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# Power to the Babushkas?

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## Reconsidering the Relationship between Russian Politics and the Elderly

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“Party for everybody! Dance!” This was the refrain of a song performed by Buranovskiye Babushki, a group of elderly women from the Russian village of Buranovo Udmurt Republic, during the 2012 Eurovision Song Contest. The number was a success, and the group finished in second place in the contest.<sup>1</sup> In the often-bizarre setting of Eurovision, the image of this colorful group of smiling grandmothers mixing folk tradition with pop seemed perfectly placed. Yet, it was much more difficult to conciliate it with the ideas most commonly associated with the elderly as the poor, disgruntled, and most pro-government segment of the Russian population.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Eurovision Song Contest, *About Buranovskiye Babushki* (December 10, 2014), <http://www.eurovision.tv/page/history/year/participant-profile/?song=26973>.

<sup>2</sup> OECD, *OECD Reviews of Labour Market and Social Policies: Russian Federation 2011* (December 2011): 162, [http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/employment/oecd-reviews-of-labour-market-and-social-policies\\_20743408](http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/employment/oecd-reviews-of-labour-market-and-social-policies_20743408); Denis Pinchuk, “Russian Pensioners Protest against High Food Prices,” Reuters (November 3, 2007), <http://www.reuters.com/article/2007/11/03/us-protest-russia-food-idUSL0312283020071103>;

This contrast reveals the power of stereotypes (and, yes, Buranovskiye Babushki themselves could be said to embody a stereotype) in shaping the ways in which observers cast an entire social group. In an attempt to go past the stereotypes associated with the Russian elderly as a homogeneous group of enfeebled victims of state neglect, I will explore the political significance of the elderly in contemporary Russia, highlighting the potential impact that members of this demographic can have on politics.<sup>3</sup> By looking at how voting patterns and issues related to Russian pensioners have both constrained and facilitated certain political outcomes, I will bring attention to the precariousness of the relationship between the Russian government and the country’s older citizens.

In the first section, I will discuss the connection between politics and old age in Russia, focusing on the main themes defining their exchange and the challenges in researching this subject due to the limited scholarship and data available. In the second section, this report will offer an overview of instances in post-Soviet history from 1991 on that reveal recurring patterns in Russian politics vis-à-vis its senior citizens. In the final section, I will show how these patterns might be a destabilizing factor in the current political environment and a

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Aleksei Levinson, “The Institutional Framework of Old Age: Old Age as Gender,” *Sociological Research* 52, no. 3 (May–June 2013): 53.

<sup>3</sup> Aleksei Levinson, “The Institutional Framework,” 53; Andrea Chandler, “Democratization, Social Welfare and Individual Rights in Russia: The Case of Old-Age Pensions,” *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne des Slavistes* 43, No. 4 (December 2001): 429.

potential danger to the longevity of the Putinist enterprise. As unfavorable economic circumstances are exacerbated by the imposition of economic sanctions by the West and declining oil prices, could Russia's pensioners rise in revolt against the system?

## POLITICS AND OLD AGE: THEMES AND CHALLENGES

Politics and society can interact in different ways depending on the political system in place and the level of development of civil society. In the majority of cases, however, this interaction is reciprocal—society defines and constrains politics as much as politics shapes society. This is, of course, also true of Russia. Various scholars, including Anna Arutunyan in *The Putin Mystique*, and Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy in *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin*, have adopted this outlook.<sup>4</sup> Both present in-depth looks

at the state established by Putin and his inner circle through the prism of his relationship with his subjects, thus discarding the view of the current regime as a monolithic dictatorship solely defined by those in power.

The notion of society as a “victim” of politics is an easy trap to fall into when the elderly are involved, especially in Russia. Ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union, as the economic crisis engulfed the country, images of Russian *babushkas* (grandmothers) begging on the streets of Moscow have become tragically iconic. Pensions in Russia, for both civilian workers and military servicepeople, are

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<sup>4</sup> Anna Arutunyan, *The Putin Mystique. Inside Russia's Power Cult*. Northampton, (MA: Olive Branch Press, 2014).

