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Public opinion on human rights in Putin-era Russia: Continuities, changes, and sources of variation

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Abstract

Major setbacks in the protection of human rights during the Putin regime have produced little public outcry, suggesting that there is scant support for human rights in Russian public opinion. However, analysis of survey data spanning 2001–2015 yields several surprising conclusions. In contrast to findings from earlier studies, the data indicate that Russians think of rights in two distinct dimensions: material rights (including economic rights and rights of personal integrity) and (conventionally understood) civil liberties. Support for the former has been strong throughout the Putin era, and support for the latter has grown steadily and consistently. Moreover, support for civil liberties has increased most among less-educated and younger Russians who do not reside in Moscow and St. Petersburg: Contrary to theoretical expectations, variation in support has become less systematically linked to standard socioeconomic and demographic variables. Russians are divided over whether political NGOs should be allowed to receive foreign funding, a major issue for human rights advocates given the Russian government's crackdown on such funding and on human rights NGOs.

For scholars and activists who work on human rights issues, large-sample surveys are a potentially valuable source of information about how particular societies view human rights. From a practical perspective, surveys can help inform domestic and international activists about which issues and groups to target in campaigns designed to pressure a regime to comply with human rights norms (Mendelson and Gerber 2007; Mendelson 2015a, 2015b). From a more theoretical perspective, detailed survey data can illuminate the level of demand for human rights protection in a country, which in turn shapes the predictive power there of popular analytical models whereby domestic and transnational human rights nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) influence governments (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Risse and Sikkink 1999). These models typically assume a domestic normative context that places a high value on the protection of rights, when in fact the level of public demand for human rights in a given society is an open empirical question. Moreover, recent survey work on human rights perceptions has challenged conventional wisdom about prevailing attitudes (Ron and Crow 2015; Ron, Pandya, and Crow 2016).

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This article makes a case for expanding survey research on public views of human rights in three directions: attending to change over time, analyzing sources of within-country variation, and specifically considering public views of government tactics that are part of a backlash against human rights NGOs. It illustrates the benefits of these three steps through a study of trends in public support for different types of human rights, variations in such support by demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, and views of recent government policies to limit foreign funding of domestic NGOs in Russia.

These analyses, which draw on Russian surveys conducted from 2001 to 2015, yield counterintuitive findings. Russians tend to think of rights of personal-integrity and economic rights (often treated as analytically distinct) in the same terms, while they think of civil liberties as a different dimension of rights. Support for the former, here labeled “material” rights, has been consistently high in Russia, while support for civil liberties has grown steadily since the early 2000s. Although markers of middle-class status such as education, income, and urban residence have been associated with greater support for civil liberties, the increase in support over time has been more pronounced among lower class groups and the “class” gap in support has narrowed. Finally, Russian society is quite divided over the desirability of restrictions on foreign funding of political NGOs, with support for such restrictions highest among the university educated. These findings are surprising in light of the steady rollback of human rights and civil liberties by the Russian government since Vladimir Putin became president in 2000, the recent surge in Putin’s popularity despite accelerating assaults on human rights since early 2014, and conventional portrayals of Russian political culture and civil society. The survey results thus provide a novel empirical perspective about public views of human rights in Russia, with broader implications for our understanding of recent developments in that country. They point to the value of surveys of perceptions of human rights, particularly long-term and detailed surveys, for capturing aspects of public opinion about human rights that are difficult to measure otherwise.

Theoretical context

Quantitative studies have a rich tradition in the scholarly literature on human rights (e.g., Poe and Tate 1994; Poe, Tate, and Keith 1999). But this work has emphasized cross-national designs, leaving country-specific case studies to qualitative researchers (see Hafner-Burton and Ron 2009). Some research employs data from comparative surveys like the World Values Survey to measure cross-national variation in support for human rights, showing, for example, that the work of NGOs is critical in bringing human rights violations to the attention of publics (Davis, Murdie, and Steinmetz 2012). However, reliance on one standardized question (or a small number of them) to characterize perceptions of human rights in a given country is problematic due to the likely cross-national variation in the cultural and political meanings assigned to terms like “human rights” (Landman 2004).

One perennial theoretical concern for social scientists has been the role of domestic and international activists in compelling governments to comply with international human rights norms. Human rights activism often focuses on monitoring and reporting abuses in order to “shame and blame” governments to protect human rights (Murdie and Davis 2012; Davis et al. 2012). According to the influential “boomerang” (Keck and Sikkink 1998) and “spiral”

(Risse and Ropp 1999) models, these activities produce both domestic protests and international outcry, which in turn pressure governments to limit human rights abuses. However, revealing human rights violations is only likely to spark the type of public objections that motivate an authoritarian government to protect rights if the public in question not only supports human rights but also values them above other priorities (such as order, national security, or economic growth) that governments often cite as justifications for committing or tolerating rights abuses. Accordingly, domestic public demand for human rights is an often unspoken yet possibly decisive factor that may influence whether international and domestic organizations can effectively pressure reluctant governments to observe human rights (Cardenas 2007; Hafner-Burton and Ron 2009). Domestic public demand for human rights may also be an omitted variable in quantitative models showing that the effectiveness of international human rights organizations in mobilizing protests depends on how well their activities address the concerns of the local population (e.g., Murdie and Bhasin 2011): Such an orientation on the part of the international activists may be endogenous to the level of demand for human rights in the local population, which could be the underlying cause of human rights protests.

These considerations place a premium on measuring the level of demand for human rights in a given society in order to assess the likely impact of human rights activism. The best way to do so is using detailed surveys of the population's views of human rights. Such surveys provide replicable, methodologically reliable data that, in principle, are less influenced than qualitative studies by prior assumptions based on anecdotes or the potentially idiosyncratic and tendentious views of activists, politicians, local experts, and other interested parties that often provide qualitative data. As Ron and Crow (2015) show using human rights perceptions surveys they conducted in Mexico, Columbia, Morocco, and India, surveys can produce results that defy the understandings of activists, scholars, and other observers. Moreover, public views toward human rights are not necessarily static: Indeed, the assumption underlying efforts to promote public support for human rights norms assumes that public opinions regarding human rights are malleable and dynamic. Repeating the same survey questions over time is a powerful way to assess how views evolve in a society and, thus, whether such programs are successful. Survey data can also potentially yield insight into which particular groups in a society are more (and less) supportive of human rights, thus providing a sense of the relative strength of the proand antirights constituencies, a crucial factor for the prospects of international interventions (Cardenas 2007). Finally, surveys can illuminate how publics feel toward specific tactics in the expanding arsenal that regimes use to roll back human rights and pressure. One such tactic—the restriction of foreign funding to domestic human rights NGOs—has become increasingly common (Christensen and Weinstein 2013; Dupuy, Ron, and Prakash 2016), yet we know little about whether societies accept the arguments of governments justifying such measures.

