ANALYSIS

Popular Support for Democracy and Autocracy in Russia

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Abstract

The high levels of popular support for Putin have sometimes been interpreted as public acceptance of the moves toward greater autocracy that occurred during his first two terms as president and that continued when he served as prime minister. The results of some Russian public opinion surveys seem to confirm that impression, but these survey results may give an impression that there is less support for democracy than actually exists. Measuring support for democracy in societies where democratic institutions are not present, or do not function well, is a challenge. In societies moving either toward or away from democracy, the very meaning of "democracy" is often in question and institutions and practices that go by the label of "democratic" often vary widely from accepted norms. Interpreted in this light, survey results provide evidence of perhaps more passive support for democracy among ordinary Russians than is generally imagined, but little willingness to engage in political action.

On May 7th, 2012, Vladimir Putin started his third term as president of Russia. Unlike the previous times that he took the oath of office—in 2000 and in 2004—this time he did so in the face of significant popular opposition. Huge demonstrations arose following accusations of vote-rigging in the December parliamentary elections, and reappeared around the March presidential election, continuing into Putin's third term. Does this emergent opposition indicate a popular defense of democracy in the face of Putin's increasingly autocratic tendencies? Or is the opposition just a small group at odds with dominant trends in popular political orientations? In this article, I use the results of public opinion surveys and interviews that I conducted with ordinary Russian citizens between 1998 and 2011 to show that, while ordinary Russians may be more supportive of democracy than generally imagined, at the moment few are willing to do much to advance it.

Putin's first two terms—and his tenure as Prime Minister under President Dmitry Medvedev—saw a slow but steady contraction of democratic practice. The media—especially television—was brought increasingly under government control; elections became steadily less competitive as the regime learned how to manage outcomes; people bold enough to try to take a stand against these trends found themselves in exile, jail, or in the case of a number of unlucky journalists, dead. Putin developed what he called a "power vertical" that facilitated central government control over local politics and elections. This meant government officials could be counted on to do what the people above them demanded, not necessarily what citizens wanted. Though parts of the political system remain democratic in form, practices are increasingly autocratic. While there are many things that citizens might like about the Putin regime—economic expansion and the curtailment of the chaos of the Yeltsin years chief among them—Putin's high levels of popular support have sometimes been interpreted as public acceptance of the moves toward greater autocracy.

Some Russian public opinion surveys seem to confirm the impression that ordinary Russians see little use for Western-style democracy. According to polls conducted by the Levada Center, a respected Russian survey organization, only about 20 percent of respondents think Russia needs the kind of democracy found in Europe and America, and that percentage seems to be declining over time. Russians are quite a bit more likely to think that what is happening in Russia is the development of democracy than that it is the approach of dictatorship. They are more satisfied than not with the fairness of Russian elections. They tend to favor "order" and a ruler with a "strong hand."

Public opinion surveys also indicate little popular interest in opposition politics. Polls conducted by the Russian public opinion organization *Fond Obshchestvennoe Mnenie* show minimal public recognition of the names of opposition leaders, and leaders who are better known tend to be regarded negatively. The population's support for opposition activities is also limited. When asked whether fines for violating the government's conditions for sanctioned demonstrations should be increased, only 12 percent of respondents defend the right to protest as an essential element of democracy. Few Russians are ready to join protest demonstrations. In their new consumer economy, many Russians have been willing to ignore political life and go shopping instead.

But such survey results may give an impression of less support for democracy than actually exists. Measuring support for democracy in societies where democratic institutions do not exist, or do not function very well, is a challenge. Even in stable societies in which citizens have considerable experience with democracy, survey respondents may not completely understand the meaning of the questions that they are asked, and researchers

may not accurately interpret the meaning of the answers that they receive. In societies moving either toward or away from democracy, the very meaning of "democracy" is often in question and institutions and practices that go by the label of "democratic" often vary widely from accepted norms. Having learned about their political institutions since they were schoolchildren, citizens of stable political systems are equipped with a set of words and concepts that they can use to understand and to talk about their government. In societies undergoing political change, citizens do not have that advantage. As a result, respondents are likely to interpret survey questions on democratic concepts in unpredictable ways, and their answers may miscommunicate the intended meaning. This tendency toward miscommunication is not merely a question of translation or interaction across cultures; it is an inherent by-product of the difficulty of talking about democracy in contexts where it does not fully exist.

This problem is particularly profound for questions containing the word "democracy." As part of two different research projects, I have conducted a series of systematic, intensive interviews with ordinary Russians between 1998 and 2011. These were interviews in which the respondents were free to answer at length instead of fitting their opinions into pre-determined multiple choice responses. Their answers illustrate the variation of meaning that might be attached to the word "democracy." Some people described what democracy had meant in their own experiences: leaders who evaded their responsibilities to the nation; closed factories and economic hardship. Others talked about democracy in terms of single pieces of a complex system—personal freedom, elections, or the observance of law. As a result, when Russians answer survey questions about the need for Western style democracy in Russia, it is hard to know what they have in mind.

