Socio-economic Development and the Politics of Expertise in Putin’s Russia: The ‘Hollow Paradigm’ Perspective

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Abstract

Russia’s 2018 presidential election campaign was accompanied by a new round of strategies of socio-economic development. This article analyses these documents from the perspective of the ‘politics of expertise’ defining the relations between the political regime and policy experts. The analysis draws on authoritarian politics and public policy literatures. The article argues that a ‘hollow paradigm’ approach to the politics of expertise has emerged in response to the dilemmas of authoritarian governance. While the substantive, ideational element of this paradigm is vague, its procedural, expert community-binding element is strong. The analysis contributes to the understanding of the politics surrounding the writing of strategic plans, the role of policy ideas and state–society relations in contemporary Russia.

HOW IS COHESION MAINTAINED IN AN AUTHORITARIAN political system? Authoritarian leaders distribute rents to the elites and provide public goods to citizens. The former helps to maintain the balance among the elite actors; the latter prevents a popular uprising (Gandhi 2008; Svolik 2012). In Russia, the policy-making process by which redistributive decisions are made is seen by some scholars as being dominated by the inner circle of the elite actors close to the Russian president (Petrov et al. 2014; Gel’man 2016). Other scholars view it as a heavily bureaucratic process in which different parts of the state bureaucracy and associated elite and social interests compete for their preferred policy options and the distribution of budget funds (Fortescue 2016, 2017; Martus 2017; Remington 2019). In addition, following the contemporary global trend towards participatory governance (Truex 2017), Russian authorities have increasingly invited the participation of civil society actors in policy-
making and implementation, particularly in the social sphere (Dean 2017; Skokova et al. 2018; Bindman et al. 2019; Owen & Bindman 2019). Policy experts—working at think tanks, NGOs and academia, and often moving between these organisations and jobs within the state bureaucracy—are frequently referred to as a part of the bureaucratic policy process. Yet, with few exceptions (Gel’man 2018), they are rarely the subject of scholarly analysis themselves. This article aims to fill the gap. It asks how the cohesion of the Russian expert community, a fascinating and diverse group, is maintained.

The article specifically examines expert involvement in writing strategies of socio-economic development in Vladimir Putin’s Russia. Although strategic plans for socio-economic development have received considerable attention in the literature (Mehdiyeva 2011; Cooper 2012; Sutela 2012, pp. 54–64, 222–31; Connolly 2013; Monaghan 2013, 2014; Gromov & Kurichev 2014; Wengle 2015), I approach them from a new angle, ‘the politics of expertise’. By this, I mean the interaction between the expert community involved in developing such documents, on the one hand, and Russian government officials and top politicians, on the other. I argue that understanding how strategic plans are developed helps us understand how the loyalty of the expert community to the regime is maintained. The article argues that strategies of socio-economic development play an important role in the Russian politics of expertise by preventing ruptures and dissatisfaction within the expert community. In order to demonstrate how strategic plans do this, I borrow and adapt a number of concepts from public policy literature to develop the concept of a ‘hollow paradigm’. I argue that this concept defines the relationship between experts and the government in Russia in relation to writing economic development strategies.

In particular, public policy literature regards experts as influential actors in policy-making. As ‘knowledge actors’, the motivation of experts in the policy process is to have their preferred policy vision adopted and implemented. The main currency of experts is policy ideas. Scholars have devised different typologies of ideational variables (see for example, Hall 1993; Blyth 2002; Schmidt 2008). A special category of policy ideas are policy paradigms. Vivien Schmidt writes that policy paradigms represent a special class of ideas that:

reflect[s] the underlying assumptions or organising principles orienting policy … define[s] the problems to be solved by … policies; the issues to be considered; the goals to be achieved; the norms, methods, and instruments to be applied; and the ideals that frame the more immediate policy ideas proposed to solve any given problem. (Schmidt 2008, p. 306)

Likewise, a well-known theorist of the paradigmatic analysis, Peter Hall (1993), has argued that paradigms are generic ideas that include notions about the broad direction policy should be taking—the policy aim—as well as the complementary policy instruments by which the chosen policy aim can be implemented. For instance, the overarching paradigm of the de-institutionalisation of welfare services in relation to children left without parental care includes such instruments as foster families, the provision of various incentives and benefits for foster parents, and the restructuring of former orphanages to assume new family-support functions (see Kulmala et al. 2017). However, in addition to the substantive content of ideas, theorising about policy paradigms also involves a procedural element. Experts join in coalitions around policy paradigms (Hall 1993) and advocate their preferred policy idea. The change of
paradigms is a complex process; importantly, paradigm change happens when authority shifts from one group of supporters to another (Hall 1993; Oliver & Pemberton 2004; Blyth 2013). Paradigmatic competition is beneficial for policy as it permits a refinement of government responses to policy problems. Yet, the competition between expert supporters of different paradigmatic visions means that some expert actors and their preferred policy paradigms are side-lined. Such expert actors and their ideas can remain on the fringes of the policy process for a long time. For instance, this author has earlier demonstrated how supporters of the market approach to housing policy during the Soviet period were left on the margins of the policy-making process (Khmelnitskaya 2015, ch. 2). While such experts continued to be employed in research institutes and academia, they had no influence over the housing policy process until the days of perestroika. Turning back to the contemporary Russian scene and following the contention that the Russian regime is seeking to preserve the unity of the elites and allow different social groups to participate in governance, ruptures among the expert community arising from paradigmatic competition need to be avoided. Moreover, the need to produce sophisticated policies in different policy fields that are important for the provision of public goods means that experts represent an indispensable group for policy development. Thus, experts are necessary in an authoritarian system of policy-making, and disagreement and rupture within the expert sphere can be dangerous for the regime’s stability.

The article argues that the process of writing general plans of socio-economic development has a unique position in the Russian politics of expertise and is dominated by the ‘hollow paradigm’ logic. I define the hollow paradigm as a special type of policy paradigm which, in substantive terms, is characterised by the inclusion of different—often opposing—aims and means of policy, and also has an important organisational, or procedural, element that strives to preserve the unity of the expert community and seeks to engage as broad a circle of policy specialists as possible, in order to give a sense of involvement to different parts of this diverse group. The present article elaborates how the ‘hollow paradigm’ approach to writing plans of social and economic development serves several policy-related and regime-sustaining functions. By contrast, as far as the policy process in individual policy fields is concerned—for example social, energy and fiscal policies (Gromov & Kurichev 2014; Khmelnitskaya 2015; Wengle 2015; Kulmala et al. 2017; Starodubtsev 2018, esp. ch. 2; Bindman et al. 2019)—greater competition between opposing ideas is permitted by the authorities and observed by researchers. The latter policy dynamic is reflected in many scholarly analyses of the protracted bureaucratic policy process taking place in different policy areas in Russia (see Khmelnitskaya 2017a; Bindman et al. 2019; also Martus 2017).

