

How Russians Think about Human Rights: Recent Survey Data

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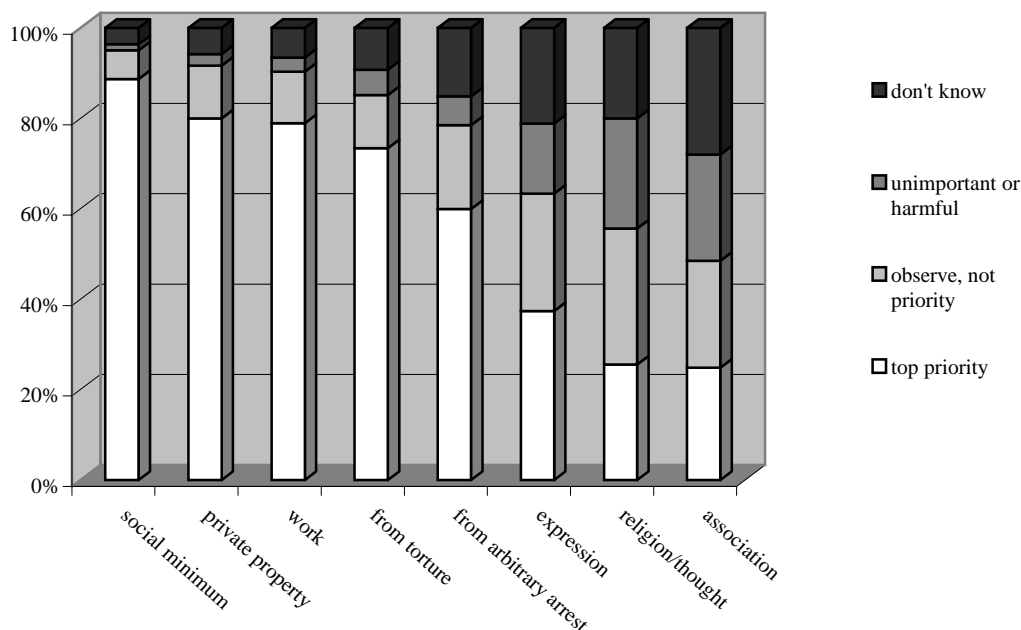
In 2001, human rights norms appear to be more widespread in Europe than they were 26 years ago at the dawn of the Helsinki process and more widely shared globally than 53 years ago during the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations. Does the same trend hold in Russia? How robust are human rights norms there? Ten years after the collapse of the Soviet Union and after millions of dollars in assistance have been spent to support democracy and human rights, how do Russians think about human rights?

Our recent survey data indicate that the answers to these important questions are, at best, mixed. Moreover, close inspection of the results reveals some troubling findings for those who hope to see democracy in Russia become robust. Although scholars and policymakers have tended to compare the diffusion of Soviet era norms and post-Soviet era norms, our data indicate that Russians in fact perceive human rights in terms of three distinct normative dimensions: civil liberties (e.g., freedom of religion, association, and expression), economic rights (e.g., the right to work, to own property, and to social welfare) and rights of the person (e.g., freedom from torture and from arbitrary arrest). Support for these varies greatly. Economic rights, including the right to own property, a “post-Soviet” concept, are strongly supported. Rights of the person receive moderately strong support. In contrast, Russians’ commitment to civil liberties is weak, by a number of measures. Russians are more than twice as likely to express indifference, uncertainty, or hostility toward civil liberties than to strongly support them. A large majority finds it acceptable for the government to suspend rights for certain goals or in response to certain threats, especially those concerning order and public safety. Few Russians are concerned about censorship of the press, and practically none fear the suspension of civil liberties. Perhaps most disturbing, younger Russians are no more likely than their grandparents to strongly support civil liberties, and the well-educated are only slightly more likely to do so than the least educated.

Overall Support for Human Rights

Our data come from a special battery of questions regarding human rights and the war in Chechnya that VTsIOM gave to a nationally representative sample of 2,405 Russians from September 17–October 9, 2001, as part of their omnibus survey. In this memo, we focus on responses to questions that asked how strongly respondents supported eight specific rights included in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In the order of appearance in the survey, these were: freedom from arbitrary arrest, freedom of religion, the right to work, freedom of expression/information, freedom from torture, the right to a minimal standard of living, the right to own property, and the right of free association. In each case, five response categories were offered, ranging from “the observation of this right should be a top priority of the government” to “this right definitely contradicts the country’s political and economic interest.” The middle category indicated neutrality toward the particular right (“neither important nor harmful”), and a “no opinion” option was also provided.

