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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Back to the future. Socialism and nationalism as tools for political legitimization

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ABSTRACT: This article analyzes how, in the past years, Russia's political discourse has concentrated on the Country's place and role in the modern world and how top-down political communication seems to have somewhat succeeded in affecting the population's political culture and reviving old ideologies. The armed conflict declared by Russia against Ukraine seems to have had the effect of strengthening – once again - the polarization between the West and the East. New geopolitical arrangements and new power relations are being reorganized, and, in this process, political cultures and ideologies seem to be reshaped. In particular, the data from Russian national surveys on the population's political values and the analysis of political discourses show that Russia seems to have dusted off its old socialist ideology, emphasizing its nationalistic and neo-imperial traits while deepening its neo-authoritarian turn. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and a short period of de-ideologization, the Russian government has repeatedly attempted to develop a nationwide general civil ideology, mainly using the concepts of the "Russian world" and of "neo-Eurasianism", considered as neo-imperial ideologies, that determined the content of public discourse in Russia. Nationalism is both an ideology and a political practice based on the value of the nation as the highest form of social unity. This kind of nationalism is widely used by states through official rhetoric, symbols and ideological institutions (education, social sciences, mass media) to assert civil loyalty and disseminate national legal norms and cultural values. (Tishkov, 2021). Nationalism and Neo-conservatism have become of particular importance to Russian society, and during the last decade, they have become the core of the Country's political actions and rhetoric. Neo-conservatism includes a set of different ideological patterns such as nationalism, imperial claims, orientations on special ways of Russia, the priority of traditional values, etc., which are accompanied by authoritarian tendencies in the political process (A. Panarin, 1994, Dugin 2000). In this way, it seems correct to affirm that

the neo-conservative ideology becomes the sociocultural base of the whole process of power legitimization. In this context and in the frames of the actual political system, no political movement, party, or group of interests can act as a real competitor of the federal government, which has built its ethno-politics not only on the idea of uniting different nations of the Russian Federation but also on ideas of irredentism. This is not totally new. If in the 90s, political discourse and public dialogue were dominated by the idea of democratization and of transition from an authoritarian to an open society, only a decade later, as early as Putin's first mandate, political discourse started to turn to the idea of "stability" and of "sustainability of the system and of the welfare state", coupled with the idea of a so-called "conservative modernization" that essentially implied the beginning of a new era of anti-reformism and a nostalgic call for the Socialist past. In this article, moving from a neo-Marxist perspective on the concept of Political Culture (Burlackij, 1970; Markiewicz, 1971; Wiatr, 1980), we will analyze how these political ideas and values have turned into a political culture that seems coherent with the above mentioned neo-imperial nationalist ideology, and, most importantly, that is inclined to support it. Whereas the Russians who do not support the regime, seem far from being capable of displaying a coherent and alternative political culture, let alone organizing a different political programme that could activate a counteroffensive. While taking into account public speeches from prominent political leaders, the empirical basis of the article derives from the data of the all-Russia annual sociological monitoring "How do you live, Russia" (1992-2023) carried out by the Institute of Socio-Political Research - Branch of the Federal Centre of Theoretical and Applied Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences, through a survey on a sample of 1400-1800 respondents, representative of all the Russian population. As we will see, the data shows that new forms of civic nationalism are largely based on nostalgic sympathies for the Soviet past and a new civil identity, formed successfully during the post-soviet period, is increasingly affirming itself.

KEYWORDS: Ideology, Political culture, Post-soviet society, Political legitimacy, Ideological conflict

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1. Introduction

After the collapse of the Soviet Union political transformations were accompanied, at first, by an intensive process of de-ideologization. In Russia, the term "ideology" was practically excluded from public discourse and political organizations tried to stress their non-ideological character. Furthermore, article 13 of the 1993 Constitution stated that ideological diversity is recognized in the Russian Federation and that no ideology can be established as "state ideology" or as mandatory.¹ Since then the term has had a very negative connotation for at least one decade. It is no coincidence that metaphors such as the "end of history" and "the end of ideology" were very popular in Russia in the 80s-90s when the country seemed relieved by the end of state ideology's dictatorship. At the same time, the formation of a new statehood and the tasks of sustainable political development challenged the political élite who had to start finding grounds for social consolidation, providing not only different levels of group solidarity but also some sort of political consensus on the strategic development of the Country and on the policies to be pursued.

A process that brought with it a new appeal for issues related to the all-Russian identity that activated the formation of a new ideological discourse, promoted both at a political and scientific level and resulted in a new "state ideology".

The connection between the State and some definite ideological priorities for Russian society has been repeatedly raised by the President of the Russian Federation in his official messages to the Nation and in

¹<http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/constitution>

various interviews (Putin 2000, 2012) and by the speeches of politicians and other prominent public officials and intellectuals (Dugin 2021). In particular, speaking about the need to preserve the Russian identity and traditional values, in 2021, Putin said that “as always during challenging times, our traditional religions stepped up to provide spiritual support to our society... Today, family, friendship, mutual assistance, graciousness and unity have also come to the fore. Spiritual and moral values, which are already being forgotten in some countries, have, on the contrary, made us stronger. And we will always uphold and defend these values” (Putin, 2021)². Later in October 2023, at the plenary session of the Valdai discussion club³, Vladimir Putin stressed that the ideological confrontation on the world stage will never end, and the enduring importance of national values and traditions will be strengthened⁴.

So, while many Western scholars and politicians continue to babble about the end of ideologies without realizing that they are immersed in one, Russia, in its struggle to keep a distance from the old enemy that’s still perceived as hostile, turns to its own specificity: its history, its past grandeur, its national and identity traits. Making it a new ideology hopefully capable of keeping the Federation socially cohesive and compact in its support for the established power. It is an ideology that comes “from the above” in a top-down process in order to direct the social and political actions that will support the present regime, even in difficult times. Of course, every regime, at every latitude, has, at least to a certain extent, displayed a resocialization process to gain support from the population, to orient its life and actions and to sterilize the opposition. In a fragmented society such as post-Soviet Russia, the simplest way to keep the population compact behind the established power seems to be the classical “close ranks against the enemy” strategy, which has enhanced the traditional aspects of society and, most of all, patriotism. As we will see in the next paragraphs, since the Crimea affair in 2014 started the process that brought Russia outside the Council of Europe in 2022, patriotism, in its multiple forms, has become a main trait of Russian’s political culture coagulating into a new form of ideology. A sentiment that brings with it a reevaluation of a “glorious” past, including that concerning the Stalinist era.

As one of the ideologists of the modern political regime in Russia stated: “We need a new offensive ideology that would restore Russian courage within [the Country] and then be projected outside. We have a huge number of ideas that lie on the table and which we do not use.... One of Russia’s tasks is to stop giving a damn about the West. We must look at them with a sufficient level of arrogance. They are experiencing a civilizational crisis.”. By affirming this Sergey Karaganov (2020), Doctor of Historical Sciences, Honorary Chairman of the Presidium of the Council on Foreign and Defence Policy has clearly redefined the polarization between the West and Russia that was given for dead after the collapse of the Soviet Union, whereas it seems to be clearly alive and kicking, at least in the eyes of the Russian ruling class. Then he moves on to explain that the development of a national ideology to be “implanted” in the nation is an urgent matter that needs to be taken care of: “This is our job, which we do not do, to develop a national ideology and plant it. For a long time, we lied to ourselves that it would come from the people. No ideology, except destructive, has ever come from below. My big complaints about this matter are to myself, to you and the country's leadership. The communist idea died in the 1970s, and no other idea replaced it. Lack of faith, pessimism... And we fell down” (*ibidem*).

In other words, the Russian government and the intellectuals and mass media propagandists supporting it, seem to seek and rely on ideologies capable of mobilization.

Given this context, in this article, we have decided to analyze how, in the past years, Russia’s political discourse has concentrated on the Country’s place and role in the modern world and on how top-down political communication seems to have somewhat succeeded in affecting the population’s political culture and in reviving old ideologies. In particular, the data from national surveys on the population’s political values and the analysis of political discourses show that Russia seems to have dusted off its old socialist ideology, emphasizing its nationalistic and neo-imperial traits while deepening its neo-authoritarian turn. Furthermore, the analysis of the dynamics of the population’s political culture through the years has allowed us to monitor

² Putin, V., 2021. Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly. Kremlin.ru, 21 April [online]. Available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/65418> [Accessed 15 March 2024].

³ The Valdai Club is a Russian think tank established in 2004, it has a conservative orientation and President Putin usually attends its conferences.

⁴ Key thesis of V. Putin at the Valdai Forum on 05.10.2023. <https://ria.ru/20231005/putin-1900586407.html>

whether and how these attempts from the ruling class to shape a top-down nationalistic ideology in order to find social unity as well as political self-legitimation have been successful. And to what extent they have managed to shift the population's ideological and political values as well as their attitudes towards the leadership in charge.

As we will see in the following chapters, we found that these attempts and political discourses seem to have had an effect on the political culture of the population for the general levels of trust and support towards the President, of appreciation for nationalistic values and the Soviet socialist past seem to have grown in the last few years, together with a growth in the support of the political regime. Whereas the Russians who do not support the regime, seem far from being capable of displaying a coherent and alternative political culture, let alone organizing a different political programme that could activate a counteroffensive.

2. Methodological note

From a theoretical perspective, here we refer to ideology as a constellation of abstract representations (Vorstellungen), which materially condition the life of society, justifying the existing state of affairs and legitimizing a specific economic and political structure (Marx and Engels, 1845–1846). From an operational and methodological perspective, when developing our research tools and in the interpretation of the results, we mainly relied on more recent works defining ideology as “a set of ideas, beliefs, values and opinions demonstrating repetitive patterns that consciously or unintentionally compete in public policy development in an attempt to justify, explain, challenge or change the social and political mechanisms and processes of the political community” (Freeden 2001), but we also found it useful to broaden our theoretical perspective on the ideological processes here analyzed, by including those works that considered ideology as a symbolic form of domination (Mannheim 1954; Thompson 1990), mainly when ideology is displayed as a field of discourse (Žižek 1989). In addition, we also analyzed and took into consideration the work of Russian researchers who addressed both theoretical and methodological aspects of the study of ideology (Slavin 2004; Golovchenko 2022; Konstantinov 2022) and applied issues related to the possibility and necessity of constructing and using state and civil unification ideology by the authorities (Petuchov 2008; Melville 2018).

