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Diagnostics of political sphere in Russia through the prism of mass consciousness

Abstract: The diagnostics of political sphere of society includes the collective assessment of the domestic political environment and the activities of the state authorities. The results of sociological polls allow identifying the subjective image of political sphere of society in the mass consciousness of population. It is characterised by the set of coefficients and the aggregate indicator of the assessment of Russian political sphere.

Keywords: political sphere of society, domestic political environment, state power, subjective image, indicators.

Introduction

The system of objective factors and subjective images creates various kinds of social tensions, which form in total the conflictogenity of society [1, 2]. The level of conflictogenity determines the stability of society and safety of citizens' existence. In this regard, one of the most important tasks of ensuring social stability is to maintain conflictogenity of society at a permissible level. It requires condition diagnostics in different spheres of society.

The political sphere represents one of the most important life spheres. It includes the state, political parties and movements, public organisations and associations, labour collectives, pressure groups, mass media, etc. The political sphere of society exerts a strong influence on social stability, comprising political and power relations between the state and society.

Political stability is first of all ensured by the government authorities, and it relies on massive support from citizens, which is manifested in the support of specific government decisions and stable positive assessments of the activities of the state authorities, confidence in political leaders and political regime, willingness to protect own interests through lawful means, etc.

The aggravation of political disagreements, tense political situation in the country provoke decrease in political stability of society and may evoke negative population response. Political disagreements arise between political parties, organisations, movements promoting political interests of different strata and groups of society. Accordingly, the subjective image of political instability in the country is characterised by lack of citizens' confidence in and support of the authorities, willingness to protect own interests.

Therefore, the assessment of the political sphere of society comprises the collective assessment of the domestic political environment and the activities of the state authorities (*Fig. 1*).

Different methods are used in the analysis of political activity; they allow the political sphere of society to be characterized with varying degrees of adequacy. The empirical methods, based on the generalisation of the large volume of factual material (for example, data of sociological polls), are applied quite often. Weakness of the government and political instability are reflected in the mass consciousness of population. Opinion polls allow identifying the individual and collective notions of the internal political situation in the country or region, and to obtain the population assessment of the activities of the state authorities. The problem is to adequately generalise the analysed material.

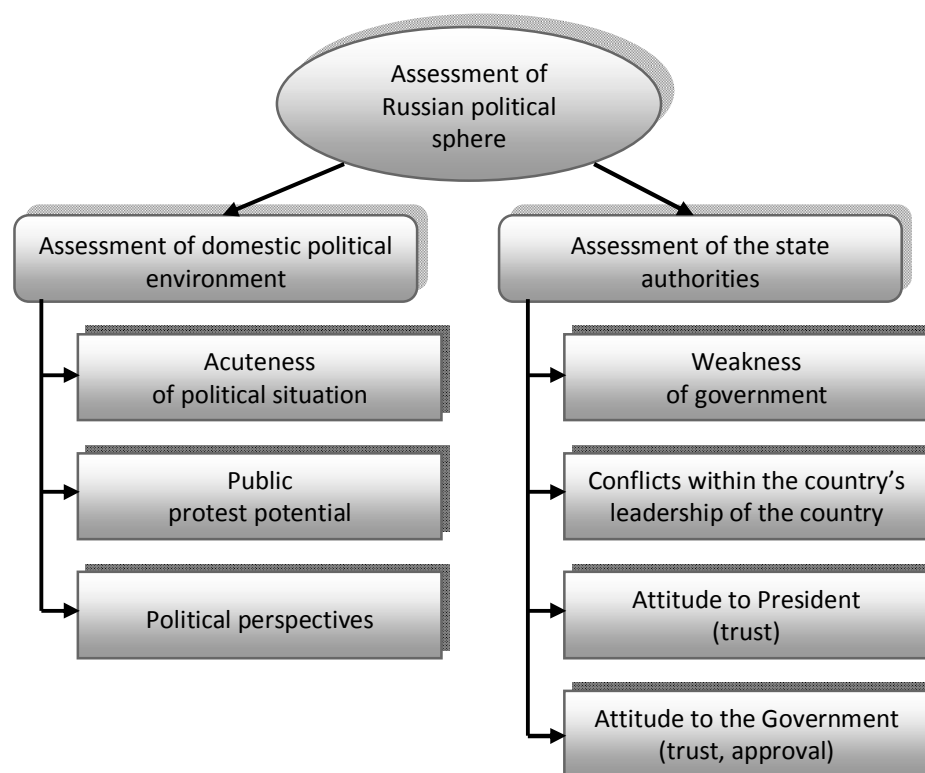


Fig. 1. Logic of the assessment of the subjective image of Russian political sphere

Assessment of the country's internal political situation

Domestic political environment is characterised by the state of political life, alignment of and interaction between political forces in the country under certain historical conditions at any given time of social development. It is substantially reflected by the population subjective assessment of the country's political conditions, public protest potential and predictive assessment of the political situation in the country. The subjective assessments are identified on the results of sociological polls [3-7].