In her book *The Putin Mystique*, Arutunyan (2014) investigates the roots of Vladimir Putin's popular regime. Her study delves into the inner workings of the Russian mind by analyzing the relationship between the ruled and the ruled. Arutunyan highlights the quasi-sacral aspect of this bond through a series of portraits of individuals belonging to different groups: the “subjects” (regular citizens), the “oprichniki” (the security apparatus), and the “boyars” (the oligarchs). The author looks back to history to highlight elements of continuity in Russia's penchant for the cult of power and power leaders, highlighting how Russians experience state power as a “mystical entity” able to act to establish order when laws fail. In Arutunyan's account, Putin exploits the mystique surrounding the figure of the president as a god-like figure.

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Fiona Hill and Clifford J. Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin*, (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2013).

In *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin*, Hill and Gaddy (2013) offer an overview of Russia under Putin through a thoughtful analysis of various identities associated with the Russian leader. Each identity – the Statist, the History Man, the Survivalist, the Outsider, the Free Marketer, and the Case Officer – is connected with a specific moment in Putin's personal history. In their assessment, the various identities define Putin's role as CEO of the country as a corporate empire (“Russia, Inc.”) in which the private commercial interests are tied together with those of the Russian state. The result is a state that operates on two levels: the formal political institutions and the informal system, “which provides access to prestigious positions and a whole array of perks and privileges, including the possibility of self-enrichment” (p. 5). The authors argue that the model envisaged, however, cannot work on a mass scale because the widespread corruption that prevents the model from functioning is also the glue that holds the system in place.

extremely low by European standards.<sup>5</sup> Foreign and Russian media often emphasize the struggles and gloomy outlook faced by the older portion of the population.<sup>6</sup> And yet, anyone who has visited Russia over the last few years will likely have encountered the feisty and tougher side of the country's senior citizens, be it in the form of a pensioner chanting communist slogans at a protest or a museum guard shouting at the tourists getting too close to the paintings in St. Petersburg's Hermitage Museum.

Scholars have replicated the tendency to assume that the Russian elderly are passive victims by depriving them of attention as agents of change. No study thus far has captured the ways in which the relationship between the state and the elderly is structured in Russia. Most of the scholarship dedicated to issues affecting Russian *pensionery* (pensioners) focuses on pension law and reform, often taking a top-down approach to these issues.<sup>7</sup> Even when scholars have been able to appreciate that the exchange

is far from unilateral, as is the case with Andrea Chandler's 2004 study of pension reform in post-Soviet Russia, this approach has not developed into a deeper study of the relationship.<sup>8</sup>

There is an absence of a solid body of qualitative and quantitative data analyzing the political behavior of the elderly, which partly explains why scholars have paid little attention to the issue. Only a few surveys focus on political attitudes and preferences by age group in Russia, and polling data on the voting behavior of the elderly is even rarer.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, an analysis of electoral results and data issued by Russian government organizations cannot avoid facing questions regarding the veracity of the materials available due to repeated reports of fraud and irregularities in the Russian electoral process.<sup>10</sup>

It is therefore important to initiate a discourse on this topic. While academics still debate the possibility of a recovery from the demographic crisis that hit Russia in the 1990s, it is now increasingly difficult to argue against the idea of its population growing older as life expectancy and fertility rate continue to

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<sup>5</sup> The Associated Press, "How Retirement Systems Vary, Country to Country," *Finance Yahoo*, (December 30,

2013), <http://finance.yahoo.com/news/retirement-systems-vary-country-country-055009752.html>;

Andrew E. Kramer, "Russia Raises Some Salaries and Pensions for Crimeans," *The New York Times*, (March 31, 2014),

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/01/world/europe/russia-raises-pensions-for-crimeans.html>.

<sup>6</sup> "What it means to get old in Russia," RT (*Russian Today*), (February 10, 2011),

<http://rt.com/news/old-russia-elderly-people/>.

<sup>7</sup> For example: Linda J. Cook, *Postcommunist Welfare States: Reform Politics in Russia and Eastern Europe*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007);

Theodore P. Gerber and Jonas Radl (2014).

"Pushed, Pulled, or Blocked? The Elderly and the Labor Market in Post-Soviet Russia," *Social Science Research* 45 (May 2014): 152-169.

