

The Russian Dream: Justice, Liberty, and a Strong State

By Felix Hett and Reinhard Krumm, Berlin

Abstract

Eighty-three per cent of all Russians perceive the distribution of income in their country as unjust, according to a survey conducted by the Russian Academy of Sciences and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. The purpose of the poll was to identify the “Russian Dream” or the nature of the society in which Russia’s citizens would like to live. It showed that social justice is the highest priority for a majority of respondents. According to many, this can only be ensured by a strong state that protects the rights of the weak against the claims of the strong. However, a majority of those questioned do not wish to see state intervention in their personal lives. The quality of democracy is measured not so much in terms of respect for political rights, but rather in terms of preserving basic social rights and the rule of law.

Protest and Dream

The wave of protests that swept Russia in the winter and spring of 2012 has made one thing very clear: Russia’s citizens are becoming more and more important as a factor in the country’s politics. The exchange of offices between Dmitry Medvedev and Vladimir Putin, who now lead Russia as prime minister and president, respectively, was seen by many as evidence of stark disregard for the voters’ wishes. The manipulations at the parliamentary elections of 4 December 2011 were the straw that broke the camel’s back: The general discontent with societal conditions had long been building up, and was now discharged on the streets of Moscow and other cities. Sociologists at the Moscow Center for Strategic Research had already registered signs of growing frustration months before. However, for the majority of observers, it was the scale of the protest wave that came as a particular surprise, suggesting that Russia’s society should be studied more closely in the future.

An oft-heard criticism is that the citizens’ movement only demonstrates against Putin and the “party of power”, United Russia. But, the critics say, the street has no alternative policy proposals to offer. This charge is partially justified and yet unfair, as independently organized platforms of political opinion formation have been prohibited by the state in recent years. With the registration of new parties having been significantly simplified in response to the protests, new opportunities may arise here in the future. In any case, an intense debate is needed on the future shape of politics, the economy, and society.

Against this background, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation together with the Institute of Sociology at the Russian Academy of Sciences produced a study of the “Russian Dream” in the spring of 2012. A representative survey of 1,750 Russians in 20 regions—from Arkhangelsk in the north of Russia to the Caucasus in the south, from Tula in the west to Khabarovsk in the far east of the country—asked respondents in which kind of country and society they would like to live. In the following,

a brief outline will be offered of a “Russian Dream”, or a vision of a desirable future.

Russia’s Dreams

The overwhelming majority of those surveyed have a dream: Only five per cent stated that they did not tend to dream, and another eight per cent said that they used to have dreams, but had given up on them in the meantime. The higher the socio-economic status of respondents, the greater the likelihood that they have dreams. Conversely, this means that those who have no dreams are generally part of the poorer classes. The absence of any dreams for the future should be seen in the context of a dominant perception among this group that most life schemes are not realizable. Here, more than half of respondents state that they see hardly any chance of becoming rich or securing a prestigious workplace. Overall, about ten per cent of the population are disillusioned and have no hope of improvement in their personal lives. It is important to remember here that all respondents were in the age bracket 16–55. It is likely that inclusion of Russia’s often impoverished retirees in the survey would have significantly increased the share of disillusioned respondents.

Among those Russian citizens who do have dreams, those aspirations relate mainly to individual well-being: For three quarters of all respondents, this is the main concern. Forty per cent wish for material wealth, i.e., the ability to spend money without having to worry about every kopeck. Another 33 per cent dream of health, 23 per cent of having a happy family, and 21 per cent aspire to be homeowners. The results are similar in the case of open-ended questions: Here, the top stated desires are health for oneself and one’s family and friends (43 per cent), followed by material wealth (39 per cent) and happiness for loved ones (25 per cent). Romantic dreams, e.g., of true love, fame, or beauty, are only found among a minority (see Figure 1, p. 12). A majority aspire to fulfill their dreams through efforts of their own (see Fig-

ure 2, p. 13). One-third of respondents have the wish to live in a more just and rationally structured society—however, this response is only given if the option is formulated by the interviewer.