The acuteness of the political situation in the country according to population estimates is determined by the results of the responses to the question "How would you assess the political situation in Russia as a whole?" in the monitoring of public opinion of social and economic changes (Bulletin), regularly conducted by All-Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VCIOM) upon representative samples several times a year in almost all regions of the country [3, 1993–2012]. The responses offered in the questionnaire are the following: "favourable"; "calm"; "tense"; "critical, explosive"; "I cannot say".

Until the year 2000 the political situation in the country was assessed as "calm" by no more than 7% of respondents, as "tense" by 54-61%, "critical, explosive" by 22-36% of respondents on an annual basis. The situation changed significantly with the newly elected President of the country coming to power. In the year 2000 the situation was assessed as "calm" by 10% of respondents (as compared to 2.6% in 1999), "tense" by 16% (as compared to 36% in 1999). Then, the political situation in the country according to population assessments improved: in 2008 the situation was characterised as "calm" by 51% of respondents, as "tense" by 26%, as "critical" by 3% of respondents. The financial crisis makes its effect shown since 2009, and the tension of the political situation in the country has been slightly increasing, but the smaller share of respondents characterises it as "critical, explosive".

The overall population assessment of the political environment is given in the form of the coefficient of the acuteness of the political situation in the country. The coefficient of the acuteness of the political situation is obtained from the expression:

$$Q_{pc}^t = \sum_v e_{pcv} \bar{m}_{pcv}^t,$$

where Q_{pc}^t – coefficient of the acuteness of the political situation in t year $Q_{pc}^t = [0, 1]$;

$v = 1 \dots 5$ – number of response choices when assessing the acuteness of the political situation;

e_{pcv}, \bar{m}_{pcv}^t – assessment of the acuteness of the political situation in the country and the average share of respondents in t year, giving the corresponding assessment

favourable – $e_{pc1} = 0$ and \bar{m}_{pc1}^t ;

calm – $e_{pc2} = 0.33$ and \bar{m}_{pc2}^t ;

tense – $e_{pc3} = 0.66$ and \bar{m}_{pc3}^t ;

critical, explosive – $e_{pc4} = 1$ and \bar{m}_{pc4}^t ;

I cannot say – $e_{pc5} = 0.5$ and \bar{m}_{pc5}^t .

The closer the coefficient value to 1, the more critical, explosive the situation in the country is estimated to be. As follows from the graph in *figure 2*, up to the year 2000 the political situation in the country was assessed as tense and critical; according to population assessments, since 2001 it is tense and calm.

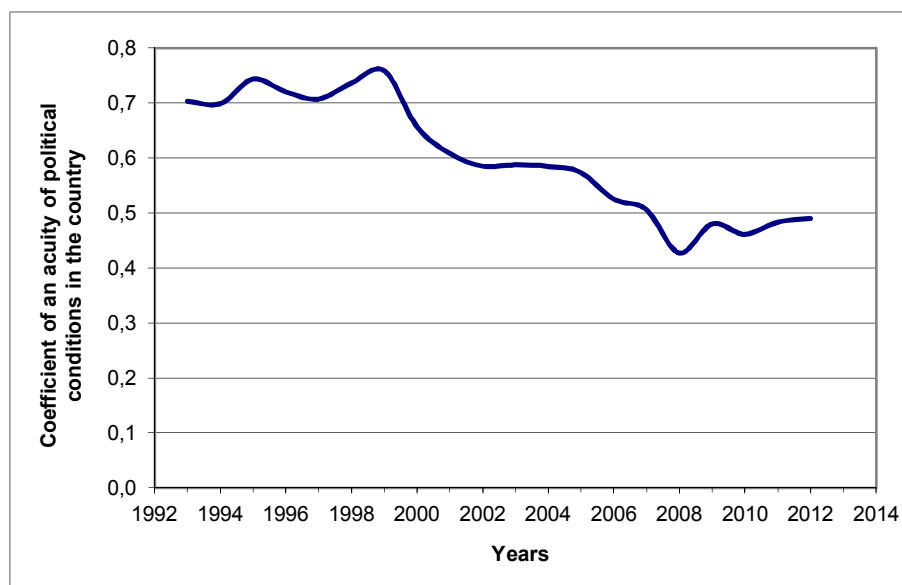


Fig. 2. Coefficient of the acuteness of the political situation in the country

Low incomes, income differentiation of population and social contrasts form *mass protest moods*. Protest moods are particularly noted by the part of the population, whose living standards have declined. The official statistics on mass actions is not publicly available. The number and the form of protest actions can be inferred by the individual data of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and political movements. While they provide rather controversial picture of the citizens' protest activities, the significant level of protest potential is obvious, especially at the beginning of the analysed period.

The picture is also corroborated by the results of the sociological poll [3, 1993–2012]. In response to the question “What, in your opinion, is the probability of mass actions of population

against drop in the living standards, for the protection of human rights in your city/settlement at present?”, the respondents chose one of the several answers (“it is quite possible”; “it is unlikely”; “I don’t know/I cannot say”).