Thus, to maximize the potential payoff, a survey approach ideally uses multiple waves of studies using the same questions, provides the basis for detailed multivariate analyses of the factors influencing pro- and anti-rights perspectives and includes questions about specific tactics used by governments to impede prorights activism. These features are all obtained in the survey data from Russia analyzed below. Russia is, in fact, an especially good case for illustrating the value of surveys for shedding surprising light on trends in public demand for

human rights due to its pronounced rollback of human rights protections during the Putin regime coupled with the surging popularity of Putin himself; standard scholarly depictions of Russian political culture and civil society; and the role of the Putin administration in pioneering tactics to: close civil society space, (such as laws requiring foreign-funded NGOs to declare themselves to be “foreign agents”).

Russia’s rights retrenchment

Russia’s first post-Soviet president, Boris Yeltsin, initially pushed to give Russians a fairly broad array of human rights and civil liberties, including a free press, extensive freedom of assembly, religion, and expression, a strong set of protections in the 1993 Russian Constitution, and a series of elections that were relatively free and fair.¹ These accomplishments were eventually marred by corruption in the police and courts, authoritarian actions such as the storming of parliament in 1993, abuses of power by incumbents in election campaigns, a brutal war in the secessionist republic of Chechnya marked by wanton violations of human rights by Russian troops, and other infringements. Yet, overall, the Yeltsin regime’s record was one of progress, despite some backsliding that set the stage for major reversals under Putin (Ambrosio 2009). Concrete evidence of human rights gains under Yeltsin includes the accession of Russia to the Council of Europe in 1996, its ratification of the European Convention of Human Rights in 1998, and the late 1990s mid-range Freedom House scores of 4 for freedom, civil liberties, and political rights.²

Starting in the 1990s, foreign countries poured money into programs designed to support the spread of human rights norms, civil society institutions, and rule of law, in particular, providing financial support for Russian NGOs that worked on these issues (see Mendelson and Glenn 2002; Henderson 2003; Sundstrom 2005). For example, in 2009 the US Government Accountability Office (USGOA 2009) reported that federal agencies spent nearly \$100 million on democracy promotion in Russia from 2006–2008, making Russia the sixth largest recipient of such assistance, with a distinctively high proportion of these funds going to “civil society programs.”

Since Vladimir Putin became Russia’s president in 2000, his regime has eroded the progress toward protection of human rights and democratic political institutions that Russia experienced under Yeltsin (Fish 2005; Ambrosio 2009; White 2011; Orttung 2015). The rollback began early in his administration with moves consolidating presidential power, such as ending elections of regional governors (instead having them appointed by the president) and turning the parliament (Duma) into a rubber stamp for presidential decrees. In the mid-2000s, Putin began limiting freedoms of the population (Carothers 2006), a campaign that accelerated dramatically in response to mass public protests against election falsification after controversial December 2011 parliamentary elections (Stoner and McFaul 2015). Both the crackdown on human rights and the accompanying anti-Western rhetoric have intensified dramatically following the onset of Russia’s military conflict with Ukraine (Lokshina 2014;

¹. See Bowring (2009) for a comprehensive overview of human rights under Yeltsin. See Fish (2005), Ambrosio (2009), and White (2011) for accounts of Russia’s post-Soviet political trajectory.

². Freedom House assigns quantitative scores annually to the countries on which it reports ranging from 1 (fully protected) to 7 (fully violated) based on a weighted index of state practices in the relevant domain. See Landman (2004, Footnote 53) for details.

Freedom House 2015; Human Rights Watch 2015; Orttung 2015; Mendelson 2015c; Gerber and Zavisca 2016).

Government takeovers of the leading national news outlets, persecution of critical and investigative journalists, and, recently, encroachments on Internet freedom have brought the mass media to heel (Lipman 2014). A succession of prosecutions targeting opposition activists, including oil tycoon-turned-democracy promoter Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the punk band “Pussy Riot,” blogger and eventual Moscow mayoral candidate Aleksei Navalny, civil rights activist Mark Galperin, head of the liberal opposition party “Yabloko” Sergei Mitrokhin, dozens of peaceful protestors against electoral fraud, and numerous less-celebrated cases revealed Russia’s criminal courts to be tools for oppression of those who step out of line with the Kremlin (see Provost 2015). The European Court of Human Rights was flooded in the 2000s by Russians seeking redress for human rights violations that Russian courts could not or would not provide (Trochev 2009). Other oppositionists and investigative journalists have been murdered under mysterious circumstances.

Putin and his associates have declared that NGOs and individuals who receive support from the United States and other foreign entities—which includes nearly all human rights NGOs in Russia—are a “fifth column” of traitors seeking to destroy Russia on behalf of sinister foreign powers. Some argue that Putin’s tactic of labeling oppositionists as traitorous dupes of enemy states helped inspire a larger global backlash against democracy assistance efforts by autocratic leaders (Carothers 2006; Mendelson 2015a). A 2006 law made it increasingly difficult for NGOs to operate by tightening registration and accounting requirements (Crotty, Hall, and Ljubownikow 2014). A more ominous 2012 law requires “political” NGOs that receive foreign funding to register as “foreign agents” and to declare themselves to be such in all interactions with the public, effectively making it impossible for them to operate. In 2014, the Ministry of Justice was empowered to unilaterally declare NGOs to be foreign agents (rather than rely on the organizations themselves to do so), and the penalties for “foreign agent” NGOs have recently increased, as have prosecutorial measures against them. Currently, almost 150 organizations have been slapped with the “foreign agent” tag, including virtually all of the most prominent human rights NGOs: Memorial, Public Verdict, the Agora Human Rights Association, *Golos*, and the Union of Committees of Soldiers’ Mothers (Human Rights Watch 2015). Many of these organizations are on their last appeals and are likely to be shuttered soon.