The article uses the method of ‘process-tracing’ (George & Bennett 2005), which is usually applied to the analysis of the influence of expert ideas in the policy-making process (Schmidt 2008, p. 308; Duckett & Wang 2017). The period covered is from the early 2000s until the end of 2017, with particular emphasis on the 2010–2017 interval. The analysis is based on a review of relevant literature, and data reported by Russian government agencies and non-governmental organisations as well as data published in the general media.
The political regime and policy-making in Russia

To understand how Russian policies of social and economic development are formulated through a process of interaction between the country’s political system and its policy experts, we need to address the logic of the Russian political regime and its implications for policy-making generally. This section draws on the literature on comparative authoritarianism and Russian politics. From the perspective of this literature, what are the sources of policy in Russia? We begin with the contention of the literature that, since authoritarian regimes, unlike totalitarian regimes, do not have the capacity for social mobilisation allowed by mass parties and ideologies, they are inherently pluralistic (Linz 2000). In addition, the current literature on authoritarianism (Gandhi 2008; Svolik 2012) argues that authoritarian rulers need to maintain their power positions with respect to fellow elite members alongside their public support. Authoritarian policies, therefore, will reflect this duality. Thus, a distinction can be made between sources of policy related to elite actors and to those associated with society at large.

We start with the elite dimension and its implications for policy-making. As Russia is regarded as an electoral authoritarian regime (Levitsky & Way 2010), the Russian leadership is not accountable to its electorate. Elections serve functions such as the alignment of different components of the political system throughout the country, as well as regime legitimisation for domestic and international audiences. In this context, it is argued that the ruling group is free to make policy choices irrespective of voter preferences. The result for policy has been the securitisation of its different spheres and issues, and a range of policies that serve the interests of the state and the ruling elite (Cooper 2012; Kulmala et al. 2014; Oxinstierna & Tynkkynen 2014; Gel’man 2016). The rent-seeking behaviour of the members of the ruling coalition leads them to set up sophisticated corruption schemes associated with state investment projects and state corporations. The tight team surrounding the Russian president produces a range of policies that result in the distribution of rents between different parts of the elite (Dawisha 2014; Orttung & Zhemukhov 2014). This is consistent with comparative findings that, in order to counter potential splits among elite actors, authoritarian leaders govern by co-opting rivals and distributing rents to members of the ruling coalition (Svolik 2012).

The social dimension is also important for understanding the policies of autocracies. The regime needs to maintain popularity and prevent social mobilisation against it (Gandhi 2008; Hale 2015). Many studies emphasise the role of stability and economic growth in ensuring the popularity of Vladimir Putin’s presidency during the 2000s (Feklyunina & White 2011). The issue of ‘performance legitimacy’, to use Samuel Huntington’s (1968) phrase, will be discussed below. In addition, the Russian regime has used tactics such as the manipulation of public opinion and the co-optation or coercion of the political opposition and civil society. During the 2000s, public support was harnessed through such devices as ‘virtual politics’ and managed democracy created by Putin’s special adviser Vladislav Surkov (Pomerantsev 2015). His dismissal, which followed the mass demonstrations of winter 2011–2012, showed the limits of Surkovian tactics (Koesel & Bunce 2012). The manipulation of public opinion has continued through close government control of mass media (Hutchings &
Tolz 2015) and of the public sphere (Greene 2014; White 2015), to which I also return below.

In the economic downturn following the 2008 global financial crisis, such tactics started to lose traction. Feklyunina and White (2011), for instance, demonstrate how, during this period, Putin’s regime deployed discourses of ‘krizis’ and modernisation to highlight the regime’s contribution to the country’s improved international standing and living standards, while seeking to avoid the blame for the unexpectedly severe impact of the crisis on the economy. The literature also emphasises that changes in the economic context and in citizens’ expectations have led the authorities to underpin their popularity using a politics of identity and values that appeal to moral, national, historical and even theological justifications for their rule (Auer 2015; Pomerantsev 2015). These strategies were supported by the aggression towards neighbouring countries and an increasingly antagonistic stance towards the West (Hale 2015; Gel’mann 2016).

Policy success is another dimension of public support for an autocracy. Mancur Olson (1993) famously argued that while their main goal is rent extraction, autocratic leaders have strong incentives to look after the material wellbeing of their citizens. By presiding over growing economies and by improving the provision of public goods and services, autocrats maintain their popularity, thus stifling the emergence of public opposition to their rule. Some scholars give greater weight to the sincerity of authoritarian leaders’ concerns for their country’s development: ‘dictatorial leaders care about both policies and rents even if they vary in the weights that they attach to each goal’ (Gandhi 2008, p. 82). Research demonstrates that since the mid-2000s, many Russian citizens have enjoyed the results of welfare programme expansion (Zavisca 2012; Kulmala et al. 2014). Moreover, despite corruption scandals, many Russians have experienced a sense of national pride as a result of ‘mega-events’ such as the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics (Orttung & Zhemukov 2014). While researchers might argue that the increase in social spending in Russia in the mid-2000s was in fact commensurate with the increase in overall budget revenues and spending at this time (Sutela 2012, pp. 196–202), they also acknowledge the positive changes in people’s lives (Kulmala et al. 2014, p. 540).

Yet, as significant as these improvements are, they are not always sufficient. People want influence over policy. As Jennifer Gandhi writes: ‘they [the public] are often after more than rents alone. They want participation in policy-making’ (Gandhi 2008, p. 71). The institutional channels that permit social groups a certain influence over policy are authoritarian parties and parliaments. Therefore, in addition to the ‘window dressing’ view of authoritarian institutions mentioned at the start of this section, another view advanced by comparative scholarship holds that, in an environment of controlled pluralism, partisan institutions allow social groups to get involved and their policy preferences to be aired. Another recent and growing trend with policy-relevant consequences has been ‘participatory governance’. Cooperation and consultations with social actors, such as big businesses and their associations, are well documented in the literature (Cook 2007; Remington 2011; Remington et al. 2013; Wengle 2015). In addition, however, since the mid-2000s, increasing public protest activity and the growth

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1See also Zweynert and Boldyrev (2017).
of civil society organisations (Greene 2014; White 2015) have led to growing cooperation and consultation between the authorities and non-profit organisations, social groups and even individual citizens (Khmelnitskaya 2017b; Skokova et al. 2018; Owen & Bindman 2019). This involves real time and online discussions of plans, projects and delivery of local services. Participatory venues allowing contributions by individuals to policy formulation represent a distinct trend in the context of neoliberal governance in democratic countries (Lee 2015). In the context of non-democracy, while particular forms—such as online consultations—may be novel (Truex 2017; Khmelnitskaya 2017b), the policy of public participation has a long tradition and was documented by the ‘groups of interests’ literature on socialist countries beginning in the 1960s (Skilling 1970; Hough 1971). The extent of public participation, this literature argued, could vary: under ‘consultative authoritarianism’ (Linz 2000, p. 254), while the ruling group remained firmly in charge of policy, the participation of specialist groups was welcomed. In the meantime, greater autonomy of and competition between opinion and ideas existed under ‘quasi-pluralistic authoritarianism’ (Skilling 1970).