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<sup>8</sup> Andrea Chandler, *Shocking Mother Russia: Democratization, Social Rights, and Pension Reform in Russia, 1990-2001*, (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> "Faktory Elektoral'nogo Vybora," FOM (December 18, 2003),

[http://bd.fom.ru/report/cat/elect/parl\\_el/dd034929](http://bd.fom.ru/report/cat/elect/parl_el/dd034929);

"Vyborye Prezidenta: Kak Golosovali Sotsialnye Gruppy," *Levada Tsentr* (March 27, 2012):

<http://www.levada.ru/27-03-2012/vyborye-prezidenta-kak-golosovali-sotsialnye-gruppy>.

<sup>10</sup> James Balls, "Russian Election: Does the Data Suggest Putin Won Through Fraud?" *The Guardian*, (March 5, 2012),

<http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2012/mar/05/russia-putin-voter-fraud-statistics>.

rise.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the notion according to which Russian pensioners are among the most politically active segments of the population and some of Putin's most loyal supporters has become so commonplace both in academia and the media that it deserves to be put to the test.

## A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

In Soviet times, the Russians developed the country's first national old age pension system, and kept improving benefits for selected categories of workers.<sup>12</sup> The cornerstone of the Soviet approach to pensions was the 1956 Pension Law, which made the state solely responsible for pensions and guaranteed pensions automatically after a certain number of years spent working.<sup>13</sup> The system might have prevented the accumulation of personal wealth, but it was fairly generous and, above all, universal.<sup>14</sup>

With the dissolution of the USSR, the situation worsened dramatically for the Russian elderly. Even before the collapse, social scientists and economists

among the proponents of Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika* had included the pension law among the targets of their restructuring efforts.<sup>15</sup> After 1991, a reform program was supposed to be gradually implemented between 1990 and 1992, but, as aptly pointed out by Chandler, the situation was "overtaken by events."<sup>16</sup> The adoption of "shock therapy" under Boris Yeltsin and the economic crisis that followed directly affected the life of the population at large, with poverty, inequality, and unemployment growing exponentially.<sup>17</sup> By 2001, Chandler had identified the plight of pensioners in Russia as "one of the most tragic social consequences of the collapse of communism."<sup>18</sup>

The elderly were among the most severely affected, with their meager pensions losing their value as inflation wiped out many families' savings. Payments were increasingly delayed, as the budget deficit inherited from the communist era became unbearable.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, the liberalization process was investing politics too. Competitive elections, as well as the competition between the legislative power represented by the State Duma and the executive power of the presidency before 1993, ensured that discussion of poverty among the elderly became a highly politicized issue.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Max Fisher, "Did Russia Just Overcome Its 20-Year Demographic Crisis?" *The Washington Post* (November 1, 2012),

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldview/wp/2012/11/01/did-russia-just-overcome-its-20-year-demographic-crisis/>;

Aleksei Levinson, "The Institutional Framework," 53.

<sup>12</sup> Andrea Chandler, *Shocking Mother Russia*, 24.

<sup>13</sup> Andrea Chandler, "Democratization, Social Welfare," 418.

<sup>14</sup> Linda J. Cook, *Postcommunist Welfare States*, 2; John B. Williamson and Michelle L. Maroto, "The Political Economy of Pension Reform in Russia: Why did Russia Adopt the World Bank Model?" Presented at 100th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association held in Philadelphia, PA, August 13-16 (2005): 3.

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<sup>15</sup> Linda J. Cook, *Postcommunist Welfare States*, 56.

<sup>16</sup> Andrea Chandler, "Democratization, Social Welfare," 423.

<sup>17</sup> Linda J. Cook, *Postcommunist Welfare States*, 63.

<sup>18</sup> Andrea Chandler, "Democratization, Social Welfare," 409.

<sup>19</sup> Andrea Chandler, *Democracy, Gender, and Social Policy in Russia: A Wayward Society*. (Croydon, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013): 87.

<sup>20</sup> Andrea Chandler, "Democratization, Social Welfare," 423.

From this point of view, Russia's senior citizens were among the "victims" of circumstances. On a different level, however, one could argue that politicians were equally constrained by their reliance on popular support. In his essay "The Collapse of Civility in Russia: The Young and Aged in a Failed Society," Ronald E. Jones illustrates how maintaining support among the older portion of the population was considered essential by the Soviet authorities, as a generous pension and full employment were the two core values of the system.<sup>21</sup> In an attempt to maintain this support, they would rely on short-term solutions, such as increasing pensions to specific groups of workers, without considering the structural changes that would have been required for the system to become sustainable in the long run.<sup>22</sup>

This tendency to rely on short-term solutions has, according to Chandler, become an institutionalized habit in Russia.<sup>23</sup> As the pension arrears threatened Yeltsin's popularity ahead of the 1996 presidential elections, for example, the Russian president publicly condemned the issue and used his authority to unblock the payments.<sup>24</sup> His inner circle fully supported this measure.

