

# CITIZENSHIP AND THE SOCIAL CONTRACT IN POST-SOVIET RUSSIA

## TWENTY YEARS LATE?

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**Abstract:** Russia does not have a social contract in which citizens have traded political quiescence for improving standards of living. Rather, state-society relations are defined more as a divorce in which citizens exchange quiescence for economic autonomy, not prosperity. In these conditions, citizens have little loyalty to the regime if it violates the terms of the deal. The question remains, however, whether civil society activists can redefine citizenship to mean that an active population forces public officials to obey the law, at least in some cases.

There is a peculiar difficulty in trying to reflect on 20 years of history and scholarship at a moment of crisis. Fittingly, the crisis at hand as this essay is written—as Vladimir Putin squares off against an unprecedented and largely unpredicted wave of resistance in his bid to return to the presidency—is both empirical and theoretical in nature. To make matters worse, this essay is written without the benefit of knowing how the story will end. But the current crisis of both politics and analysis does more than cause uncertainty about the future: it causes uncertainty about the past. As we ask ourselves how we got to this point—how a depoliticized, atomized Russia came to be captivated by a contested election, and how scholars (many, though not all) failed to see it coming—we would do well to ask

first, Where are we? Are we at a turning point? Do we understand this moment as one at which a previously nonexistent dynamic emerged, or one at which we began to take notice of a previously unobserved or misunderstood dynamic? And that means asking questions about where we began.

In the teleological way in which we approached the emergence of post-Soviet Russia, we imagined the future as a democratic one, not necessarily devoid of the detrimental legacies of a totalitarian past, but nonetheless endowed with the institutional attributes inherited from normative democratic theory and political philosophy. Reasonable people could disagree about formal institutional and constitutional design, about the sequencing of reforms and so on, but there was a broad consensus—and one seemingly shared by Russia's liberalizing counter-elites-turned-power-elites of the early 1990s—that civil society was a crucial part of the equation. An informed and engaged citizenry, combined in voluntaristic and solidary initiatives, would gain sovereignty over the state, limiting the autonomy of elites and embarking on a shining future replete with public goods and social harmony. The fact that none of this came about became the subject of much academic handwringing in the mid- and late-1990s, as civil society was declared a failure almost everywhere in the post-communist space, and in Russia in particular. We now seem to understand the relationship between Russians and their state as adversarial and predatory, underpinned by an illiberal quid-pro-quo social contract of democratic franchise abandoned for a measure of prosperity. But that analytical framework does not provide parsimonious solutions to the crisis of analysis mentioned earlier. And so, in my view, it bears returning briefly to first principles.

### **The Meaning of Citizenship**

What does it mean to be a citizen of Russia? This is a different question from that of what it means to be Russian, with all of the ethnic, linguistic, religious, cultural, and historical attributes that implies. Being a citizen of the Russian Federation carries with it a set of formal rights and responsibilities enshrined in the Constitution and other laws, including those pertaining to voting, military service, social services and so on. Citizenship also carries an inherited attachment to territory, a set of symbols, national sports teams and the like. Certainly, all of these have meaning, but only in the broader and deeper context of the basic nature of the relationship between a Russian citizen and the Russian state. And while that meaning has over the last twenty years been shaped by the way in which the new Russian state has behaved during transition, the meaning of Russian citizenship may by now be argued to have become sufficiently consolidated that it will, in many respects, shape the future development for the state itself.

The deeper meaning of citizenship is most often discussed in the terms of a social contract, and in Russia that contract is most often conceived of as involving an exchange of political quiescence for prosperity—a bargain generally argued to have been secured during the early Putin era. The challenge is to make that argument fit with what we know about the political economy of that era.