In sum, the authoritarian policy process has its roots in the dilemmas of authoritarian governance concerning the elite and society. In addition to these two dimensions is the influence exerted by the structures and procedures of Russian public administration. Postcommunist Russia failed to develop the institutions essential for policy oversight, such as the rule of law, a law-applying and law-abiding civil service, and a vibrant system of political parties. Thus, power is disproportionally concentrated in the executive branch. Policy matters are decided through the lengthy bureaucratic processes (Huskey 2009), which have been observed in different fields, for instance, the development of Russia’s Far East (Fortescue 2016), budget formation (Fortescue 2017), pension provision (Remington 2019) and environmental protection (Martus 2017). The top leadership, in the meantime, using its political authority sparingly, avoids taking sides, allowing different state agencies, regional administrations and associated societal interests to compete for preferential treatment and budget funds (see Remington 2019, pp. 303–5). This ‘bureaucratic politics’, nonetheless, can be seen as a channel for resolving the ‘dilemmas of authoritarian governance’ towards elites and society via different policies. Results of this are rent-seeking opportunities for elites—including the administrative elite—and redistribution of economic growth revenues in the form of welfare and public employees’ salaries, as well as limited access to policy formulation through different participatory venues for the public.

*Theorising experts’ involvement in policy-making in Russia*

Where do experts fit in the process outlined above, in which the regime tries to find a balance between the elite and public expectations and demands? The public policy literature widely regards policy-making as a knowledge-intensive process and experts have policy-relevant knowledge (Howlett et al. 2009). The literature on comparative authoritarianism notes that, in the absence of ideology, authoritarian systems find it hard to motivate intellectual communities, students and young people. At the same time, autocracies need to keep these groups engaged for fear that they may provide radicalising ideologies to popular movements (Linz 2000, pp. 164, 194).
During the Soviet period, the relationship between Russian authorities and intellectuals, specialists and scientists was an uneasy one. While such professionals provided a source of knowledge and new ideas, their proposals and the underlying system of values often clashed with the policy-makers’ own attitudes and priorities (Service 1998, p. 197; Huskey 2009). Jerry Hough (1971), illustrating the difference in values between the party cadres and specialists, described it using the phrase ‘either red or expert’. In a similar vein, in the context of Russian non-democracy, experts emerge as ambiguous actors, belonging simultaneously to the elite and the civic arenas (see also White 2015). Many of them work for non-state organisations such as think tanks, socially-oriented NGOs, professional associations and academia. ‘Celebrity’ experts such as Aleksei Kudrin, Boris Titov, Sergei Glaziev and Oleg Klepach, as mentioned below, do not write strategic documents on their own. Development plans and strategies involve the work of many, often hundreds, of specialists working in different expert organisations. The extent of such involvement is often only evident upon examination of individual policy documents or conference proceedings. Considering this rather numerous group, the frequently modest renumeration they receive for their input and their low profile make them appear as less of an elite category. Yet, as indispensable policy advisers, experts are close to the locus of power and decision-making in Russian executive institutions and the Duma. The careers of many state officials, politicians and parliamentarians include stints in ‘expert’ posts in think tanks, academia and consultancies (Huskey 2009, p. 188; Fortescue 2017).2 Non-state experts take part in coalitions of bureaucratic officials involved in policy formation in Russia (Fortescue 2016, 2017; Khmelnitskaya 2017a; Remington 2019).

From the above, we can take several key points for understanding the politics of expertise in Russia. Policy-making requires technical expertise, yet experts are a complex community to manage in an authoritarian polity. Experts are close to the top decision-making authority and thus represent elite-type actors. From the perspective of comparative literature on authoritarian politics addressed in the previous section, divisions and ruptures among the expert community need to be avoided. At the same time, they are civil society actors who seek access to policy-making and can be brought on board using institutional channels as well as the participatory governance techniques mentioned above. These two requirements set a frame for the authorities in dealing with experts.

To this relational dimension, it is necessary to add the policy substance dimension, which expert advice inevitably involves. Not every piece of expert advice will receive equal treatment in an authoritarian system of governance. In the literature we find two contrasting opinions about the importance of policy ideas and expert knowledge in contemporary Russia. Suzanne Wengle (2015, p. 131) summarises the common position regarding the marginal influence of ideas on politics in Russia by quoting Dmitri Trenin’s claim that ‘ideas hardly matter [in Russia], while interests reign supreme’. While Zweynert and Boldyrev (2017) identify a vibrant debate and a division between liberal and statist views among the scholarly community, they conclude that the impact of these views on Russian economic policy has been marginal. A similar position is found in the work of Bryan Taylor (2014) and Vladimir Gel’man (2018). By contrast, other studies

2Although business and administrative posts predominate.
consider policy ideas championed by different professional and expert groups to have had real consequences in the form of policy changes. Such influence has been demonstrated across a diverse range of policy domains: child welfare (Kulmala et al. 2017; Bindman et al. 2019), electricity generation (Wengle 2015), housing (Khmelnitskaya 2015), prevention of human trafficking (Dean 2017), and fiscal relations between the Russian federal centre and the regions (Starodubtsev 2018).

This dichotomy of views about the role of experts and the extent of their policy contribution is not coincidental. In order to explore this role, we need to bring in the insights from the scholarship on policy ideas and pay close attention to the substance of policy ideas with which different experts work. Experts advising government officials in individual economic or social policy domains such as welfare, housing and human trafficking laws are often seen as having greater impact on policy because improvements in these areas can deliver performance legitimacy to the political regime. Here the competition between different policy approaches pertaining to, for instance housing or urban organisation, is welcome by the authorities. Experts join forces with parts of the state bureaucracy and promote their preferred policy choices in a process involving intensive bureaucratic bargaining. Thus, in individual social and economic policy domains where success ensures the provision of public goods and therefore performance legitimacy, the politics of expertise is characterised by the ‘quasi-pluralistic authoritarianism’ identified in classic studies of comparative authoritarianism (Skilling 1970).

By contrast, ideas related to the general direction of socio-economic development and reflected in the strategic plans produced during Vladimir Putin’s time in office concern the social and economic power structures and are highly political. These ideas have the potential to undermine ‘the fusion of political power and economic privileges’ (Zweynert & Boldyrev 2017, p. 932). Gel’man (2016) argues that plans for modernisation and reform are only welcome if they do not challenge the basis of the authoritarian rule. Thus, while the debate on innovation and economic growth in Russia may be vibrant—as that surrounding the preparation of the ‘Strategy 2010’ and ‘Strategy 2020’ programmes of socio-economic reforms—its effects on policy are seen as marginal (Gel’man 2018, p. 294).

