

## Trends in Russian Views on Democracy 2008–12: Has There Been a Russian Democratic Awakening?<sup>1</sup>

By Henry E. Hale, Washington

### Abstract

With the surprising outbreak of the largest street demonstrations of the Vladimir Putin era against widely perceived election fraud in the December 2011 Duma elections, many observers have speculated that a democratic awakening might be afoot in Russia. Comparison of original public opinion surveys of the Russian citizenry just after the parliamentary-presidential election seasons of 2008 and 2012 reveals little evidence of an awakening and finds broad support for democracy to have remained steady during this period. Survey evidence also shows that the idea of an “awakening” might be misplaced, however, since the “democracy” that many Russians tend to support is fully compatible with a “strong leader” who rules without checks and balances. That is, they support what Guillermo O’Donnell famously called a “delegative democracy” where people freely and regularly elect leaders who are then expected to wield broad powers without constraints to solve problems and promote development.

### Russians and Democracy

A debate has long raged over what Russians think about democracy. The older view is that Russians are somehow culturally authoritarian, that they have long been conditioned to believe that autocracy is the optimal form of government for their particular land and people. Other scholarship has challenged this argument, condemning it as cultural determinism that essentially blames the people for the governments that have victimized them. Even these challengers, however, are divided on exactly what Russians do think of democracy. Some see them as democrats at heart who just do not think it can work in Russia at the present time. Others think of them as “contingent autocrats,” people whose hopes that democracy would usher in prosperity got too high as communism collapsed, setting them up for bitter disillusionment. Still others see them as little different from people in other countries, preferring democracy but willing to sacrifice some freedom for vital goods like overcoming collapse or restoring economic growth. A famous Russian pollster, Yury Levada, even articulated the idea that Russians themselves were essentially confused on the question.

Many of these positions can in fact be reconciled if one thinks of Russians as “delegative democrats.” That is, they do widely favor “strong hand” leadership that does not have to bother with checks and balances in order to solve problems, but they also want to collectively decide who this strong hand should be. I sought to test this idea using the 2008 wave of the Russian Election Studies (RES) survey, conducted just after the presidential election of that year. In an article published

in *Europe-Asia Studies* in October 2011, I reported confirmation that an overwhelming majority of Russians “think that to solve its problems Russia needs a head of state with a strong hand”—a finding that Pew Associates and others have interpreted in their surveys as an indicator of support for authoritarianism. But the RES survey did not stop there, and asked where people thought this “strong hand” should come from, and it turns out that all but 4 percent of those who supported a strong hand thought that “the people should have the right to choose who becomes this head of state,” and almost all of those (87 percent) thought that this should happen through “free and fair elections” among “several candidates with different views.”

This reconciles widely reported findings that Russians tend to support powerful and largely unconstrained leaders with equally consistent evidence that they also support democracy, want to choose their leaders in free and fair elections, think that political competition makes the state stronger, and do not think leaders should violate basic human rights—all of which was also confirmed in the 2008 RES survey.

### Fresh Survey Evidence from 2012

In the wake of the massive protest movement that began in December 2011 and continues to mobilize tens of thousands in the streets periodically to this day, many now say that Russians are less and less willing to accept Putin’s strong hand, increasingly able to see through the regime’s manipulations of the political system, and are more insistent on demanding change. Some have predicted that this will even lead to the regime’s demise in the near future. Are such suppositions correct, and has there been a significant change in Russians’ attitudes to democracy between 2008 and 2012?

<sup>1</sup> Numbers reported in the text might differ slightly from those in the following section of graphs due to rounding.

To help answer this question, we can turn to results that are just in from a new wave of the RES survey, this one conducted among a nationally representative sample of 1,682 adult citizens of the Russian Federation between April 1 and May 18, 2012, just after the 2011–2012 national election season concluded with the March presidential voting. Carried out by the Moscow-based Demoscope group of survey specialists based on their time-tested and academically rigorous methodology, the questionnaire was designed by myself and Timothy Colton, who has co-led every iteration of the RES since its inception in 1995.

### Support for “Democracy” in 2008 and 2012

First, let us examine findings when people are simply asked straight up: “Do you agree or disagree that Russia should be a democratic country?” As in 2008, we find in 2012 that approximately three quarters of the population supports democracy in Russia. While the percentage of “democrats” in 2012 (77 percent) is slightly higher than it was in 2008 (74 percent), so also is the share of people who disagree (up to 14 percent from 12 percent). What is happening here is that the share of Russians who were unable to give an answer has shrunk from 14 percent to 9 percent. What this suggests, then, is that there has been no significant net rise in the share of the population supporting democracy in Russia, and that on balance people who have only recently started to formulate opinions have been nearly as likely to break toward opposition to, as much as support for, democracy.

Of course, it is also well documented that the particular wording of survey questions can have a big effect on the answers one gets, so the survey also asked a number of related questions using different wording. Just to make sure that using the term “democracy” was not throwing things off, the RES also includes a number of questions that capture attitudes to core attributes of democracy without mentioning the term “democracy” itself. On balance, the evidence reveals no strong upsurge in support for democracy. In one case, there was a decline even as a majority still could be considered “democratic”: Asked whether they tend to agree or disagree that “competition among political parties makes our political system stronger,” the percentage of those agreeing went down from 60 percent in 2008 to 53 percent in 2012, with the share of people disagreeing rising from 29 percent in 2008 to 38 percent in 2012. Asked about whether regional governors should be elected, however, the answers seemed to reflect an upturn in democratic attitudes. In 2008, 45 percent had backed Putin in ending such elections while only 35 percent came out clearly for restoring them, with 9 percent expressing indifference and 10 percent unable to answer.