Briefly put, rent-seeking is the guiding principle of the contemporary Russian political economy and it informs the peculiar relationship between Russia's formal and informal institutions. Clifford Gaddy and Barry Ickes are only among the most prominent of numerous scholars who have described the ways in which a rent-seeking elite transformed the chaotic, zero-sum competition of the 1990s into the system of managed competition that has provided a growing elite with a growing pool of rents since 2000.<sup>1</sup> This is mirrored in Henry Hale's description of "patronalism" as the dominant socio-political framework in Russia (and elsewhere in the former Soviet Union), which he defines broadly as a socioeconomic equilibrium in which individuals organize their political, social and economic pursuits primarily around personalized exchange through informal networks; politics, then, becomes a battle of networks, rather than of institutions or individuals.<sup>2</sup> These networks, fluid and opportunistic, compete primarily for the extraction and maximization of rents.<sup>3</sup>

Unsurprisingly, Russian citizens are aware of this arrangement. The numbers vary on the poll and the specific nature of the question, but very few Russians feel that they are sovereign in their own state, or even that they are truly constituents of it.<sup>4</sup> The ubiquity of the moniker "партия жуликов и воров—the party of swindlers and thieves," which has become synonymous with the ruling party United Russia, speaks perhaps most eloquently to this awareness. The protests that erupted after the December 4, 2011 parliamentary elections speak perhaps most loudly to the same.

To their credit, Mikhail Dmitriev, Sergei Belanovskii, Igor Yurgens and others within the liberal camp close to the government saw this awareness early as a potential problem for the regime and, to some extent,

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<sup>1</sup> Clifford G. Gaddy and Barry W. Ickes. 2009. "Russia's Declining Oil Production: Managing Price Risk and Rent Addiction." *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 50(1): 1-13.

<sup>2</sup> Henry E. Hale. 2006. "Democracy or autocracy on the march? The colored revolutions as normal dynamics of patronal presidentialism." *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 39(3): 305-329.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel A. Greene. 2010. "The Political Economy of Cash Flow in Russia." Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington; Volodymyr Dubrovskiy, Jan Szyrmer, et al. 2007. "The Reform Driving Forces in a Rent-Seeking Society." Working Paper. Kiev: CASE Ukraine.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Rose, William Mishler and Neil Munro. 2011. *Popular Support for an Undemocratic Regime. The Changing Views of Russians*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

predicted what emerged on the streets of Moscow in December 2011.<sup>5</sup> Such a turn of events also sits supremely well with Hale's theory of critical elections in semi-authoritarian regimes.<sup>6</sup>

### The Social Contract

Whether and how the regime will weather the storm remains an open question, and one beyond the scope of this essay, but this is a problem as well for us as political scientists. We understand when residents of a state acquiesce to a regime that they recognize as exploitative when that regime is repressive, but Russians, at least until December 2011, have given their support to their regime broadly and willingly. This circle has been squared most prominently by those—including Henry Hale and Tim Colton, and Dan Treisman—who suggest that there exists in Russia a social contract, by which the population abdicates political engagement in return for prosperity.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the evidence for economic voting, at least up until the most recent global financial crisis, has been fairly strong.

But that evidence is also contradictory. For one thing, data from the crisis period suggests that large declines in economic welfare and sentiment produced extremely minor shifts in political support for the regime, at least as measured by support for the once and future president. And the decline in political support that led up to the December 2011 protests came against a backdrop of stable or even rising economic welfare and sentiment. Thus, if we are to take the economic voting argument at face value, we have to explain the trend-lines seen in Figure 1, in which massive drops in economic sentiment from August 2008 to March 2009 fail to produce a concomitant drop in political support for the regime, while a significant drop-off in regime support beginning in December 2010 and accelerating through the second half of 2011 appears disjointed from economic sentiment.

The picture presented in Figure 1 also does not compute with the standard social contract argument, given that there seems to be no penalty for breach of contract, and that the regime is in fact punished when it is no longer clearly in breach of that contract. This disconnect points to another curious attribute of the figure, specifically the relationship of the