Strong State and Liberty

If Russian citizens are asked about their dreams in the sphere of politics, there is a noticeable preference for a strong state. When given the choice of selecting from a series of political keywords those that most accurately reflect a personal dream for the future of the country, 45 per cent choose social justice, equal rights for all, and “a strong state that looks after its citizens”. Values such as “democracy, human rights, and individual fulfillment”, social stability, or a return of Russia to great power status are less prevalent (see Figure 3, p. 13).

For an overwhelming majority of Russian citizens, there is no doubt that only the state can establish social justice: A total of 91 per cent believe that it is precisely the government that should take on responsibility in protecting the social rights of the population, 71 per cent wish for the state to have a stronger role, and 60 per cent agree that the state must enforce the interests of the entire population against those of individual groups. This also appears to be the main reason for the pro-government enthusiasm, which, however, clearly clashes with the high appreciation of individual liberty, without which more than two thirds believe that the purpose of life is lost. In this context, the notion of liberty is mainly understood as the possibility of being the master of one’s own destiny and not having to put up with any kind of encroachment when it comes to decisions about personal choices. This unusual state of affairs—advocacy of a strong state that imposes limitations on others, but should stay out of one’s own business—is further complemented by the stereotypical rejection of “Western-style individualism and liberalism” by 54 per cent of respondents. Apparently, there is generally a positive view in Russia of collectivist values and norms, which has little effect, however, on the reality of everyday life. In particular, feelings of community are most acutely perceived in relations with one’s own family (65 per cent), friends (63 per cent), and work colleagues (40 per cent), but not so much with people who share similar political views (five per cent) or are fellow citizens of Russia (4.5 per cent).

Social Justice and Democracy

Across all social groups, there is widespread appreciation of social justice, even in the more affluent classes (see Figure 4, p. 14). One apparent reason is the fact that the current situation in Russia is perceived as particularly unjust: Two thirds of respondents wish for social equality, which in turn is understood by 59 per cent as equal-

ity of opportunity and a sizeable 41 per cent as equality of income. The disparity of rich and poor is seen by 83 per cent of respondents as being too great. Two thirds perceive the distribution of private property as unjust, and just as many share that view when it comes to the current structure of incomes. About half of the population believes that they personally are receiving unjust pay levels.

The high appreciation of justice does not mean, however, that inequality is not accepted at all. Certain disparities of income resulting from varying levels of education or effort are seen as justified. However, a relative majority of Russians (48 per cent) do not accept that someone should have access to better medical care due to higher income. A society is perceived as democratic if social and economic rights are preserved (79 per cent of respondents agreed). When asked to name indispensable conditions for all dreams of a democracy to be realized in society, 77 per cent mentioned equality before the law. Another 40 per cent believe that a prevalence of low disparities of income is a basic condition for democracy, and 37 per cent referenced independent courts. The perceived importance of free elections (27 per cent) has diminished in public opinion, however—possibly because of widespread disillusionment with regard to the electoral process. Three quarters of respondents stated that their ideas for building democracy in Russian society had not been fulfilled (see Figure 5 on p. 14).

Mixed Economy

The high expectations for social justice are to be met by the state: Two thirds agree that it is necessary to enhance the role of the state in all areas and to nationalize major enterprises, as well as sectors of strategic importance. The opposite view is held by 28 per cent: They believe it is necessary to “liberalize all areas of life and to liberate the economy from the power of bureaucrats”. Statists, or adherents of a strong role for the state, therefore form a clear majority of the population, but find themselves opposed by a sizeable liberal minority.

When it comes to preferences regarding the economic system, there are both overlaps and differences. One quarter of the liberals advocate pure capitalism, as do 15 per cent of statists. The remainder is either a proponent of a socialist economy or in favor of a “mixed economy” consisting of state direction as well as free-market elements. It is this last option that is favored by more than half of respondents.

A Polarized Society?