Another issue that Yeltsin had to face was the emergence of the elderly as an active force in the political arena. In particular, as pensioners disillusioned with capitalism filled the ranks of the Communist Party of Russia, as well as the smaller Party of Pensioners, opposition

parties made the protection of pensioners' rights a top platform plank.<sup>25</sup> This directly threatened Yeltsin's position in power, as many of those who had personally experienced the disastrous consequences of the economic crisis opposed his reelection, supporting Communist leader Gennady Zyuganov instead as he promised a return to Soviet-style welfarism. Many have argued that Yeltsin might have lost, had he not relied on the oligarchs to rig the elections.<sup>26</sup>

## CAN RUSSIAN PENSIONERS BRING DOWN THE SYSTEM?

A defining aspect of the relationship between the state and the elderly in Russia is the fact that economic concerns have often created situations of imbalance, with discontent leading to active opposition. As argued by Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs in *The Power of Silver: Age and Identity Politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, while political militancy among the elderly has failed to materialize in the West, it is much more likely to develop in post-Communist countries.<sup>27</sup> This partly explains the narrative according to which Putin has the support of the older population, since his arrival on the political scene coincided with the gradual improvement of the economic situation within the country. The favorable economic conditions allowed the Russian leader to complete the deferred reform of the pension system with the introduction of a centralized national pension fund.

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<sup>21</sup> Ronald E. Jones, "The Collapse of Civility in Russia: The Young and Aged in a Failed Society," *Sociological Inquiry* 72, Issue 3 (Summer 2002): 413.

<sup>22</sup> OECD, *OECD Reviews*, 3.

<sup>23</sup> Andrea Chandler, *Shocking Mother Russia*, 26.

<sup>24</sup> Andrea Chandler, "Democratization, Social Welfare," 430.

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<sup>25</sup> Stephen White, "Soviet Nostalgia and Russian Politics," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 1(2010): 7.

<sup>26</sup> Anna Arutunyan, *The Putin Mystique*, 174.

<sup>27</sup> Chris Gilleard and Paul F. D. Higgs, "The Power of Silver: Age and Identity Politics in the 21st Century," *Journal of Aging & Social Policy* 21(2009), 12.

The system transitioned towards a “multi-pillar arrangement,” bringing together features of different pension schemes, including mandatory and voluntary provisions, as well as a pay-as-you-go system of contributions and pre-funding to finance benefits.<sup>28</sup> This coincided with visible improvements in the lives of Russian pensioners that happened to coincide with the reforms’ timing: most arrears in pensions and benefits were eliminated, and the average pension rose above the above subsistence level.<sup>29</sup>

Yet even Putin approached the elderly with care, cultivating support among the interested parties through public speeches and pension increases, timed to coincide with the introduction of the reforms.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, the government was able to absorb the Party of Pensioners within the “managed opposition”—showing the importance placed on defusing its political independence. Having merged with other two parties to form “Just Russia,” the Party of Pensioners led by Igor Zotov left this bloc in 2012 to form the Russian Pensioners For Justice Party.<sup>31</sup> The “new” pensioners’ party has consistently supported Vladimir Putin and United Russia.<sup>32</sup>

All of this effort on the government’s part might be justified. After all, Russian pensioners have gone rogue under Putin before. When a law came into effect in 2005 that replaced

longstanding social benefits (including free public transportation and healthcare) with monthly cash payments, groups of pensioners took to the street to express their opposition to it. In a comment piece published in *The Nation*, Katrina vanden Heuvel described the protests as “the largest, angriest and most passionate since Putin came to power,” hinting that they could pose a serious challenge to the stability of his regime.<sup>33</sup> The Russian leader’s response—doubling increases in pension payments and reintroducing free public transport—proved that Russian pensioners could exact concessions from the authorities much more than previously imaged.<sup>34</sup>

This approach brings to mind the policies pursued by the leader of another post-Soviet country: the Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko. In power since 1994, and dubbed by the West as “Europe’s last dictator,” has often relied on the country’s older demographic groups for support. To maintain his power base, throughout the years he has repeatedly increased pensions.<sup>35</sup> President Lukashenko has fully embraced the image

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<sup>28</sup> OECD, *OECD Reviews*, 174.

