

*From Economic Crisis to Political Crisis?:
Changing Middle Class Political Attitudes in Moscow and St. Petersburg, 2008-2012¹*

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Abstract

This paper examines long-term changes in the political attitudes that may have contributed to the sudden emergence of middle class protest activity in Moscow and St. Petersburg, Russia, during the 2011-2012 electoral cycle. It analyzes three interrelated hypotheses to address this question: the impact of the global financial crisis, attitudes about liberal-democratic concerns, and views on government effectiveness. These trends are examined using data of responses to the survey question “What is the most important problem for the country?”, in 9 surveys conducted between March 2008 and March 2012. Corruption and red tape, the standard of living, housing and utilities, healthcare and education were of increasing concern to middle class groups in this period. Dissatisfaction with quality of life or with the pervasiveness of corruption may tie these issues together. The concerns of the middle class were not significantly different from those of the general population, but the middle class and particularly residents of Moscow and St. Petersburg were more critical when assessing all problems. Comparison with additional data demonstrates that participants in the 2011-2012 protests in the major cities shared similar concerns with the general population, but for most, participation in the protests made them significantly more interested in democracy.

I. Introduction

In early December 2011, protests began to be held in Moscow that would culminate in the largest public demonstrations since the fall of the Soviet Union. Organized in response to the Duma elections, which were widely viewed as fraudulent, the first protests attracted 5,000-7,000 participants, but grew to 100,000-120,000 participants in the lead-up to the presidential election. Participants brought demands for free and fair elections out into the streets on a large scale for the first time. As the presidential election neared, their rhetoric became increasingly critical of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, openly mocking him and calling for his removal from power.

These protests, the scale of their participation and their demands were largely unexpected given that under Putin’s leadership, public political participation had been low. During his presidency, political quiescence so closely followed economic prosperity that scholars and experts theorized that an informal social contract existed, wherein the population stayed quiet and Putin provided stability and growth.

During the 1990s and for most of the Putin era, when protests did occur, they tended to be outside the capital and relatively small in size (Robertson 2013). Protests largely addressed social-

¹ This version May 9, 2013.

economic concerns, welfare benefits, and labor disputes, but with increased centralization, Moscow became the audience for the majority of political claims. As protests moved to Moscow, claims became increasingly political; for example, demonstrations were held against certain laws or in support of a specific criminal justice issue (Robertson 2013). Though the electoral cycle protests were in line with this trend, they departed from earlier events, in that they were of a notably larger scale and expressed more overt political demands and dissatisfaction.

The 2011-2012 electoral cycle protests seemed to break with the longstanding trend of middle class political apathy. Survey data has shown that the crowds at the largest protests in March and February were overwhelmingly comprised of members of Moscow's developing middle class, which is a break from their established behavior. Gudkov, Dubin and Zorkaia (2009: 44) found that only 6 percent of middle class young people would "definitely like to take part" in political life.

Why did Moscow's middle class suddenly buck their politically apathetic reputation and begin participating in large, highly publicized and creatively organized political protests?

The announcement that Putin would run for president with Medvedev as his prime minister and the fraudulent Duma elections on December 4, 2011 were the proximate motivation for the protests. On September 24, Medvedev announced that he would not seek re-election, but would serve as Putin's prime minister—a switch-up that was known as the *rokirovka*, after the Russian term for castling in chess. Many of the people who coordinated the earliest protests following the Duma elections would later identify the *rokirovka* as the beginning of the protest movement (de Vogel 2013). It laid a foundation of anger, frustration and in some respects nihilism directed at United Russia and Putin in the lead-up to the Duma elections. This reaction, however, is not necessarily obvious in a country that has never had a transition of executive power that was not heavily managed, with the outcome almost predetermined. This paper in part explores what preexisting political attitudes might have made the *rokirovka* so unpleasant.

The fraudulent Duma elections are a second proximate and most immediate cause for the protests. Held on December 4, 2011, the Duma election featured poorly executed, widespread fraud that was widely acknowledged on the day of the election. When United Russia officially won a solid victory in Moscow, many people immediately felt that these results were insultingly and obviously fraudulent. On December 5, 5,000 Muscovites participated in a protest against the election results, setting off a series of demonstrations of increasing size, and giving rise to a new opposition movement. Clearly the Duma election touched a nerve among the emergent urban middle class, but it is not clear why. The Duma election was comparably corrupt as its predecessors, which had passed without major incident. In fact, in the lead-up to the 2011 election, the public had a high expectation of fraud and a low interest in the election in general.² It therefore seems possible that longer-term trends might underlie the rejection of the Duma election by the urban middle class.