The 2015 “undesirable organization” law bans foreign and international organizations that conduct actions vaguely defined to be detrimental to Russia, subjecting Russians who work with such organizations to criminal penalties. Other laws have dramatically restricted freedom of assembly, limited free speech (under the guise of banning statements that incite “extremism”), curtailed the rights of sexual minorities, prohibited employees of the military, judiciary, and other government branches from traveling abroad and criminalized the expression of certain perspectives about the Second World War. Reflecting these and other developments under Putin, Russia’s Freedom House 2015 scores for freedom, civil liberties, and political rights all stood at 6, where 7 is the worst possible score (Freedom House 2015).

The Russian public and human rights

What have Russians thought about the sharp rollback of civic freedoms and other human rights under Putin? The lack of public outcry suggests that the Russian population is at best indifferent toward human rights and the NGOs that promote them, despite over two decades of efforts by domestic and external organizations to cultivate a human rights culture in Russian society. The two signature trends in Russian public opinion since Russia's annexation of Crimea have been surging support for Putin and rampant hostility toward the West (Gerber and Zavisca 2016), neither of which portends well for support for human rights among Russians. In fact, they seem to point to a deeper support for the closing of human rights and civil society space in Russia: If Putin is so popular, does it not imply that so are the specific policies he has pursued, including crackdowns on human rights?

Academic research on how Russians view human rights, democracy, rule of law, and civil engagement generally finds limited support for these ideals, at least by their conventional "Western" definitions, substantial nostalgia for the Soviet Union, and even admiration for Stalin (Reisinger, Miller, Hesli, and Maher 1994; Gibson 1996, 1997; Gerber and Mendelson 2002; Mendelson and Gerber 2005, 2006, 2007; Gerrits 2010; Hale 2011; Lussier 2011). Scholarly interest in how ordinary Russians perceive human rights and democracy peaked in the early 2000s, perhaps because the literature appeared to demonstrate that the pattern of ambivalence, indifference, and skepticism persisted in the face of early retrograde actions by the Putin regime. However, support for Putin and anti-Westernism are not necessarily tantamount to a wholesale endorsement of Putinism as such, and without recent public opinion polls we lack a sound empirical basis for making conclusions about how the Russian public views human rights issues.

Judging by Putin's persistently high popularity ratings throughout the period, his reelection as president in 2012 despite oppositional street protests, and the surge in his popularity since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Russian public approves of these measures.³ However, it is risky to jump to such conclusions, because Putin's popularity may be driven by factors other than support for his domestic crackdown, such as Russia's record of economic growth in the 2000s or surging nationalistic sentiments (Gerber 2014). The best source of information we have about public views of policies on human rights is public opinion data.

There has been a fair amount of survey-based research on how the Russian public views democracy. Many such studies have concluded that Russians prefer order over democracy, often attributing this preference to a long-standing authoritarian political culture (Gibson 1996, 1997; Reisinger et al. 1994; Lussier 2011). Others suggest that the experiences of the

³ The authoritative Levada Analytic Center publishes on its website a time series of approval ratings for Putin since he first became president in 2000 (Levada Analytic Center 2016). His ratings have never dipped below 60% approval. After languishing in the 60–70% range at the start of his third term in office in 2012, Putin's approval shot above 80% after the annexation of Crimea in February 2014 and has remained at or near that mark since. A survey list experiment indicates the high poll numbers reflect "real" attitudes (Frye, Gehlbach, Marquardt, and Reuter 2016). In 2008, after his second term in office, Putin temporarily yielded the presidency to his protégé, Dmitri Medvedev. However, most observers see the Medvedev administration, which ended with Putin's election to a third term in 2012, as having been under tight control by Putin, who was prime minister during it. Accordingly, it is standard practice to treat the entire period since 2000 as the "Putin era."

1990s led Russians to associate democracy with chaos and corruption and thus prefer Putin's more authoritarian approach (Mishler and Willerton 2003; Petukhov and Ryabov 2004; Carnaghan 2007). Countervailing findings indicate that Russians have contradictory views about the desirability of democracy, wish to combine democratic institutions with strong leadership and are not particularly authoritarian in comparative perspective (Colton and McFaul 2002; Fish 2005; Hale 2011).

In any case, although democracy is clearly related to human rights protections, they are not the same thing (Hafner-Burton and Ron 2009), and much less research focuses explicitly on Russians' support for human rights protections. Qualitative studies often conclude that Russians reject liberal conceptions of human rights and civil liberties, they strongly favor state economic guarantees or "social rights" (at least in part due to the legacy of Soviet-era welfare provisions and security), and they are comfortable with heavy state involvement in civil society institutions (Carnaghan 2007; Henry 2009; Turbine 2012; Ljubownikow, Crotty, and Rodgers 2013; Ljubownikov and Crotty 2015). Gerber and Mendelson (2002) specifically examined views of human rights using survey data from 2001. They identified three distinct dimensions of rights, which they labelled economic, political, and civil. Support for economic and political rights was much deeper and more widespread than support for civil rights.

Much has happened in Russia since the early 2000s, and Russians' views of civil rights may have changed since then. The various democracy assistance and human rights promotion efforts of domestic NGOs that began in the 1990s and continued through much of the 2000s may have increased public awareness and appreciation of civil liberties. Long-term growth of education, urbanization, exposure to global discourses about human rights, and Internet use could also have strengthened human rights norms in Russian society in the last decade or so. Modernization theory (Lipset 1960) and its offshoots such as Inglehart's (1990) arguments regarding postmaterialist culture would lead to such a prediction. However, most studies of Russians' views of democracy and civil society institutions call for skepticism that support for civil liberties would increase, given their association with liberal ideology explicitly condemned as "Western" in the government's resurgent nationalist rhetoric. While not definitive, robust support for Putin during his crackdown on human rights is suggestive that human rights—and specifically civil liberties—are low priorities for most Russians.