The monitoring shows that the probability of mass actions of population against drop in the living standards, for the protection of human rights was considered higher by respondents in 1997 and 1998. During these years 35–40% of respondents on average by year chose the response “it is quite possible”. In certain surveys of these years the probability of mass actions was estimated to be 45–48%. 31% of respondents on average by year considered such actions quite possible in 1993 and 1999, while in certain surveys the share of such responses made up 35–40%. Protest potential was observed to increase again during the second financial crisis; in 2009 and beyond this fact was noted by 28–30% of respondents. In the remaining years the probability of mass actions was estimated to be 21–28%. On the whole, the answer “it is unlikely” prevailed over the answer “it is quite possible” during all years of the analysed period.

The coefficient of public protest potential reflects the overall assessment of the probability of mass protest actions. It is defined as weighted arithmetic mean of the respondents’ assessments, and it is expressed in the form of the coefficient:

$$Q_{pp}^t = \sum_v e_{ppv} \bar{m}_{ppv}^t,$$

where Q_{pp}^t – coefficient of public protest potential in t year $Q_{pp}^t = [0.1; 0.9]$;

$v = 1...3$ – number of response choices when assessing the level of public protest potential;

e_{ppv}, \bar{m}_{ppv}^t – assessment of the probability of mass actions of population and the average share of respondents in t year, giving the corresponding assessment:

it is quite possible – $e_{pp1} = 0.9$ and \bar{m}_{pp1}^t ;

it is unlikely – $e_{pp2} = 0.1$ and \bar{m}_{pp2}^t ;

I don’t know/ I cannot say – $e_{pp3} = 0.5$ and \bar{m}_{pp3}^t .

The higher the value of the coefficient is, the more sure the respondents are of the probability of protest actions in their settlement. The dynamics of values of the coefficient of public protest potential is presented in *figure 3*.

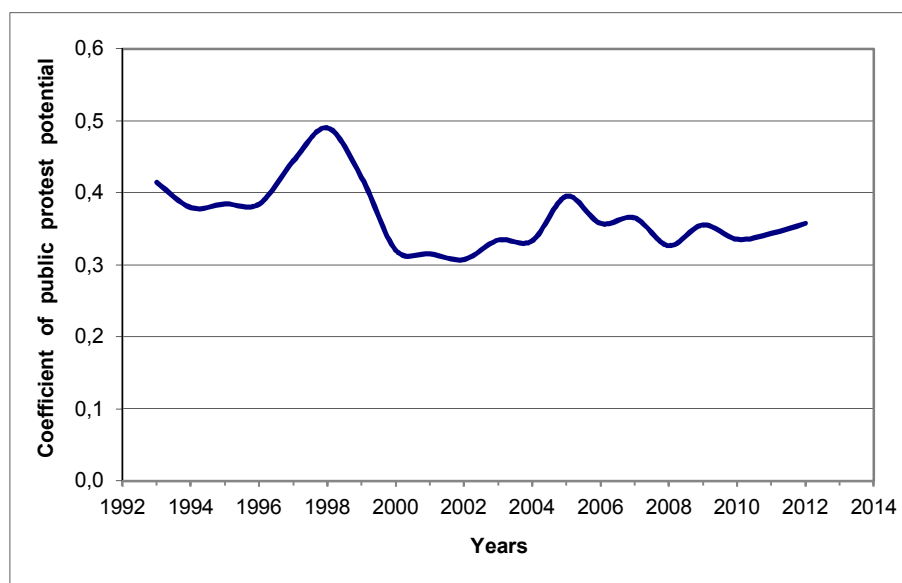


Fig. 3. Coefficient of public protest potential

As follows from the graph, the highest level of public protest potential was observed in 1997–1999, when it reached the values of 0.42–0.49, and the lowest level was registered in 2002 (0.3). The years of economic changes and the first financial crisis were accompanied by the growth of public protest potential. In the remaining years the probability of mass actions was estimated as “rather unlikely”.

However, according to VCIOM surveys, the overwhelming majority of Russians (92%) never participated in strikes. Every fifth Russian citizen (21%) considers it unnecessary to support strikers. Those respondents, who are confident such actions are necessary, note rallies and petitions as effective methods (24% and 25% of respondents respectively). Gathering money and products for participants of protest actions and their families, as well as solidarity strikes, are marked by 12% of respondents (for each). Those who do not consider it necessary to support strikers are mainly Muscovites and Petersburgians (32%), as well as respondents residing in localities of less than 50 thousand of inhabitants (56%).

Political conditions in the country are indirectly characterised by the *predictive assessment of the political situation* in the country. The assessment is determined by the results of the responses to the question “In your opinion, what expects Russia the next months in political life?” in sociological polls [3, 1994–2012; 4, 1993; 5, 2008, 2009, 2012]. The responses offered in the questionnaire are the following: “significant improvement of the situation”, “some improvement of the situation”, “some deterioration of the situation”, “significant deterioration of the situation”, “It is hard to tell”.