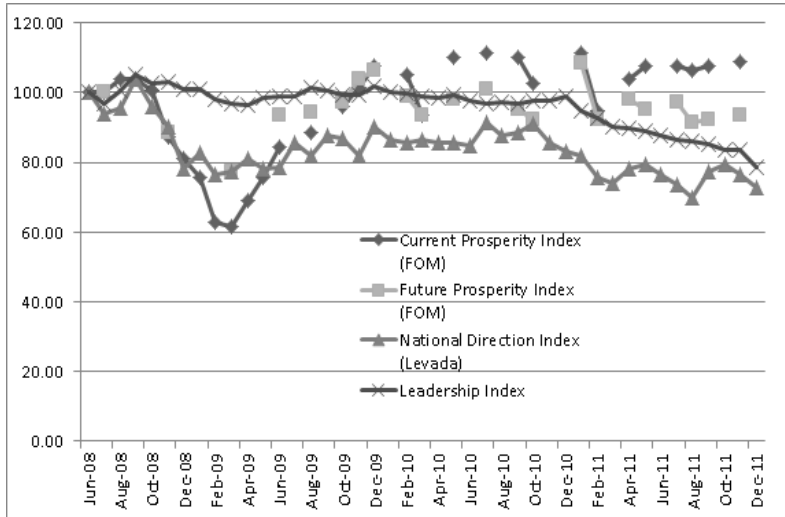
<sup>5</sup> Sergei Belanovskii and Mikhail Dmitriev. 2011. *Politicheskii krizis v Rossii i vozmozhnye mekhanizmy ego razvitiia* [The political crisis in Russia and possible mechanisms for its development]. Moscow: Center for Strategic Development; Evgenii Sh. Gontmakher, Mikhail B. Denisenko, et al. 2011. *Obretenie budushchego. Strategia 2012. Konspekt* [Acquiring the future. Strategy 2012. Summary]. Moscow: Institute for Contemporary Development.

<sup>6</sup> Hale. 2006. "Democracy or autocracy on the march?" ...

<sup>7</sup> Timothy J. Colton and Henry E. Hale. 2009. "The Putin Vote: Presidential Electorates in a Hybrid Regime." *Slavic Review* 68(3): 473-503; Daniel Treisman. 2011. "Presidential Popularity in a Hybrid Regime: Russia under Yeltsin and Putin." *American Journal of Political Science* 55(3): 590-609.

“National Direction Index”—the balance of respondents who think the country is going in the right or wrong direction—to the other indicators.

**Figure 1: Political and Economic Sentiment in Russia, 2008-11 (Rebased)<sup>8</sup>**



Up until the fall of 2010, the National Direction Index tracks most closely with the economic sentiment indicators. After that, it appears to shift and track with the Leadership Index while divorcing itself from economic sentiment. This suggests both an assigning of blame for the national state of affairs to the regime, and that dissatisfaction with that state of affairs is not fundamentally economic. Indeed, this conclusion is reinforced by the fact that the grievances brought to the fore in the December 2011 protests are not economic in nature.<sup>9</sup>

Another option is suggested by Joel Migdal, who, in *State in*

<sup>8</sup> The “Current Prosperity Index” represents the balance of respondents in Public Opinion Foundation (FOM) surveys who report that their personal/family welfare has improved/worsened over the preceding 2-3 months; the “Future Prosperity Index” represents the balance of respondents in FOM surveys who believe that their personal/family welfare will improve-worsen over the coming year; the “National Direction Index” represents the balance of respondents in Levada-Center surveys who believe that the country is on the right/wrong track; the “Leadership Index” is a composite of the approval ratings of President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin from surveys conducted by FOM, Levada and VTsI-OM. Underlying data are available from the author.

<sup>9</sup> No author. “Opros na prospekte Sakharova 24 dekabria”. Levada-Center, at <http://www.levada.ru/26-12-2011/opros-na-prospekte-sakharova-24-dekabrya>, accessed February 10, 2012; Samuel Greene. 2012. “The End of Virtuality.” Moscow: Center for the Study of New Media & Society, at <http://www.newmediacenter.ru/2012/01/18/the-end-of-virtuality/>, accessed February 10, 2012.

*Society*, argues that states and elites rarely operate on the basis of norms and frameworks that are orthogonal to those held by society at large, but rather that there tends to be a great degree of congruence.<sup>10</sup> If Russia has a rent-seeking elite, we might then expect to see a congruent social contract.

Beth Mitchneck and others remind us of the importance of one's workplace for the provision of social services and, indeed, for the maintenance of one's entire lifestyle during the Soviet period, and argued that the continual provision of such services through the workplace in the early transition period acted as a brake on labor migration.<sup>11</sup> But the phenomenon of a workplace-based provision of social goods and services would also have been affected by the Soviet-era deficit economy, as a result of which the actual acquisition of the social goods and services to which one was nominally entitled was effected through the mobilization of informal institutions, networks, and *blat*. And while the transition brought a gradual (though not total) end to the workplace provision of such goods and services, the informal institutions have remained in place, such that Russian citizens continue to resort to informal practices to ensure the adequate provision of housing, health care and education, at the very least. Aside from continuing to anchor Russians to dying industrial towns such as Pikalevo or Zabaikalsk, such practices are themselves a form of rent extraction. This is, of course, a peculiar form of rent extraction, not from the state, per se, and thus not reinforcing dependence on the state, but from one's particular position and set of comparative informal advantages, and thus reinforcing immobility and a fear of change. And so Russians may recognize the suboptimal nature of such transactions, they present formidable resistance to rationalizing reforms, such as the introduction of the unified state university entry exam or condominium associations, which would have required the abandonment of the informal practices that are currently at the core of citizen-state relations.