There is reason to believe that the protest movement that has formed since the elections is dominated by the

liberal spectrum of Russian society. This also seems to have been the assumption of some of Moscow’s more vocal political strategists, when they tried to position the conservative majority of the population against the liberal minority, the “saturated Muscovites”. However, the success of this strategy is far from certain, and a polarization of Russian society is not inevitable. It is possible to build political bridges, as the study on the “Russian Dream” also shows. Values such as social justice; a conception of democracy that is not purely procedural, but also involves awareness of the social foundations of democracy; rejection of economic models based on market radicalism; and the conviction that everyone must

do their part—all of these mark the contours of a Russian Dream that enjoys a widespread consensus in Russia’s population. However, this dream also still involves a strong preference for societal stability. Averseness to revolutionary upheaval is seen in the question relating to the historical epoch in which Russia was closest to realizing its dream: Here, 32 per cent of respondents named the Putin era, while 14 per cent chose the last decades of the Soviet Union, the “golden autumn” of state socialism (see Figure 6 on p. 15). However, one third stated their concern that the Russian Dream has never even come close to being fulfilled.

Translated from German by Christopher Findlay

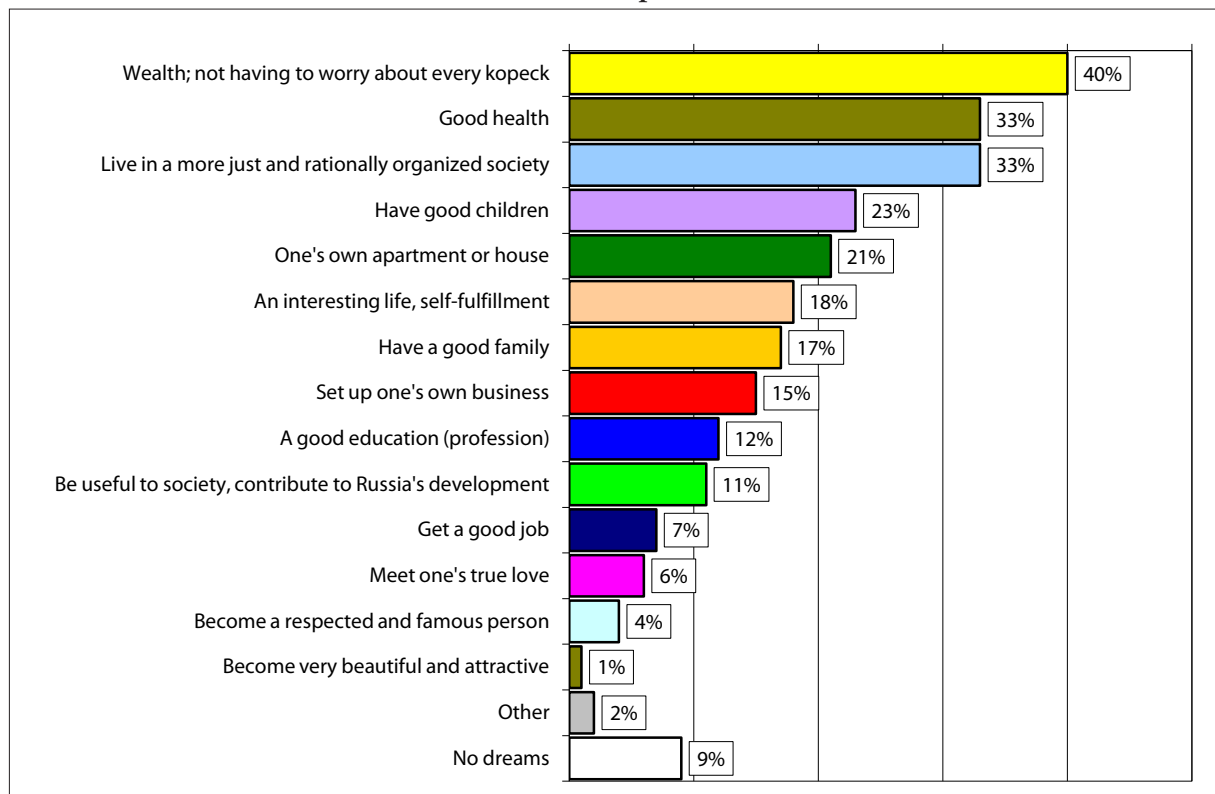
About the Authors

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Further Reading

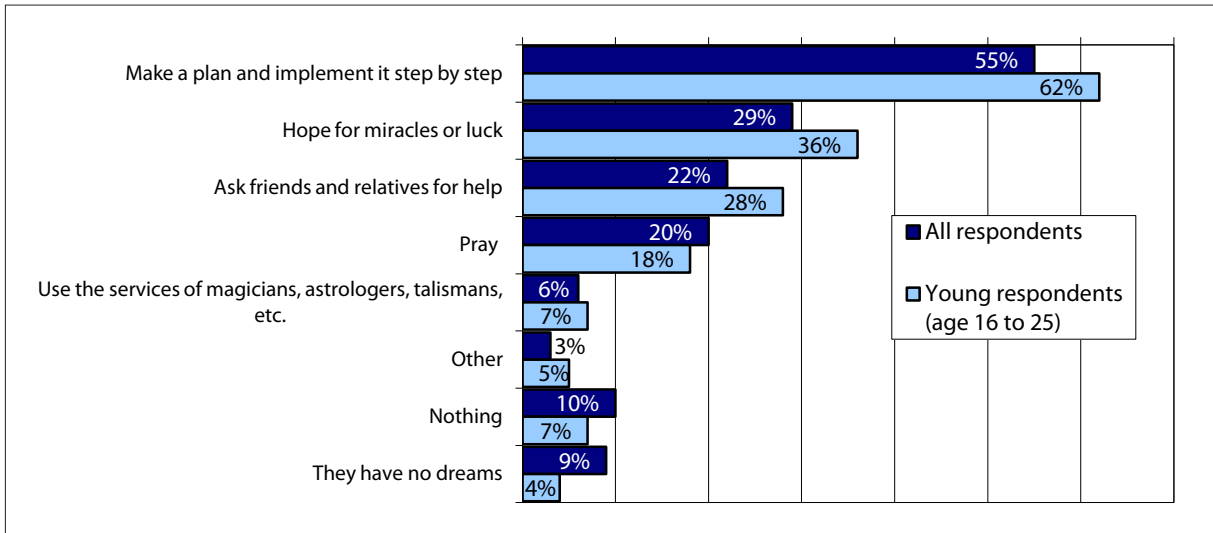
- Hett, Felix and Krumm, Reinhard, *Gerechtigkeit, Freiheit und ein starker Staat. Konturen eines widersprüchlichen Russischen Traums*. FES Internationaler Dialog. FES Moskau, July 2012, available (in German) at <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id/09212.pdf>
- Institute for Sociology, Russian Academy of Science, *O chem mechtayut rossiyane (razmysleniya sotsiologov)*, 2012 [complete survey, in Russian] available at: http://www.isras.ru/analytical_report_o_chem_mechtayut_rossiyane.html

Figure 1: What Are Russians’ Dreams?
(Choices for Answers Predetermined, Up to Three Answers Possible)