Nonetheless, I suggest qualifying this view and argue that the expert impact on policy in relation to general plans for socio-economic development follows the logic of ‘consultative authoritarianism’ highlighted by Linz (2000). In this category, the leadership group remains in charge, yet open to specialist advice, which is helpful in policy-making. While free to use some of this advice or none, the leadership still needs to keep the intellectual community close and on its side. I propose to define this mode of authoritarian ‘politics of expertise’ as a process of creating a ‘hollow paradigm’.

As noted in the introduction, coalitions of experts join around competing policy paradigms—‘big ideas’ that guide policy action and dictate the choice of policy tools. I argue that the requirement of authoritarian politics to preserve unity among the elite actors, which includes policy experts close to the government, means that this diverse

3See also Truex (2017).
community has to be pushed towards forming a broad coalition which—ideally—works according to a single paradigm. Such a joint but essentially ‘hollow’ process of creating a shared paradigm about the future direction of Russian society and the economy is an important dimension in the writing of socio-economic development strategies. Zweynert and Boldyrev (2017) may be right about the divisions among the Russian scholarly community, but the empirical analysis in the next section demonstrates that, through the process of elaborating strategic programmes, differences are, to a certain degree, bridged and ruptures among experts are prevented.

Strategies of socio-economic development in Russia: widening the expert coalition

A multitude of strategies of socio-economic development emerged in Russia from the early 2000s and new ones continued to appear in the run-up to the 2018 presidential elections. Andrew Monaghan described this as ‘a plethora of new or updated concepts, strategies and doctrines’ (Monaghan 2013, p. 1222). The first document of this kind, known as the ‘Gref Programme’ or ‘Strategy 2010’ was prepared by a team of experts headed by Herman Gref, from the Centre for Strategic Development (Tsentr Strategicheskogo Razvitiya—TsSR), formed in the late 1990s. The plan became Putin’s first pre-election programme. It was followed by several other strategic papers. The most notable of these was ‘Strategy 2020’, commissioned by the government and developed by a much larger specialist community headed by Yaroslav Kuz’minov of the Higher School of Economics (Vysshaya Shkola Ekonomiki—HSE) and Vladimir Mau of the Russian Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (Rossiiskaya Akademiya Narodnogo Khozyaistva i Gosudarstvennoi Sluzhby—RANKhIGS). In 2015–2016, the same broad team worked on ‘Strategy 2030’, also commissioned by the government (Khamraev 2016a, p. 3; Shevchenko 2016).

This section demonstrates that the circle of policy experts involved in the writing of socio-economic development strategies had widened by the early 2010s compared to a decade earlier. It is also argued that while individual advocacy coalitions—liberal and statist—were observed among the expert community, the divide between them was not as pronounced as one would assume. The section demonstrates that the process of strategic plan writing brought individual experts from these coalitions together in a process of creating a ‘hollow paradigm’, and through the joint work, even if deep agreement between them was not achieved, divisions were nonetheless avoided. This approach was particularly characteristic of the run-up to Vladimir Putin’s third term and the preparations for his fourth term as president.

Major strategies of socio-economic development: 1999–2012

While the contents of the Gref programme, as an early strategic document of the Putin era, have not been overlooked by scholars (Cooper 2012; Sutela 2012), it is worth devoting attention to the expert actors who wrote it and their relationship to other groups within the specialist community. The development of the Gref Programme involved a fairly small group of the TsSR experts (Sutela 2012, p. 54; Khamraev 2016a, p. 3). The close association of this group with the ascending president catapulted their proposals directly
into the centre of the policy process. The policy produced on the basis of the Gref Programme led to the adoption of a large package of social and economic legislation in December 2004. Linda Cook (2007) in her analysis of Russia’s post-socialist welfare state development argues that the reduction of the independent role of the Duma and the compromises achieved with powerful bureaucratic constituencies were important for the adoption of the social reform measures envisaged in the ‘Gref Programme’. At the same time, Cook refers to interview data with social policy experts from outside Gref’s team, who complained about the exclusive approach to the Programme’s development. They argued that while offering ‘really deep analysis…of substantive possibilities [for policy reform]’ (Cook 2007, p. 154) the programme nonetheless represented only the ‘ideas of a few people’ (Cook 2007, p. 183). Thus, the wider community of social policy specialists researched by Cook was never consulted in the formulation of the ‘Strategy 2010’ and was side-lined in this process. Yet, it could be argued that the expert coalition started to widen when the next policy programme, ‘Concept 2020’, was developed by government ministries—primarily economy and finance, the latter headed by Aleksei Kudrin at the time—and adopted by a government resolution in 2008 (Cooper 2012, pp. 9–10; Monaghan 2013, p. 1233). This new strategic statement was made almost instantly obsolete by the effects of the 2008 global financial crisis, necessitating a new round of revision, this time with the participation of a significantly larger group of specialist advisers (Sulakshin 2011; Cooper 2012, p. 10). The development of the new document, ‘Strategy 2020’ led by Yaroslav Kuz’minov and Vladimir Mau, of the HSE and RANKhiGS respectively, included 21 expert groups and involved around 1,500 experts (Makarov 2011). The range of expertise and the large number of specialists involved are evident from the strategy’s table of contents.4

The wider expert community

The HSE and RANKhiGS were not the only centres of expertise involved in the debate surrounding the development of policy reform plans during Dmitry Medvedev’s presidency. The Institute for Contemporary Development (Institut Sovremennogo Razvitiya—INSOR), a coalition of liberal economists, social scientists and business leaders which became linked to Dmitry Medvedev in the mid-2000s, was responsible for the development of four National Priority Projects (healthcare, education, housing and agriculture) aimed at strengthening Russia’s social capital.5 A programme by the INSOR institute entitled ‘Finding (or Defining) the Future: Strategy 2012’ (Obretenie budushchego: Strategy 2012) appeared in late 2011 (INSOR 2011).

The HSE/RANKhiGS coalition’s proposals concerned economic and social policy, while INSOR made proposals for liberal, including political, modernisation. Many of the HSE/RANKhiGS group’s proposals were included in Vladimir Putin’s ‘May decrees’ of 2012, indicating the influence of these experts over policy development. In addition, from 2015

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4 Available at: http://2020strategy.ru/, accessed 30 June 2019.
5 See, for example, ‘Natsional’nye prioritety Rossiiiskoi Federatsii’, INSOR, 9 June 2008, available at: http://insor-russia.ru/node-en/12579/97/, accessed 14 October 2020; see also INSOR’s history at: http://insor-russia.ru/about_us/, accessed 14 October 2020.
to spring 2016, the HSE/RANKHiGS coalition worked on ‘Strategy 2030’, a document commissioned by Dmitry Medvedev’s government (Khamraev 2016a, p. 3).