Ultimately, the extent of support for human rights in Russia remains an empirical question. In addition, it remains to be seen whether Russian public support for Putin in general is tantamount to support for his policies regarding human rights and civil society. For example, no studies have examined how Russians view Putin's arguments demonizing NGOs that receive foreign funding. The political impact of these claims and the associated "foreign agent" law is hard to underestimate, given the chronic need for external funding that human rights NGOs experience around the world (Ron et al. 2016). Finally, it is of particular interest whether the Russian middle class—defined as the highly educated, urbanized, and well-to-do—has distinct views regarding human rights, as modernization theory would predict.

Data and measures

The data integral to this study come from 10 harmonized and pooled cross-sectional Russian surveys spanning 2001–2015. Details regarding the surveys, sampling, fieldwork, quality control procedures are provided in the online appendix.⁴

Two separate batteries of questions provide the measures of views of human rights. The “rights” battery included nine questions measuring support for three “economic rights” (the right to work, to a minimum living standard, and to private property), three “rights of personal integrity” (freedom from torture, arbitrary arrest, and slavery), and three “civil rights” (freedom of expression, religion/conscience, and assembly).⁵ Respondents were told that each of these rights is included in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations, which was signed by the Soviet Union, but that people have varying views of how important they are. They were then asked to indicate which statement best reflects their view of each particular right:

1. The observation of this right should be a top priority of the state;
2. This right should be observed, but in our current circumstances there are other more important priorities;
3. This right is neither important nor harmful to Russia;
4. This right might be necessary for other countries, but, in our circumstances, it might hurt our country’s interests;
5. This right definitely contradicts the political and economic interests of our country;
6. I do not have a strong opinion about this right or I have never thought about it.

For our purposes, the key distinction is between those who strongly support a particular right (Response 1), those who weakly support the right (Response 2), and those who do not support the right (Responses 3–6, none of which indicate any support at all for protecting the particular right).⁶ Thus, I collapse Responses 3–6, yielding a three-category measure of support for each of the nine rights. The “rights” battery was not on the 2015 survey. Unfortunately, this makes it hard to say whether the intensification of anti-Western rhetoric

⁴. The 2015 data are from the Comparative Housing Experiences and Social Stability survey, which was supported in part by the US Army Research Laboratory and the US Army Research Office via the Minerva Research Initiative program under grant number W911NF1310303. The views reported here do not represent those of the US Army or the US government.

⁵. We used the original language from the Universal Declaration to present the rights to respondents, and they were listed in the order shown in Table 1, not grouped by the three “types” of rights. The short descriptions used here for simplicity were not given to the respondents. The 2001 survey did not ask about freedom from slavery, but it is unlikely that omission affects any of the results, because that question is combined with five others into an aggregate scale.

⁶. By aggregating the final four responses into a single “no support” category we lose information about variations in nonsupport — for example, distinguishing those who are indifferent from those who actually oppose a right from those who have no opinion at all. While distinctions of degree and kind among nonsupporters merit interest, I leave their analysis to future research because the main focus of the present article is on levels of *support* for different human rights, and it greatly simplifies analysis to group the variations in nonsupport together. It is worth noting, however, that very small numbers of respondents in any year expressed outright opposition to specific rights (Responses 4 and 5 combined) — in all cases under 5%. Furthermore, sensitivity tests showed that treating the “hard to say” category as distinct in the factor analysis and multinomial regressions reported in this article yielded substantively identical results; therefore, the more parsimonious aggregation is preferable for clarity of exposition.

and actions starting with Russia's annexation of Crimea in early 2014 has affected support for human rights in Russia.

The "NGO" battery includes two questions about whether respondents support or oppose foreign funding of two types of domestic NGOs: those that monitor elections (an explicitly "political" NGO) and those that work on ecological issues. There were three response choices: support, oppose, and indifferent. I combine volunteered "hard to say" responses with the latter category. This battery appeared only the 2012 and 2015 surveys, but it is worth analyzing because of the growing prominence of restrictions on foreign funding of NGOs in the arsenal of tactics states use to counter organizations that promote rights (Christensen and Weinstein 2013; Dupuy et al. 2016). The degree and structuration of Russian public support for, opposition, and indifference to foreign funding for such organizations indicates whether the arguments that Putin and other leaders have made to justify these actions resonate with the public and show which groups of the population are more likely to find them convincing.

Trends over time

The weighted distributions for our 11 measures of support for rights in each year the questions were asked reveal trends over time in the average levels of support for human rights among 20- to 59-year-old Russians (see Table 1). Early in the Putin era, public support for economic and personal-integrity rights was robust (Gerber and Mendelson 2002). In 2001, from 62 percent (for freedom from arbitrary arrest) to 89 percent (right of a minimum standard of living) were strong supporters, with most figures for these rights above 70 percent. Strong support for these rights tended to remain stable (with minor trendless fluctuations) in the early 2000s. Despite slight decreases between 2004 and 2010, three quarters or more of 20-to 59-year-old Russians strongly supported all six economic and personal-integrity rights at the end of 2012. The enduring support for economic rights confirms the conventional wisdom that Russians have been advocates of what others label "social rights" (Henry 2009). The equally strong support for personal-integrity rights is consistent with claims that these rights are nearly universal norms (Keck and Sikkink 1998), and qualitative studies of views of rights in Russia (Sundstrom 2005). At the same time, these personal integrity rights fall outside the rubric of "social rights" that Russians have been known to support.

The more dramatic trends over time pertain to support for civil rights. Consistent with standard accounts of the preferences of Russians, only 23 percent strongly supported freedom of conscience, 24 percent freedom of assembly, and 38 percent freedom of speech in 2001 and these levels grew modestly and unevenly in the early 2000s. However, by 2010, we observe more substantial increases in strong support, which continued through 2012. Overall, from 2001 to 2012 strong support for freedom of conscience, assembly, and expression grew by 84 percent, 88 percent, and 39 percent, respectively. A majority strongly endorsed freedom of expression in 2012. The percentages of Russians who voiced no support of these rights all fell by approximately half, so the increases in "strong" support did not come at the expense of "weak" support.⁷

In short, the surveys reveal a gradual but previously unnoticed and potentially important increase in public support for civil rights in Russia. We do not know whether support for civil rights has continued to grow, or even endured at its 2012 levels, since. But the unmistakable trends of growing endorsement of civil liberties evident in Table 1 cut against the view that the Russian public has rushed to support the Putin regime's agenda of closing civil society space.

