

**THE MYTH OF MASS AUTHORITARIANISM IN
RUSSIA**

PUBLIC OPINION FOUNDATIONS OF A HYBRID REGIME

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Executive Summary

New survey research, sensitive to local understandings of key terms, helps resolve a longstanding debate on whether Russian public opinion generally supports democracy or authoritarianism. The central conclusion is that while Russians differ among themselves, they are best understood not as autocratic but as supportive of a particular form of democracy that social scientists have dubbed “delegative democracy”. This logically consistent preference structure reconciles diverse arguments and findings in the literature, sheds light on Putin’s puzzling decision to cede the presidency to Medvedev in Russia’s 2008 presidential election, and lends insight into the public opinion foundations of “hybrid regimes”.

Introduction

Russians are frequently described as the enablers of their own autocracy. Many journalistic and scholarly accounts from both Russia and the West portray supporters of democracy as a small minority in Russia and depict the broader masses as heavily inclined to authoritarianism, if not actual Stalinism.¹ Some view this mass authoritarianism as primarily the product of history, of a political culture with its strongest roots in either the Soviet period² or the many centuries in which Russians knew nothing other than autocracy.³ The few interludes in this history are seen as exceptions that prove the rule: They have invariably led to socio-political turmoil and a return to dictatorship.⁴

Others treat today's Russian authoritarianism as more circumstantial than cultural, as a result of the unfortunate coincidence of Russia's post-Soviet democratic opening with institutional disintegration, economic collapse, and political turmoil, even bloodshed.⁵ Still others reframe the question: The key point is not that Russians actually like the version of authoritarianism they now have, but that they have become resigned to it as the only legitimate,

¹ Baker P. & Glasser S. (2005) *Kremlin Rising: Vladimir Putin's Russia and the End of Revolution* (New York, Scribner), p. 3; Fleron, F., Jr. (1998) "Congruence Theory Applied: Democratization in Russia," in Eckstein H., Hoffmann E. & Reisinger W. (eds) (1998), p. 41; Gudkov L. & Dubin B. (2007) "Posttotalitarnyi sindrom 'upravliaemaia demokratiia' i apatiia mass," in Lipman M. & Riabov A. (eds) (2007); Mendelson S. & Gerber T. (2006) "Failing the Stalin Test: Russians and Their Dictator," *Foreign Affairs*, 85, 1, January/February, pp. 1-8.

² Chen C. & Sil R. (2004) "State Legitimacy and the (In)significance of Democracy in Post-Communist Russia," *Europe-Asia Studies*, 56, 3, May, pp. 347-368; Frum, D. (2007) "Russian Democracy is Dying," *American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research: Articles & Commentary*, March 10, available at <http://www.aei.org/article/25742>, accessed July 14, 2009.

³ Huntington, S. (1996) *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York, Touchstone); Pipes, R. (2004) "Flight From Freedom," *Foreign Affairs*, 83, 3, May/June, pp. 9-15.

⁴ Biriukov N. & Sergeev V. (1997) *Russian Politics in Transition: Institutional Conflict in a Nascent Democracy* (Brookfield, Vermont, Ashgate), p. 3.

⁵ Kohut A., Wike R. & Speulda N. (2005) "Prosperity Tops Political Reform: Russia's Weakened Democratic Embrace," 2005 Pew Global Attitudes Survey, available online at www.pewglobal.org, accessed July 14, 2008; Levy, C. (2007) "Russia's Knockoff Democracy," *The New York Times*, December 16, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/16/weekinreview/16levy.html>, accessed August 2, 2009; Ordzhonikidze, M. (2008)

available alternative.⁶

The larger body of research into this question is far from conclusive, however. Some have found that Russians are not in fact unusually autocratic in comparative terms and that attitudes toward regime type have not been a factor in Russia's authoritarian turn under Putin.⁷ Others go a step further and argue that the majority of Russians are actually quite democratic in their preferences despite institutional trends and the views of their country's elites.⁸ By these lights, while some have indeed become disillusioned during the instability and economic crises of the 1990s, they have generally given up not on democracy itself but on how it has been practiced in Russia.⁹

Many researchers find evidence that Russians are both authoritarian and democratic at the same time, frequently calling the phenomenon "puzzling". That is, Russians seem to mix both democratic and authoritarian attitudes in what Mishler and Willerton brand a "dual political culture"¹⁰ or what Russian pollster Levada dubs "Russian double-think".¹¹ In short, despite a great deal of excellent research, we still lack agreement not only on whether Russian attitudes have tended to facilitate or hinder Putin's authoritarian turn, but also on how we should

"Western Values as Perceived by Russians," *Sociological Research*, 47, 5, September-October, pp. 6-35; Zevelev I. & Glebov K. (2006) "If You Want Democracy, Don't Push Putin," *International Herald Tribune*, March 12.

⁶ Rose R., Mishler W. & Munro N. (2006) *Russia Transformed: Developing Popular Support for a New Regime* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).