According to the opinion poll results, negative forecasts prevailed in the 1993–1999 period. Subsequently, the forecasts became more positive. The most positive forecasts were observed in 2008 with half of the respondents (50%) choosing the responses “significant improvement of the situation” and “some improvement of the situation”. In the remaining years the forecast of the political situation was more pessimistic.

The coefficient of political optimism gives general characteristic of political forecasts (Fig. 4). It is calculated as the difference between positive and negative predictive assessments of respondents. Positive assessments include the responses “some improvement” and “significant improvement of the situation”, negative assessments – “some deterioration” or “significant deterioration of the situation”. In this case 0 signifies neutral assessment, positive values are considered as the optimistic forecast of political prospects, negative values – as the pessimistic forecast.

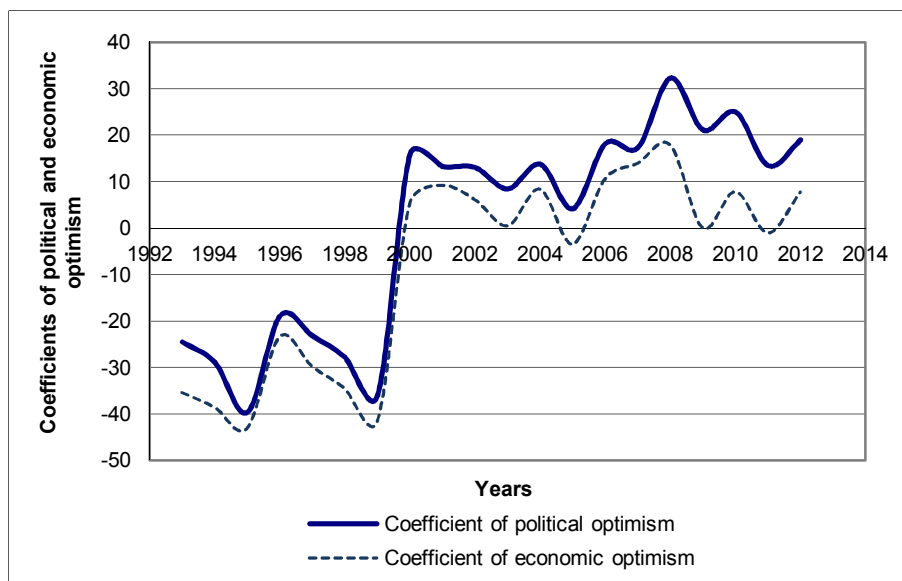


Fig. 4. Coefficients of political and economic optimism

The curve of economic optimism is presented in the same graph for comparison. The forecast of the situation for the economic sector is constructed on the basis of the emotional reaction of the population to the state and changes of the economic situation in a country or in a region. The assessment of the economic optimism is set based on the respondents' choice of an answer to the question "In your opinion, what awaits Russia in the economic sector in the coming months?" [3, 1993–2012; 5, 2008, 2009, 2012]. The questionnaire offers the same variants of answers as for the assessment of political prospects. The overall coefficient of economic optimism is determined identically to the coefficient of political optimism.

As follows from the graphs, the curve of political optimism retraces the curve of economic optimism to a considerable degree. It can be inferred from the graphs that until 2000 the subjective forecasts of both political and economic situation were pessimistic, subsequently becoming neutral or optimistic. In general, political forecasts are more optimistic than economic forecasts, particularly at the end of the analysed period.

Set of the population assessments of the political environment reflects the *subjective image of the political situation in the country*. It is characterised by the received coefficients: acuteness of the political situation in the country; public protest potential and political optimism. The overall indicator – the aggregate indicator of the assessment of the domestic political environment – is constructed on the basis of these coefficients.

Since the coefficients are constructed on different logic and have different variation of values, it is necessary to reduce them to the comparable form. Hereafter the aggregate indicators are constructed according to the following algorithm:

- a) all coefficients are reduced to the form reflecting the positivity of assessments;
- b) due to different variation of coefficients values, z-set is constructed for each of them:

$$\tilde{x}_i^t = \frac{x_i^t - \bar{x}_i}{\sigma_i},$$

where \tilde{x}_i^t – value of i coefficient in t year;

\bar{x}_i – average value of i coefficient for the analysed period;

σ_i – mean-square deviation of i indicator;

- c) rationing is performed through nonlinear transformation:

$$\hat{x}_i^t = \frac{1}{1 + e^{-\tilde{x}_i^t}}.$$

As a result, it is possible to determine the corresponding standardized indicator, which ranges from 0 to 1, while the average ratio is 0.5. Increase of the indicator value implies the rising positivity of the assessment.

The dynamics of the values of the aggregate indicator of positivity of the assessment of the political situation in the country is presented in *figure 5*.