The responses to the two "NGO" questions, while failing to reveal a clear trend from 2012–2015, cast doubt on whether Russians accept wholesale the regime's condemnation of foreign funding of NGOs. There is no consensus against such funding, even for an NGO that monitors elections. Official media accused one such NGO, *Golos*, of serving foreign powers just before the December 2011 parliamentary election. Fifty-four percent of Russian respondents opposed foreign funding of that type of NGO in 2012, but that number fell to 43 percent by 2015 despite the ratcheting up of anti-Western rhetoric by the Kremlin. Moreover, a sizable minority of Russians approve of foreign funding of groups that monitor elections, and over one third are either indifferent or do not have a clear opinion. Views of foreign funding of environmental NGOs are even more mixed, which makes intuitive sense because such organizations are less overtly political, though the trend from 2012 to 2015 is one of increasing opposition.

Statistical results

Support for human rights

The first step is to combine the nine measures of support for human rights into a more manageable set of aggregate scales. Thus far, I have divided the nine rights covered in the surveys into three groups—economic, personal-integrity, and civil rights—following Gerber and Mendelson (2002). However, a principal components factor analysis of the pooled data shows that only two latent factors underlie the correlations among the nine measures (see Table 2).

The rotated solution indicates that the "economic" and "personal-integrity" rights all load on a single factor, while the three "civil" rights load on a second factor.⁸ This pattern suggests that the nine rights fall into two categories more reminiscent of Ronald Inglehart's (1990) distinction between materialist and postmaterialist values than T. H. Marshall's (1950) tripartite schema of civil, political, and social rights. The six rights that load on Factor 1 relate to "material" needs for economic sustenance and physical well-being (including freedom from bodily abuse and coercion). Standard claims that Russians support social rights only capture part of the picture: Russians perceive rights that protect them from physical abuse and coercion as closely related to classic social rights. Henceforward, I label the constellation of six rights that load on Factor 1 as "material rights," which encompass *both* rights of personal integrity and social rights. Yet, the analysis also confirms that they think of civil rights, which load on Factor 2, differently. These rights relate to "postmaterial"

⁷. The decreases in "no" support were driven mainly by shrinking percentages of "don't know" answers: indifference and (less commonly) skepticism toward these rights remained fairly stable.

⁸. This pattern is robust to alternative specifications of the original questions' scales, listwise deletion of "hard to say" responses, alternative rotation methods, and period-specific analyses.

concerns for freedom and social and political expression. However, postmaterial values represent a broad category that also includes such diverse notions as feminism, ecological concerns, and rights of sexual minorities, so it is more precise to continue referring to the three rights that load on Factor 2 as “civil rights.”

For the remainder of the analysis of support for human rights, I constructed composite categorical scales corresponding to civil and material rights. Respondents are “strong supporters” of a particular *set* of rights if they chose the first category (indicating that protecting a right should be a top priority of the government) for *all* the individual rights that constitute the scale. Thus, “strong supporters” consistently assign top priority to all the individual rights that tap into a particular dimension of rights (that is, civil or material). To further classify the remaining respondents into weak supporters and nonsupporters of a particular set of rights, I assigned integer scores to the five substantive response categories for each individual rights question and assigned a “neutral” value of 3 to “hard to say” responses. Respondents with average scores for the individual questions greater than 3 are “weak supporters” (because 3 denotes complete neutrality) and those with an average of 3 or less are “nonsupporters.”

The annual distributions of views toward civil rights using the composite scale confirms the trend of increasing support over time (see Figure 1). Only about 10% considered all three civil rights a top priority in 2001; by 2012, the number had risen to 28 percent. Correspondingly, the estimated percentage of 20- to 59-year-old Russians who do not support civil rights at all fell from 24 percent to 9 percent. Despite the narrowing of civic space and rollback of civil liberties, public support for freedom of expression, religion, and assembly grew steadily during the first decade of Putin’s rule. The “methodological” bar for strong support for material rights is higher, because it requires respondents to choose the “top priority” category for six rather than three individual rights. Nonetheless, about half the 20- to 59-year-old Russian population has strongly supported material rights from 2001–2012, with some trendless fluctuation around the average of 52 percent (see Figure 2). Most of the rest are weak supporters, with nonsupporters never exceeding 3 percent.

To see whether some groups of Russians are more supportive of human rights than others, I estimated multinomial logistic regressions for the two composite scales (see Table 3). The models include measures of age, gender, education, household income, work status, locality type, household size, and year, plus interaction terms between a linear specification of year and, respectively, education, age, Moscow residence, and St. Petersburg residence.⁹ The interaction terms indicate whether the increase in support for civil rights evident in Figure 1 occurred uniformly across diverse groups or, in contrast, was concentrated within particular groups (young adults, the highly educated, or residents of Moscow or St. Petersburg).

Education, age, income, type of locality, and self-employment are all systematically related to support for civil rights. Judging by the parameter estimates, more education, age, and residence in Moscow and St. Petersburg all increase the odds of being a strong supporter,

⁹. See Table A2 in the Online Appendix for models that exclude the interaction terms, which significantly improve the fit of the models. I also tested interactions involving income and gender, but none of these proved to be statistically significant. See the Online Appendix for explanations of measures of covariates.

while a university degree, income in the top three quintiles, and self-employment decrease the odds of being a nonsupporter, relative to the probability of weak support. Also, the pattern of increasing strong support and declining nonsupport over time is robust to statistical controls for the covariates in the model. However, four interaction effects involving time are statistically significant, and they complicate the picture. Their signs imply that the differentials in support for civil rights along the axes of education, age, and locality type shrank during the 2000s.