Whereas, by “political culture” we here adopt a broader definition than that originally given by Almond and Verba (Almond and Verba, 1965). In particular, we disregard its substantially individual and psychological traits and reconnect with the Marxist, albeit less widespread, tradition of political culture studies that contemplate both material and immaterial aspects of a culture, such as laws, ethics, knowledge, behaviour and attitudes (Wiatr 1980: 105; Burlackij 1970; Markiewicz 1971; Levashov 2020; Saccà 2004, 2014, 2020, 2021, 2023).

From this perspective, “a political culture ... includes citizens' beliefs and knowledge about the political sphere, their values, political/electoral behaviours, attitudes, symbols and objects, institutions and legislation, political organization, and actions, as well as political theories - that contribute to the formation of ideas and ideologies, of legal and institutional forms. Last but not least, a political culture includes attitudes as well as feelings, evaluations as well as options” (Saccà 2021: p.38). In other words, a political culture is therefore extended to the totality of attitudes, values, and patterns of behaviour existing in a given society with reference to the reciprocal relationship between state power and citizens. It includes knowledge about politics, evaluations of political phenomena, emotional aspects of political orientations and patterns of political behaviour. We focus particularly on the dynamics and distribution of ideological values, so-called idea patterns (M Freedon), which are widespread in the mass consciousness of Russians.

As far as the methodology is concerned, in order to trace the ideological traits of today's Russian political power, we have taken into account the most significant recent public speeches from prominent political leaders that are representative of the main trends in present political discourse, and we have then tried to assess their effects on the people's political culture.

In order to analyze these effects, we relied on the data of the annual monitoring survey "How are you living, Russia?", conducted by the Institute of Socio-Political Research - Branch of the Federal Center of Theoretical

and Applied Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences) (FCTAS RAS) since 1992⁵, to which co-author Nataliya Velikaya has contributed through the years. The sample size varied from 1,312 to 1,866 respondents in different years of the study. The last survey was carried out in June 2023, and the sample size was 1,700 respondents. The research is based on a proportional quota all-Russian sample with interdependent features of the general population: gender, age, education, and place of residence. Territorial placement of the sample depends on the economic and geographical zoning of the Country while respecting the proportion of the population and the proportions between urban and rural populations. The monitoring is conducted as a questionnaire survey, the toolkit includes a set of indicators measuring the dynamics of social and political views and assessments of Russian citizens over 30 years.⁶

3. Ideological public discourse as an instrument of legitimization of modern Russia's political regime

If we look at the data, we can see that since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Country has not found a new, clear, undisputed, unitarian and affirmed ideology, but certainly, efforts have been made in that direction. We can say that the various ideological tendencies are rather eclectic and do not correspond to the well-known ideological categories used by Western political studies. And yet in more recent years, there is a new flourishing of ideological work, a sort of "Ideological Renaissance" as Andrei Melville calls it (Melville, 2018), that makes us foresee the premises for a new polarization between the West and the Russian Federation based on a new ideological battle.

Given that the political regime in Russia has undergone many transformations in recent decades, including an authoritarian turn, the Russian government and Russian society as well, throughout its recent history, have searched for a new identity⁷ and new mechanisms of legitimization. These mechanisms had started to be renamed, if not as a national ideology in itself (Denisov 2020: 105), at least as a national idea that could consolidate society.

Recent years' public discourses given by prominent political leaders can be read in the light of the theoretical attempts that in the second decade of the Third Millennium have started to promote a newly formulated "national idea", rotated around the concept of the "Russian World" (Narochnitskaya 2007; Nikonov 2015) and of the so-called "New Conservatism" (Panarin 2014). This idea was repeatedly proposed in public discourse and was meant to replace both state-bureaucratic socialism and market consumer capitalism, without openly rejecting neither liberalism nor communism in its old form.

The "Russian world" concept is based on reviving and preserving the national identity as a strategy to oppose Western influence and culture. The Russian World concept derives from pre-communist pan-slavism ideas and is based on philosophical constructions such as the "Russian idea" and "neo-Eurasianism". It includes references to a well-known Russian culture people can easily identify themselves with (Shchedrovitsky 2000; Dugin 2000), but along those lines, it also specifically states the idea of Russia's political sovereignty (Gronsky 2017 p. 189-190). Significantly, Dugin has recently been cited as "Putin's brain" during his last interview by

⁵ Annual monitoring survey "How are you living, Russia?", conducted by the Institute of Socio-Political Research - Branch of the Federal Center of Theoretical and Applied Sociology of Russian Academy of Sciences with the participation of the co-author of the article Nataliya Velikaya. Head of the project is Victor Levashov, doctor of sociology, Director of the Institute of Socio-Political Research.

⁶ Survey: How are you, Russia? Express information. 53rd stage of the sociological monitoring, June 2023 / V. K. Levashov, N. M. Velikaya, I. S. Shushpanova [et al.]. Moscow: FCTAS RAS, 2023. – 91 p.

⁷ At the end of the 80's and at the beginning of the '90s intellectuals and scientists started a debate about the crisis of identity of the citizenship. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the issue became an even more urgent matter- In the Soviet Union the unifying state ideology served the purpose but after its collapse, all of a sudden, an entire Country seemed confused about its own identity and It seems confused about their future as state, as nation, as community: ...who were the Russian people, after all? Was its identity based on ethnicity, or on its religion or on Soviet identity or was it to be individuated in its political identity? And furthermore, what political identity was there, in the '90s? Were the Russians still to be considered as leftists or not?

the American journalist Tucker Carlson⁸, with reference to his ideas of creating the so-called New Empire, which should confront the USA in the new global order. This New Empire should unite Eurasian and some European countries. It is interesting that at first, Dugin advocated the creation of a broad geopolitical axis of allies: Germany, Iran, Japan — in order to resist Atlanticist influence [Dugin 2000], but later his views and those of his followers increasingly shifted towards distancing themselves from the West favouring instead Russia's transition to an Orthodox civilization pole with traditional values, sovereignty, integrating other countries" [Dugin 2022]. Thus, the "Russian world" concept can be considered both as an instrument of soft power and as a tool for exerting pressure in international relations (Vasiliev, 2021), like the articulation and defense of the idea of irredentism, for example, which was clearly manifested during the last "special military operation".

We consider it important to emphasize here the metaphorical nature of the term "Russian World", primarily due to the insufficient theoretical elaboration of the concept by contemporary Russian political philosophers' literature (Meguyev 1997; Kot 2023). Modern "Russian world" ideologists basically relied on the soteriological "Russian idea" deriving from Russian religious philosophy⁹, based on the conviction of the Messianic character of the Russian people, of the fact that they are God-chosen and that Russia should follow its own special path. Obviously, modernity forced today's ideologists to update these ideas to the existing reality in a mix of high philosophical and political reflections and the usual down-to-earth pragmatism of party programs. As a result, the gradual movement of the concept into the sphere of real politics was accompanied by a rather aggressive discourse, which caused fair criticism from a number of researchers (Inozemtsev 2015: 150-155; Travin, Gel'man and Zaostrovsev, 2017).

Nonetheless, a new type of hybrid ideology, known under the name of "new conservatism", can nowadays be recognized as somewhat successful. As Radikov rightly noted, "Post-Soviet Russian conservatism arises as a reaction to the consequences of radical socio-economic reforms. After the rejection of the imposed liberal ideologies, a request for conservative attitudes was formed in the mass consciousness. The government's turn to a conservative social order was caused by the shock of the defeat of the first liberal party... in the 1993 elections [a party that was already well inserted in the Country's power circles]." (Radikov 2019: 62).

Conceptually, a new conservatism appeared in the "conservative modernization" program of the pro-presidential party "United Russia", during the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev; but also in the program articles of V. Surkov, the former head of the presidential administration— who focused on sovereign democracy and on a "Putinism era"¹⁰; and last, but not least, in the ideas of social conservatism reflected in a number of speeches by President Putin and in Russia's National Security Strategy documents¹¹. This ideological scheme includes not only an appeal to traditional values from the pre-socialist era but also the romanticization of the socialist period of Russia's Soviet history, which, in the current political discourse, is narrated exclusively as a time of victories and technological achievements¹².

Despite the efforts being made in the ideological field, the development of an integrative ideology faced a number of difficulties, since not a single idea (neither the idea of a national revival, nor the idea of a strong Russia, nor the idea of returning to socialist principles, nor building a free economy) in Russia is perceived by the majority as a widely spread and supported "national" ideology. The Country doesn't seem to be ready for the return of a "state ideology". But at the same time, the ideological framework of those supporting the

⁸ The Tucker Carlson Encounter: Alexandr Dugin. Tucker Carlson Network. 29.04.2024. <https://tuckercarlson.com/the-tucker-carlson-encounter-aleksandr-dugin/>

⁹ presented by various authors between the end of the XIXth and the beginning of the XXth century, see for example Soloviev 2011; Berdyaev, 2023; Ilyin, 1993; Florenskiy, 2009

¹⁰Surkov V. Dolgoe gosudarstvo Putina [Putin's Long State] // Nezavisimaya gazeta. 2019. URL: https://yandex.ru/turbo/ng.ru/s/ideas/2019-02-11/5_7503_surkov.html. (In Russ.)

¹¹ Strategiya nacionalnoi bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federacii [National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation: Decree of the President of the Russian Federation]. (2021). <http://government.ru/docs/all/135405/> (In Russian)

¹² Furthermore, a number of researchers prefer to associate the phenomenon of Russian social neoconservatism with Eurasianism, emphasising Russia's emerging transition from Western ideologies to its own ideology of Eurasianism, reflected in the turn to the East (Kurylev, Stanis, Barannik and Zakaryan, 2019:151-165).

government seems to be more coherent than the one of those opposing it. In fact, in spite of the Country's apparent fragmented ideological picture, the main ideological fracture is represented by the positions of those supporting the government and its Neo-conservatism ideological traits on the one hand and, on the other, the articulated position of those who are against the freezing of the present political regime and express a will for some kind of change. However, this fracture has not proven to be enough to lead to the formation of adequate and viable political alternatives, while, on the other hand, élite groups close to the present regime close ranks and proceed from their thesis, voiced by the speaker of the Russian parliament, Vyacheslav Volodin, at the Forum of the Valdai discussion club, "attacks on Putin are attacks on Russia ... If there is no Putin, there is no Russia"¹³.

As we will see in the next paragraphs, the above may not be an entirely far-fetched statement, for today, the president seems to benefit from a rather large consensus, at least from those who feel free to participate in academic surveys.