The negative image of the political situation in the country was marked by the respondents at the beginning of the analysed period (until 1999), when the level of the aggregate indicator did not reach the value of 0.4. The intensification of negative political environment was also noted in 2005 and during the second financial crisis at the end of the analysed period. On the whole, since 2000, the domestic political environment was estimated to be neutral or positive.

Assessment of the state authorities

State power represents the system of political institutes that are engaged in the organisation of social life in certain territories. The power is divided into legislative, executive and judicial branches, which have state powers, perform certain state functions and act within the scope of their competence and the powers granted. The President holds a special place in the system of public authorities, being the Head of State and the guarantor of rights and freedoms of citizens. The Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation (the Federation Council and the State Duma) exercises legislative power. The Government of the Russian Federation is the supreme

body of the executive power. Federal courts represent judicial power. The President and the Government of the Russian Federation exercise the powers of the federal government throughout Russia. Increasing negative attitude to the government is one of the signs of the conflictogeneity of society.

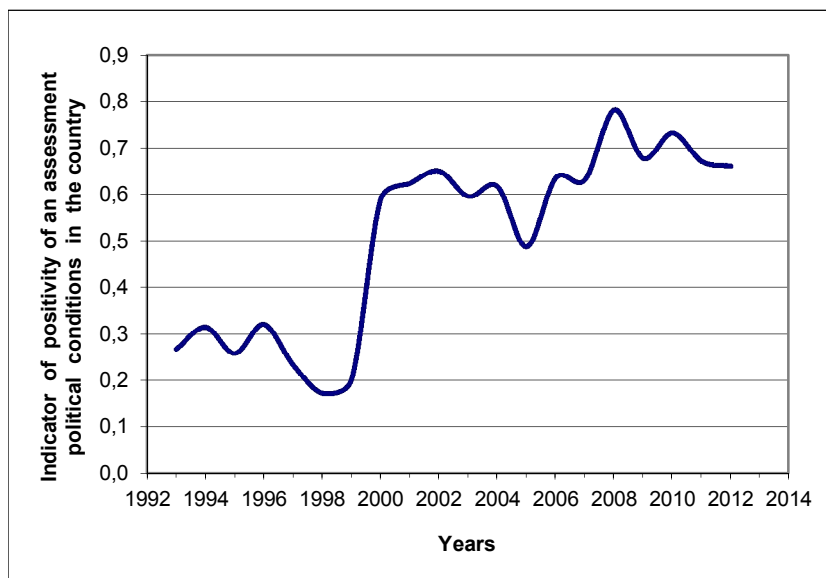


Fig. 5. The aggregate indicator of the positivity of the assessment of the political situation in the country

The effective governance of society requires that the population trusts and approves of the activities of the state authorities. In this regard, it is necessary to estimate the level of people's trust in and approval of the activities of the state authorities, first of all, the Government and the President of the country. Should the assessments be negative, certain measures aimed at the formation of more positive image of the government in mass consciousness are to be adopted in order to prevent negative emotional and behavioural response of the population.

Transformation periods in the state are accompanied, as a rule, by the weakening of the government. The economic life of the country is profoundly affected by the level of political stability, governmental ability to face challenges. Weak government is not fully capable of collecting taxes and complying with financial obligations from non-inflationary sources of funds. The impossibility to balance budgetary income and expenditure leads to budget crisis, the aggravation of problems concerning fiscal commitments. The possibilities guaranteeing the fulfilment of contracts are reduced. When the vertical state power structure weakens, the authorities have to solve routine society's problems rather than to perform strategic functions.

Strong disagreements between powerful factions weaken the Government. 86% of respondents indicated the presence of such disagreements in the sociological research "What Russians are afraid of?" in 2008. The study of the level of people's trust in state and public institutions demonstrated that the population has the least confidence in parties (13%), judicial system (21%), law enforcement agencies (24%), trade unions (23%). 60% of the population trusted the Government, while only 29% of the population had confidence in the State Duma [6].

The dynamics of the subjective assessment of the government is determined on the basis of the data from the monitoring of social and economic changes [3, 1993–2008, 2012]. The assessment of the activities of the state authorities in general, according to the monitoring results is reflected by two indicators: weakness of the government and conflicts within the country's leadership according to population estimates.

Until the year 2000 *the weakness of the government* was marked by 29–37% of respondents. Since 2000, with the newly elected President of the country coming to power, this

fact was reported by no more than 15% of respondents, which indicates the strengthening of the government according to population estimates. The dynamics of the assessment of conflicts within the country's leadership (between different branches of government) is similar (fig. 6). Higher level of conflictogenity within the country's leadership was also noted in the first half of the analysed period. The financial crisis at the end of the analysed period intensified the negativity of the assessment of the government again.