Survey researchers are of course aware of this problem and try to avoid it to the degree that they can. One strategy to minimize the problems associated with variation in the meaning of the word "democracy" is to avoid using the word itself, asking instead about various aspects of democratic systems, usually elections, institutions, and individual liberty. My respondents show that even these less abstract questions rely on words that mean different things to different respondents. Survey questions sometimes ask about particular institutions—presidents, parliaments, elections, courts—that are the vehicles for the participation, competition, or the protection of individual rights that are at the heart of democracy. But this strategy depends on respondents recognizing the significance of specific institutions—for instance, that presidents are different than kings or that legislatures embody the principle of representation of diverse interests. It is not clear that ordinary citizens can always do this, or that the differences they see are the same as the ones survey researchers have in mind. Some of my respondents, for instance, thought a tsar, a president, and a Soviet-era commissar were pretty much the same thing. It is not surprising, then, that Russians understand their own system to be more democratic than most outside observers think it is.

Another problem with questions about particular institutions is that respondents may answer in terms of the specific—and often flawed—institutions of their own experience, instead of in terms of how those institutions are supposed to work in the abstract world of perfect democracy. Polls show, for instance, that Russians are not very supportive of representative legislatures. Since the legislature is usually considered one of the lynchpins of democracy, Russians' hostility to their State Duma can look like hostility to the principle of representation or to competition between various political forces. Yet it was clear in the interviews that I conducted that respondents' complaints arose from the way their own State Duma operated. They labeled deputies "swindlers" and "parasites" and accused them of being only concerned with their own personal welfare, with feeding at the public trough. My respondents did not want to be without representation. They just wanted representative institutions to work better, to serve the needs of ordinary people like themselves.

Survey researchers use phrases like "a strong hand" or "strict order" as code words indicating authoritarian rule and limits on personal freedom, but it is not clear all respondents successfully crack the code. My respondents, for instance, were in favor of "strict order," but they understood that to mean that everyone—including government officials—would be bound to obey the law. For many of my respondents, order was not the opposite of democracy or any practical concept of freedom. Rather, order—along with democracy—occupied a midpoint between autocracy on the one hand, and chaos, random violence, and social collapse on the other. As one young man explained, "order supports the majority of spheres. But nothing will come of anarchy, which is what you get without order."

The upshot of all this is that survey responses probably underestimate the degree to which ordinary Russians favor democracy. In non-democratic or partly-democratic countries like Russia, real world referents for words like "democracy," "freedom," or "elections" are likely to be less than wholly savory and not what researchers have in mind. In political systems undergoing uncertain transitions, respondents may need a great deal of political knowledge to answer questions well, but these are just the places where knowledge acquired in the past may not help people understand the present.

And there is much in Russians' survey responses that indicates considerable support for many aspects of democracy. Although ordinary Russian citizens can be somewhat hazy about the expected organization of democratic institutions, they are much more consistent in their support for individual rights. This feeling may be most intense in regard to personal liberties—like the right to travel freely—but it also extends to political rights. Generally, citizens do not think the interests of the state take precedence over the rights of individuals. A large majority of citizens think opposition groups should exist, and they do not support the use of force against such groups, even though they do not personally expect to find themselves at a protest rally.

That only a very small proportion of Russians report themselves to be ready to join demonstrations or other forms of protest is not surprising. In most countries, that level of political activity is very much the province of the few, and it is probably something that individuals become ready for unexpectedly, in the face of quickly changing circumstances. To the degree that Russians rely on state-controlled media sources, they do not necessarily have the kind of information they would need in order to be able to articulate the sources of their dissatisfactions or to figure out how to turn dissatisfaction into action. Indeed, the state-controlled press tends to present all regime opponents as violent extremists, and local government officials loyal to (or dependent upon) Putin make it difficult for the opposition to organize events. But surveys show that internet usage has been expanding steadily in Russia, and information that the official press does not provide is available to Russians on opposition websites and blogs. Indeed, polls indicate that some parts of the opposition's message are beginning to get through. Alexei Navalny, an anti-corruption blogger, led a campaign to link Putin's United Russia party with the slogan, "The Party of Swindlers and Thieves." Between April 2011 and January 2012, the percent of the population who agreed that the name fit rose nine percentage points. So far, however, the majority has not bought the opposition's claims that elections are rigged or that better government is possible.

Although the proportion of the population that believes the country is going in the wrong direction is down from its highs during the Yeltsin administration, at around 40 percent it is still substantial. It is possible that, during Putin's third term as president, these dissatisfied citizens will remain content to complain privately, convince themselves that the regime ultimately has their best interests in mind, and continue to provide active support neither to the government or its opponents. It is also possible that they will gradually find reasons to move into more active opposition. That opposition could come from many directions—communists and exclusive nationalists retain significant pockets of support—but supporters of the basic tenets of democracy probably outnumber either of these groups. What remains to be seen is whether these people will choose to defend democratic practices or, alternately, to mind their own business and go shopping as autocracy intensifies.

About the Author
Ellen Carnaghan is Professor and Chair of the Political Science Department at Saint Louis University in Saint Louis, Missouri, USA. She has published articles on popular attitudes in Russia and Eastern Europe in *Comparative Politics, Democratization, Post-Soviet Affairs, P.S: Political Science and Politics,* and *Slavic Review.* Her recent book, *Out of Order: Russian Political Values in an Imperfect World* (Penn State University Press, 2007) examines how the political values of Russian citizens have been shaped by the disorderly conditions that followed the collapse of communism.