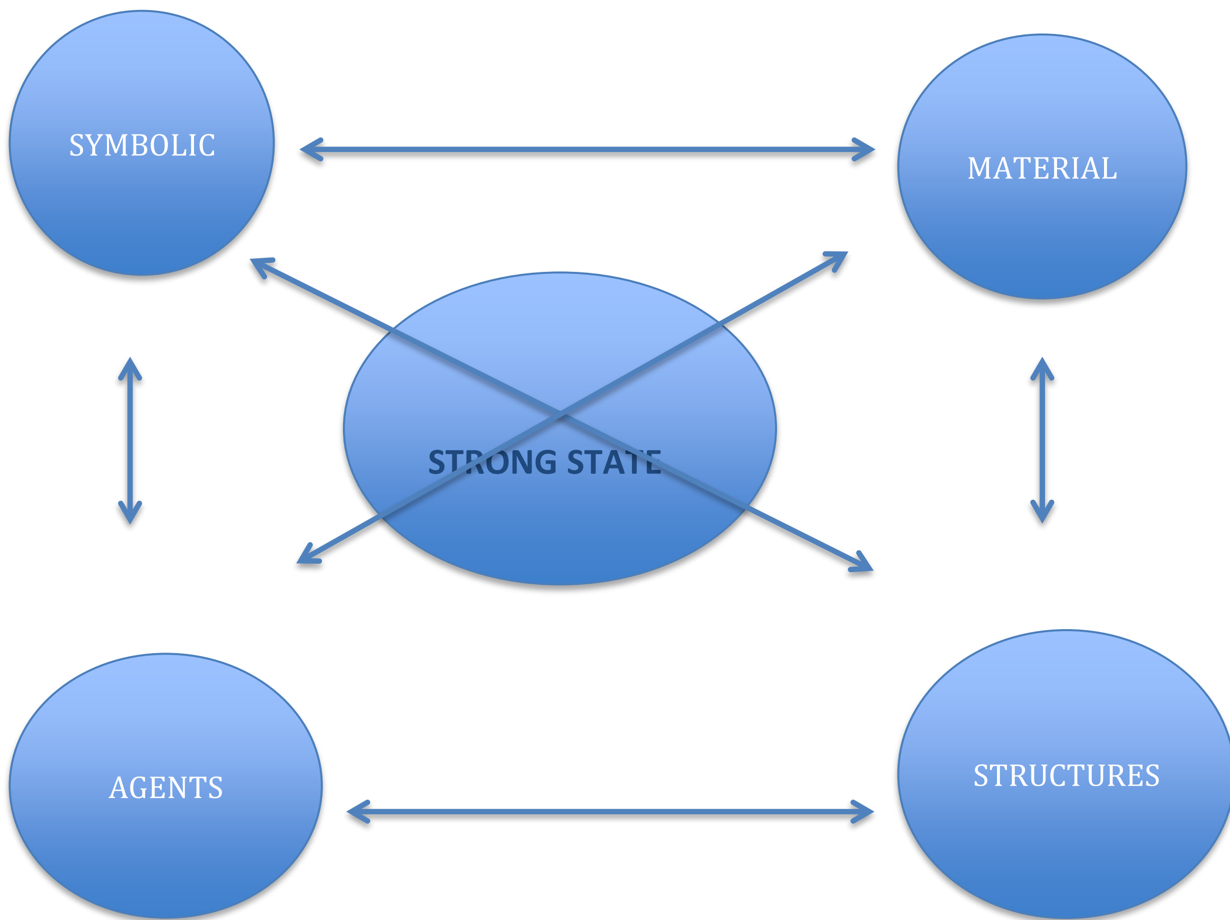

Figure 1 Dimensions of the Strong State in Russia

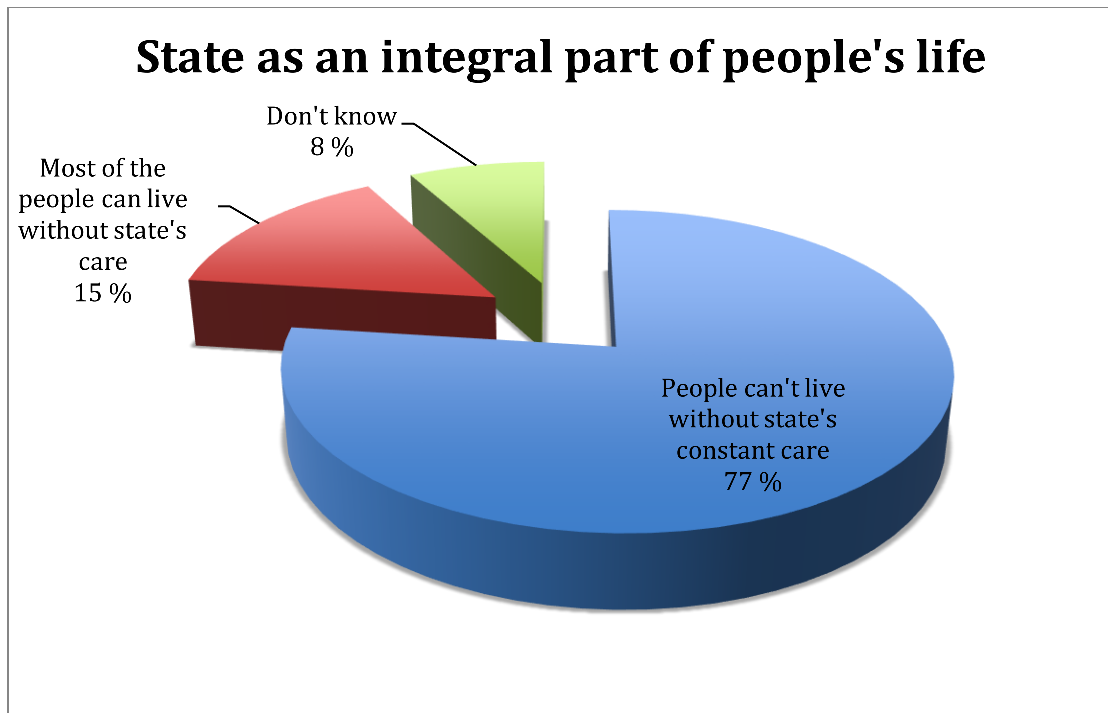

Figure 2 The State as an Integral Part of People’s life in Russia (Levada-Center, 2010b)