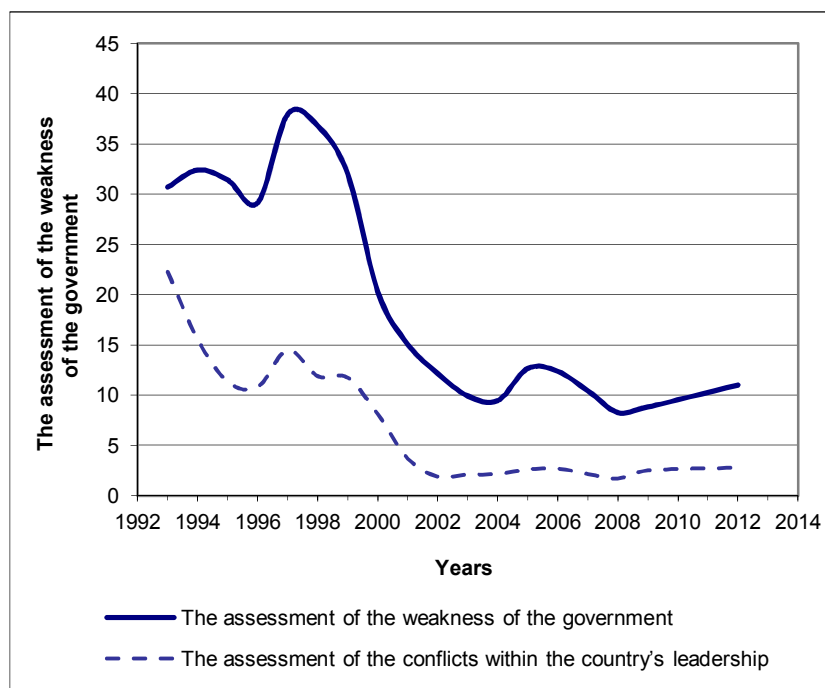


Fig. 6. The assessment of the weakness of the government and conflicts within the country's leadership

The population attitude to the President of Russia is reflected by the indicator, characterising *trust in the President*. The level of trust in the incumbent President of Russia was monitored according to representative samples in the sociological polls of the monitoring of social and economic changes [3, 1993–2006] and FOMnibus [7, 2003–2012]. The respondents answered a question, concerning trust in the President of Russia. They were offered to choose one of the answers, expressing their trust in the President, distrust of the President, or providing no answer.

At the beginning of the analysed period the confidence of respondents in the President (“I more likely trust”) did not exceed 28% (1997). In certain years the confidence in the President was absolutely low (3% in the autumn of 1998 and in 1999). Accordingly, the most distrust (“I more likely distrust” or “I completely distrust”) was expressed to the then President B.N. Yeltsin in the autumn of 1998 and in 1999 (91% of the population).

On the election of V.V. Putin as the President of Russia the following year, already more than half of the population expressed their trust in the President (52% as compared to 2% to B.N. Yeltsin previous year). Nevertheless, more than third of the population still expressed distrust (37%). During all the years of V.V. Putin presidency more than half of the population trusted him (from 52% in 2000 to 66% in 2007). Distrust was expressed by 37% of respondents in 2000 to 8% in 2008.

The number of respondents, who trusted President D.A. Medvedev, was slightly lower, and it decreased on an annual basis from 55% in 2008 to 43% in 2012. Nevertheless, about half of the population in those years trusted the incumbent President of the country. Accordingly,

from 10% (in 2008) to 18% (in 2011–2012) of the population distrusted the incumbent President of the country.

The generalising coefficient of trust in the incumbent President of the country is constructed on the basis of poll results. It is defined as the difference between the part of the population, who trust, and the part of the population, who distrust the President. The dynamics of the coefficient is presented in *figure 7*. In the 2003–2006 period the results of two polls are superimposed on one another in time and slightly differ; hence, the interval of variation in respondent opinions during these years is shown by a dotted line.