⁷ Fish, M. (2005) *Democracy Derailed in Russia: The Failure of Open Politics* (New York, Cambridge University Press).

⁸ Colton T. & McFaul M. (2002) "Are Russians Anti-Democratic?" *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 18, 2, April-June, pp. 1-31; Gessen, M. (2004) "Velvet Globe," *The New Republic*, May 31, pp. 18-20; Gibson, J. (1997) "Mass Opposition to the Soviet Putsch of August 1991: Collective Action, Rational Choice, and Democratic Values in the Former Soviet Union," *The American Political Science Review*, 91, 3, September, pp. 671-684; Gibson, J. (2001) "The Russian Dance with Democracy," *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 16, 2, April-June, pp. 129-158.

⁹ Carnaghan, E. (2007) *Out of Order: Russian Political Values in an Imperfect World* (University Park, Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania State University Press).

¹⁰ Mishler W. & Willerton J. (2003) "The Dynamics of Presidential Popularity in Post-Communist Russia: Cultural Imperative versus Neo-Institutional Choice," *Journal of Politics*, 65, 1, February, pp. 111-41.

¹¹ Levada, Yu. (2001) "Homo Praevaricatus: Russian Doublethink," in Brown A (ed) (2001), pp. 312-322. See also Alexander, J. (2000) *Political Culture in Post-Communist Russia* (New York, St. Martin's); Petukhov & Ryabov 2004.

conceptualize these Russian attitudes.

The present study throws new light onto this question with an original survey of the Russian population. While the focus here is on results from 2008, leverage is gained by drawing on earlier waves of the same survey series (The Russian Election Studies series, or RES) that spans back to the mid-1990s.¹² The central conclusion is that while Russians differ amongst themselves, they are best understood not as autocratic but as supportive of a particular form of democracy, one that social scientists have previously dubbed “delegative democracy.”¹³ That is, the predominant view in Russian public opinion is supportive of a strong ruler, but a strong ruler whom they elect in free and fair elections, who is respectful of the rights of the opposition, and whom they can remove in case this mandate is violated. This logically consistent preference structure reconciles many of the diverse arguments and seemingly contradictory survey findings present in the social science literature and sheds light on Putin’s decision to cede the presidency to Medvedev in Russia’s 2008 presidential election. Accordingly, for comparative theory, the argument lends insight into the public opinion foundations of “hybrid regimes” like Russia’s that

¹² Designed and conducted by Timothy Colton (1995 to the present), William Zimmerman (1995-96), Michael McFaul (1999-2008), and Henry Hale (2003-08) in collaboration with the Demoscope group of Mikhail Kosolapov and Polina Kozyreva at the Institute of Sociology at the Russian Academy of Sciences, the RES has surveyed the Russian population during every federal election cycle between 1995 and 2008. During the 1995-96 and 1999-2000 cycles, interviews were conducted in three waves, with respondents (adults only) being interviewed first in the fall before the Duma election, then re-interviewed between the Duma and presidential elections, and then interviewed a final time after the presidential contest. Due to funding constraints, the 2003-04 survey included only a post-Duma and post-presidential wave, while the 2008 survey had only a post-presidential wave. For 1995-96, the RES queried 2,841 adult Russian citizens November 19 - December 16, 1995, and 2,776 of them again December 18, 1995 - January 20, 1996. The third wave surveyed 2,456 during July 4 - September 13. For 1999-2000, 1,919 adult Russian citizens were interviewed November 13 - December 13, 1999, and of these 1,842 were re-interviewed December 25, 1999 - January 25, 2000, while the third wave interviewed 1,748 of them again during April 9 - June 10, 2000. For 2003-04, 1,648 adult Russian citizens were interviewed December 19, 2003 - February 15, 2004, with 1,496 re-interviewed April 4 - May 11, 2004. For 2008, 1,130 adult Russian citizens were interviewed March 18 - May 8. On the different waves, see: Colton 2000; Colton and McFaul 2003; Hale 2006; and Colton and Hale 2009.

¹³ O’Donnell, G. (1994) “Delegative Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy*, 5, January.

combine elements of democracy and autocracy.¹⁴

How Russians Understand Democracy

One problem for survey researchers is that Russians may not understand terms like “democracy” (usually translated in Russian as *demokratiia*) in the same way that the researchers do. A number of scholars have observed that Russians, in ordinary usage, tend to include elements in the very definition of democracy that do not correspond with the most authoritative or widely used Western definitions. A study by Faranda and Bell as well as a series of surveys by Rose and various colleagues, for example, have given ordinary Russians a list of items and asked them which ones were part of the definition of democracy, and large numbers included such concepts as equal wealth distribution and social welfare.¹⁵ Such findings are crucial to consider when interpreting what Russians mean when they answer such questions as whether Russia is or should be a democracy.