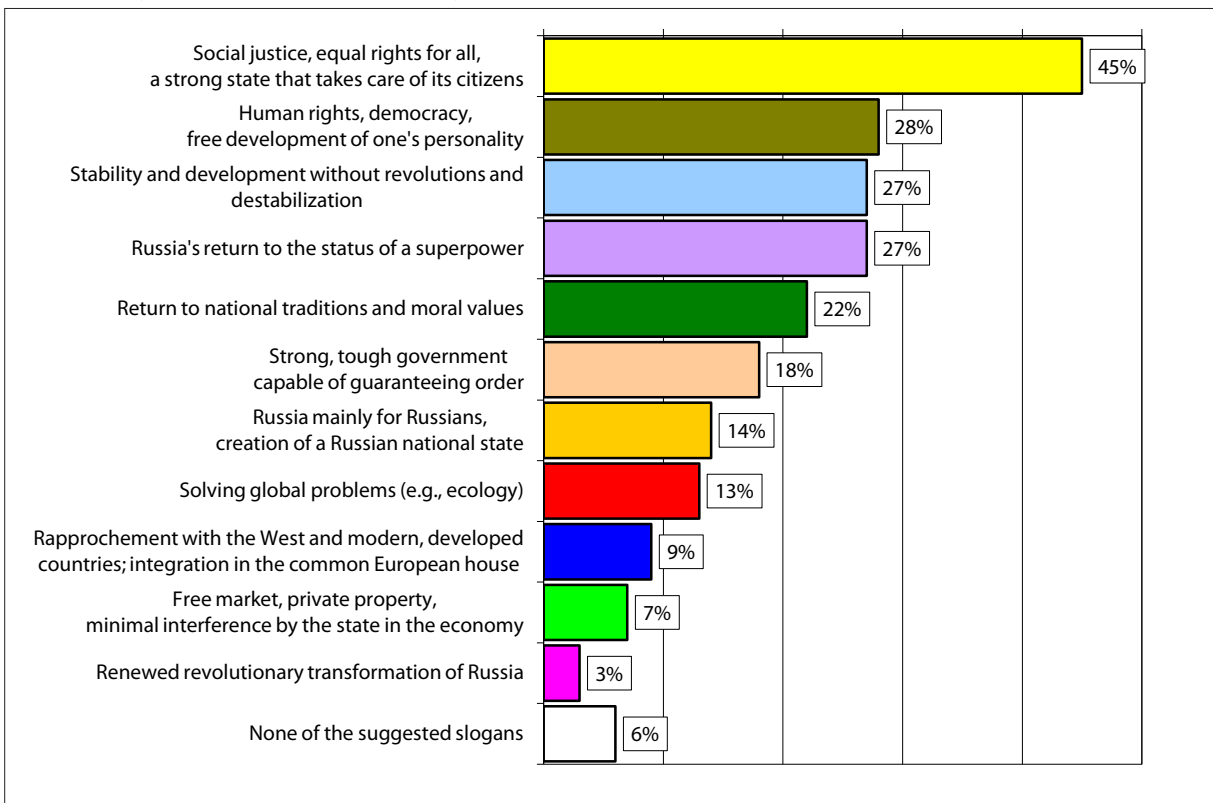
Source: Hett, Felix; Krumm, Reinhard: *Gerechtigkeit, Freiheit und ein starker Staat. Konturen eines widersprüchlichen Russischen Traums*. FES Internationaler Dialog. FES Moskau. Perspektive, July 2012 <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id/09212.pdf>

Figure 2: What Do Russians Do To Realize Their Dreams?
(Choices for Answers Predetermined, Several Answers Possible)



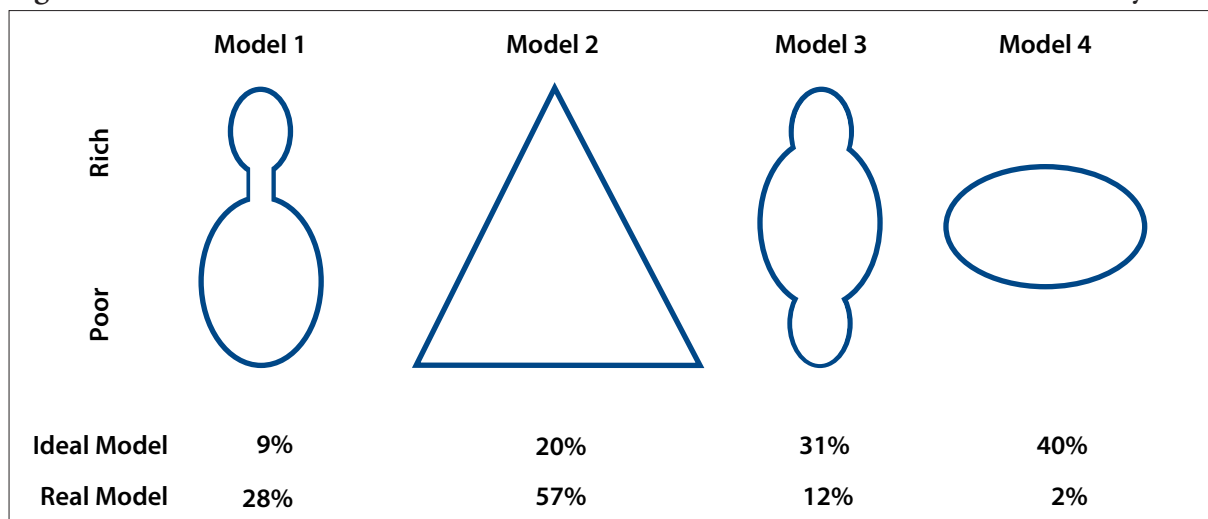
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Figure 3: What Political Slogans Express the Dream of Russia's Future?
(Several Answers Possible)