For this study, I analyze several interrelated hypotheses to address this question. The first asks whether the global financial crisis had a significant effect on the development of protest sentiment. This hypothesis addresses the possibility that the social contract between Putin and the

² "Do you think the upcoming Duma elections will be fair or will fraud and manipulation be used?" Manipulation and fraud – 34%; serious manipulation and fraud – 12%; obstruction – 12%. "Is the Duma election a real struggle for power by parties or is it just an imitation of a struggle, with seats distributed by authorities?" An imitation of the struggle and the distribution of seats in the Duma will be determined by the decision of the authorities – 51% (<http://www.levada.ru/25-11-2011/vybory-v-gosdumu>)

middle class was sundered by the economic crisis. It asks whether the economic crisis might have had a longer term effect on political attitudes, as studies conducted immediately following the crisis have generally concluded that it had no effect on Putin's popularity. The second hypothesis addresses rising interest in liberal democratic issues, for example human rights and corruption. This hypothesis considers whether the values conventionally exhibited by the middle classes in liberal states are becoming more prevalent in Moscow's middle class. Finally, a third hypothesis addresses middle class assessments of government effectiveness. If Putin's popularity stems from positive regime performance, a drop in that support might stem from a negative assessment of regime performance.

These trends will be examined using data gathered over 9 surveys conducted by the All-Russia Public Opinion Research Center (WCIOM) between March 2008 and March 2012 responding to the question "What is the most important problem for the country?" This study will focus on the change over time in the answers of respondents displaying characteristics of the urban professional middle class. This analysis will then be compared with the results of a similar survey of members of the middle class conducted by Graeme Robertson in late February-early March 2012.

My analysis will demonstrate that corruption and red tape, the standard of living, housing and utilities, healthcare and education were of increasing concern to middle class groups in this period. I argue that higher expectations for enhanced quality of life or the escalating issue of corruption might inform concern for these issues. Contrary to expectations, the concerns of the middle class were not significantly different from those of the general population. Members of the middle class did, however, tend to be more critical when assessing all problems. Most critical of all groups were residents of Moscow and St. Petersburg, which suggests residents of the capitals, regardless of their socio-economic status, are more likely to make demands of the state. Finally, I show that participants in the 2011-2012 protests in the major cities shared similar concerns with the general population, but for most, participation in the protests made them significantly more interested in democracy. This result suggests that concern for democracy is highly responsive to current events, rather than a continual concern in citizens' lives.

This paper begins with a working definition of the urban professional middle class and methodological design, then considers results relating to economic, liberal-democratic and state efficacy concerns, and compares these results to the second data set. The final section draws conclusions.

Russia's Middle Class and the Social Contract

There is little consensus about the shape and size of Russia's middle class. Some scholars argue that it does not yet exist, while others say it is flourishing.³ According to Remington's (2011) comprehensive review of work on the middle class, most studies found that between 20 to 30 percent of the population might fall into the middle class. As this study seeks to draw conclusions about changing values and behaviors of Moscow's middle class, and speculates as to its societal role and collective action, I will use a definition of the middle class that assesses a spectrum of social

³ See Samson and Krasil'nikova (2012) for a survey of major approaches to Russia's middle class.

markers, for example educational level or income level. This approach recognizes that consensus around a definition of the middle class remains elusive, while allowing us to define what might signal its existence. For this study, the middle class will be assessed according to four criteria.

- *Educational level* of at least some university-level education, which includes degrees in progress as well as completed degrees.
- *Occupation* as a businessman/entrepreneur or specialist with higher education. Government officials or administrative authorities might account for a portion of the middle class according to income measurements, but are not included for the purpose of this study, as their dependency on and deep involvement with the state complicates any assessments of their political motivations.
- Self-assessment of *purchasing power* as able to afford expensive consumer durables.
- *Income* over 50,000 rubles (US\$1,618) per month. This is significantly higher than the mean income of approximately 20,000 rubles (US\$647) per month.⁴ However, the higher income bracket will be used because this study addresses residents of Moscow, who make significantly more money and have a much higher cost of living than residents outside the capital.

Using these criteria, we can establish that the participants in the protests that marked the 2011-2012 electoral cycle were in fact members of the middle class, based on polls conducted during the events held on December 24, 2011 and February 4, 2012.⁵ Most participants had a high level of education, worked as specialists, managers or business owners, and had a medium level purchasing power (see table 1).