In any case, the analysis of the dynamic data through the years, concerning the structure of the ideological concepts valued by the population, actually shows at least a partial dependence on the content of public discourse which, in 20 years, has clearly shifted towards conservative and traditional values, exploiting the concept of the "Russian world" and the idea of reviving the former greatness of the Country on the basis of Russia's and the West's contrasting interests.

4. Contrasting ideologies: attitudes towards socialism and capitalism in today's Russian political culture

It should not surprise, then if an integral part of today's widespread ideological concepts in Russia is still the ideas of "capitalism" and "socialism" that have characterized last century's economic and geopolitical order.

In Russia a market economy, associated with radical liberal transformations, began with the dismantling of the political, economic and social foundations of the socialist social system and it was accompanied by slogans on market economy, denationalization, privatization, transformation, liberalization and de-ideologization. This process has taken different forms in different periods of time, and it continues to these days. The bitter reality, though, is that it has brought with it a widespread loss of social gains: social insecurity, a decrease in welfare and a predictable deepening of social fractures that have resulted in a general feeling of disappointment towards capitalism. At the same time, the "capitalism – socialism" dichotomy clearly emerges in the mass consciousness of civil society, reflecting the problems of today's actual social reality, in which different ideological constructs coexist.

Fueled by the leader's political discourse and by the theoretical attempts from intelligentsia to emphasize the glorious aspects of the Country's past, especially those that oppose it to the Western political and cultural traditions, "socialism" seems to have an absolutely positive image in public opinion while the concept of "capitalism" has a predominantly negative image, according to the values of the integral index calculated on the basis of the results of the semantic differential.

If we look at table n. 1, we can see that when Russian citizens are asked to assess capitalism and socialism as socio-economic and political systems, the verbal characterization of these two alternative systems by public opinion can be synthesized as follows:

- Socialism is a collectivist society characterized by law and order, patriotism of citizens, democracy and respect for human rights, morality and mutual assistance, equality of all before the law;
- Capitalism is a society of private property and competition, characterized by the power of "the few", corruption, crime, and social insecurity.

These formulations are similar to the ideological framework formed in the historical memory of the population of the former USSR, which, as our data shows, was successfully reproduced during the years of post-Soviet transformations.

¹³Volodin's speech at the XI Valdai Forum. 22.10.2014 <https://yandex.ru/video/preview/4378283249987929716>

Respondents' assessment of the two alternative socio-economic and political systems – Socialism and Capitalism

(Russia, 2023, % of the number of respondents)

	SOCIALISM	CAPITALISM
Justice	44,3	3,8
Order	34,5	7,8
Freedom	16,9	16,7
Collectivism	42,5	3,3
Crime	1,2	21,4
Human rights	24,6	6,8
Competition	1,0	51,4
Poverty	10,3	19,2
People's power	24,3	2,1
Spiritual	14,3	1,8
Suppression of personality	6,4	19,1
Corruption	3,5	39,5
Humanism	17,1	1,8
Morality	24,7	1,6
Social insecurity (vulnerability)	7,6	27,0
Private property	0,8	61,3
Economic backwardness	8,4	5,2
High standard of living	13,6	12,9
The power of a few	5,2	43,4
Technical progress	8,2	18,8
Patriotism	38,4	1,4
Mutual assistance	29,0	1,1
Equality of all before the law	29,1	3,4

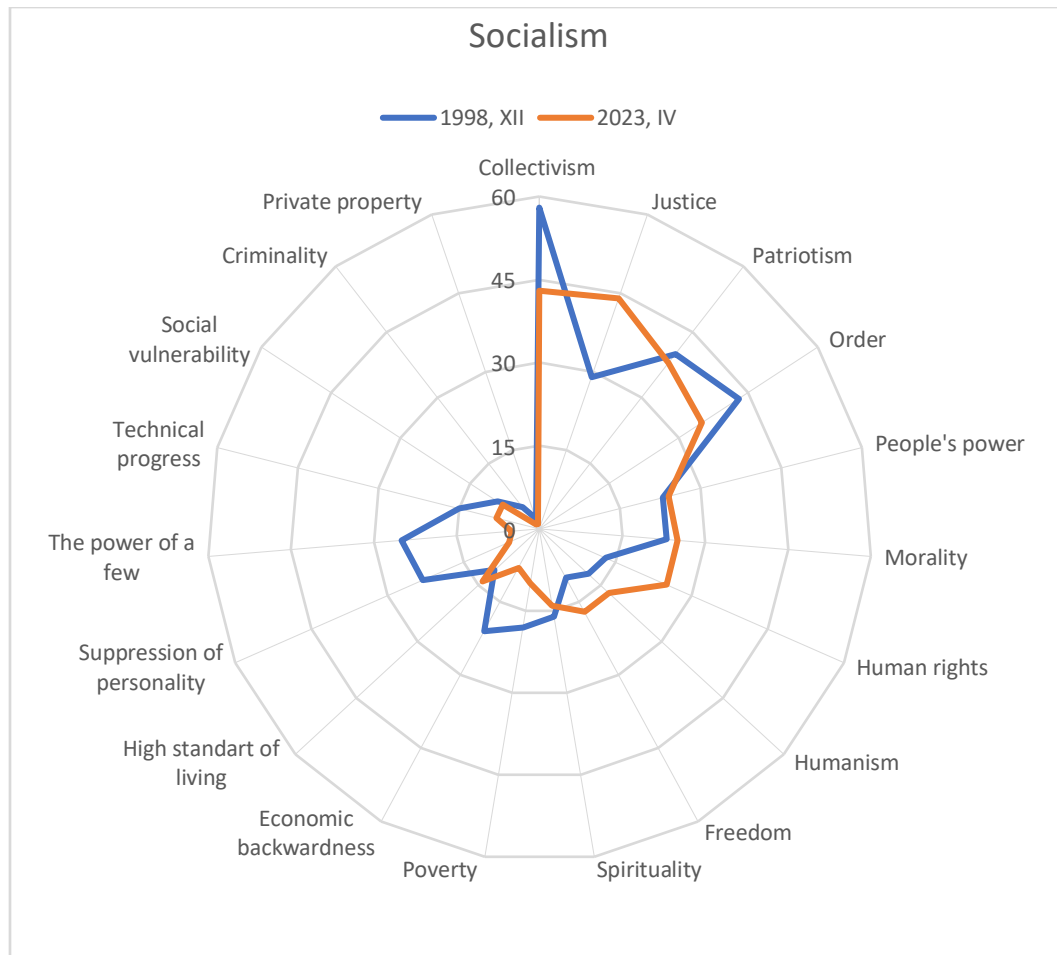
Source: Annual monitoring survey "How are you living, Russia?". Institute of Socio-Political Research of the FCTAS RAS (Russian Academy of Sciences). Year 2023

If we look at the following graphs (n. 1 and 2), the dynamics of the operational concepts concerning the essence of socialism show the growth of positive connotations and the fall of negative ones. Thus, over the

past 20 years, the perception of socialism as a time associated with the suppression of personality, violation of human rights, economic backwardness and social vulnerability has significantly decreased.

Graph N. 1

Cognitive operational opinions on the concepts of "socialism" (Russia, % of the number of respondents)



Source: Annual monitoring survey "How are you living, Russia?", conducted by the Institute of Socio-Political Research of the FCTAS RAS (Russian Academy of Sciences). Years 1998, 2023

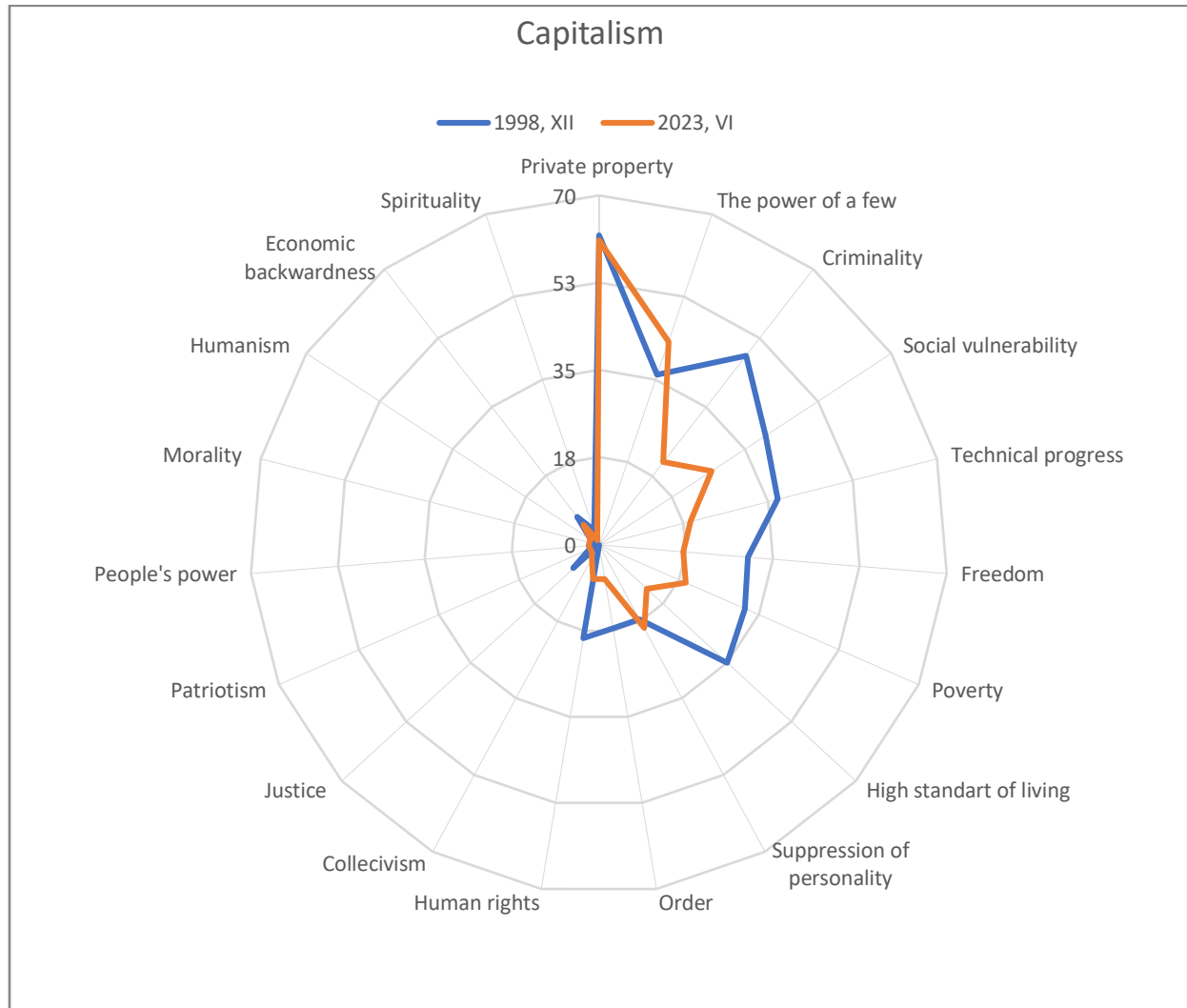
It can be said that the further socialism is in the past, the more attractive it looks in the memory of the generations living today, which allows a number of authors to describe social ideas about socialism in terms of a "lost paradise".