<sup>29</sup> Linda J. Cook, *Postcommunist Welfare States*, 150.

<sup>30</sup> Andrea Chandler, *Shocking Mother Russia*, 143; 157.

<sup>31</sup> “Istoriya Partii,” *Rossiyskaya Partiya Pensionerov za Spravedlivost*, <http://www.ppzs.ru/2013-06-23-14-42-57/история6-23-14>.

<sup>32</sup> “Rossiyskaya Partiya Pensionerov,” FOM (March 31, 2005), <http://bd.fom.ru/report/map/projects/dominant/dom0513/dd051332/printable/>.

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<sup>33</sup> Katrina vanden Heuvel, “Babushkas vs. Putin,” *The Nation* (January 20, 2005), <http://www.thenation.com/article/babushkas-vs-putin>.

<sup>34</sup> Claire Bigg, “Protests Across Russia Force Putin to Double Increase in Pension Payments,” *The Guardian*, (January 18, 2005), <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/jan/19/russia>.

<sup>35</sup> “Pensions Increased by 15.3 Per cent in Belarus,” *BBC Monitoring International Reports* (September 22, 1998); President of the Republic of Belarus, *Alexander Lukashenko Signs Decree on Raising Pensions*, (October 24, 2014): [http://president.gov.by/en/news\\_en/view/alexander-lukashenko-signs-decree-on-raising-pensions-10065](http://president.gov.by/en/news_en/view/alexander-lukashenko-signs-decree-on-raising-pensions-10065).

of president as champion of the elderly, speaking out, for example, against the unpopular proposal of increasing the country's retirement age.<sup>36</sup> The Belarusian strategy, while feasible in the short term, however, could prove financially unsustainable in the future, as highlighted in a 2009 study by the European Commission.<sup>37</sup> In contrast, Ukraine, a country facing severe economic and security issues, has had to deal with pressure from Europe to take a tougher stance in the pension sector. In March 2015, the Ukrainian government approved pension cuts alongside a whole set of other austerity measures, hoping to get financial help from the IMF in exchange.<sup>38</sup> Pensions in Ukraine were lower than in Russia even before the cuts, as proved by the increase in pension size experienced by the residents of Crimea following the Russian annexation of the peninsula in 2014 and their adjustment to Russian rates.<sup>39</sup>

Ever since Putin's return to the presidency in 2012, Russian experts have

noted how the government has moved closer to the Russian Orthodox Church and presented itself as the promoter of traditional values and nationalism. To some, like Arutunyan, this was a move aimed at creating a split within the opposition.<sup>40</sup> Yet, it could be argued that the move is also a way to capture the favor of the part of the population that traditionally has a more conservative outlook on the issues targeted, including homosexuality and respect for religious authorities. Putin's nod to the patriotic sentiment of the country, as embodied by the great fanfare that surrounds celebrations honoring World War II veterans, can be explained in a similar way.<sup>41</sup>

Finally, looking at the mass protests that took place in Russia between 2011 and 2013, it is also important to notice that they saw the participation of people belonging to all age groups: the young, the middle-aged, and the elderly.<sup>42</sup>

So far, this essay has highlighted the patterns that dominate the relationship between the Russian authorities and the elderly. The main goal of this approach has been to provide foundation to the thesis according to which the current situation in Russia might prove to be a defining moment for the country's politics, and that one of the reasons for this might be the complexity of the exchange between politics and the older segment of population.

Against the backdrop of the Ukrainian crisis, Russia faces severe

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<sup>36</sup> "Lukashenko Speaks against Raising Retirement Age in Belarus," *Belarus Bureau Prime-Tass* (March 16, 2012), <http://www.prime-tass.by/english/print.asp?id=98447>.

<sup>37</sup> European Commission, *Social Protection and Social Inclusion in Belaru* (2009), <http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=4346&langId=en>.