Alongside the ‘liberals’, there was also a broad and loosely defined advocacy coalition of ‘national conservatives’ (gosudarstvenniki) (Zweynert & Boldyrev 2017, pp. 929–31), namely the Russian Academy of Sciences (Rossiyskaya Akademiya Nauk—RAN)-based specialist community. This group included academics formerly or at the time of writing attached to its economic and mathematical research organisations, for instance, the Central Institute for Economics and Mathematics (Tsentral’niĭ Ekonomiko-matematicheskii Institut—TsEMI) and the Institute for National Economic Forecasting (Institut Narodno-khozyaistvennogo Prognozirovaniya) (Nikolaeva 2016). Some of this community’s views come close to the statist views expressed by such prominent actors as academician and presidential adviser Sergei Glaz’ev (Aslund 2013; Nikolaeva 2016; Orekhin 2016), and the chief economist of the state-owned bank VEB, Andrei Klepach, whose early career path had taken him through the above-mentioned institutes. The RAN-based coalition, including Glaz’ev and Klepach, together with business ombudsman Boris Titov joined the Stolypin Club formed in 2006 on the initiative of Delovaya Rossiya, an association of medium-sized businesses. Titov, a lobbyist and head of the Party of Growth (Partiya Rosta), was an elite figure who frequently appeared in meetings with the president and government and in the news. Yet, the fact that Titov did not write policy strategies on his own but as a part of a large group of experts, supports the view of this article of a mixed expert-civic status which policy experts as a community have.

An important feature of this community was that despite the opposing views among the liberal and statist expert coalitions, in the process of writing development strategies there were no clear dividing lines between the two groups. Supporting the ‘hollow paradigm’ logic advanced in this article, there was a considerable degree of fluidity between their members. For instance, conservative statist experts associated with the RAN coalition were involved in revising the government’s (fiscally conservative) ‘Strategy 2020’, while simultaneously taking part in the INSOR coalition working on an even more liberal version of the modernisation strategy, which advocated economic and political reform (Makarov 2011, p. 59; Sheviakov 2011, p. 54). Some proposals by these pro-growth experts, such as the creation of 25 million skilled jobs or a 50% increase in labour productivity, also made their way into the 2012 ‘May decrees’ (Cooper 2012). This demonstrates that, since the late 2000s, strategic planning has been characterised by the broadening of the ‘insider’ circle, with the result that a much larger group of experts,

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6For Sergei Glaz’ev’s biography on the official website of the Russian president (www.kremlin.ru) see http://www.kremlin.ru/catalog/persons/323/biography, accessed 31 August 2018; for Andrei Klepach’s biography see, http://www.banki.ru/wikibank/klepach_andrey_veb/, accessed 31 August 2018.

7See the website of the Stolypin Club (Stolypinskii klub) available at: https://stolypinsky-club.ru/, accessed 14 October 2020.

8In the September 2016 parliamentary elections, the ‘Party of Growth’ received 1.29% of the vote, according to the data of the Central Electoral Commission (Tsentral’naya izbiratel’naya komissiya—TsIK). See ‘Resul’taty vyborov deputatov Gosudarstvennoi Dumy sela’mo sozyva’, available at: http://www.vybory.izbirkom.ru/region/region/izbirkom/action=show&rrot=1&tvd=100100067795854&vrm=100100067795849&region=0&global=1&sub_region=0&prver=0&kronetvd=0&vibid=100100067795854&type=242, accessed 14 October 2020.
with highly heterogeneous policy views, was able to claim participation in developing different aspects of Russian policy strategies.

*Developing a strategy for Vladimir Putin’s fourth presidential term*

The development of economic strategies continued during Vladimir Putin’s third term (2012–2018). Some new expert organisations became prominent among the specialist community, yet the ‘hollow paradigm’ approach of co-opting experts and bringing them closer into the dialogue with the regime and with each other carried on. The work of Aleksei Kudrin, a famous economist with an international reputation, presents a good example and his career is noteworthy.

A liberal economist and colleague of Putin’s from his time at the St Petersburg Mayor’s office in the 1990s, Kudrin was part of the Centre for Strategic Development (TsSR) team in the late 1990s. In the 2000s Kudrin served as minister of finance and vice prime minister and received international recognition for his strict neoliberal approach to dealing with Russia’s finances and with the impact of the global financial crisis (Orekhin 2016). In March 2011 he demonstrated non-compliance with then-president Medvedev and resigned following a dispute over budget spending priorities. During the 2011–2012 electoral protests, Kudrin did not express public support for anti-regime demonstrations but did not endorse the regime either. Instead, he argued for an evolutionary transformation of the Russian political system (White 2015, p. 315), a position he continued to hold during the run-up to the 2018 presidential elections (Butrin 2017b, p. 1). Yet, the refusal by this domestically and internationally prominent expert figure to endorse the regime in 2011 indicated a possibility for elite defections from the Putin coalition at a time of widespread contention. Following the protests, Kudrin assumed an independent role and moved to become a civil society activist by forming a new expert organisation, the Committee for Civic Initiatives (Kommitet Grazhdanskikh Initsiativ—KGI) (Orekhin 2016). This expert group held a series of expert–civil society conferences, ‘Civic Forums’ (Grazhdanskii Forum), devoted to the problem of Russia’s social and economic development. Kudrin claimed that his objective was to propose a ‘series of professionally developed documents, each offering concrete measures addressing nascent problems of different spheres … so that their quality and depth … match those developed by government experts’ (Khamraev 2015, p. 6). The stance of Kudrin and his emerging organisation presented a threat for the regime, opening the prospect of a possible opposition movement that might even become an opposition government. Yet, in April 2016, in an unexpected move, which nonetheless followed the ‘hollow paradigm’ logic of expert co-optation, President Putin himself interfered, by stating during a televised ‘direct line’ with the public that Aleksei Kudrin was ‘one of the exceptionally useful experts’ (Khamraev 2016a, p. 3) and that he might be soon taking an influential advisory job with the government. Following this, Kudrin was elected chairman of the TsSR Council and Deputy Chair of the Presidential Economic Council (Butrin 2016, p. 2; Khamraev 2016a, p. 3). In these top advisory positions, at the president’s request, Kudrin began to work on the Strategy for Russia’s Development Post-2018. The new strategy was cast as Putin’s election programme for his fourth presidential term (Khamraev 2016a, p. 3; Shevchenko 2016).
As chairman of the TsSR Kudrin’s work further followed the ‘hollow paradigm’ approach. He began by building an inclusive new community of state and non-state experts, which according to media reporting included those from the HSE/RANKhigS group, who up until May 2016 had been working on ‘Strategy 2030’. Moreover, the media reported that the ‘Party of Growth’ actors were included in this group too (Kriuchkova & Butrin 2016, p. 1), despite their vocal disapproval of the neoliberal ‘Kudrin paradigm’ which, according to Boris Titov, had been followed by the government. For instance, the ‘Challenges 2017’ conference was held in early June 2016, with around a hundred experts and ministerial officials taking part. Kudrin stated that these specialists had to write a new strategy for the country’s long-term development for 2018–2024 by summer 2017 (Khamraev 2016b, p. 3; Shevchenko 2016). During the second half of 2016, a series of meetings took place including Kudrin, Medvedev, representatives of the presidential administration, and different ministerial and non-state experts, indicating that the work on a new policy plan was underway (Khamraev 2016b, p. 3; Shevchenko 2016).