To understand the extent of the changes over time in these effects, as well as convert the multinomial logistic regression (MLR) coefficients into a more intuitive metric, it is instructive to plot the predicted probabilities of different categories of support for selected values of education, age, and locality type over time (see Figures 3–5).¹⁰ Differentials in support for civil rights by education, age, and locality type diminished over the course of 2001–2012. In fact, most of the gains in strong support for civil rights occurred among those groups that initially were least likely to be strong supporters: those with less than university education, younger adults, and residents of medium-sized towns. The convergence of the eight series around higher levels of strong support (see Figure 3) and lower levels of nonsupport (see Figure 5) is striking. For example, the differences in the probability of strongly supporting civil rights between university-educated 50-year-old Muscovites and high-school-educated 20-year-old residents of medium cities were .28 versus .07 in 2001, but .21 versus .24 in 2012. In essence, middle-class status mattered in shaping support for civil rights in the early 2000s but did not by the start of the next decade. Contrary to what we might expect on the basis of modernization theory and standard findings of greater support for human rights among more educated, urbanized citizens, in Russia, it is the less educated and residents outside the country's "capital" cities whose adherence to civil rights norms increased. The age gradient disappeared during the period. This could reflect cohort replacement (more supportive cohorts leaving the "age window" to be replaced by more supportive young cohorts) or an unlinking of age and support for human rights. As Figure 4 shows, there were minimal or no differences by education, age, and locality in the probability of weak support for civil rights throughout the entire period.

In contrast to the results for civil rights, we find very few significant relationship between socioeconomic and demographic variables and support for material rights. Age is associated with elevated probability of strongly supporting these rights, while Russians with the least education, those who are not working, and those who reside in large cities other than Moscow and St. Petersburg are more likely to be nonsupporters. None of the interaction effects are significant. Given the scant number of significant relationships, the lack of a clear and coherent pattern, and the stability in relationships over time, it is not worth plotting the magnitudes of the effects in terms of predicted probabilities. Variation in support for material rights is much less linked to variables that often predict views of social and political

10. These predicted probabilities are obtained by entering different values on the variables of interest (age, education, and the "Moscow" dummy variable) into the appropriate equations using the parameter estimates in Table 4, holding constant income in the third quintile and the other variables at their baselines. Thus, the predicted probabilities in Figures 3–5 are those for middle income males who are working for hire and live alone.

issues than variation in support for civil rights. Finally, the results provide no evidence that members of the military and police are less supportive of human rights than other Russians.

Political NGOs that receive foreign funding

Views regarding foreign funding of political NGOs vary systematically by the variables of interest, but in some counterintuitive ways. To facilitate interpretation, I present the results of the MLR model of support for election-monitoring NGOs in terms of average marginal effects on the probabilities of falling in each of the three categories of support (see Table 4).

University education raises the probability of *opposing* such funding by an average of .114 and specialized secondary by .076 relative to general secondary education. At the same time, the least educated Russians also are more likely to oppose such funding than general secondary graduates. Two other markers of middle-class status operate in the opposite fashion: Russians in the top income quintile and Moscow residents are strikingly more likely than their those in the bottom quintile and residents of middle-sized towns to support foreign funding and, correspondingly, less likely to oppose it. Here, we do find intuitive effects of serving in the military or police: Current employees of those institutions are significantly more likely to toe the regime's line on the issue of foreign funding of election-monitoring NGOs. Women are more likely to register indifference to foreign funding than men. The results are broadly similar with respect to foreign funding of environmental NGOs, with some exceptions: Most notably, employment in the military and police is unrelated to views on foreign funding of environmental NGOs (see Table A3 in the online appendix).

The opposing directions of the effects of education, compared to Moscow residence and income, suggest that the variables generally linked together as reflecting the impact of "modernization" via the middle class on views of various political institutions should be disaggregated, because they can cut in different ways. The results also suggest that elite groups—those with the most income who reside in the capital—are the most resistant to the Putin regime's demonizing of foreign-funded NGOs as lackeys of the West. This implies that the strength of resistance to this tool for closing civil society space is greater than its numbers.

Conclusion

Survey data on how the Russian public has viewed human rights over the period 2001–2012 contain several surprises. Rather than make the standard distinction between political, civil, and social (or economic) rights, Russians think of rights in just two dimensions: material rights and civil rights. Political theorists may have good reason to separate economic rights from rights of personal integrity, but Russians see the individual rights comprising these different analytical concepts as of the same piece. This tendency, which recalls Inglehart (1990) on the materialist versus postmaterialist axis of values, may obtain in other countries. Studies of human rights perceptions elsewhere might test for a similar binary distinction in mass publics.

Consistent with other research (Sundstrom 2005; Mendelson and Gerber 2008; Henry 2009), support for material rights has been strong throughout the Putin era, despite their persistent

and increasing violation. But, contrary to standard accounts of Russian public opinion, support for civil liberties increased. Although modernization theory would lead us to expect this increase to be concentrated among the more educated, urbanized, and well-to-do segments of the population—which would be consistent with accounts of the 2011–2012 prodemocracy protest movement that emphasized its middle-class character—the data indicate the opposite. Similarly, Ron and Crow (2015) found only inconsistent support for the conventional wisdom that the middle class is more supportive of human rights norms in their four-country study.

More theory and research are necessary to understand what has driven the gradual but steady shift in support, as well as its concentration in unexpected social groups. Support among the middle classes did not reach a ceiling, as it remained below 30% among university-educated Muscovites. One possibility is that the efforts of domestic NGOs and foreign civil society programs eventually started to bear fruit in particular by reaching constituencies who were not addressed in the 1990s. Strong support for civil liberties within the middle classes may have peaked by the start of the Putin regime, while untapped potential remained for recruiting new “converts” among the less educated and non-Muscovites. Another possibility is that the Putin regime offers alternative incentives to middle-class Russians, such as job stability and upward income mobility, which offset a secular tendency for them to embrace human rights norms.

The Russian public is quite divided over whether political NGOs should receive foreign funding. This will probably not stop the Putin regime from continuing its policies of cracking down on such funding, but it is important that both domestic and foreign advocates for human rights in Russia realize that there are sizable constituencies within Russia that potentially support their efforts. It is also striking that Russians with the highest incomes and those who reside in Moscow are the most likely to oppose restrictions on foreign funding of NGOs. The evident limits of Russian government propaganda at swaying a majority of the population against foreign funding of NGOs suggest that, appearances to the contrary, large swathes of the Russian public reject efforts to impose restrictions on foreign funding. Even larger portions of Azerbaijani, Kyrgyz, and Ukrainian societies similarly favor foreign funding of NGOs (Gerber and Zavisca 2016). In a similar vein, Ron and Crow (2015) found little confirmation that linking human rights NGOs to foreign funding hurts their public image. Taken together, these findings point to the importance for scholars and practitioners of further research on how publics react to steps taken by governments to limit the development of NGOs in the name of fears of the supposed malicious influence of foreign funding.