<sup>38</sup> Anastasia Forina, "Verkhovna Rada Revises \$20 Billion Budget, Cuts Pensions in Hopes of \$25 Billion in Loans," *Kyiv Post* (March 13, 2015), <http://www.kyivpost.com/content/politics/verkhovna-rada-revises-20-billion-budget-cuts-pensions-in-hopes-of-25-billion-financial-aid-382405.html>.

<sup>39</sup> Andrew E. Kramer, "Russia Raises Some Salaries and Pensions for Crimeans," *The New York Times* (March 31, 2014), [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/01/world/europe/russia-raises-pensions-for-crimeans.html?\\_r=2](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/01/world/europe/russia-raises-pensions-for-crimeans.html?_r=2).

<sup>40</sup> Anna Arutunyan, *The Putin Mystique*, 266.

<sup>41</sup> "Putin Thanks WWII Veterans for Their Heroism during War," *ITAR-TASS* (May 9, 2014), <http://itar-tass.com/en/russia/731040>.

<sup>42</sup> Anton N. Oleinik, "Mass Protests in the Context of the Russian Power Regime," *Russian Social Science Review* 54, no. 3 (May- June 2013), 2.

economic issues, including rampant inflation, an impending recession, and declining oil prices. The situation has been exacerbated by the introduction of economic sanctions by Western countries in response to Russia's position over Crimea.<sup>43</sup> In response to the economic downturn, the Russian government has targeted pensions in particular. In August 2014 the government dipped into pension funds, diverting \$8 billion in contributions earmarked for retirement schemes towards government spending.<sup>44</sup> In October 2014, in an even more controversial move, the Russian State Duma passed in its first reading a bill, known as the Rotenberg Law, which would allow citizens and companies who have lost property abroad due to the economic sanctions to seek reimbursement from the state.<sup>45</sup>

According to both Western and Russian media, it is likely that the money to finance the refunds will be taken from pension funds.<sup>46</sup> Former Finance Minister

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<sup>43</sup> Moody's, *Moody's: Russia Sanctions Exacerbate the Country's Economic Challenges But Liquidity Crisis Unlikely in the Short-Term* (July 14, 2014), [https://www.moody.com/research/Moodys-Russia-sanctions-exacerbate-the-countrys-economic-challenges-but-liquidity--PR\\_305457](https://www.moody.com/research/Moodys-Russia-sanctions-exacerbate-the-countrys-economic-challenges-but-liquidity--PR_305457).

<sup>44</sup> Allison Schrage, "Unlike Russia, the U.S. Government Won't Take Your Pension Outright," *Bloomberg Businessweek* (August 18, 2014), <http://www.businessweek.com/articles/2014-08-18/russia-seized-citizens-pension-funds-dot-could-that-happen-in-the-u-dot-s-dot>.

<sup>45</sup> Sam Skove, "Russia's State Duma Passes Law Compensating Western Asset Seizures in First Reading," *The Moscow Times* (October 8, 2014), <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/business/article/russias-state-duma-passes-law-compensating-western-asset-seizures-in-first-reading/508651.html>.

<sup>46</sup> Alexey Eremenko, "Cabinet Wants to Compensate Russian Victims of 'Illegal' Asset Seizures Abroad," *The Moscow Times* (2014,

Alexei Kudrin has severely condemned the renewed reliance of the government on pension savings as a move that threatens the long-term stability of the system.<sup>47</sup> "The concentration of resources at the expense of long-term stability—this is the result of the view that the task is to 'withstand' the next two or three years," Kudrin wrote in a column for Russian newspaper *Kommersant*.<sup>48</sup>

Kudrin's words echo the considerations made in this essay regarding the tendency showed by Russian authorities towards preferring short-term solutions over long-term planning. Moreover, as previously highlighted, the relationship between politics and Russia's senior citizens tends to shift whenever the economic conditions undergo a dramatic change—like it is the case in today's Russia. The behavior of the Russian government, willing to return on its steps when facing discontent among the elderly, due to its unpopular policies, proves that Russian pensioners are perceived as a volatile yet important segment of the population. And while it is true, as pointed out by Mariya Riekkinen of Finland's Åbo Akademi University, during

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October 2, 2014), <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/business/article/russian-government-backs-rotenberg-bill-to-blunt-western-sanctions/508304.html>;

Moskovskiy Komsomolets, *Krepostnaya Rossiya* (October 2, 2014), <http://www.mk.ru/politics/2014/10/02/krepostnaya-rossiya.html>.