To better inform our interpretations, therefore, the RES 2008 survey included the following question: “What is a ‘democratic country’ (*demokraticheskaiia strana*) in your view? Please tell me, in your own words, what makes a country democratic as opposed to undemocratic?” By asking Russians to define the distinguishing features of democracy in their own terms, without giving them any prompting or preconceived lists of elements from which to choose as do the other survey-based efforts cited here, one gains a better idea of exactly what

¹⁴ On these regimes, see Diamond, L. (2002) “Thinking About Hybrid Regimes,” *Journal of Democracy*, 13, April; Levitsky S. & Way L. (2002) “The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism,” *Journal of Democracy*, 13, April; Schedler, A. (ed) (2006) *Electoral Authoritarianism: The Dynamics of Unfree Competition* (Lynne Rienner).

¹⁵ Faranda R. & Bell J. (2006) “Surveying Progress toward Democracy: Comparative Perspectives from Eurasia,” paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies, November 16-19; Rose, Mishler, & Munro 2006, pp. 127-8. Similar findings have been reported by Riabov, A. 2008. “Demokraticheskoe dvizhenie v sovremennoi Rossii: istoki, sostoianie, prichiny,” text of presentation delivered at the Gorbachev Foundation, May 18, 2008, <http://www.carnegie.ru/ru/news/78295.htm>, access date August 2, 2009.

voters have in mind when using the word “democracy” or responding to questions about it.

The results add new precision to our understanding of what Russians really have in mind when talking about democracy. One of the most striking findings is that over a quarter of the population (26%) proves unable to articulate any definition at all, while another 4% refuse even to try when asked by interviewers.¹⁶ Also quite dramatic is that nearly a fifth of the population understands democracy in a way that completely diverges from how scholars generally define the term. That is, 18% of Russians define democracy as consisting primarily of some combination of material welfare, a market economy, order, sovereignty, a strong leader, and economic equality, among other things.¹⁷ In fact, only 41% described democracy primarily in any of the same terms that Western scholars use, exclusively stressing elements like rights, freedoms, the rule of law, elections, political competition, or, in the most general terms, “people power.” Another 11% combined some “standard” definitional elements with “nonstandard” ones.

Table 1 breaks these findings down, giving us better insight into the specific features that Russians associate most readily with democracy.¹⁸ One of the most important results to keep in mind is that only 5% of our representative sample mentioned anything related to elections or even political competition as central to the definition of democracy. Instead, among elements that figure prominently in standard definitions of democracy, the most commonly cited by Russians were various rights and freedoms (mentioned by 37%), principles related to the rule of law and honest politics (13%), and the vague notion that democracy was “people power” (8%).

¹⁶ Percentages of the population cited here are estimated using a standard weighting procedure designed by Leslie Kish to compensate for the survey’s tendency to oversample certain types of people.

¹⁷ The first 80 characters of each verbatim response, as recorded by the interviewers, were coded to generate the figures analyzed here.

It is also crucial to see how far many Russians diverge from those who analyze them in interpreting the term democracy. Most prominently, one-tenth of the Russian population sees material welfare (including monetary income, the provision of jobs, high pensions) as a defining feature of democracy. About 5% understood it as a system in which the state deigns to look out for the interests of its citizens or in which the people are allowed to “participate,” citing this mainly as something that the leadership decides to do rather than something that comes by the people themselves actually wielding power. Others cited a wide range of criteria for identifying democracy, including general social equality (3%), fairness (1%), political order (2%), a strong leader (0.3%), and a sense of common purpose or accord (0.3%). A few defined democracy as constituting at least partly a form of economy, with 1% identifying it with a free market and 0.5% with state ownership of at least major enterprises. Putin’s chief political strategist Vladislav Surkov, however, appears to have made little popular headway in propagating his concept of “sovereign democracy,” with under 1% of the population identifying democracy explicitly with some form of national sovereignty. About 4% responded to the definitional question by reciting a list of problems, seeming to equate democracy with these (for example, disorder or poverty).

¹⁸ Since the survey let respondents define democracy in their own words, they frequently cited more than one defining feature, as is reflected in Table 1.

Table 1. Different Components of the Definition of Democracy Identified by Russians in Response to an Open-Ended Question, by Percent Population Naming Each Component (Spring 2008)

Rights and freedoms	37.4
Rule of law	12.9
Material Welfare	9.7
Power of the people	7.7
Elections, political competition, voting	5.2
Benevolence	4.8
Problems	3.5
Equality	2.6
Order	1.7
Market	1.1
Fairness	1.0
Sovereignty	0.7
State ownership	0.5
Participation	0.4
Strong leader	0.3
Accord	0.3
Other	5.4
Hard to say	26.8
Refuse	4.3

Who are the people with nonstandard definitions? The nonstandard definitions appear to be fairly evenly spread throughout the population, though they are a somewhat larger percentage of those over 50, men, and the less educated than of other social categories. When evaluating different Russians' views on democracy, therefore, it will be helpful to understand whether they have in mind a more-or-less standard or nonstandard definition. It will also be important, where possible, to ask about the specific things we have in mind with "democracy" (for example, free and fair elections) rather than use that term and assume that Russians understand it in the same way.