Figure 1 (bellow) illustrates for each right the distribution of the weighted adult sample (18 and over) across the following positions: protecting this right is a top priority, it is desirable but not a priority, it is unimportant or harmful, and “no opinion.” The rights are arranged in order of decreasing levels of overall support, which is measured by combining the first two categories. More than 90 percent support rights concerning a minimum standard of living, private property, and a job, and in each case the overwhelming majority say protecting these rights should be a top priority. Support for freedom from torture is only slightly lower, at 85 percent, and about equally unqualified. The remaining rights enjoy less overall support and, among supporters, more qualified support. Still, majorities express at least moderate support for all the rights except freedom of association (48.5 percent). Nonsupporters of a particular right are generally more likely to have no opinion about it than to view it as unimportant or harmful.

Figure 1: Importance of Eight Human Rights, September–October 2001

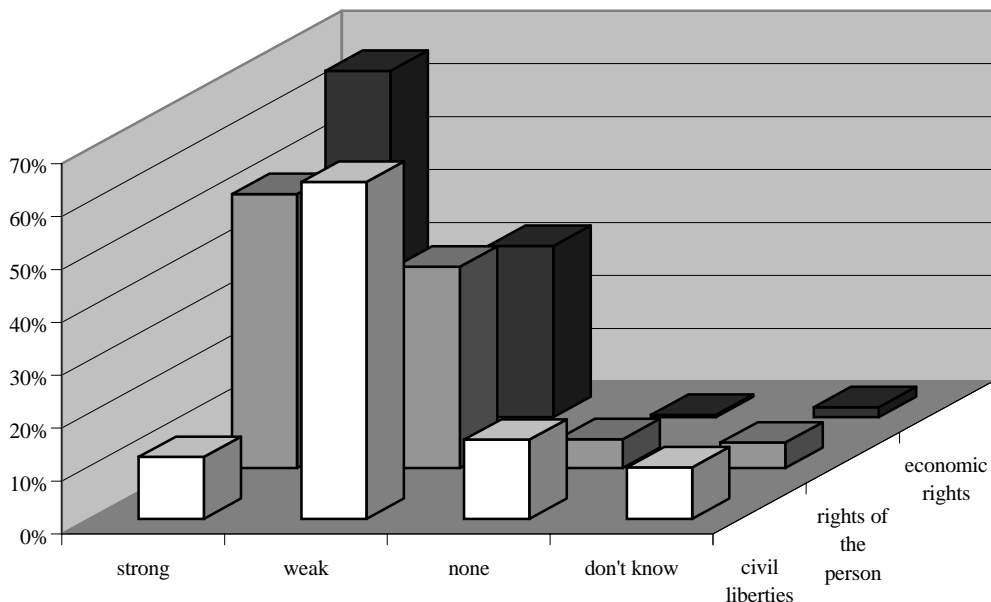
Economic Rights vs. Civil Liberties

The left-to-right ordering in Figure 1 suggests that economic rights enjoy the highest level of support among Russians, civil liberties the least amount of support, with rights of the person in between. Additional analysis provided more evidence that this is the case, and, furthermore, that support for civil liberties is even weaker than these numbers indicate. First, using factor analysis, we determined that in the minds of our respondents the eight individual rights line up along the three distinct dimensions: the first three correspond to economic rights, the next two to rights of the person, and the final three to civil liberties. Next, we created measures of support for each dimension based on the levels of support for the cluster of rights corresponding to it. For example, our measure of support for the economic dimension combines information about the levels of support for social welfare, private property, and work. “Strong” supporters of a dimension of rights assign top priority to protecting *all* of the corresponding specific rights. “Weak” supporters advocate, on average, protecting the corresponding rights but do not assign top priority to all. “No support” means that the respondent is, on average, indifferent to or opposed to protecting this type of right. Those who “don’t know” have no opinion on all of the specific rights corresponding to that particular dimension.

This coding schema confirms that Russians’ support for economic rights dramatically exceeds their support for civil liberties (Figure 2): although 65 percent say all three economic rights should be a top priority, only 12 percent say the same for all three civil liberties. Moreover, although only 2 percent do not support or have no views on economic rights, 25 percent do not support or have no views on civil liberties. Thus, those who are indifferent,

uncertain, or even hostile to civil liberties outnumber strong supporters of civil liberties by more than 2 to 1.

Figure 2: Levels of Support for Three Types of Rights



Suspending Rights

After polling our respondents on the eight specific human rights, they were asked to indicate up to two general goals and up to two specific threats that would justify, in their view, the suspension of at least some human rights. Only 19 percent of respondents consistently said that no such goal or threat justifies violating rights. Three-quarters (75 percent) indicated that considerations involving order and public safety—namely, fighting crime, terrorism, and/or corruption—justified the violation of human rights. One-third (34 percent) advocated limiting rights for the sake of improving the economy or halting economic crisis. More than one-quarter (28 percent) saw enhancing the domestic or international power (*vlast*) of the state as a legitimate cause for sacrificing human rights.