At the same time, the coalition of statist experts had carved out their own niche within the process of writing policy strategies during the run-up to Vladimir Putin’s fourth term. During 2015, the ‘pro-growth’ community of RAN experts, headed by Glaz’ev and Klepach, worked on a ‘Growth Economics’ (Ekonomika Rosta) report, offering alternatives to the government’s tight monetary policy and the government-commissioned ‘Strategy 2030’ (Nikolaeva 2016; Orekhin 2016). This work, even though at odds with the thinking of an influential part of government officials within the economy and finance ministries (the economic ‘bloc’ of the government) (Fortescue 2017; Khmelnitskaya 2017a; Remington 2019, p. 304), was endorsed by the top leadership (Orekhin 2016). Moreover, Putin and Medvedev invited closer cooperation and discussion between specialists with statist and liberal views and did not include any strict deadline for the development of strategic plans based on such a dialogue between opposing expert ideas (Nikolaeva 2016; Butrin 2017a). For example, during the summer and autumn of 2016, at the same time as commissioning Kudrin’s programme, Putin and Medvedev held several meetings with Boris Titov, Chairman of the Stolypin Club to which the RAN-based expert coalition belonged, and asked him to develop the ‘Growth Economics’ report into a full ‘Strategy of Growth’ (Strategiya Rosta) by January 2017. Moreover, the fact that a discussion forum between the government and the pro-growth experts was created in the form of a new interdepartmental working

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9 See, ‘Programma Stolypinskogo Kluba “Strategiya Rosta” v yanvare budet predstavlena presidentu’, 19 October 2016, available at: http://stolypinsky.club/2016/10/19/titov-programma-stolypinskogo-kluba-strategiya-rosta-v-yanvare-budet-predstavlena-prezidentu/, accessed 14 October 2020.

10 According to the Presidential Order No. Pr-1347 from 14 July 2016, see ‘Programma “Ekonomika Rosta” dorabotana v sootvetstvii s porucheniem Predsedatelya pravitel’stva RF Dmitriya Medvedeva’, Stolypin Club website, 27 September 2016, available at: http://stolypinsky.club/2016/09/27/programma-ekonomika-rosta-dorabotana-v-sootvetstvii-s-porucheniem-predsedatelya-pravitelstva-rg-dmitriya-medvedeva/, accessed 15 October 2020; ‘Programma Stolypinskogo Kluba “Strategiya Rosta” v yanvare budet predstavlena presidentu’, Stolypin Club website, 19 October 2016, available at: http://stolypinsky.club/2016/10/19/titov-programma-stolypinskogo-kluba-strategiya-rosta-v-yanvare-budet-predstavlena-prezidentu/, accessed 14 October 2020; see also Nikolaeva (2016, 2018, p. 2).
group attached to the government’s Analytical Centre (Analyticheskii Tsentr pri Pravitel’stve Rossiiskoi Federatsii)\(^{11}\) (Nikolaeva 2016, 2018, p. 2) further demonstrated an official endorsement of the Stolypin club experts’ efforts. By the end of the year, the Stolypin Club/RAN community presented an outline of their new strategy to the public during a presentation held at the Analytical Centre.\(^{12}\) However, the new strategy was not unveiled in January 2017 as stated. Instead, following the hollow paradigm logic which prioritises the continuation of the dialogue among experts over its results, further discussions began between the Stolypin Club members and other prominent experts and bodies, such as the Institute of International Relations (Moskovskii Gosudarstvennyi Institut Mezhdunarodnykh Otnoshenii—MGIMO).\(^{13}\)

Further tracing of the Party of Growth’s and Kudrin’s strategies demonstrates that during 2017 both programmes continued to be in the news: a meeting (soveshchanie) on 30 May 2017 of the President with government officials was dedicated to them; and Putin and Medvedev held several meetings with Kudrin and Titov during the year. This activity, though, continued to follow the ‘hollow paradigm’ mode in which an open-ended process surrounding elaboration of policy plans by different and often intersecting sets of state and non-state experts took precedence over having these plans finalised, as we further discuss in the following section. For example, during the 30 May meeting at the president’s office including members of the presidential administration, the government and non-state experts, Kudrin and Titov, made official presentations of their respective strategies (Butrin 2017a, 2017b). Moreover, the media reported that at the same meeting the government’s ministries of the economy and finance presented their own programme of economic and social development for the next presidential term (Kriuchkova 2017; Butrin 2017a, 2017b). Furthermore, Kudrin’s strategy remained a work in progress throughout the year. For instance, during a meeting in St Petersburg on 17 November 2017, the president and Aleksei Kudrin still continued discussing the ‘preparation’ (podgotovka) of the strategy.\(^{14}\) Boris Titov, in the meantime, also had several consultations with the president and government officials during 2017 (Nikolaeva & Butrin 2017, p. 1), and in November announced that he was joining the presidential race

\(^{11}\)See, ‘Programma “Ekonomika Rosta” dorabotana v sootvetstvii s porucheniem Predsedatelya pravitel’stva RF Dmitriya Medvedeva’, Stolypin Club website, 27 September 2016, available at: http://stolypinsky.club/2016/09/27/programma-ekonomika-rosta-dorabotana-v-sootvetstvii-s-porucheniem-predsedatelya-pravitelstva-rf-dmitriya-medvedeva/, accessed 15 October 2020; the Government’s Analytical Centre (Analyticheskii Tsentr pri Pravitel’stve Rossiiskoi Federatsii) is a non-profit organisation under the auspices of the Russian government. According to its own description, it is a ‘government affiliated think tank’. See the Analytical Centre’s description at its website at: http://www.ac.gov.ru/about, accessed 12 October 2020; also see its mentioning within the government structure at the Russian Government official website at: http://government.ru/department/225/, accessed 12 October 2020.

\(^{12}\)See ‘Predstavlena struktura “Strategii Rosta”’, Stolypin Club website, 21 December 2016, available at: http://stolypinsky.club/2016/12/21/predstavlena-struktura-strategii-rosta/, accessed 12 October 2020; also see Nikolaeva (2016).

\(^{13}\)See ‘KPI dlya administratsii rosta dolzhno stat’ ispolnenie maiiskh ukazov Predsidenta’, Stolypin Club website, 25 January 2017, available at: http://stolypinsky.club/2017/01/25/kpi-dlya-administratsii-rosta-dolzhno-stat-ispolnenie-majskih-ukazov-predzidenta/, accessed 15 October 2020.