As for the assessments of capitalism, we see a decrease in positive connotations, such as technological progress, high standards of living, freedom, which is associated with the unsuccessful experience of the reforms in the post-Soviet period. At the same time, compared with the 90s, indicators of social insecurity, poverty, and crime have also fallen.

Graph N. 2

Cognitive operational opinions on the concepts of "Capitalism"

(Russia, % of the number of respondents)



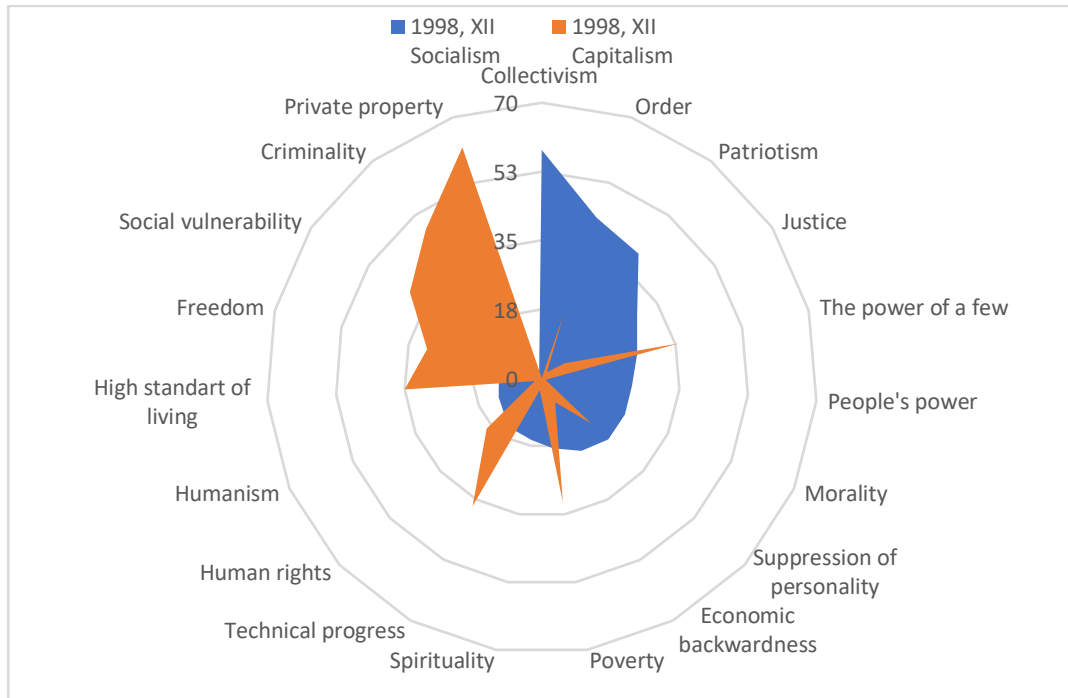
Source: Annual monitoring survey "How are you living, Russia?". Institute of Socio-Political Research of the FCTAS RAS (Russian Academy of Sciences). Years 1998, 2023

It can be assumed that the opinions of respondents in the 90s were determined by their own personal experience. In the 90s, Russian citizens were just starting to live under capitalism, the main signs of which, for them, were crime and social insecurity, along with some of capitalism's fundamental characteristics such as private property. Socialism, the rejection of which was declared by the government and promoted by the overwhelming majority of the media, despite the information and psychological pressure exerted, was still associated with the positive ideas of collectivism, order and patriotism.

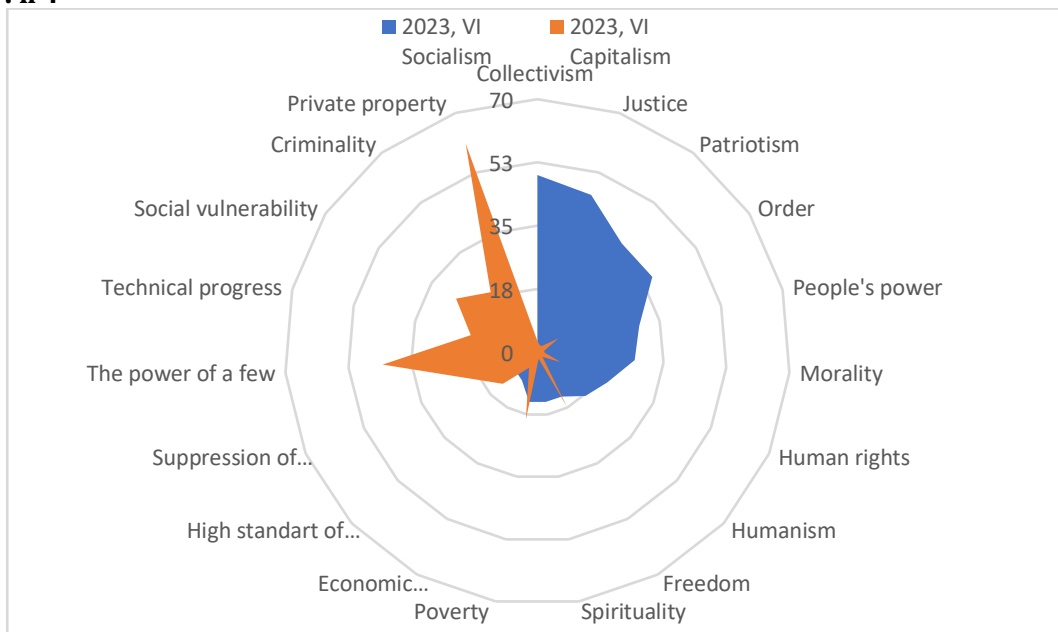
In other words, the "capitalism– socialism" dichotomy clearly emerges in the mass consciousness of society (graphs N. 3 and 4), reflecting the problem field of the current social reality, in which different ideological constructs and different idea-patterns coexist (Obraz Budushego, 2023: 30).

Graphs N. 3

Dichotomy of cognitive operational opinion on the Concepts of "Socialism" and "Capitalism"
(Russia, % of the number of respondents)



Graph . n 4



Source: Annual monitoring survey "How are you living, Russia?". Institute of Socio-Political Research of the FCTAS RAS (Russian Academy of Sciences). Years 1998, 2023

Later transformations of the political regime, which have manifested themselves most intensively since Putin's third term, were accompanied, in political discourse and the cultural sphere, by harsh criticism of the first post-Soviet transformations and the '90s liberalization policies on the one hand and by appeals to the positive experience of the Soviet Union on the other.

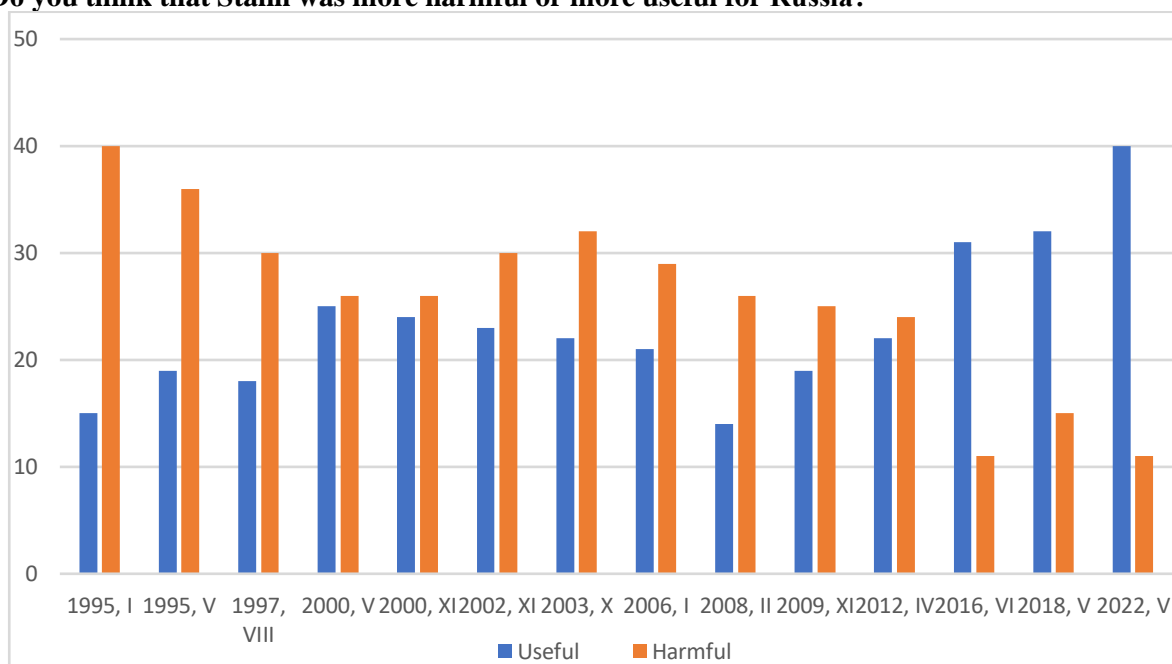
Nostalgic sentiments were actively fueled by the cultural policy of the Russian Federation that started financing films, TV projects and art exhibitions dedicated to the Soviet era and the military victories and achievements of the Soviet people in economy, sports, space, etc. Attempts to rehabilitate the darkest pages of the Soviet past have clearly intensified. On the one hand, they restored monuments to Joseph Stalin, for example, on the other, they limited the activities of organizations that were engaged in preserving the memory of the victims of Stalinist repression, which led to a significant increase in the number of citizens who sympathize with the Soviet leader. The dynamics of the attitudes towards Stalin, whose number of sympathizers increased from 15% in 1995 to 40% in 2022, look particularly indicative (see Graph n. 5).