A note of caution: the human rights situation in Russia is grim indeed, and there is little open opposition to the government’s measures to close civil society space and to roll back the civil liberties established in the 1990s. However, the data suggest that the conventional wisdom among pundits and other observers exaggerates the extent to which the Russian population endorses Putin’s domestic agenda. Support for Putin should not be conflated with deep-seated support for Putinism, as some have argued (Laqueur 2015). Russian society is complex and heterogeneous. We should not be lured by high poll numbers showing support for Putin and hostility toward the United States into presuming societal consensus behind the

closing of civil society space or a crackdown on political NGOs that receive foreign funding. An important limitation of this study is that the questions pertaining to views of the nine specific rights were not asked in the 2015 survey; therefore, we cannot say whether the surge of nationalism and enthusiasm over the annexation of Ukraine in 2014 somehow changed the dynamic evident in the data from 2001–2012. This article has emphasized the value of analyzing change over time in demand for rights, and it would be inconsistent with that principle to rule out the possibility that recent geopolitical and domestic developments might influence demand for rights. However, other survey data from 2015 suggest that in that year the Russian public was similarly divided about issues such as the impact of protests, the importance of freedom of assembly, a strong political opposition, free and fair elections, and rule of law as it has been about the importance of civil rights (Gerber and Zavisca 2016).

Normative change is a gradual process, and the Russian public is still divided with respect to the importance of civil freedoms. But the increase in support for them and the continuing ambivalence regarding foreign funding of NGOs should provide tentative hope to those who wish to see a human rights culture take root in Russia, in the face of an avalanche of negative news. Under current political circumstances, advocates have little choice but to take a long-term perspective. They should, however, take the findings reported here as a sign of potential for success in the long term.

Public opinion research has its skeptics among human rights scholars and activists: For example, Kenneth Roth (2015) argues against overemphasizing majority opinions and instead attending to how strategically important groups view human rights (see also Pruce 2015). But surveys are valuable not only for identifying an “average” at one point in time but they can also yield unexpected insight into trends in public support for human rights (which activists often seek to influence) and can identify and calibrate the strength of pro- and antirights constituencies. This study shows how surveys can generate information about the level, trend, and distribution of demand for human rights in a particular society, as well as shed light on how societies respond to policies that governments implement in order to impede the work of human rights NGOs. Another major recent survey also produced findings that challenge received wisdom (Ron and Crow 2015). Inevitably, these studies raise questions that require additional theorizing and empirical replications. But in so doing, they make a case for the utility of detailed single-country surveys of the level, nature, and trends of public demand for human rights, which in turn play a vital, if underappreciated, role in many theories of how activism can produce improvements in human rights regimes.

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Figure 1.

Dynamics of support for civil rights in Russia, 2001–2012. *Source:* Estimated from data sources in Table 1.

Figure 2.
Dynamics of support for material rights in Russia, 2001–2012. *Source:* Estimated from data sources in Table 1.

Figure 3. Predicted probabilities of strong support for civil rights by age, education, Moscow residence, and year. *Source:* Estimated from Preferred Model in Table 3.

Figure 4. Predicted probabilities of weak support for civil rights by age, education, Moscow residence, and year. *Source:* Estimated from Preferred Model in Table 3.

Figure 5. Predicted probabilities of no support for civil rights by age, education, Moscow residence, and year. *Source:* Estimated from Preferred Model in Table 3.

Table 1.

Trends in levels of support for nine specific rights and two types of NGOs in Russia.

		2001	2002	2003	2004	2010	2011	2012
A. Degree of support for specific human rights (respondents age 20–59)								
Freedom from arbitrary arrest	<i>Strong</i>	62%	73%	68%	74%	72%	73%	75%
	<i>Weak</i>	18%	16%	23%	15%	17%	19%	18%
	<i>None</i>	20%	10%	8%	11%	11%	8%	7%
Freedom of conscience, religion	<i>Strong</i>	23%	30%	26%	32%	42%	40%	42%
	<i>Weak</i>	30%	32%	37%	32%	27%	35%	34%
	<i>None</i>	47%	38%	38%	36%	31%	25%	24%
Right to work	<i>Strong</i>	79%	86%	83%	86%	77%	69%	74%
	<i>Weak</i>	12%	9%	13%	10%	15%	22%	19%
	<i>None</i>	9%	5%	4%	4%	8%	9%	7%
Freedom of expression	<i>Strong</i>	38%	43%	40%	43%	49%	47%	53%
	<i>Weak</i>	25%	29%	33%	27%	28%	34%	30%
	<i>None</i>	37%	27%	27%	30%	23%	18%	17%
Freedom from torture	<i>Strong</i>	74%	85%	82%	88%	77%	78%	81%
	<i>Weak</i>	12%	7%	10%	6%	10%	15%	14%
	<i>None</i>	14%	7%	8%	6%	13%	7%	5%
Right to a minimum living standard	<i>Strong</i>	89%	94%	94%	94%	88%	82%	85%
	<i>Weak</i>	7%	3%	5%	3%	7%	13%	10%
	<i>None</i>	4%	3%	2%	2%	5%	5%	6%
Right to own property	<i>Strong</i>	80%	86%	85%	89%	81%	74%	76%
	<i>Weak</i>	12%	9%	11%	6%	12%	19%	15%
	<i>None</i>	8%	4%	5%	4%	7%	7%	9%
Freedom of assembly, association	<i>Strong</i>	24%	28%	28%	29%	37%	37%	45%
	<i>Weak</i>	24%	32%	32%	31%	27%	33%	29%
	<i>None</i>	52%	40%	40%	41%	36%	30%	26%
Freedom from slavery	<i>Strong</i>		89%	88%	92%	83%	78%	80%
	<i>Weak</i>		5%	7%	3%	8%	13%	12%
	<i>None</i>		7%	4%	5%	9%	8%	8%
		2012	2015					
B. Views on foreign funding for NGOs that... (respondents age 18–49)								
Monitor elections	<i>Support</i>	17%	21%					
	<i>Indifferent</i>	28%	36%					
	<i>Oppose</i>	54%	43%					
Protect the environment	<i>Support</i>	67%	38%					
	<i>Indifferent</i>	21%	33%					
	<i>Oppose</i>	12%	30%					

Table 2.