How Do Russians Understand the State of Democracy in Russia?

The 2008 RES survey finds that Russians do not generally think their country is democratic, and this conclusion holds regardless of how they themselves define democracy. Just 28% report that “Russia is a democratic country today” while 54% avowed it was not, with 18% finding it hard to answer. This general pattern appears among Russians adhering to standard as well as nonstandard definitions of democracy, with 57% of the former and 71% of the latter concurring that Russia was not a democratic country in 2008. This pattern has also been relatively consistent since at least the 1990s: The RES has found that the percentage of the population thinking Russia was a democracy was 35% in 1996, 18% in 1999, and 34% in 2003.

Russians also did not appear to believe their country was on a democratic track during spring 2008. Among those who did not think Russia was already democratic, only a third (35%) thought it likely that “Russia will be a democratic country in the foreseeable future,” while another third (33%) said it would most likely not be and 30% could not articulate an answer. Pessimism levels were about 10% higher, however, among those who held nonstandard definitions. If we single out people who included material welfare in their definition, however, assessments become much rosier, with 55% anticipating a “democratic” Russia as they define it. Among people with more standard definitions of democracy, only 39% expected Russia to become democracy.

A series of RES survey items that do not use the term “democracy” corroborate Russians’ general sense that the system is not democratic, though it indicates that Russians see their country as having something that resembles a hybrid regime more than an authoritarian one. To begin, while only 28% of the population was willing to affirm that the 2008 presidential election was “fair” without caveats, just 14% branded it unambiguously “unfair.” Nearly a majority, 48%,

rated the election as being somewhere in between the categories of fair and unfair.¹⁹ Accordingly, Russians do feel at least somewhat empowered by their political system. Asked whether voting “can make a difference to what happens” or whether “no matter whom people vote for, it won’t make any difference to what happens,” only a fifth of the population (21%) would affirm the latter position. All but 4% of the rest indicated that voting can make at least something of a difference, with 25% adopting the latter position without tempering it at all.

Thus while Russians do not see their regime as being democratic, neither do they seem to think that it is truly or fully authoritarian. This dovetails with research by Rose, Mishler, and Munro, who finds that on an eleven-point scale ranging from complete dictatorship (a rating of 0) to complete democracy (a rating of 10), Russians on average place their regime in the middle, giving it a mean rating of 5.4.²⁰ Russians, on the whole, see their system as neither fully democratic nor fully autocratic, but as a kind of hybrid regime.

Do Russians Prefer Democracy or Autocracy?

Most studies that address Russian preferences for regime type tend to assume a dichotomous choice between democracy and autocracy and treat any indication that people prefer order to democracy, when forced to choose, as a symptom of popular authoritarianism.²¹ For example, the Pew Global Attitudes Project asked Russians (and people across the world) whether they “should rely on a democratic form of government to solve the country’s problems

¹⁹ Interestingly, Russians did not generally see the mass media as a source of unfairness. A majority, 53%, said they did not “sense that any of the main television channels (First Channel, the Rossiia Channel, or NTV) was supporting any of the candidates.” Of the 34% that did perceive a bias, unsurprisingly, 85% said it was for the Kremlin’s candidate, current president Dmitry Medvedev.

²⁰ Rose, Mishler, and Munro 2006, p. 129.

²¹ Important exceptions include Colton & McFaul 2002 and Rose, Mishler, & Munro 2006.

or a leader with a strong hand.”²² Answers indicating a “strong hand” are interpreted as a “retreat” from democracy. Survey evidence that significant numbers of Russians would vote for Stalin if he were on the ballot is interpreted in the same way.²³ These and other surveys have also found, for example, that Russians think that “a strong economy” is more important than “a good democracy,” interpreting this, too, as indicating dictatorial inclinations.

Other studies have shown, however, that posing these sorts of dichotomies and interpreting them in this way may be inappropriate. For one thing, Rose, Mishler, and Munro find that Russians themselves do not prefer either complete democracy or complete dictatorship when given the opportunity to choose options in between. On their 11-point scale described above, the average Russian in the mid-2000s advocated an ideal positioning of 7.2, significantly different from complete democracy (10), but at the same time far closer to it than to autocracy (0).²⁴ They do not consider how individuals’ different definitions of democracy influence how they rate democracy’s desirability, however. Colton and McFaul specifically take up the issue of tradeoffs, finding that the majority of Russians in 1999-2000 thought that democracy was incompatible with neither order nor a strong economy.²⁵ The choices posed by Pew and studies like it, therefore, are false ones, leading to a significant overestimation of the authoritarian proclivities of Russians.

The 2008 RES survey adds new evidence to the claim that Russians are less inclined to authoritarianism than is widely thought. For one thing, when it asked people straight up whether they thought “Russia should be a democratic country,” 74% said they agreed. Moreover, when

²² Kohut, Wike, & Speulda 2005.