These data lead us to the conclusion that this positive sentiment associated with the glorification and mythologization of the socialist era and with widespread criticism of democratic and market reforms contributed to the increase in the number of people who consider socialism as the optimal model and constructs a political chimaera that is increasingly mutating towards Soviet dystopia.

Graph n. 5

Attitudes towards Stalin (%)

“Do you think that Stalin was more harmful or more useful for Russia?”



Source: Annual monitoring survey "How are you living, Russia?". Institute of Socio-Political Research of the FCTAS RAS (Russian Academy of Sciences). Years 1995-2022

As a result, the number of Russians who would prefer to see the future of Russia as socialist has grown significantly and has reached its maximum in 2023 when 47% of respondents confirmed that they would like to live in a socialist society (see Graph. N. 6). The dichotomous perception of socialism and capitalism as alternative political systems is typical for all generations of Russians.

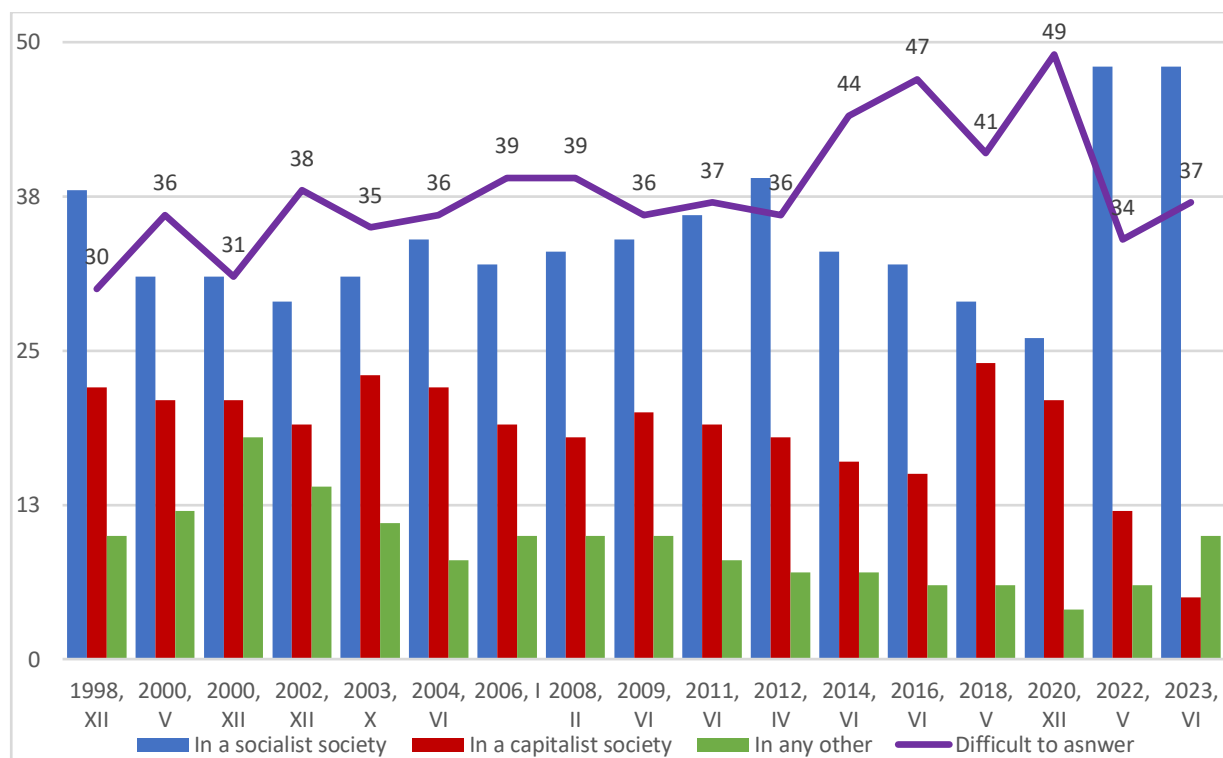
We have to underline that capitalism (as it has developed in modern Russia) is rejected by all social groups regardless of their income and of their age. One third of those who have not lived in the socialist era (18-40 years old) refer that they would prefer to live in a socialist society. Of course, these attitudes also partially

depend on the political orientation of the respondents. As we can see from the following table, 86% of the Socialists, 75% of those who identify themselves as Communists, even half of the Liberals (47%) and of the Patriots (52%), 41% of the Conservatives, and one third of those who identify themselves as Democrats, refer that they would like to live in a Socialist Country.

There is also a high percentage of vacillators, who are unable to determine which political system they would like to live in. These are mainly Nationalists (64.4%), Social-Democrats (45.2%), Conservatives (43.3%), followed by Democrats (38.1%) and Patriots (32.4%).

Graph. N. 6

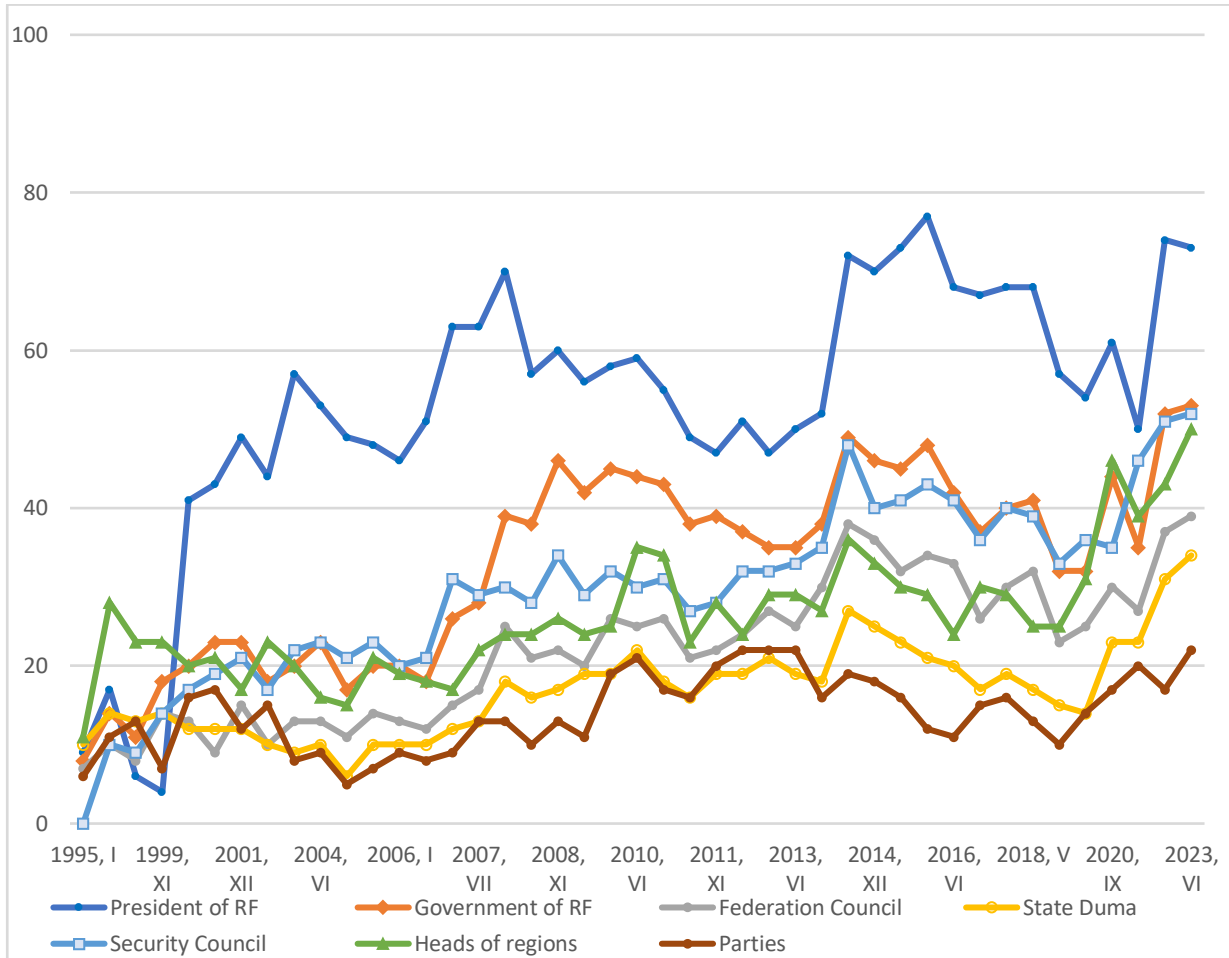
Respondent's opinion about the type of society they would prefer to live in



Source: Annual monitoring survey "How are you living, Russia?". Institute of Socio-Political Research of the FCTAS RAS (Russian Academy of Sciences). Years 1998-2023

It is also interesting to note that the authoritarian turn is reflected in some of the respondent's answers. For example, in graph. N. 7 we can see that the levels of trust towards political institutions are basically concentrated towards the President of the Russian Federation and, in lower amounts, towards the national government and the Security Council, in a way that has more or less steadily grown through the years, with remarkable peaks in correspondence of the two main recent conflicts with the West (2013-2014 the Crimea affair; 2014 the "Maidan revolution" and 2022 the invasion of Ukraine).