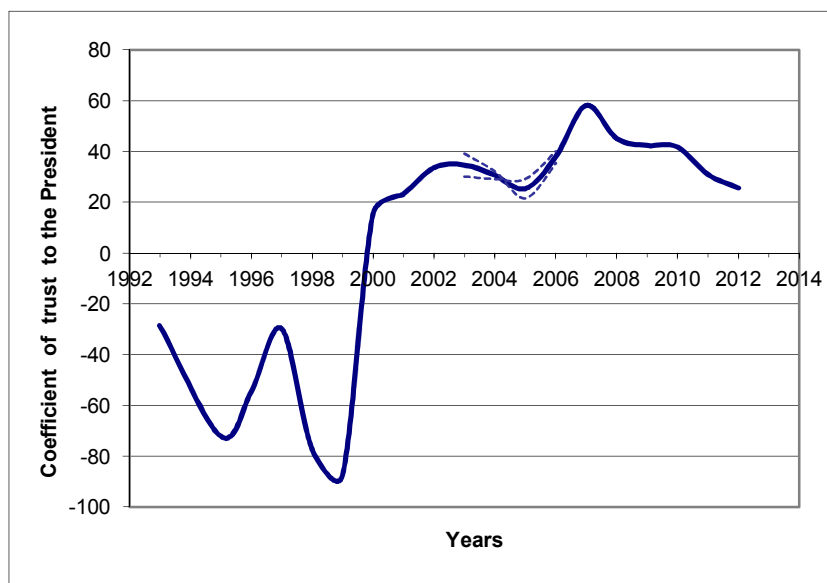


Fig. 7. Coefficient of population trust in the President of the country

As a result, it can be seen that in general, until 2000 the attitude to the incumbent President of the country (B.N. Yeltsin) was negative, due to the following reason: B.N. Yeltsin's activities have been directed at the destruction of the existing economic system. However, this period dragged on, and the population got tired of economic and political uncertainty, decrease in the level of income and unemployment. Following the election of V.V. Putin as the President of Russia the population hoped that the social and economic situation in the country would improve. In the following years the attitude to the incumbent President changed by year in the period under review, but remained generally positive.

The population attitude to the Government is reflected by the indicators, characterising trust in and approval of its activities. The level of trust in the incumbent Government of Russia was monitored in the sociological polls of 1993–2006 [3, 1993–2006]. The respondents answered the question “To what extent do you trust the Government of Russia?”. The responses offered in the questionnaire were the following: “completely distrust”, “rather distrust”, “rather trust”, “it is hard to tell”. Since 2003 the assessment of the approval of the activities of the incumbent Government was made. The respondents answered the question, reflecting the level of the approval of the government activities. The responses offered were the following: “absolutely yes”; “rather yes”; “rather no”; “absolutely no”; “it is hard to tell”.

The most confidence in the incumbent Government (“rather trust”) was observed in 2008. However, only third of the population (32%) trusted the Government of Russia that year. The population expressed the least confidence in the Government (“rather distrust” or “absolutely distrust”) in 1995–1999. During those years three quarters of the population (73–79 %) considered the Government not be trusted.

The approval level of the activities of the incumbent Government (“absolutely yes” or “rather yes”) had been increasing from 28 % of respondents in 2005 to 62% in 2009 with the

subsequent decrease of the coefficient up to 49%. Accordingly, half of the population (50%) did not approve of the Government activities in 2005. In the following years the share of the population disapproving the Government activities fell to 23% in 2008 with the subsequent growth of the coefficient to 42 % in 2012.

As a consequence of the rearrangement of the poll results, the three groups of responses characterising the attitude to the incumbent Government (negative attitude, positive attitude, hard to tell) were formed, and the overall coefficient of the positivity of the population attitude to the Government of the country was constructed (fig. 8). The coefficient is calculated as the difference between positive and negative assessments. In the 2003–2008 period the results of two polls are superimposed on one another in time and differ; hence, the interval of variation in respondent opinions during these years is shown by a dotted line.

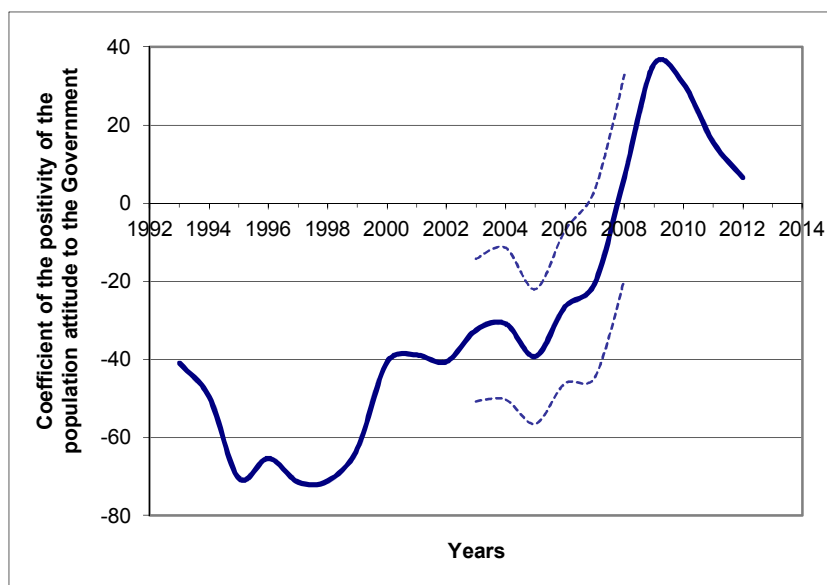


Fig. 8. Coefficient of the positivity of the population attitude to the Government of Russia

As follows from the graph, until 2008 the attitude to the Government of the country was generally negative, but the level of negativity had been decreasing since 1999, and at the end of the analysed period the attitude to the incumbent Government became positive.

According to available information, *the subjective image of the activities of the state authorities* is characterised by the aggregate indicator of the positivity of the assessment of the state authorities based on four indicators: the coefficient of the population attitude to the President, the coefficient of the population attitude to the Government of the country, the assessment of the weakness of the government, the assessment of conflicts within the country's leadership. The dynamics of the aggregate indicator of the assessment of the state authorities is demonstrated in *figure 9*.