²³ Mendelson S. & Gerber T. (2003) “Up for Grabs: Russia’s Political Trajectory and Stalin’s Legacy,” PONARS Policy Memo no.296, November, http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/pm_0296.pdf, accessed July 14, 2009.

²⁴ Rose, Mishler, and Munro 2006, p. 128-9.

²⁵ Colton and McFaul 2002.

this figure is broken down by how people understand democracy, we see that the support for democracy is strongest (backed by 85%) among those who hold a standard definition of the term, that is, among those who we might say “know what democracy is.” In fact, the clear majority (60%) of Russians who do not support democracy consists of those who do *not* think of it as involving rights, freedoms, the rule of law, honest politics, people power, elections, or political competition.

To verify these findings, the RES also posed the question in a somewhat different way, asking Russians whether they thought “a democratic system” was “a good fit” for their country. Again, a clear majority (59%) averred that democracy was a “very good” or “fairly good” way to govern Russia. And once again, we find that the percentage of democracy supporters is even higher (67%) among those who know what democracy is and that the bulk of those saying democracy is inappropriate have in mind something different from what scholars usually do when interpreting such responses.

To compare, the study also asked about a system with “a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections.” While this system did find the support of 49% as “very good” or “fairly good” for Russia, democracy still came out stronger.²⁶ Moreover, democracy had lower “negatives” than the strongman alternative: Only 23% asserted that the former was bad for Russia while 34% said that of the latter. Interestingly, 26% of the population indicated that both democracy and strongman rule are good for Russia. It will be demonstrated later in these pages that this may not be an inconsistent position.

The finding of significant support for democracy (as scholars usually define it) is also corroborated when Russians are asked about various features of democracy without the term

“democracy” being used. For example, the RES reveals that 59% agreed that “competition among political parties makes our political system stronger” while only 29% disagreed. There was also significant support for elections as an institution, with 65% asserting that they “should be maintained even if they are not free and fair” and just 28% voicing the opposite view. Support for elections appears stronger for federal than regional elections, however: While Putin was supported only by a minority in ending gubernatorial elections starting in 2005, the minority was substantial (45%) and larger than the number who opposed the move (35%).

The 2008 RES also replicated the series of questions it began in 1999-2000 to explore the democracy-order and democracy-economy tradeoffs that some studies put at the basis of their analyses of Russian opinion. The results here generally confirm Colton’s and McFaul’s original analysis. Only 33% saw a need to choose between democracy and a strong state in Russia at that time, with a majority of 56% affirming that they could have both at the same time. True, when asked to choose which is “more important for Russia right now,” 43% picked a strong state, but an equal percentage said that they are equally important and another 10% opted for democracy. Similarly, nearly two-thirds of the population (62%) thought that economic growth and democracy were perfectly “possible for Russia at the present time” and just 27% thought there was actually any need to choose. When forced to pick which is “more important for Russia right now,” 49% opted for economic growth, but 44% said they are equally important and another 2% picked democracy.

A few calculations lead us back to the conclusion that the share of actual authoritarians in Russia is decidedly a minority. For one thing, based on the questions discussed in the preceding paragraph, one finds that only 22% of Russia’s population believed *both* that democracy and a

²⁶ This figure remained about the same regardless of whether one’s definition of democracy was standard or non-standard, as is to be expected since the term “democracy” was not used here.

strong state are incompatible *and* that a strong state should be prioritized over democracy. Similarly, only 22% of the population both perceived a trade-off and prioritized economic growth over democracy. It turns out that there is a great deal of overlap in these categories, and that only 30% of the population saw any need to sacrifice democracy for either economic development or strengthening the state. And even this figure shrinks to just 24% when one looks only at people who define democracy in something like the standard way and increases to 40% among those with a nonstandard definition.

Likewise, the category of people who assert the present need to sacrifice democracy for the sake of state strength or growth is made up primarily of people with non-standard definitions of democracy or who cannot define democracy unprompted. And due to the line of questioning that produced these figures, these are people who may in principle still support democracy but just think that it needs to be put on the back burner for a while given Russia's attempt to emerge from its state-building and economic crisis. The survey evidence, once one moves beyond superficial analysis, does not seem very strong at all that Russians are heavily inclined to authoritarianism.

Russians as Delegative Democrats

So far we have seen that Russians seem to combine a proclivity for a "strong hand" at the same time that they also support democracy itself, and that while they tend to qualify their support for democracy, they distance themselves even further from true authoritarianism. One might reasonably stop the argument here, resting with a refinement of the "dual political culture" or "Russian doublethink" thesis in a way that gives a bit more emphasis to the democratic rather than the authoritarian element. There is reason to think, however, that there is more to the story,

that Russian attitudes to democracy and autocracy are not simply an odd mixture. That is, might there be a certain logic underlying the perceived duality that can help tie together different public opinion threads and help explain why scholars have reached such divergent conclusions? The thesis advanced here is that Russians might usefully be thought of as being *delegative democrats*.