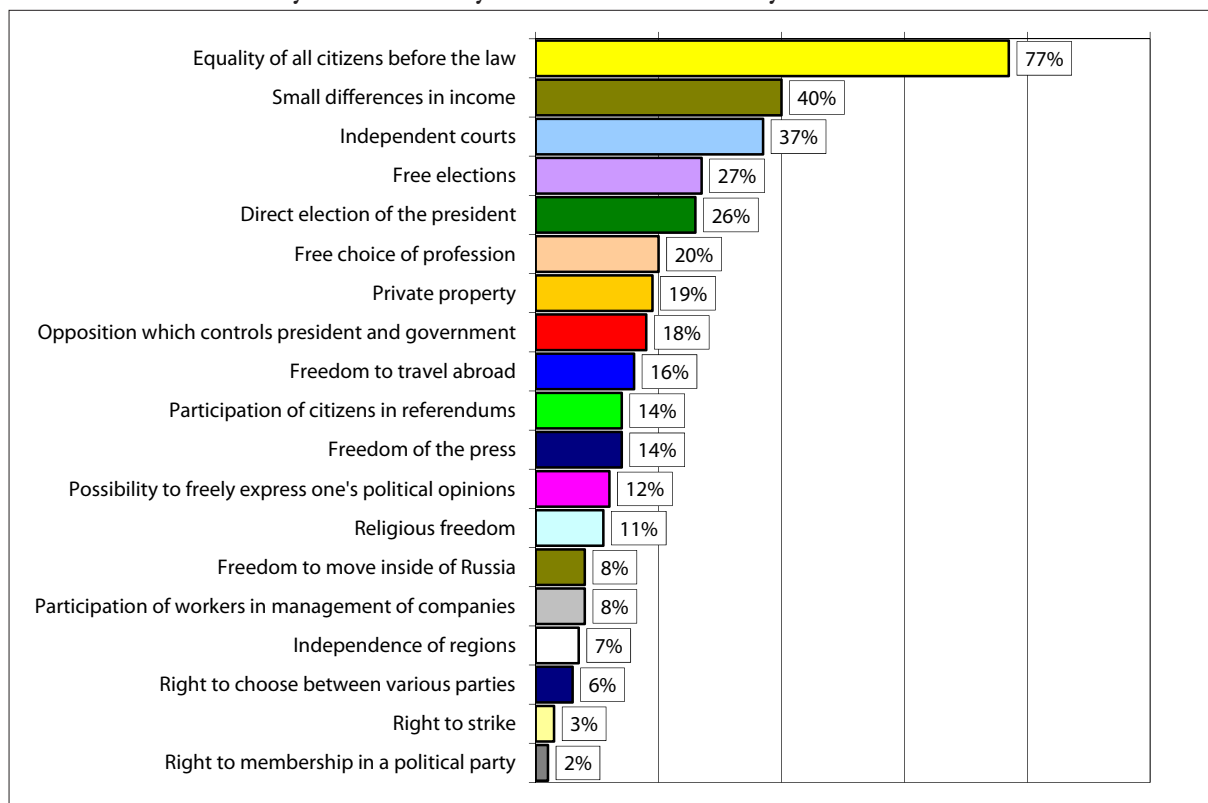
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Figure 4: Which Model Is Best Suited To the Ideal and Real Structure of Russian Society?