On the whole, the overall tendency of the assessment of the activities of the state authorities on the basis of the analysed indicators is to increase the positivity of the assessment. Decrease in the positivity of the assessment was observed in 1998–1999, in the year 2005, and in 2011–2012. In addition, the activities of the President are perceived by the population through the prism of a certain individual and depending on the ability to resolve social and economic problems.

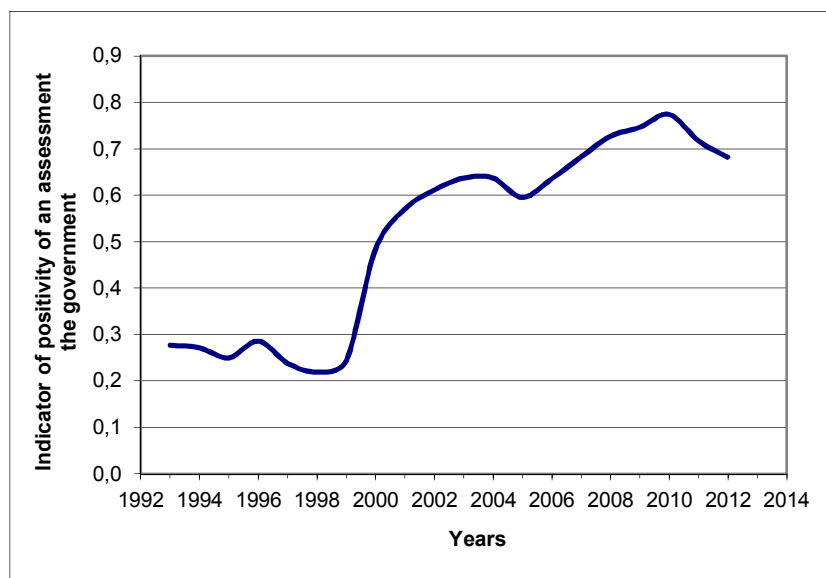


Fig. 9. The aggregate indicator of the positivity of the assessment of the state authorities

Assessment of Russian political sphere

The overall aggregate indicator of the assessment of Russian political sphere is constructed on the basis of two aggregate indicators of the positivity of the assessment of the political situation in the country and of the state authorities. The dynamics of this indicator by year is graphically presented in *figure 10*. The dotted lines in the figure show the graphs of the positivity of the assessment of the country's political situation and the state authorities.

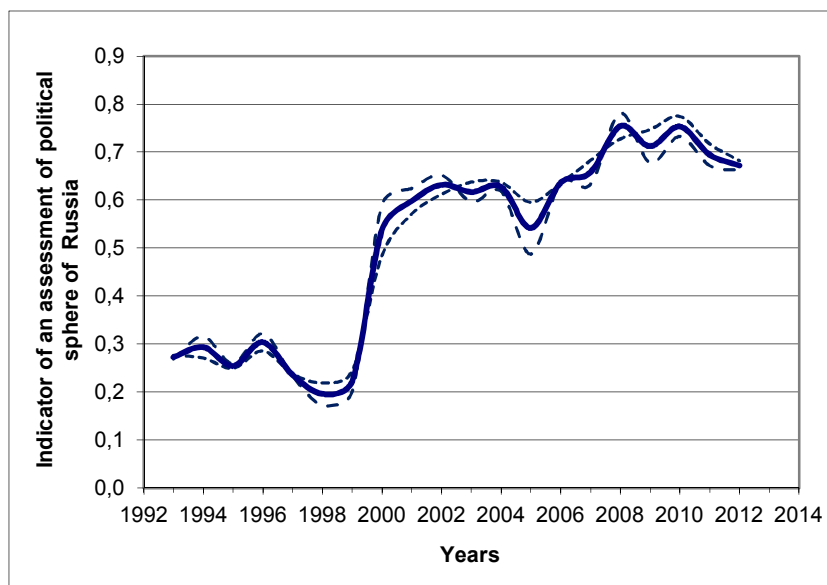


Fig. 10. The aggregate indicator of the positivity of the assessment of Russian political sphere

Testing of all aggregate indicators evidenced their high quality. Upon availability of the additional sociological polls data, characterising the political situation in the country and the activities of the state authorities, the set of indicators covered by the indicator of the assessment of the country's political sphere, can be expanded.

Conclusion

The results of sociological polls allow us to identify the subjective images of the domestic political environment and the activities of the state authorities in the country, to construct the set of coefficients characterising the subjective image of Russian political sphere in mass consciousness. The aggregate indicators enable us to obtain the overall population assessment of the positivity of the political situation in the country, positivity of the assessment of the state authorities, and positivity of the assessment of Russian political sphere as a whole.

The dynamics of the aggregate indicators suggests that the positivity of the assessments of the domestic political environment and the activities of the state authorities in the country, as well as of the political sphere as a whole, tends to increase since 2000, except for the year 2005 and the years of the financial crisis at the end of the analysed period.

The subjective image of the country's political sphere should be considered in the process of governing society. The suggested tools allow estimating the options of management measures in the political sphere of social life.

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