Delegative democracy is a concept coined by O'Donnell, who was originally describing patterns of rule in Latin America in the 1980s and early 1990s. In these countries, he observed, the public tended to vest almost all of their hopes in a single president. The president was generally elected, making this a form of democracy, but was also considered to be entitled to govern as he or she saw fit after winning this election, and for the duration of his or her term, with the primary purpose of solving major problems facing the nation.

That is, the public delegated almost unlimited power to this president, who was then expected to take hard measures for the good of the country. What limits the president in such a system is not other institutions like parties or parliament, which are seen as nuisances potentially hindering the president, but the "hard facts of existing power relations" and constitutional limits on the length of his or her service in office. Accordingly, the president assumes full personal responsibility not only for successes, but also for failures.²⁷ O'Donnell saw this as a negative phenomenon that hindered the institutionalization of new democracies and that could lead to a collapse of state authority when the president fails to deliver on lofty promises, as was usually the case in the Latin American countries he had in mind but that he also explicitly recognized might be relevant for post-communist countries.²⁸

The argument here is not that Russia actually *is* a delegative democracy, but that the

²⁷ O'Donnell 1994.

²⁸ O'Donnell, G. (1993) "On the State, Democratization, and Some Conceptual Problems: A Latin American View With Some Glances at Postcommunist Countries," *World Development*, 21, August.

concept captures an important *way in which a large number of Russians think about the desired relationship between leadership and society* during a time of great challenge facing the state.²⁹ That is, the largest part of the Russian public wants to elect its top leadership, but having chosen, wants to give that leader a great deal of latitude to do what is best for the country.³⁰ This logically consistent principle helps explain much of the aforementioned “duality” or “double-think” researchers have found in Russian public opinion: Russians want the strongman leader at the same time they want that leader to respect their rights, including the very important right to select and potentially remove that leader through free and fair elections.

To test this claim, the 2008 RES examined the meaning of “a leader with a strong hand” that the Pew Global Attitudes study assumes is seen as an anti-democratic option by Russian respondents.³¹ Indeed, while few studies seek to explore what Russians actually mean when discussing “democracy,” even fewer examine what Russians actually mean with concepts like “a strong hand.”

Much like Pew, the RES does indeed find overwhelming support among Russians for the proposition that to solve its problems, Russia needs a head of state “with a strong hand.” Fifty-five percent of our respondents “fully” agreed while another 34% “more or less” agreed. Rather than stop there, however, the RES took the line of questioning a step further and asked people whether “the people should have the right to choose who becomes this head of state” or whether “this head of state should appear without the participation of the people.” Just as the “Russians as delegative democrats” theory would expect, a whopping 96% of them wanted the right to choose

²⁹ Russia does bear great resemblance to this model, though, with President Boris Yeltsin’s experience during the 1990s demonstrating significant parallels to the failed presidents O’Donnell (1994) describes. On similarities between Russia and this model under both Yeltsin and Putin, see Hale, McFaul & Colton 2004 and Remington 2010.

³⁰ The top leader, for Russians, is not necessarily a president.

³¹ Kohut, Wike, & Speulda 2005.

who gets to wield this “strong hand.”

These 96% were then posed with another question: By what means should the people choose this strong-hand leader? Our respondents were unusually united in their response: 87% said that “the citizens should choose from among several candidates with different views by means of free and fair elections.” Only 9% said that “the previous head of state should propose one candidate and citizens should vote either for or against that candidate,” and just 0.2% ventured any other mechanism.³² Russian citizens also do not want any strong leader, even a very successful one, to act above the law and ignore the rights of his opposition. Only one-fifth of the population would agree with the proposition that “if the president successfully manages the country, then he is within his rights to deal with his opposition by any available means, even illegal means.” Disagreeing were nearly three-quarters of the population, 42% “strongly” and 32% “more or less.” The evidence is quite clear, then, that Russians do not generally see strong-hand leadership and democracy as being incompatible, but instead tend to expect them to go together in a vision that resembles an idealized form of delegative democracy.

It is in this light that we must interpret the survey finding that many Russians would be willing to vote for Stalin if given the chance.³³ For one thing, even setting aside the observation that this survey question is “extremely counterfactual” in nature, its very formulation breaks the relationship between Stalin and dictatorship: At issue is a hypothetical Stalin *for whom one can vote*. Moreover, Mendelson and Gerber themselves find that a large share of the people who support Stalin in this way are in fact ignorant of the mass repressions that took place under his

³² Even among the 3% that thought the people should not have a role in selecting their strongman leader, only a partial retreat from democratic norms is found. When these people were asked what should happen “if the actions of this strong head of state turn out to be directed against the interests of Russia,” 73% of them replied that Russian citizens should have the power to replace such a head of state. When these 73% were in turn asked how this replacement should be effected, four-fifths opted for free and fair elections conducted from among several candidates with different views as opposed to other options.

rule or are at a minimum skeptical that these actually took place.