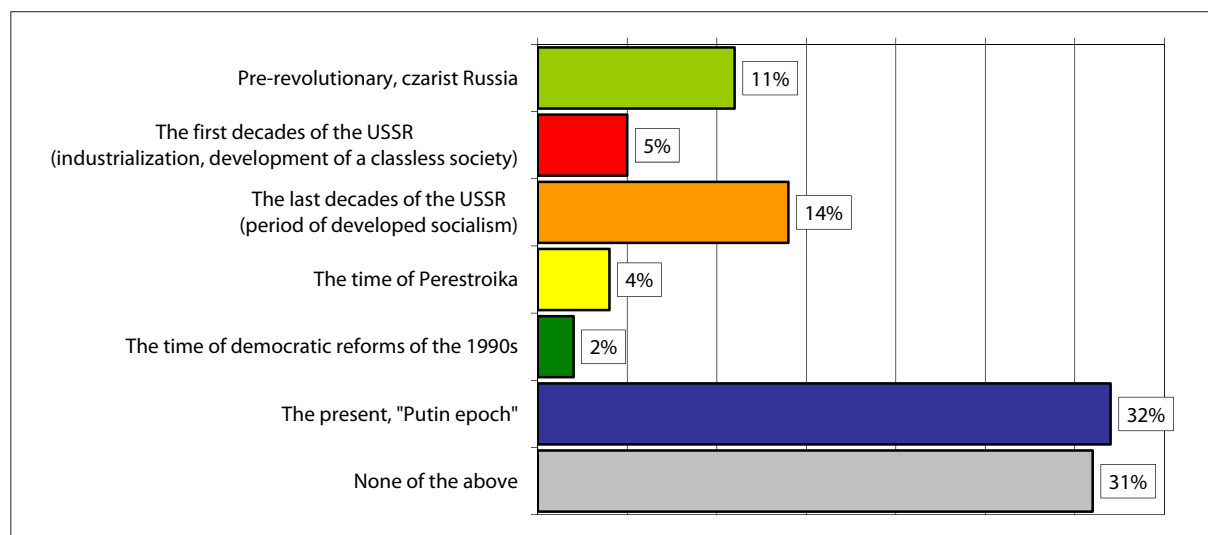
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Figure 5: Which of the Following Elements Are Absolutely Necessary in Order to Say: Yes, This Is the Society In Which My Dreams of Democracy Have Been Realized?



Source: Hett, Felix; Krumm, Reinhard: *Gerechtigkeit, Freiheit und ein starker Staat. Konturen eines widersprüchlichen Russischen Traums. FES Internationaler Dialog. FES Moskau. Perspektive, July 2012* <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id/09212.pdf>

Figure 6: Which Period of Russia's History Most Corresponds to the Ideals of Russian Citizens and Their Ideas of What Russia Should Be?



Source: Hett, Felix; Krumm, Reinhard: *Gerechtigkeit, Freiheit und ein starker Staat. Konturen eines widersprüchlichen Russischen Traums*. FES Internationaler Dialog, FES Moskau, Perspektive, July 2012 <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id/09212.pdf>

ANALYSIS

Seven Challenges of the Russian Protest Movement

By Oleg Kozlovsky, Washington

Abstract

This article describes some of the tests facing the Russian protest movement in 2013. These include balancing between moderates and radicals, dealing with regime defectors, reducing the influence of extremists, institutionalizing the movement, broadening its appeal to a wider public, encouraging citizens to play a more active role in politics, and developing support in the regions outside of Moscow and St. Petersburg.

An Evolving Movement

The Russian democratic movement (a.k.a. the “protest movement”) made international headlines in December 2011 when tens of thousands took to the streets of Moscow and other cities to protest fraud in the Parliamentary elections. After initial confusion, the regime eventually regained confidence and responded with a series of repressive actions, from restricting freedom of assembly and going after independent NGOs to jailing opponents. As a result, the protest movement lost its momentum and found itself in a defensive, reactive position, unable to assert its own agenda.

However, the movement is far from being dead, as was demonstrated by the recent protests in Moscow against the “anti-Magnitsky law,” banning Americans

from adopting Russian babies, and by its unceasing online activity. In order to overcome the present crisis, the protesters will have to find solutions to numerous problems, some of the most crucial of which I will pose and briefly discuss in this article.

Moderates and Radicals

Inherent to all social movements is the array of opinions ranging from moderation to radicalism, and this range is reflected in both the strategic and tactical approaches of activists. Some strive for a regime change and the effective recreation of the state, while others simply want to reform it by removing the ugliest forms of corruption and autocracy, leaving the rest to take care of itself. Some believe that it is more important to guarantee the safety