<sup>47</sup> Reuters, "Kudrin Joins Growing Criticism of State's Use of Pension Savings," *The Moscow Times* (August 8, 2014), <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/business/article/kudrin-joins-growing-criticism-of-state-s-use-of-pension-savings/504810.html>.

<sup>48</sup> Alexey Kudrin, "Pravila Igrы," *Kommersant* (August 8, 2014), <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2540459>.



a Skype interview in November 2014, that today's pensioners will not be affected by Russia's decision to dip into pensions funds, the situation sets the scene for a future in which the elderly might see their pensions threatened.<sup>49</sup>

One must also not forget the fact that Russian pensioners have consistently proved to be politically active and heterogeneous in their approach to politics.<sup>50</sup> From Communists to convinced Putinists, from anti-Putin liberals to grandparents who rarely vote, the elderly will turn out on the streets to protest. This could prove to be a double-edged sword for Putin. Even though so far he has proven to be able to control the political outcome and has restrained discontent among the elderly, such a multi-layered social group can become unpredictable in situations of crisis and more difficult to manage.

## CONCLUSION

According to the views of the economists of The Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (RANEPA), Russia is too old for a revolution.<sup>51</sup> RANEPA bases its assumption on two main observations: that the group of Russians aged 55 and older will grow much more solidly than the other age groups, and that in the 2012 presidential elections the majority of older votes went to Putin. RANEPA is only one of the many organizations guilty of oversimplifying the

relationship between Russian politics and the elderly.

As illustrated in this essay, scholars, the media and politicians too often regard the elderly as victims and subjects of the state, rather than as participating actors with the potential to push for policy changes. At the same time, the relationship between the Russian government and its pensioners remains understudied. This led to an underestimation of the complexities of this relationship and their relevance when trying to assess and predict the ways in which the current political situation in Russia will evolve.

It is for this reason that this report recommends a framework that highlights a few features in the relationship that might hint at a shift in the balance. Namely, Russia's tendency to rely on short-term solutions instead of focusing on long-term stability; the defining quality of economic factors in shaping the ways in which the government is constrained by or able to rely on the support of the elderly; the high levels of political activism and the heterogeneity of the politically active pensioners as a complicating factor in Russia's attempt to manage the opposition. As the economic climate deteriorates further, those elements can become increasingly important. The fall of the ruble's value and a food ban on some Western imports in response to the sanctions appear to have driven up the cost of basic foods, which is a major concern for the elderly given their special dietary needs and fixed incomes.<sup>52</sup> A 2014 money-saving health care reform

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<sup>49</sup> Skype interview with Mariya Riekkinen, Åbo Akademi University, Finland on November 17, 2014.

<sup>50</sup> Aleksei Levinson, "The Institutional Framework," 55.

<sup>51</sup> "Rossiya Sliskom Stara Dlya Revolyutsiya," *Finmarket.ru* (December 13, 2013), <http://www.finmarket.ru/main/article/3577467>.

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<sup>52</sup> "Russians Feel the Pinch of Rising Food Prices as Inflation Bites," *The Moscow Times* (February 19, 2015), <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/article.php?id=516256>.

threatens the quality of the services delivered by Russian hospitals.<sup>53</sup> All are issues that promise to become primary concerns for the elderly.

So, is Russia “too old for a revolution?” It is unlikely that Russian *babushkas* will be the force driving an actual revolution, especially if one subscribes to the theory according to which Russia’s revolutionary path has more often being forged by the intellectual and/or political elites rather than by the masses.<sup>54</sup> Yet, the complexity of the relationship between politics and the elderly shows that the ground might be fertile for a disruption of the status quo. For that, Russia might just be old enough.

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<sup>53</sup> Nataliya Vasilyeva, *Thousands of Hospital Staff to Be Sacked in Russian Healthcare Reforms* (November 28, 2014),

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/thousands-of-hospital-staff-to-be-sacked-in-russian-healthcare-reforms-9891710.html>.

<sup>54</sup> Sergei V. Kulikov, “Revolutions Invariably Come from Above. The Fall of Tsarism through the Prism of the Elite Circulation Paradigm,” *Russian Studies in History* 47, no. 4 (Spring 2009), 8–39.

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