\(^{14}\)See ‘Aleksei Kudrin dolozhil presedentu o rabote nad strategiei ekonomicheskogo razvitiya Rossi’, Kommersant’, 17 November 2017, available at: https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3472301, accessed 12 October 2020.
with the ‘Strategy of Growth’—by this time officially published\textsuperscript{15}—as his platform for the March 2018 elections.\textsuperscript{16}

In summary, the professional community involved in writing expert strategic documents during Putin’s third term was characterised by its fluidity and its involvement with the government via diverse meetings, discussion groups and advisory bodies that linked officials with the expert community. The way in which experts were connected to official structures could also be described using Eugene Huskey’s (2009) term ‘pantouflage’. Because of the continuous movement of individual specialist actors from expert structures to government posts and back, we cannot really draw clear dividing lines between the positions of policy officials and experts, as implied in Zweynert and Boldyrev’s article (2017). We may speak of the inclusive nature of the coalition involved in the process of developing strategic plans. At the same time, I argue that the process of drafting policy strategies that included myriad specialists with different policy preferences has its own functionality. As discussed further in the next section, this includes what I define as ‘a hollow paradigm’.

\textit{The benefits of writing strategies of socio-economic development}

Cooper (2012) has suggested a functional reason for the process of writing policy strategies involving different coalitions of experts and officials. The broad involvement of policy experts, representing the entire spectrum of views on the problem of socio-economic development, allowed the Russian leadership to draw on the different proposals that various sections of this large community put forward in evolving circumstances. The policy goals and instruments it found most acceptable could then be applied in the subsequent policy formulation. Moreover, association with competent expert actors allowed the leadership to reassert its claim to effective technocratic governance, described by Susanne Wengle (2015, pp. 33–4, 245) as ‘doing the right thing for the country’. In this light, the invitation from the president to Aleksei Kudrin to become involved in the development of ‘Strategy 2018–2024’ during the tense pre-election period allowed the leadership to simultaneously bring on board new policy proposals, and to boost its claim to ‘doing the right thing’ within a challenging environment.

Yet, I would argue that the all-inclusive nature of the policy plans, both in terms of the actors involved and of the ideas put on paper, displayed the qualities of the hollow paradigm. It is not unusual to come across experts’ comments that the goals chosen in such documents were ‘declaratory… and thus unattainable’, with little detail of how the policy was to be implemented, that is, poorly defined ‘policy means’ (Sulakshin 2011, p. 12). The need for internal coherence between the goals of a policy and for complementarity between these goals and the means used to achieve them, was hard to sustain while policy experts of often opposed ideational strands participate in writing the same text, which was further diluted in the process of seemingly endless consultations.

\textsuperscript{15}'Strategiya Rosta’, Stolypin Club website, 8 February 2017, available at: http://stolypinsky.club/strategiya-rosta-3/, accessed 15 October 2020.

\textsuperscript{16}'Boris Titov prisoedinilsya k presidentskoi gonke’, Kommersant’, 6 November 2017, available at: https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3479825, accessed 12 October 2020.
The process of combining different, sometimes incompatible, policy goals and means in a joint ‘hollow paradigm’ can be illustrated by scrutinising the process of the formulation of two strategic documents during 2017 by expert teams headed by Aleksei Kudrin and Boris Titov. When the documents were presented to the president at the 30 May 2017 meeting, President Putin suggested the creation of a ‘united economic strategy’ (Butrin 2017a, 2017b, p. 1). No such joint strategy was developed, but common ground was found in each text. Kudrin’s strategy had three central elements: economic, particularly speeding up Russian technological modernisation; measures to improve social capital, including greater budget financing of healthcare and education and an increase in the pension age; and administrative reform. Meanwhile, the Party of Growth’s programme, in its earlier versions including the ‘Growth Economics’ programme and the ‘Strategy of Growth’ discussed during 2016, contained measures to create 25 million hi-tech jobs, which in the 2017 version was increased to 35 million. A new set of social development measures were added in winter 2017. While it acquired such social capital enhancing measures as preventive healthcare and investment in education, which also featured in Kudrin’s strategy, the Stolypin Club’s strategy version of May 2017 did not mention the increase of retirement age—one of the flagship measures in Kudrin’s strategy—and instead supported the development of pension saving schemes. The unique selling point of the Stolypin Club strategy—the application of quantitative easing, leading to higher inflation and public debt, and severely criticised by Kudrin (2017, p. 1)—was also somewhat muted in the latest version of the text. The public debt estimates in the programme were scaled down from the 60% contained in the earlier proposals to 30% in the May 2017 version (Butrin 2017b). Only Titov’s strategy contained lobbyist demands to extend funding for the ‘institutions of development’: R1.5 billion annually for industrial development, monotowns, the state-owned bank VEB and the Russian Railways Corporation.

In addition, presented at the same 30 May 2017 meeting, the government’s own plans—developed by the economic bloc of the government—contained a similar package of economic and social policy measures (Butrin 2017a, 2017b, p. 1; Kriuchkova 2017, p. 2). Vladimir Putin, however, true to his style of encouraging policy factions to settle their differences without his interference wherever possible (Fortescue 2010, p. 44), suggested that either one of the strategies would be taken as the basis of policy or that policy would emerge on ‘the basis of deep analysis and further consultations’ (Butrin 2017a). No time limit for the completion of such analysis and consultation was set.

One may ask how different options thus included in these strategy texts advance interests of specific bureaucratic and elite groups, for instance the state corporations and government departments concerned with social issues, such as housing and education. I have earlier referred to several recent studies that note the involvement of expert actors in the bureaucratic battles for resources and policy options (Gromov & Kurichev 2014; Wengle 2015; Dean 2017; Kulmala et al. 2017; Starodubtsev 2018; Bindman et al. 2019). The objective of this article is to examine a different dynamic involved in the politics of

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17 Also see ‘Strategiya Rosta’, Stolypin Club website, 28 February 2017, available at: http://stolypinsky.club/strategiya-rosta-3/, accessed 15 October 2020.
expertise: that associated with the hollow paradigm approach to dealing with the expert community. As the process tracing above illustrates, expert actors are encouraged to work together, smooth over their differences, and constantly negotiate in a process which under another set of institutional circumstances would be more reminiscent of elaboration of official government programmes. Yet the policy plans examined here have no executive power attached to them.