Principal components factor analysis of support for nine specific rights. (Factor loadings and unique variances from the rotated solution).

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Uniqueness
Freedom from arbitrary arrest	.516	.323	.630
Freedom of conscience/religion	.093	.780	.383
Right to work	.659	.220	.517
Freedom of expression	.186	.757	.393
Freedom from torture	.701	.167	.481
Right to minimal living standard	.782	.037	.387
Right to own property	.728	.172	.440
Freedom of assembly	.119	.785	.370
Freedom from slavery	.722	.157	.454

Note. The table entries are factor loadings and unique variances from the rotated solution, estimated on the pooled data from all surveys containing all nine measures. $N = 9605$.

Table 3.

Multinomial logistic regressions, support for civil and material rights in Russia, 2001–2012.

Dependent variable Outcome	Civil Rights				Material Rights			
	Strong support		No support		Strong support		No support	
	B	RSE	B	RSE	B	RSE	B	RSE
Education (general secondary)								
University	0.6 **	.156	−0.4 **	.141	0.2	.110	0.0	.514
Specialized sec.	0.2 **	.097	0.0	.101	0.1	.073	0.5 **	.243
Lower vocational	0.1	.117	−0.1	.114	0.1	.085	0.3	.312
Less than sec.	0.2	.175	0.2	.156	0.0	.122	0.9	.363
Woman	−0.1	.065	−0.1	.073	−0.1	.052	0.3	.181
Age (−20)	0.0 **	.006	0.0	.005	0.0 **	.004	0.0 **	.016
Household income quintile (bottom)								
Second					0.0	.096	−0.3	.338
Third					0.1	.097	−0.2	.326
Fourth					−0.1	.098	−0.4	.350
Top					0.0	.107	−0.2	.404
Top three	0.1	.083	−0.2 *	.090				
Missing	0.2 *	.104	0.0	.112	0.0	.102	0.5	.321
Work status (working for hire)								
Self-employed	0.0	.198	−0.4 *	.210	−0.1	.142	−0.6	.485
Military/police	0.0	.395	0.1	.359	0.0	.299	0.5	.810
Not working	0.1	.073	0.1	.078	0.0	.057	0.4 **	.182
Moscow	0.4 **	.149	−0.3 **	.150	0.2	.116	0.2	.480
St. Petersburg	1.0 **	.280	−0.8 **	.388	−0.1	.149	−0.1	.788
Other large city	−0.1	.090	−0.1	.096	0.0	.070	0.5 **	.206
Rural/village	−0.2 *	.086	−0.2 *	.092	0.0	.065	0.2	.231
Household size	0.0	.028	0.0	.029	0.0	.022	−0.2 **	.079
Year (2004)								
2001	−0.4 **	.159	0.4 **	.134	−0.8 **	.107	−0.1	.497
2002	−0.3 *	.140	0.0	.131	−0.3 **	.100	0.0	.493
2003	−0.2	.139	0.0	.139	−0.4 **	.099	−0.8	.604
2010	1.1 **	.147	0.1	.152	−0.2 **	.111	0.8	.522
2011	0.9 **	.157	−0.2	.166	−0.2	.118	0.8	.556
2012	1.2 **	.185	−0.4 **	.216	0.1	.143	0.9	.627
University * year	−0.1 **	.017	0.0	.018	0.0 **	.013	0.0	.055
Age(−20) * year	0.0	.001	0.0	.001	0.0 **	.001	0.0	.002
Moscow * year	−0.1 **	.020	0.0	.026	0.0 **	.016	0.0	.061

Dependent variable Outcome	Civil Rights				Material Rights			
	Strong support		No support		Strong support		No support	
	B	RSE	B	RSE	B	RSE	B	RSE
St.Petersburg * year	−0.1 **	.037	0.1 *	.052				
Constant	−2.1 **	.178	−1.1 **	.186	0.1	.143	−3.472	.644
Log-likelihood	−9105.3				−8147.1			

*
p < .05, one-tailed.

**
p < .05, two-tailed.

Table 4.

Average marginal effects from multinomial logistic regression model for support for foreign funding of election-monitoring NGOs.

	Support		Indifferent		Oppose	
	AME	SE	AME	SE	AME ^{**}	SE
Education (general secondary)						
University	-.016	.022	-.098 ^{**}	.027	.114 ^{**}	.029
Specialized sec.	-.040 [*]	.023	-.036	.027	.076	.029
Lower vocational	-.011	.033	.068 [*]	.039	-.056	.044
Less than sec.	-.040	.056	-.068	.067	.108 [*]	.064
Woman	.008	.015	.060 ^{**}	.019	-.068 ^{**}	.020
Age(-18)	.000	.001	-.002	.001	.002 [*]	.001
Income quintile (bottom)						
Second quintile	-.005	.025	.047	.031	-.042	.033
Third quintile	.047 [*]	.027	.029	.031	-.076 ^{**}	.033
Fourth quintile	.034	.028	-.041	.033	.007	.036
Top quintile	.088 ^{**}	.036	.010	.040	-.098 ^{**}	.044
Income missing	.014	.025	.121 ^{**}	.033	-.136 ^{**}	.034
Work status (working for hire)						
Self-employed	.014	.038	-.003	.045	-.011	.045
Military/Police	-.421 ^{**}	.159	.135	.130	.286 ^{**}	.133
Not working	-.005	.017	-.015	.020	.020	.021
Locality type (medium city or small town)						
Moscow	.136 ^{**}	.024	.088 ^{**}	.033	-.224 ^{**}	.036
St.Petersburg	.060	.039	-.038	.056	-.021	.062
Other large city	-.012	.021	-.017	.026	.030	.027
Rural/village	-.004	.020	-.023	.024	.027	.025
Household size	-.020 ^{**}	.006	-.016 ^{**}	.008	.036 ^{**}	.008
2015 vs. 2012	.068 ^{**}	.016	.086 ^{**}	.020	-.153 ^{**}	.022

* p < .05, one-tailed.

** p < .05, two-tailed.

AME = Average marginal effect. SE = Standard error.