These numbers suggest that Russians' commitment to human rights is weaker when they are juxtaposed against concrete concerns than when they are presented in abstract terms. They also suggest that Russians see the main tradeoff for rights as order and public safety—not economic progress. In other words, Russians see an inverse relationship between fighting terrorism, crime, and corruption and the protection of rights. The events of September 11 may have temporarily inflated concerns for order and public safety. However, it is doubtful that this explains why these concerns are such prominent justifications for limiting rights, because other questions in

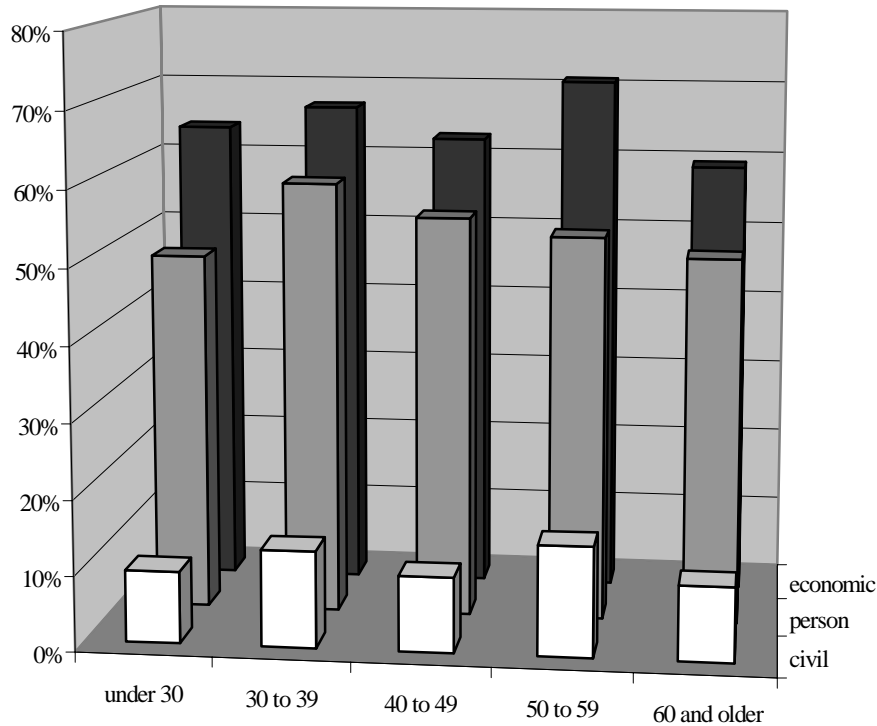
the survey indicate that Russians fear economic hardships more than they fear crime, terrorism, and corruption. Most likely, these issues are more saliently linked to human rights than are economic issues.

Ignorance is Bliss? Indifference to Threats to Human Rights and Censorship

Elsewhere in the survey, respondents were asked which of 5 or 6 of 20 specific threats—including the loss of civil rights, democratic freedoms, freedom of expression, and freedom of the press—they fear most. Only 1.3 percent of the weighted adult sample listed loss of these civil rights as among their five or six greatest fears. As for censorship, respondents were also asked to assess the level of government control over press reports on the conflict in Chechnya. Only 17.2 percent said they think government control of media reports from Chechnya is excessive. In contrast, 32.0 percent advocated *more* censorship of such reports! If Russians were as committed to civil liberties as their responses to the individual questions suggest, a much greater level of concern about these developments would be evident in our data. It could be that Russians who are deeply committed to civil liberties simply have little information about the current threats to these rights and therefore trust the authorities not to trample them. Only further research can determine how aware Russians are of such recent developments as increased government control of the media, official harassment of individuals and voluntary associations who criticize the government, restrictions on the activities of many religious groups, and a litany of grave breaches of human rights by the Russian military in Chechnya.