Graph. n. 7
Dynamics of the level of trust in political institutions
 (Russia, % of the number of respondents)

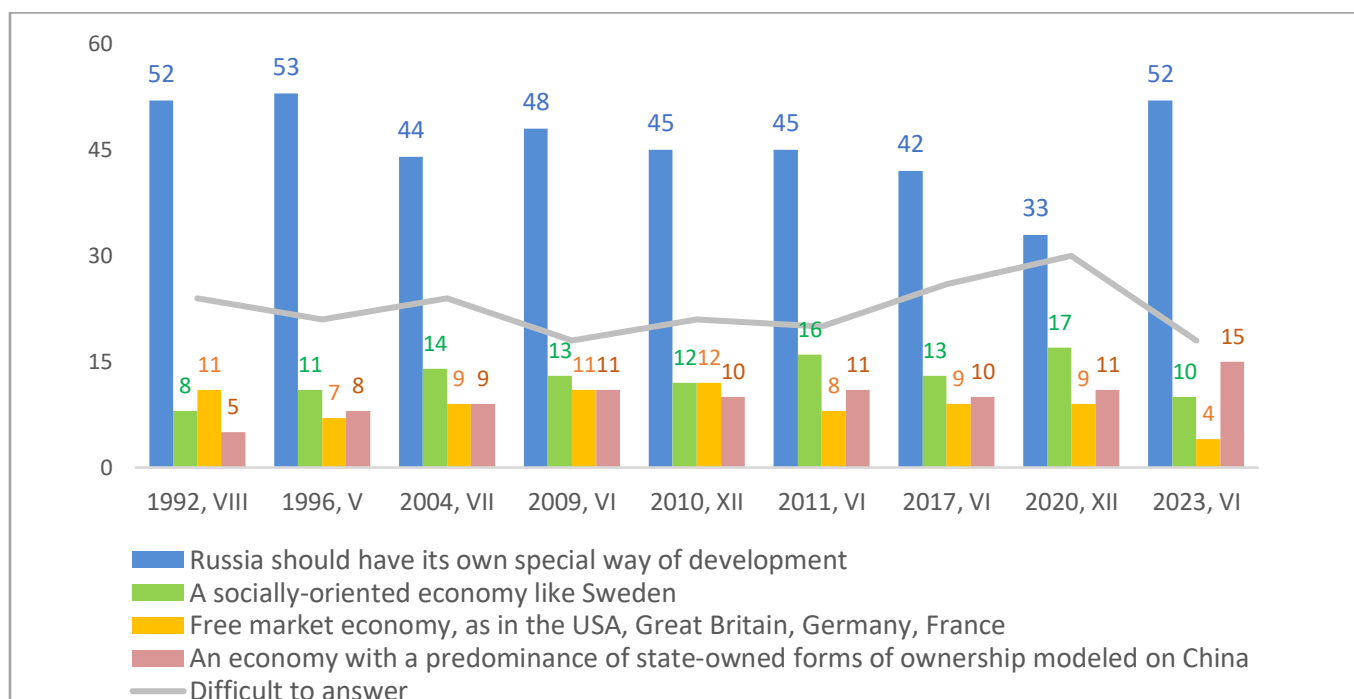


Source: Annual monitoring survey "How are you living, Russia?". Institute of Socio-Political Research of the FCTAS RAS (Russian Academy of Sciences). Years 1995-2023

As we mentioned at the beginning of the article, the ideological context created by the government actualizes the ideas in support of the "Russian world", it emphasizes the extremely positive value of the Russian national identity and of the "Russian way", so it is no wonder that, as we can see in the following table, 52.3% of the respondents believe that Russia should have its own *special path* of development based on the traditional values of Russian civilization and on ideas about fair domestic economic relations as it was in the soviet period.

The majority of people of all age groups and of both urban and rural backgrounds seem to prefer a Russian's "own way" of development, following the power élite stereotyped narration of the Nation's grandeur, and when it comes to defining possible alternatives, answers seem to be less definite. Not the social democratic system experienced in Northern Europe, not the state economy like in China and certainly not a free market economy as in the Western Countries.

Graph. N. 8
Respondents' opinion on which type of economic development is most acceptable for Russia
 (RF, % of the number of respondents)



Source: Annual monitoring survey "How are you living, Russia?". Institute of Socio-Political Research of the FCTAS RAS (Russian Academy of Sciences). Years 1992-2023

Actually, there is only one type of economic development everybody seems to have clear ideas about: no-one seems to accept the classic Western capitalism, which the Country started experiencing after the Fall of the Soviet Union. But the experiment left Russians poorer and feeling the Country as less powerful than before. So, it is no wonder that today the "Free market economy" doesn't seem appealing to any age group of the Russian population.

5. Ideological dominants of the political culture of modern Russian society

In order to try to evaluate the impact on society of the regime's ideological discourse and authoritarian tendencies, we need to analyze the dynamics and fluctuations of political values that determine the trends of public consciousness as far as ideologies are concerned. In order to try to evaluate the impact on society of these top-down efforts to create a socially cohesive ideology, we need to analyze the data on the political culture of the Russian population through the years.

As we can see from table n. 3 the key ideas shared by Russians, which could form the core of Russia's renaissance policy, remain basically unchanged throughout the post-Soviet period, which indicates a steady reproduction of the political culture formed by the end of the 80s. The most popular concepts shared by the majority of the population are Justice, Order, Peace, Law, Human Rights. For many years, Justice and Order have dominated the structure of Russian political culture (Velikaya, Novozhenina 2021). At the same time, the value of "Peace" has significantly raised by 10 points since the 2014 Crimea affair. This remarkable increase can be explained by the population's forecasts of possible conflicts and by the later reality of the "special military operation". We can expect this value to keep on increasing in 2024 due to the recent appearance of signs of war on Russian territory (like the drones in Belgorod that caused three victims in January 2024, but

also in 2023 in Crimea, in Moscow when some drones damaged some buildings and in other regions, also in 2023.

From a broader perspective, it can be stated that the absolute majority of the population sees themselves in a state governed by the principles of social justice, without wars and social conflicts (but with not much attention paid to human rights) (table n. 2). The same values they have indicated as typical of a socialist society. So, while, as we will see in Table n. 3, they lament a lack of guarantees for civil rights in modern Russia; it seems that this “new conservatism” operation promoted by the power and intellectual élite is somewhat successful, at least in the “socialist” and “nostalgic” part of its programme. Certainly, this entails a certain level of contradiction for some of its core values seem far from being guaranteed by the government, although it is difficult to count this as proof of widespread - although not outspoken - levels of dissatisfaction towards the present regime: for example, we selected the most significant values, which in each age group were preferred by at least 20% of respondents: Justice, Peace, Order, Freedom, Human Rights, Law. Let us note that the priority of what seem to be the principles of the rule of law is present amongst all generations but although these answers could make us think of a quest for a society based on the rule of law, we have to be cautious before drawing this conclusion for two main reasons: 1) we cannot forget how strong is the general sentiment of antipathy towards capitalism and so far we have not seen in history many examples (if any) of societies based on the rule of law without being also based on the free market and on liberal democracy; 2) furthermore, if we look at these same values of Justice, Human Rights, Law, in the dynamic perspective, we can see that they have steadily (and at times dramatically) decreased since 1995.

Table n. 2

Concepts that, according to representatives of various age groups, could form the basis of the policy of development, independence and prosperity of Russia.

(Russia, 2023, % of the number of respondents in groups)

Concepts	Age					
	18-24	25-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	More than 60
1. Freedom	27,8	24,1	20,4	16,9	9,7	14,9
2. Justice	30,4	30,1	28,0	32,2	26,7	41,9
3. Human rights	24,1	22,9	22,7	25,4	17,0	14,0
4. Order	16,5	21,7	19,9	20,3	24,4	20,0
5. Peace	29,1	25,3	26,5	30,5	36,9	26,5
6. Law	17,7	16,9	21,3	21,6	25,0	15,8

Source: Annual monitoring survey "How are you living, Russia?". Institute of Socio-Political Research of the FCTAS RAS (Russian Academy of Sciences). Year 2023

As for the ideological self-determination of Russian citizens, one can see quite a dramatic rollback of liberal and democratic values during the last 10 years. We can hypothesize that the changes in international political relations, (such as the lack of acknowledgement of the Crimean referendum in 2014) have pushed Russia far opposite from the democratic and liberal values that were starting to timidly circulate in the first ten years of the Second Millennium, reaching almost one-third of the population (in 2014, 32 % of the respondents

considered themselves as Democrats whereas almost ten years later, in 2023, that percentage has dropped by 10 points: 22%, during the same years the percentage of Liberals has also dropped from 9% to a mere and 3%).

Table N. 3- Ideological self-identification of respondents (Russia, % of the number of respondents)

	Democrats	Patriots	Communists	Liberals	Socialists	Social-democrats	Conservatives	Nationalists	Difficult to answer
2002, XII	16	17	7	4	9	1	3	1	17
2003, X	28	21	13	8	9	4	3	3	30
2004, VI	26	19	7	8	12	5	4	3	30
2005, IX	23	24	8	6	9	4	5	4	32
2006, I	26	21	7	7	10	6	5	5	31
2007, I	26	22	10	10	7	5	6	4	29
2008, VI	30	20	9	10	7	4	5	2	29
2009, VI	24	22	9	11	13	7	5	3	26
2010, VI	32	21	9	10	7	6	6	2	25
2011, VI	27	20	8	9	14	10	5	2	24
2012, IV	30	17	9	9	11	8	5	2	26
2013, VI	31	17	11	9	5	6	5	2	28
2014, VI	32	21	8	9	10	7	6	2	23
2015, VI	28	32	6	8	6	6	4	3	26
2016, VI	23	30	6	9	10	7	5	3	27
2017, VI	29	28	10	9	9	7	4	3	20
2018, V	26	28	7	9	9	7	5	3	24
2018, XII	28	28	10	7	10	7	6	3	20
2019, VI	26	28	7	8	8	4	5	4	26
2020, V	30	28	8	5	5	5	3	2	29
2021, VI	20	19	9	10	8	10	8	3	31
2022, V	18	19	8	6	12	5	5	1	27
2023, VI	22	14	6	3	17	4	4	1	30

Source: Annual monitoring survey "How are you living, Russia?". Institute of Socio-Political Research of the FCTAS RAS (Russian Academy of Sciences). Years 2002- 2023

(See Table N. 3). And although the Democrats still represent the majoritarian group of those who manage to identify themselves from an ideological point of view, we also have to note that the Socialists have gone from 10% in 2014 up to 17% in 2023, that the population seems extremely fragmented and that almost one-third of the people cannot identify themselves in any way (30% in 2023).

The paradoxical and blurred political consciousness of Russians can be illustrated by the dominant values in groups that share certain political views. We emphasize that despite the verbally expressed sympathy for democratic values, the analysis of respondents' judgments, which allows us to identify their actual attitude to certain problems related to the ideological field, demonstrates the very hybrid type of ideological consciousness, which is not only the result of globalization, but also of certain social transformations of the Russian political sphere, where ideological diversity and political pluralism have shrunk over the last two decades (Gel'man 2020).