This must color our understanding of people's responses, which surely have primarily in mind other things that Stalin is widely associated with in Russian minds, especially the victory over Nazi Germany in World War II (generally considered the single greatest moment of Russia's 20th century) and, to a lesser extent, industrialization and a major push toward modernization. While this ignorance of Stalin's atrocities is extremely worrisome for other reasons, it does mean that people who say they would vote for Stalin in an election are not necessarily advocating those same kinds of atrocities.³⁴ In light of the logic of delegative democracy, they may not even be advocating a real dictatorship. Again we find that once we consider what Russians actually mean when using certain terms and do not automatically impute Western meanings to them, Russians seem a lot more like delegative democrats than totalitarians, and readers are also reminded that these would-be "Stalin voters" are still far from a majority.³⁵

In fact, there is strong reason to believe that these sorts of delegative democratic inclinations are an important part of how Russians relate to Vladimir Putin. In the public's eye, Putin represents just the sort of "leader with a strong hand" that most Russians appear to desire (and to have desired, unrequited, during the 1990s). Ever since he appeared on the national scene in 1999, Russians have rated Putin in the most glowing of terms as a person and as a leader. The RES found that in 2008, 72% believed that Putin "really cares" about ordinary people, 85% held him to be honest and trustworthy, 93% found him to be "strong," and 98% agreed that he was

³³ Mendelson & Gerber 2003.

³⁴ This is supported by the focus-group responses to questions about voting for Stalin among Russian youth reported in Mendelson & Gerber 2006, pp. 5-7.

³⁵ A similar logic explains how, as described above, 26% of the population can simultaneously think that both democracy and "a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections" are at least fairly good

“intelligent.”

These findings have not varied much since 2000, with surveys regularly indicating that voters found him to be by far the most competent person for dealing with the most important issues Russia faced.³⁶ Russians have felt quite comfortable, then, delegating a great deal of real authority to him, giving him a great deal of discretion even when they may have disagreed with some of his policies.³⁷ This sense of having delegated power to Putin helps explain the great degree to which Russians have proven willing to accept biased or incomplete media messages or, even being aware of them, to simply dismiss them with irony rather than rebel or actively seek those independent and reasonably objective sources of information that are in fact available even in 2009 in the Russian mediascape.³⁸ That is, once delegated, power need not be the concern of ordinary citizens.

All this does not mean, however, that Russians have wanted Putin to become a dictator. Quite the contrary. As of spring 2008, only 40% of the population regretted that Putin had not changed the Constitution so as to remove his two-term limit and run for a third term, while a significantly greater number (49%) said such a change would have been a bad idea despite the fact that they liked Putin so much as a leader.

Moreover, while 77% did not want Putin to leave politics entirely after Medvedev became president, they also did not want Putin to continue to run the show from a different post, as Prime Minister. In fact, asked in spring 2008 who they thought *should* have the most influence

political systems for Russia, especially if “not bothering with...elections” is understood to apply primarily during a constitutionally defined term in office.

³⁶ Colton T. & Hale H. (2009) “The Putin Vote: Presidential Electorates in a Hybrid Regime,” *Slavic Review*, 68, 3, Fall.

³⁷ Hale H., McFaul M. & Colton T. (2004) “Putin and the ‘Delegative Democracy’ Trap: Evidence from Russia’s 2003-04 Elections,” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 20, 4, October-December, pp. 285-319.

³⁸ For example, the news programming on REN-TV and Ekho Moskv, available in most major Russian cities but seldom turned on, or a significant number of newspapers and an even larger array of Internet news sources. On Russian mass media and their relationship to ordinary Russians, see Mickiewicz 2008.

on Russian policy during the upcoming three-four years, far more replied Medvedev (42%) than Putin (18%).³⁹ And even if Putin were to return to the presidency, as 48% said they thought should happen one day, an impressive two-thirds of the population (67%) averred that Putin should not have the right to become president for life.

Thus even for a leader as popular as Putin, the public supported him not as a dictator with unchecked authority unbounded in time, but as a strong people's delegate, a delegate with a mandate that was quite expansive but that nevertheless had specific limits. He surely had the raw political power as of 2007-08 to have violated these limits, but doing so may well have made a third term less successful than his first two. Indeed, when Yeltsin lost popular support in the early 1990s, he was able to stay in power and secure re-election through largely illegitimate means, but found these means very costly and found it very difficult to govern after using them. Consideration of this public understanding of his mandate, then, may have been a real factor leading Putin to the otherwise surprising decision not to seek a third term and instead to take the risky step of handing the presidency over to a successor.