A different rationale for this relentless negotiation of policy plans is proposed in this article. From the viewpoint of the politics of ideas, paradigms are broad visions of policy binding communities of experts together. While the policy-relevant value of an all-encompassing ‘hollow’ paradigm may suffer from the internal contradictions of details contained in the policy plans, the community-binding element involved in this policy work is not insignificant. The participatory process of creating strategic plans, the hollow paradigm approach, has a value of its own in the context of authoritarian governance where elite splits are dangerous. While it is important to examine policy details included in strategic plans or consider how those details benefit different interests, the process of writing policy strategies deserves consideration in its own right. This process attracts a large number of policy experts holding diverse policy ideas, and because of its inclusive nature helps to ‘embed’ the policy planning within the specialist community. For instance, as Irina Dezhina (2013) writes, the scientific community in Russia may be insufficiently organised in the form of established academic societies. Yet, as the above shows, the policy process in Russia provides a means for the politicisation and binding of the scientific community in an inclusive policy sub-system involved in policy development. This process can be interpreted from a number of viewpoints. From the viewpoint of the developmental state literature, this may not be a dissimilar process to the one described by Wengle (2015) as ‘enlisting’ the owners of large industrial conglomerates in the process of sectoral reform. This facilitates cooperation on other matters and attempts to create the sought-after ‘infrastructural power’ of the state (Mann 1984) or the ‘embeddedness’ of the state in society (Evans 1995). However, from the perspective of authoritarian politics advanced here, the process of creating a hollow policy paradigm—into which many policy instruments and views seemingly merge, and where conflicts are smoothed—allows experts a place in policy-making and prevents defections among this indispensable and diverse elite group. One illustration of how this system works is Boris Titov’s decision to run for president in 2017—an act agreed with the Kremlin to diversify the presidential ballot. A further (counterfactual) scenario would be for a prominent expert like Titov or Aleksei Kudrin to join the opposition. The invitation to Sergei Guriev from President Putin to return from a self-imposed exile in 2015 can be considered in this light (Smertina 2015; Zweynert & Boldyrev 2017, p. 936). In this way, the hollow paradigm approach emphasises the process of participation itself rather than the development of coherent policy plans, thereby tying the specialist community—academics, experts and other professional groups—to the political regime.

The hollow paradigm phenomenon, observed in Russia since the late 2000s, arises from the Russian regime’s governance approach of maintaining a balance, whereby elites and civil society are engaged in policy formulation and differing views are thus co-opted and neutralised rather than manifesting in opposition. This is particularly relevant in what
Zweynert and Boldyrev (2017) refer to as the highly politicised part of Russian expert ideas associated with planning of socio-economic development.

How consequential are policy ideas included in these strategic plans? A similar question was asked about public involvement in policy debates during the socialist period (Fortescue 2010, p. 35). At first glance, it is easy to dismiss the influence of such ideas, as the ruling elite, following the definition of consultative authoritarianism, is free to take or ignore the advice. Yet, we can note the advice is often taken and applied in policy. For instance, the Development Strategy for 2018-2024 to the best of our knowledge has not been published, which may indicate that it is likely to provide a source of policy initiatives. As mastery over policy matters has been seen as important for the Russian leaders in order to maintain the confidence of the political elite (Remington 2019, p. 304), having access to unexpected and innovative policy solutions—especially in conditions of a crisis situation—is an advantage. For instance, in the circumstance of the squeeze on Russian budgetary resources in 2015-2016, proposals from experts such as Aleksei Kudrin were taken seriously by the government when deciding on budgetary priorities for the critical 2017 budget (Khmelnitskaya 2017a).

Expert communities and their ideas may also be influential around times of leadership change. A new ascending and/or reform-minded leader is likely to turn to reformist ideas to inform the new policies. To take a historical example, Archie Brown (1996) demonstrated that proposals for economic and political reform, long in circulation among Soviet intellectuals, played a key role for defining policy during the perestroika period and the early post-Soviet transition.

**Conclusion**

This article started by posing the question of how cohesion is maintained by the Russian regime with regard to the diverse group of experts and policy specialists. In its analysis, the article focused on the process of developing strategies of socio-economic development. Unlike other studies devoted to strategic plans, this article concentrated on the interaction between the politics, on the one hand, and the actors holding policy expertise, on the other hand, involved in the process of drafting policy strategies. The argument here is not to deny that strategy documents aim at generating new policy ideas or that they have the regime-legitimating effects that are highlighted in many studies. The analysis in this article aims to complement such work by illuminating the politics–expertise nexus associated with this process.

This article has argued that in Russia, the involvement of experts in policy and politics is dominated by the ‘hollow paradigm’ logic when it comes to writing major strategies of socio-economic development. These documents are associated with the structure and organisation of Russian government and economy, and thus have implications for the power position of the leadership. This represents a kind of expert involvement in policy where pluralism is maintained but closely controlled, and where the relationship between experts and authorities follows the ‘consultative authoritarianism’ mode. Beyond strategic plans, experts and specialists are involved in policy development in different economic and social domains. Here, a greater diversity of specialist views and a competition between them is described by the existing research as a process approximating ‘quasi-
pluralistic authoritarianism”. Effective social and economic policy-making and implementation—involving competition between expert opinions—is a prerequisite of policy success and helps the performance legitimacy of an authoritarian state. In the meantime, participation by different social groups—including prominent experts with their combined elite and civil society status—in policy-making helps to bind these communities to the political system. Both aspects—performance legitimacy and participation—are dictated by the requirement of authoritarian governance. This leads to the regime adopting a ‘quasi-pluralistic’ approach to expert involvement in policy-making in relation to those areas of policy that generate performance legitimacy but without threatening elite rents and opportunities.

The hollow paradigm perspective on policy plans in Russia, to a certain degree, chimes with the arguments put forward by Brian Taylor (2014) about Russia’s ‘virtual politics’ and the untouchable basis of Russian authoritarianism as argued by Vladimir Gel’man (2016). Similarly, Zweynert and Boldyrev (2017, p. 935) conclude that ‘strategy papers and official declarations mainly serve to simulate reform activity, and conceal the fact that any deep-going structural change would endanger the volatile equilibrium between those who enjoy privileged access to rents, and is thus intolerable to those in power’. From the perspective of this article, strategic policy documents, viewed as a process of creating a hollow paradigm, have an element of political theatre about them. While another strand in Russian scholarship recognises the commitment of different groups of Russian reformers to initial coherent sets of policy ideas, it emphasises that, more often than not, original reform plans change beyond recognition in the process of their implementation (Shleifer & Treisman 2000; Cook 2007; Sutela 2012).

The argument here is that the role of expert knowledge and ideas in Russian politics and policy-making should be seen as multidimensional. Interpreted as a process of creating a hollow paradigm, strategic plans play a role in phony as opposed to real politics. At the same time, they are important in maintaining the stability of the Russian regime, helping to preserve the unity of elites and the participation of civil society, preventing authority shifts usually associated with the change in the guiding policy paradigm while also helping to formulate policies that generate public support. While allowing experts a sense of involvement in policy-making, the hollow paradigm also complements the country’s protracted and bureaucratic policy-making process, and represents an essential device for managing the politics of expertise in contemporary Russia.

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