In 2012, 62 percent tended to agree that “gubernatorial elections should be restored” with only 14 percent being opposed. While the slightly different angles taken in wording these questions complicates direct comparison, the findings are consistent with a rise in support for electing provincial heads of state.

### Democracy and a “Strong Leader”

Another approach used in the RES surveys has been to ask people about different political systems and whether they were a “very good,” “fairly good,” “fairly bad,” or “very bad” way to govern Russia. Here we find what on the surface appears to be some evidence for an increase in support for democracy: In 2008, those generally thinking democracy was good for Russia outweighed those thinking it was bad by 58 percent to 23 percent, while in 2012, the share of democrats had bumped up to 63 percent while the share of their opponents held steady at 23 percent.

What complicates the simple “democratic awakening” interpretation here is the second political system that the RES asked Russians about: “a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections.” It turns out that the share of Russians telling survey researchers that this was generally a good idea also increased, from 49 percent in 2008 to 56 percent in 2012, with the share of those opposing it declining from 34 percent in 2008 to 30 percent in 2012.

Here, however, we must keep in mind what was mentioned above and documented more extensively in my *Europe-Asia Studies* article using 2008 data: Many Russians want both a strong leader operating without constraints for long periods of time and the right to determine who this leader will be in free and fair elections. Some other follow-on questions also show they want the right to remove such a leader should he or she start operating against the interests of the public. This is the logic of delegative democracy, and helps explain why a full 26 percent of the population in 2008 could actually support both a “democratic system” and a “strong leader” in the same survey. Interestingly, the share of such people rose to nearly 35 percent in 2012. This cautions that even where one might observe a rise in Russian support for democracy, the kind of democracy they actually want may not be of the ideal-typical Western variety.

### Trading Off Democracy

The RES also includes a series of questions, originally introduced more than a decade ago by Colton and Michael McFaul, designed to explore the extent to which people understand the tradeoffs involved in advocating democracy with regard to other high-priority values. Comparing answers in 2012 with those in 2008

reveals no clear evidence of a trend toward emphasizing democracy more with respect to other values like a strong state or economic growth.

When asked whether it is possible for Russia to be both democratic and have a strong state, 56 percent in 2008 and 53 percent in 2012 believe that they can have both, and only 33 percent in 2008 and 38 percent in 2012 think that one must choose. The distribution of priorities between these two values has hardly changed between 2008 and 2012: 43 percent in 2008 and 41 percent in 2012 would prioritize the strong state, while 10 and 11 percent (respectively) would opt for democracy and 43 and 42 percent aver that they are equally important. The share of people who thought that there was a tradeoff between these values and would choose a strong state over democracy has held fairly steady, but only at 22 percent of the population in 2008 and 23 percent in 2012.

Answers regarding perceived tradeoffs with economic growth are highly similar: 62 percent in both years think that they can have both, with 27 percent and 29 percent disagreeing in 2008 and 2012 respectively. As for how the population prioritizes these values, 49 percent in 2008 and 52 percent in 2012 would favor growth, 2 and 3 percent respectively would put democracy first, and 44 and 42 percent respectively

think growth and democracy should be equally valued. The share of Russian citizens who think that growth and democracy are not compatible and would choose growth was essentially unchanged between 2008 and 2012, rising only from 22 percent to 23 percent.

### Implications

Overall, this first cut into fresh findings from the April–May 2012 RES survey finds little evidence of a sea change in Russia regarding attitudes toward democracy. While responses to some questions show a slight rise in the share of supporters of democracy, others indicate either no change or even a slight decline in the prevalence of democratic values. Nevertheless, it at least appears to be the case in 2012 as much as in 2008 that a majority of Russian citizens can be considered supporters of some kind of democracy. Importantly, however, these “democrats” often tend to be “delegative democrats” rather than “liberal democrats” or Western-style democrats. This will make it harder for a strong leader ever to “go all the way” and completely eliminate opposition and elections. But at the same time, it will also tend to facilitate the acquisition by leaders of the power to do so and to promote the rise of leaders who display tendencies disregardful of the procedural niceties of liberal democracy.

### About the Author

Henry E. Hale is Associate Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at George Washington University and the author of *Why Not Parties in Russia? Democracy, Federalism, and the State* (2006) and *The Foundations of Ethnic Politics: Separatism of States and Nations in Eurasia and the World* (2008). He is currently finishing a new book manuscript, tentatively titled *Great Expectations: Eurasian Regime Dynamics in Comparative Perspective*.

### Further Reading

- Henry E. Hale, “The Myth of Mass Russian Support for Autocracy: Public Opinion Foundations of a Hybrid Regime,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, v. 63, no. 8, October 2011, pp. 1357–1375.
- Guillermo O’Donnell, “Delegative Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy*, v. 5, no. 1, January 1994, pp. 55–69.