On many fundamental positions, we see a significant change of opinions even in the last three years. For example, in 2023, 74% of the respondents agree with the judgment that the current government should be supported in any case, while 26% think (and quite courageously express) that the current power should be removed. But three years earlier, in 2020, the percentage of those who manifested criticism towards the regime was much higher: 37%. And although the majority (78%) considers political freedom, democracy and multiparty system to be a prerequisite for the existence of the state, the authoritarian and conciliar ideal¹⁴ is reproduced at the heart of the Russian statehood: the authoritarian ideal is based on the absolutization of supreme power; the conciliar ideal demands the unity of the people also in supporting power. As we can see in the following graph, as high as 72% of respondents in 2023 prefer, for their Country, "order" and a "firm hand" to "freedom, democracy and political competition" and they prefer "stability" to "change".

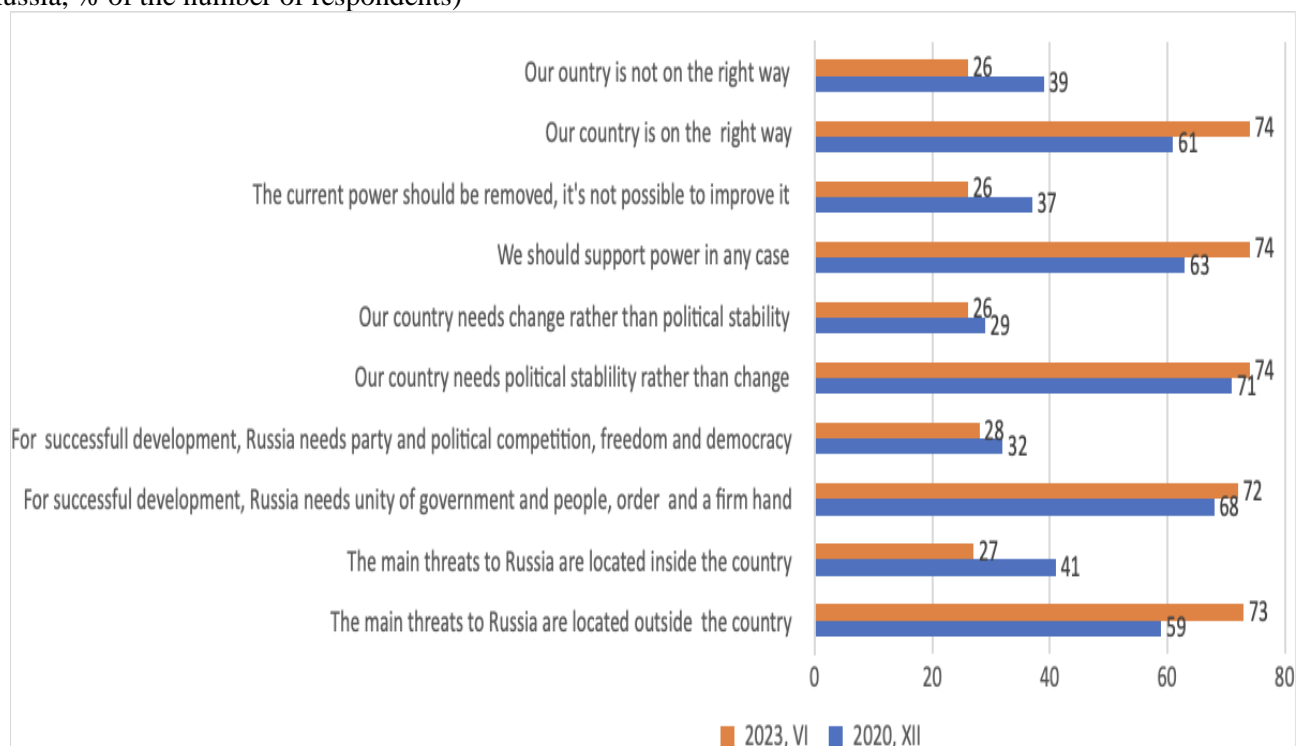
In spite of the fact that the majority of the population seems to support the government's firm hand and authoritarian lead, they don't appreciate some of its consequences. For example, they lament the fact that the state does not guarantee some of their basic civil and political rights and freedoms, such as the freedom to assemble, participate in demonstrations and participate in the management of State affairs. But they are satisfied with the social guarantees that the state provides them, like the support of motherhood, health, the possibility to choose a profession, rest and have paid holidays (see table n. 4).

¹⁴ "...conciliarity as a significant feature of Russian thought and Russian life is a religious-theological and philosophical concept meaning joint activity, the rallying of free citizens, based on Christian love and patriotism" see Alexandrova E.V., Bagnovskaya N.M., Smirnov Yu.I., Efimova L.N. (2019) Socio-Cultural value of the Russian Civilization. *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, volume 333. <https://www.atlantis-press.com/article/125913352.pdf>

Graph. N. 9

Which of the following opposite affirmations regarding your Country do you support?

(Russia, % of the number of respondents)



Source: Annual monitoring survey "How are you living, Russia?". Institute of Socio-Political Research of the FCTAS RAS (Russian Academy of Sciences). Year 2020-2023

Table N. 4

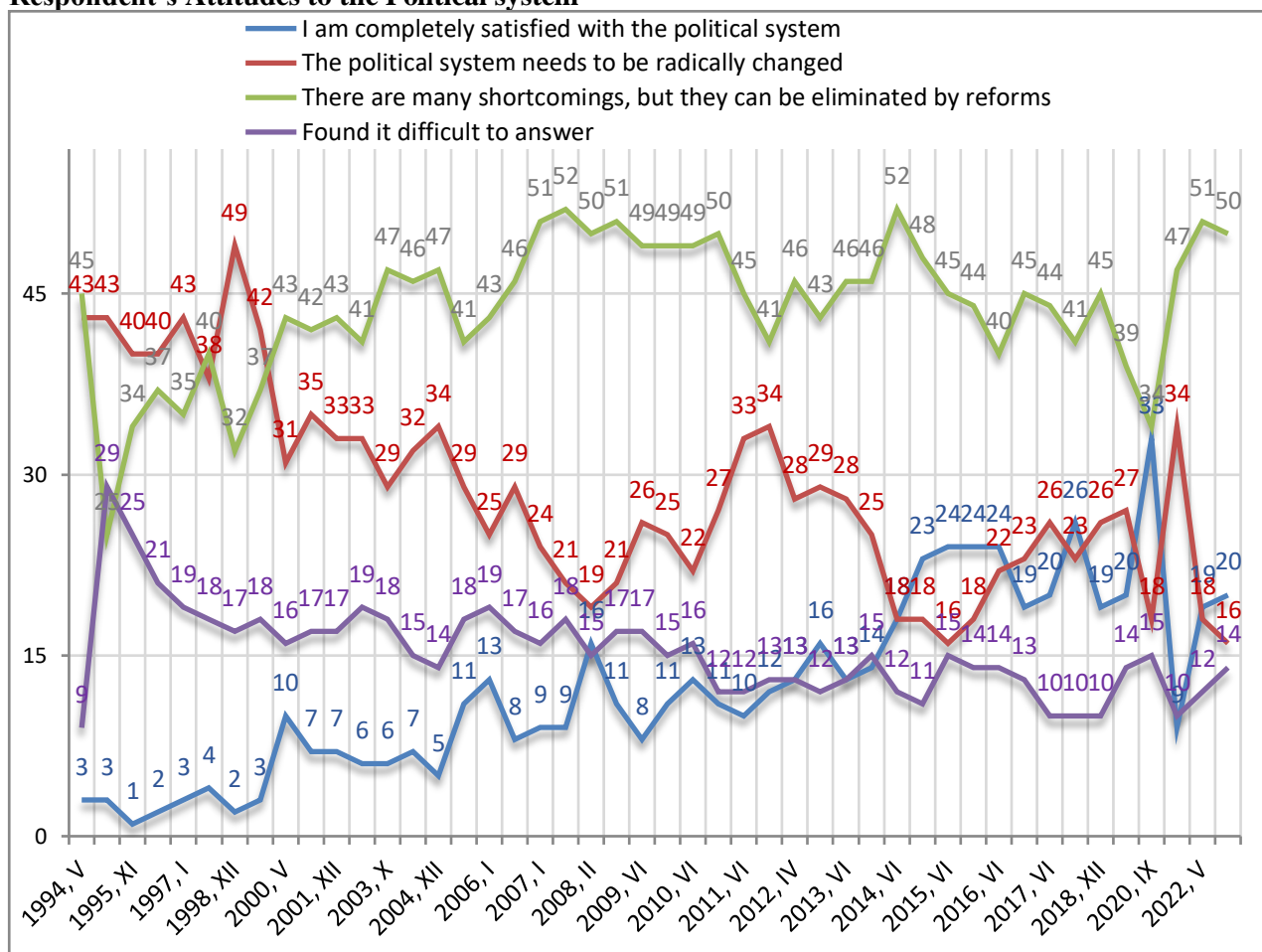
Respondents' opinion on whether the Russian state does or does not fulfill its obligations to guarantee the rights and freedoms of citizens (Russia, % of the number of respondents)

Rights and guarantees	Fulfills τ ($a=+1$)	Doesn't fulfill ($b=-1$)	Difficult to answer	The sum of articulated position	Duty Fulfillment Index (Y)
Equality before the law and the court	34,4	49,3	16,3	83,7	-0,2
Freedom of thought and speech	39,1	42,9	18,0	82,0	0,0
The right to choose a profession	80,8	10,2	9,0	91,0	0,8
The right to be informed	70,7	15,4	13,9	86,1	0,6
The right to rest (to have paid holidays)	74,1	13,1	12,8	87,2	0,7

State protection of motherhood and childhood	81,2	7,5	11,3	88,7	0,8
Right to receive social security and pension	76,8	15,4	7,8	92,2	0,7
The right to housing	43,7	36,3	20,0	80,0	0,1
The right to health protection and medical care	62,8	27,0	10,2	89,8	0,4
The right to a favorable environment	51,2	31,9	16,9	83,1	0,2
The right to free education	58,4	31,2	10,4	89,6	0,3
The right to judicial protection of the rights and freedoms of the citizens	45,4	29,8	24,8	75,2	0,2
The right of organizations and associations	38,8	24,5	36,7	63,3	0,2
The right to organize /participate to meetings, rallies, demonstrations, marches and picketing	36,3	35,7	28,0	72	0,0
The right to participate in the management of State affairs	23,3	43,2	33,5	66,5	-0,3

Source: Annual monitoring survey "How are you living, Russia?". Institute of Socio-Political Research of the FCTAS RAS (Russian Academy of Sciences). Year 2023

Graph. N. 10
Respondent's Attitudes to the Political system



Source: Annual monitoring survey "How are you living, Russia?". Institute of Socio-Political Research of the FCTAS RAS (Russian Academy of Science). Years 1994- 2023

Interestingly, the relatively high level of loyalty to the government (“I am completely satisfied with the political system” + “There are many shortcomings, but reforms can eliminate them”) or at least the low explicit levels of dissatisfaction (Graph. N. 10), is accompanied by a low level of trust in political institutions (excluding the president) and by the awareness of the fact that ordinary citizens cannot influence the government in any way (as it was mentioned by 69% of respondents in 2023)¹⁵. Following the regime’s effort towards a Neo-conservatism ideological framework, that is functional in supporting the authoritarian turn and the President of the Russian Federation, we can see in Table n. 5 that the President (72.6%) benefits from the highest levels of trust by the respondents, followed by the Army (68,6%), and then, at a distance, by the Government (52,9%), by the Council of Security (51.9%) and, a recent entry, by the Church (51,7%).