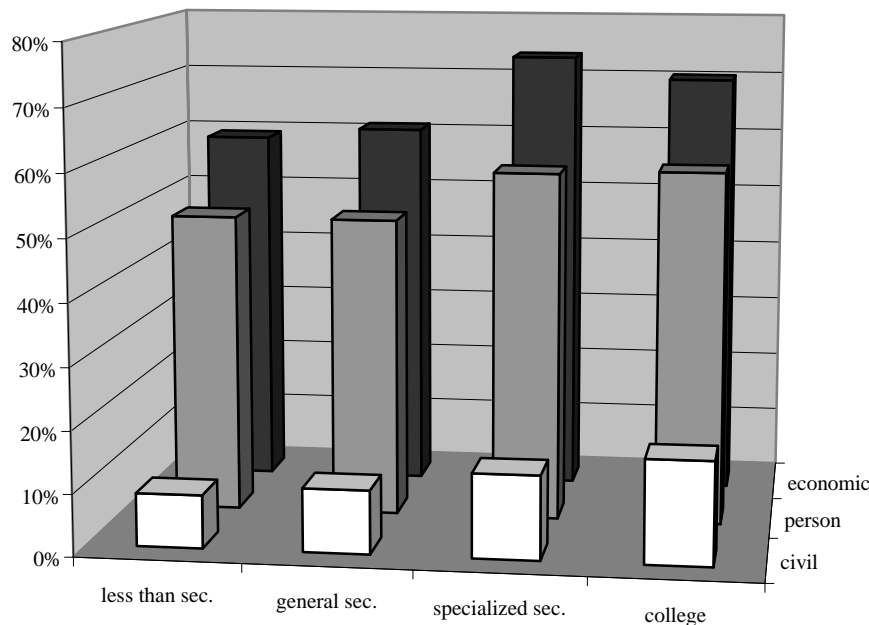
Demographics: No Catalysts for Change

Conventional wisdom would expect higher support for civil liberties and other rights among younger and better-educated Russians. This could serve as the basis for some optimism, because the younger generations will eventually replace the old, and the highly educated tend to play a more influential role in the political life of modern societies. Our evidence contrasts with the conventional wisdom. In fact, there is little systematic variation by age in support for rights (Figure 3), and 50–59 year olds—not those under 30—evinced the strongest level of support for civil liberties.

Figure 3: Strong Support for Rights, By Cohort

As expected, education is associated with higher levels of strong support for civil liberties (Figure 4), but this effect is muted: 16 percent of university-educated Russians are strong supporters, versus 8 percent of those with less than secondary schooling. Altogether, demographic patterns offer little encouragement that the younger generation or the well-educated will act as strong defenders of civil liberties. Further research is necessary to explore why this is currently the case, and how it might be reversed.

Figure 4: Strong Support for Rights, by Education



Conclusion

Some argue that human rights and democratic norms have steadily diffused throughout the international community in the last several decades, and that we should expect this to be the case in Russia. One recent study claims that Russians have in fact made considerable progress in assimilating democratic values.

Norms favoring human rights are a crucial component of democratic values, and our findings on how Russians think about human rights portray a less optimistic picture. Russians' views on human rights are complex; to speak of support for "human rights" as a whole is not accurate. Instead, support varies for different types of rights. Russians are strongly committed to economic rights. However, their support for civil liberties is weak, especially when they are asked concrete questions rather than abstract ones.

Those who wish to see democracy take hold in Russia should be alarmed. Advocates of market reform should also be concerned; multivariate analysis shows that those who support civil liberties are 66 percent more likely to support market reforms than those who do not. Supporters of economic rights are only 31 percent more likely to support market reforms. Notably, Russians back a cluster of economic rights—some of which are at odds with market reform. Russians highly value social welfare, the right to work, *and* the right to own property. This could pose a dilemma for President Vladimir Putin's economic policymakers. Although those who want to see free markets in Russia may not be surprised by Russians' support for private property, the continued high levels of support for welfare and jobs suggest that the Putin administration will face extreme challenges in undertaking any economic restructuring that

causes large unemployment or reductions in social welfare. The Russian government likely will be forced to balance radically different economic objectives.

In terms of civil liberties, the news is grim. Russian and Western human rights organizations have detailed an increase in threats to civil liberties, but our data suggest that virtually no one in Russia is bothered by this. For example, we found solid evidence of the widely reported apathy toward freedom of the press. This apathy was also evident in the lack of public reaction to the takeover of NTV and TV6 in 2001 by companies in which the state was the majority stakeholder. Together, public lethargy and increased governmental control of the media create permissive conditions for violations of human rights. News about the rights that Russians do strongly care about, such as freedom from torture and arbitrary arrest rarely, if ever, make it onto television. Those who monitor human rights have little access to the media so assaults on rights go largely unnoticed.

Policymakers in the United States need to devote more attention to the status, both legal and normative, of civil liberties in Russia. An important aspect of this will be to work with Congress to increase funding for democracy assistance. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States has spent money supporting a range of institutions we associate with democracy. Many more assistance dollars, however, have gone to market reform. In 2001 indifference toward civil liberties across all generations in Russia is markedly high. Now is the time to dramatically increase assistance to democracy programs, and, within democracy assistance, to increase funding for education about human rights, human rights groups monitoring abuses, and groups that support free media. Perhaps most important, human rights groups that document abuses and atrocities in Russia are looking for help to develop media strategies in the face of a serious constraint: they have little access to the media. Left unchallenged or ignored by supporters of democracy outside Russia, the low levels of support for civil liberties in Russian society are likely to encourage forces within the leadership who prefer “managed democracy” to the real thing.

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