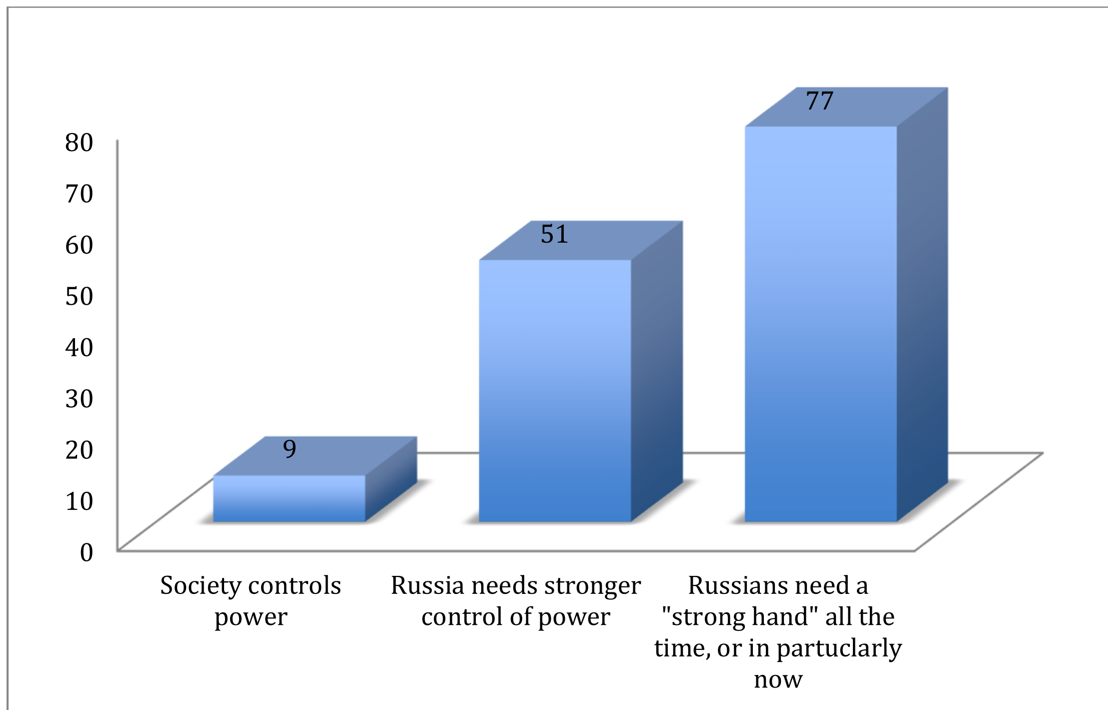

Figure 3 Perceptions of State-Society Relations in Russia (Levada-Center, 2010c)

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