In 2003, Wegren wrote of the changing relationship of rural Russians to their state, arguing that:

The nature of the rural social contract changed in three important ways: (1) the "contract" was changed from below, not above; (2) rural households became less dependent upon the state for their income and welfare; and (3) the content of the "contract" changed from the Soviet era exchange of increasing standards of living for quiescence/compliance to increased economic freedom for political quiescence/compliance.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Joel Migdal. 2001. *State in Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>11</sup> Beth Mitchneck and David A. Plane. 1995. "Migration and the Quasi-labor Market in Russia." *International Regional Science Review* 18: 267.

<sup>12</sup> Stephen K. Wegren. 2003. "The rise, fall, and transformation of the social contract in

### A Divorce Settlement

This shift in the social contract—really more of a divorce settlement than a pre-nuptial agreement—pertains not only to rural communities, but rather to the country as a whole, and that the salient point indeed is that the exchange is of quiescence for economic autonomy, not prosperity. And while this autonomy would seem to have been fated, given the state's inability and unwillingness to hold up its end of the Soviet-era economic and social bargain, the argument takes on a finer point when seen in the context of the atomization of the state-society relationship that is a hallmark of post-Soviet governance. Thus, while the state was no longer in a position to provide relative prosperity as a public good, it remains able to provide and/or impede relative prosperity as an individual (or, sometimes, a club) good. Accordingly, self-interested individuals would refrain from political engagement in order to ensure the state's own quiescence or non-interference in that individual's personal prosperity.

But if the social contract is one of non-interference, then loyalty turns out to be remarkably thin in the face of a breach by the state. Evgeniia Chirikova, leader of the movement to defend the old-growth forest in Khimki, outside Moscow, from highway construction, told the magazine *The New Times* the following (speaking well before the protests that emerged in December):

You understand, my thinking is absolutely local: in other words, I don't think in grand terms, like some people do, but in terms of the view out of my window. It is very important to me that I can walk out of my building with my children and find myself in an environmentally sound place. And that no one can take that away from me. My immediate surroundings are very important to me. And when I felt that being taken from me, my consciousness shifted, and I understood that without a normal country you are not guaranteed even of your immediate surroundings, and they can take from me anything they want: my business, my child, and not only the environment in which I live. In other words, for me a normal country is one in which my rights are respected.<sup>13</sup>

Certainly, the rhetoric of the new protest movements such as Chirikova's that have emerged since 2005 and become particularly

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Russia." *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 36: 1-27.

<sup>13</sup> Evgeniia Al' bats. "Edinstvennoe, chego u menia net, -- normal'noi blagopoluchnoi strany." *The New Times*. October 3, 2012.

prominent in recent years is compelling, not least because it is simultaneously authentic and Tocquevillean. Most of the previous obituaries written for Russian civil society had, after all, identified poor social capital and the anti-liberal legacies of Leninism as the primary causes of death. The fact that grassroots activists, with no prior education in politics and no funding from the National Endowment for Democracy, should have arrived independently at the vocabulary of Locke and Hume is indeed remarkable and might seem to be a shot in the arm for normative theorizing.

But emergence is hardly the end of the story. To succeed, Russia's new activists do not need to overturn the regime. Rather, their implicit task is to provide and prove the worth of an alternative, a vision of state-society relations in which, at least in rare and exceptional cases, officials are bound by law, and citizens empowered by it. The crucial question facing Russia now is whether civil society, such as it is, will define and assert a new meaning for Russian citizenship, in which public sovereignty and collective responsibility play a prominent role and a public space is reestablished, or whether the centrifugal inertia of disaffection will prevail and citizenship will continue to be perceived as an accident and a burden rather than a right and an opportunity.