¹⁵ Survey *How are you, Russia? Express information. 53rd stage of the sociological monitoring*, June 2023 / V. K. Levashov, N. M. Velikaya, I. S. Shushpanova [et al.]. – M. : FCTAS RAS, 2023. P. 29-30.

Table n. 5**Respondents' attitudes (trust/distrust) towards the various governmental and administrative institutions and towards civil society organizations (2023) %**

Governmental and Administrative Institutions and Civil Society	Trust (a=+I)	Do not trust τ (b=-I)	Difficult to answer	<i>The total number (sum) of those who have formulated a positive or negative opinion</i>	<i>index of trust in the institute(I)</i>
President	72,6	16,2	11,2	88,8	0,6
Government	52,9	30,7	16,4	83,6	0,3
Federation Council (Upper Palace of Parliament)	39,3	35,1	25,6	74,4	0,1
State Duma	34,5	42,8	22,7	77,3	-0,1
Administration of President (Cabinet of the President)	46,9	29,6	23,5	76,5	0,2
Council of Security	51,9	24,6	23,5	76,5	0,4
Public Chamber	34,6	32,1	33,3	66,7	0,0
Police, Courts,	37,1	40,5	22,4	77,6	0,0
Army	68,6	17,6	13,8	86,2	0,6
Trade unions	34,2	37,0	28,8	71,2	0,0
Church	51,7	25,5	22,8	77,2	0,3
Political parties	21,7	50,7	27,6	72,4	-0,4
NGO	34,6	35,2	30,2	69,8	0,0
Head of regions	50,4	29,3	20,3	79,7	0,3
Local government	41,3	36,3	22,4	77,6	0,1
Mass media	26,6	50,9	22,5	77,5	-0,3
Banks, entrepreneurs	22,0	54,5	23,5	76,5	-0,4

Source: Annual monitoring survey "How are you living, Russia?". Institute of Socio-Political Research of the FCTAS RAS (Russian Academy of Science) Year 2023

Altogether, the data gives us ground to identify the modern Russian political regime as a neo-authoritarian (Wiatr, 2017) and personalized regime determined by the narrowing of the public policy field, the

strengthening of presidential powers to the detriment of parliamentary institutions, by the attack on civil society institutions, by the restriction of a number of political rights and of citizens freedoms (Velikaya, 2019).

The personification of power, fixed in Russian political culture, manifests itself in the so-called authoritarian syndrome, reproducing hopes for a strong leader who is capable of solving every problem. As a result, we see a particularly high level of support for the president during the "post-Crimea consensus" and the "special military operation", which was accompanied by a tough sanctions policy against Russia and heavy international pressure.

On the other hand, we can't disregard the Russians who can't be considered supporters of the present political regime, but, as we have just seen in Graph. N. 10, the percentage of those who believe that the current power must be removed has plummeted in the last three years, going from over a third of respondents in 2020 (34%) to a mere 26%, in 2023.

In the following Table, we can see the strong correlation between the level of trust towards different institutes and the approval of the political system in general (table N. 6)

Table N. 6
The level of trust in political institutions and civil society according to the respondents' attitude towards the political system

(Russia, 2023, % of the number of respondents in groups)

	Variant of answers	I'm completely satisfied with the political system	There are many shortcomings, but they can be eliminated	The political system need to be radically changed	Found it difficult to answer
President of RF	Trust	94,5	80,9	29,6	61,4
	Do not trust	3,5	7,0	59,3	17,1
Government of RF	Trust	87,0	57,0	9,9	39,3
	Do not trust	9,5	23,7	76,5	32,9
Federation Council	Trust	68,5	42,2	8,0	23,6
	Do not trust	13,5	30,7	75,3	35,0
State Duma	Trust	60,0	37,6	3,7	22,9
	Do not trust	20,5	38,4	85,2	41,4
Office of the President	Trust	74,0	51,2	13,6	31,4
	Do not trust	11,0	23,5	72,2	28,6
Security Council	Trust	79,0	55,4	21,6	35,7
	Do not trust	7,0	20,5	60,5	22,9
Police, Courts, Prosecutor's office	Trust	64,0	37,3	12,3	26,4
	Do not trust	20,0	37,1	76,5	40,0
Army	Trust	90,0	73,9	34,6	58,6
	Do not trust	4,5	11,8	51,9	17,1

Trade Unions	Trust	48,0	35,9	21,6	22,9
	Do not trust	21,0	37,3	61,1	30,7
Church	Trust	65,5	55,8	34,6	37,1
	Do not trust	12,5	23,7	45,7	27,1
Political Parties	Trust	41,5	20,3	9,9	12,1
	Do not trust	34,0	49,8	76,5	47,9
Non-governmental organizations	Trust	51,0	34,7	21,0	26,4
	Do not trust	22,5	35,1	55,6	30,0
Head of region	Trust	73,0	54,8	21,6	35,7
	Do not trust	17,0	24,5	61,1	27,1
Head of municipality	Trust	64,0	45,6	11,7	27,9
	Do not trust	22,5	30,3	72,8	35,0
Mass media	Trust	47,5	25,5	13,6	15,7
	Do not trust	29,5	51,4	76,5	50,0

Source: Annual monitoring survey "How are you living, Russia?". Institute of Socio-Political Research of the FCTAS RAS (Russian Academy of Sciences). Year 2023

6. Conclusion

The analysis of the data and the discursive strategies of power in Russia demonstrates how - in the span of the transformations that have occurred in the country over the last 30 years – the political élite has attempted to define, and exploit some sort of political ideology, in order to legitimate itself, maintain the social and political order and, more recently, to ensure national security (Velikaya, 2022, p.61).

As V.S. Martyanov and L.G. Fishman have pointed out, "While the [political system] stabilizes, the temptation to solve ideological problems along the lines of the Russian imperial tradition turned out to be strong... The emphasis has become mainly on the manipulative function of ideology, which allows the achievement of short-term advantages." (Martyanov, Fishman: 2016, p. 13). As we have seen, the process of progressive authoritarianism of the political regime was accompanied basically by one main idea rotating around the concept of a "Russian's own special path." At the same time, as our and other research have demonstrated (see for example Pain, 2015), the image of this "special path", although somewhat attractive, is actually extremely blurred in the mass consciousness, devoid of any specificity and is mainly associated with the idealization of traditional Russian norms of behaviour, that are opposed to Western ones.

The ideology of the modern Russian state can be identified as a form of "social conservatism" as some of its ideologues have baptized it. We have seen that it is quite contradictory in itself, for it includes ideas drawn from different ideological doctrines deriving from different periods of Russian statehood which, in many ways, make it difficult for the government to define it properly.

The main features of this thin, confused and somewhat contradictory ideology are the emphasis on the principle of Russian sovereignty and the recognition of a specifically Russian statehood as one of the main values of Russian society; emphasis on the opposition of interests, values and ways of life between the West

and Russia; priority of the unity of the Russian civil nation and the multinational character of the Russian people; reliance on conservative and traditional values; patriotism and constant appeals to the past glorious days; the past is interpreted exclusively with positive connotations; reproduction of the paternalistic model of the welfare state; moderate isolationism in foreign policy while opening towards the East in terms of neo-Eurasianism; populist rhetoric.

This polarization between the East and the West, seems to have been further emphasized by the process that has brought Russia outside of the European Council in 2022. This process started in 2014, when the West failed to recognize the Crimean referendum as valid and that has, as we have seen from our data, caused the population to increasingly follow the “Russian special path” rhetoric which pushed towards a revival of the socialist days and which led to dusting off the old glories of the past even when this past is called Joseph Stalin.

In conclusion, the dynamic data through the years shows a fragmented society, with somewhat confused ideas about its future. Nonetheless, we have registered high and actually growing levels of loyalty towards the government and especially towards the President. The only shifts in the population’s values seem to have followed the nostalgic and conservative attempts from the President and the government to support the old Russian glorious times (the trend appears to be particularly evident starting from the year 2014). When interviewed about the Capitalist and the Socialist model, the population referred to a strong preference towards the latter, associating the first with crime, corruption and violence. Nonetheless, when asked what kind of economic model it would be best for Russia the only possible answer seems to be an indefinite “Russian model” accompanied by a general refusal of any other deriving from foreign countries (including China).

This fragmentation and confusion, combined with the high levels of trust towards the President - and the President only - exposes the Country to the risks of an even more authoritarian turn, for the people seem to back up the personalistic type of power displayed by Putin’s presidency. They even go to the extent of affirming that the Country needs a firm hand and not democratic changes, in spite of the fact that they lament that the government does not guarantee enough of their civil and political rights.

The only glimmer of hope that seems capable of possible future changes in this support to the actual regime, seems to be the growing quest for peace.

Having said that, we also have to bear in mind that during a regime and, most of all, during a regime engaged in a conflict, people cannot afford to speak freely about their actual hopes, values, and orientations. As we know, as of today, the population is not even free to openly nominate the events in Ukraine, for a new law approved in March 2023 forces Russians to call it a “special military operation”. Those who do not oblige, risk a 7 to 15 years of jail sentence. In these conditions, we cannot expect any opposition to the regime to speak freely when interviewed, even for academic reasons, just as it happened to the Italian population in the Fifties when Almond and Verba’s survey tried to assess Italian civic culture (Almond, Verba, 1963). As it is well known, their conclusions were that the Italian newly born democracy was at risk because the interviewees seemed distant and unaware of the political sphere (G. Almond, S. Verba, 1980), whereas they were just reluctant to speak freely about their political orientations after the recent fascist regime had shown them how risky it is to contradict power in authoritarian times (Saccà, 2014).

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