Conclusion

While there is a great deal of variety across Russian individuals in their support for democracy, we find that relatively few Russians can be called true authoritarians. Many of the studies claiming to find evidence of mass authoritarian sentiment in Russia are based at least in part on misinterpreting terms that are assumed to have the same meaning in Russia as elsewhere (such as "democracy" or "strong hand"), posing choices that Russians themselves perceive to be false (such as "democracy versus economic growth"), or overlooking categories of regimes that

³⁹ Thirty percent thought they should have equal influence.

lie between democracy and dictatorship (that is, hybrid regimes). At the same time, Russians do display a greater preference for relying on strong individual leadership than is typical of Western democracies, and are clearly willing to forgive their leaders (or treat with irony) a great deal more than are the populations of most Western societies when it comes to restrictions on freedoms and influence on media coverage.

While some have contended that this is simply a duality that characterizes Russians, a “species” that Levada goes so far as to dub “*homo praevaricatus*,” this study contends that the duality is well explained by thinking of Russians instead as “delegative democrats.” That is, a large share of Russian public opinion does in fact desire a strong leader who is largely unconstrained by other institutions in solving Russia’s immense challenges of transition, but Russians are also quite clear that they simultaneously want and expect to choose that leader through free, fair, and competitive elections and to have the right to remove that leader in the same way should things go wrong.

Russians are thus strikingly principled in rejecting outright autocracy. Russia’s leaders, including even the highly popular Putin, are desired not as dictators but as powerful delegates with an expansive--but still limited--mandate to get things done. The limits are: that the basic rights of the opposition not be violated; that the leader not have a right to remain in complete power for life; and that the people retain the right to select a successor in a free, fair, and competitive process when that leader’s constitutional term limits are up.

Just because Russians support delegative democracy does not mean that this is what they get, however. Delegating so much authority to leaders can be dangerous since leaders can use this power to insulate themselves against future efforts to remove them from power, to influence the succession process, and to shape media coverage that can mould public opinion. This

strongly appears to have been what has happened in Russia, with incumbent authorities findings all kinds of ways to “defeat-proof” elections.⁴⁰ The RES surveys also find that the Kremlin has been successful in biasing political media coverage in such a way that the population largely does not detect the bias when it comes to election coverage.

Russians, then, still feel empowered by elections at the same time that a majority recognizes them as falling at least a little bit short of fully free and fair. And there does seem to be evidence that they still actually have some influence in Russia, as the regime’s intense attention to public opinion hints. In fact, it may have been partly Putin’s fear of violating his own delegated mandate from the population, a violation that could have cost him in terms of public opinion and legitimacy, that led him not to follow the path of many other post-Soviet leaders by changing the constitution so as to allow himself a third consecutive term as president. While most observers continue to regard Putin as being the country’s dominant political figure, it is significant that state-controlled television gives more coverage to Medvedev than to Putin himself as of early 2009.

The overall result, however, is that the desire for delegative democracy has in fact led Russians to enable a regime that, while still hybrid, is now closer to dictatorship than to democracy and that therefore diverges from the more democratic preferences of the Russian electorate. Thus this study winds up confirming the observation with which it began, that Russians are frequently regarded as the enablers of their own autocracy, but for reasons different from those usually given.

That is, the public opinion structure that has enabled authoritarianism is not any kind of culturally embedded or historically developed support for autocracy, but the preference for a

⁴⁰ Robertson, G. (2008) “Managing Protest and Politics: Regime and Contention in Post-Communist Russia,” book

kind of *democracy* that nevertheless relies on electing a strong leader as a way of concentrating national efforts on the resolution of major national challenges. In this way, the Russian case may hold some important comparative lessons as to the kind of public opinion structures that are conducive to autocratization, structures that may not themselves be authoritarian. For example, to avoid retreats from initial democratization, there may ironically be a greater need for checks on and balances against strong presidential power precisely where society--even for democratic reasons--prefers a strong leader.⁴¹

At the same time, the Latin American cases of delegative democracy that O'Donnell studied have virtually all made the transition now to a more robust democracy, one less reliant on elected strongmen (and strongwomen) and without delegative democracy's cycles of institutional instability and dysfunction.⁴² This indicates that so long as society's underlying preference is in fact for democracy, even delegative democracy, there is a good chance that even strongman rulers will not ultimately be able to escape their mandates indefinitely. The underlying preference for democracy will continue to be one resource on which opposition forces can draw. While it may not be very potent when the delegate-rulers can credibly claim to be delivering on their mandate, as Putin has been able to do during the 2000s, it can quickly become an important basis for opposition mobilization even in the most forbidding of political circumstances when the regime--for whatever reason--ceases to be seen as delivering benefits that the population desires from its president.

manuscript.

⁴¹ Parliament can also be a basis for dictatorial or strongly "delegated" power, so the emphasis here is precisely on checks and balances rather than strong parliaments per se, emphasised by Fish 2005.

⁴² See, for example, year-by-year ratings of countries on different scales of democracy compiled by Freedom House (Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2009," available at http://www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/fiw09/FIW09_Tables&GraphsForWeb.pdf, accessed April 20, 2009) and the Polity project (Marshall, M. "Polity IV Project: Political Regime Characteristics and Transitions 1800-2007," 2008, available at <http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm>, accessed April 20, 2009).