Table 1: Participants in December 24, 2011, and February 4, 2012 Protests in Moscow

	December 24	February 4
% participants with a partially completed university degree, one or two university degrees	83%	81%
% participants employed as a manager, specialist or business owner	71%	59%
% participants able to purchase moderately priced or expensive consumer durables	68%	65%

Adapted from *Levada Center*, Press Release: Survey at the Meeting on February 4, *13 February 2011*, accessed 8 April 2013 <<http://www.levada.ru/13-02-2012/opros-na-mitinge-4-fevralya>>

The protest participants exhibited a characteristic expected of the middle class that had in large part been absent in Russia: they were politically active. A middle class or bourgeoisie has long been seen as a cornerstone of a strong democracy. As members of the middle class become more financially stable, they become more engaged in politics to protect their interests and property and

⁴ http://www.gks.ru/bgd/regl/b12_110/Main.htm

⁵ <http://www.levada.ru/13-02-2012/opros-na-mitinge-4-fevralya>

act as a check on the unconstrained power of the state. Ideas about the value that such a middle class adds to society are so prevalent that Putin has advocated that the middle class play a more active role in Russia. Still, Russia's emergent middle class has not begun to exhibit these values or behaviors on a large scale.

One of the most widely referenced explanations for Russia's middle class political apathy theorizes an informal social contract between society and Putin, wherein the public is politically quiescent in exchange for stability and economic success. Entering office after the tumultuous 1990s, Putin quickly enacted a series of reforms that eliminated open political competition, led to an increase in election fraud, curtailed civil liberties and impinged upon human rights (Gelman and Ryzhenkov 2011: 451). At the same time, the Russian economy enjoyed a consistent period of growth driven by rising oil prices, and living standards rose for most Russians. It appeared that an informal *quid pro quo* had been arranged: the public accepted or ignored Putin's steps toward semi-authoritarianism in exchange for a higher standards of living, a respite from economic and political upheaval, and the promise that Russia would return to the great-power status it once had.

This arrangement is commonly described as a social contract between society and Putin, for example, in an extensive 2011 series of articles in *Vedomosti*⁶ written by experts who had participated in debates on the issue during the 2011 Perm Economic Forum. This euphemism assumes the Russian population shares a collective agency and particular set of political desires.⁷ Given the limitations on free and fair elections, the obstacles to political participation, restrictions on civil society, and the complexity and obscure nature of intra-elite politics, it is unclear to what extent the public could have resisted Putin's advancement of semi-authoritarianism, had it wanted to.⁸ Further, the notion of the social contract assumes that the public has given up something of value in the compromise, specifically the full array of political and civil freedoms available in a liberal, Western democracy. In fact, Russians did not have a full array of rights to bargain with, as Russia was not a consolidated democracy, though they did experience a perceptible decline in freedoms. It is not obvious that Russians placed a very high value on those rights in the first place. As Arkady Ostrovsky has put it, "there is nothing more misleading than to portray Russia as a liberal-minded society suppressed by a nasty bunch of former KGB agents" (2009: 74).

II. Economic, Liberal-Democratic and State Efficacy Concerns

Survey data collected between March 2008 and March 2012 will be used to test increasing concern for economic, democratic and state efficacy issues. Respondents (n=1,600) of a variety of backgrounds from across Russia were able to select multiple responses to the question "Which of the following issues are most important to the country?" For the purposes of this study, I will look

⁶ Articles were published throughout the summer of 2011 in *Vedomosti*, following the 2011 meeting of the Perm Economic Forum. Authors included Sergey Vorobyov, Kirill Rogov, Oleg Chirkunov, Vadim Volkov and Bulat Stolyarov.

⁷ See also, for example, Makarkin and Oppenheimer (2011) and Greene (2012).

⁸ It is also important to note that the idea of a social contract was not Putin's invention, and the conversation about it predated its association with him. See for example Alexander Auzan (2009), who founded of the Institute for a National 'Social Contract' in 2000.

at responses from (1) respondents with three or more years of university; (2) respondents working as businessmen or entrepreneurs, or specialists with higher education, science or culture, excluding state employees; (3) respondents earning 50,000 rubles or more per family member per month; (4) respondents easily able to purchase medium-priced consumer durables or expensive durables; (5) respondents from Moscow or St. Petersburg. This study assesses problems that were of increasing concern during the time period in question. These results will be compared to the responses of the general population, and a separate survey conducted of members of the middle class, including those that participated in the electoral cycle protests.

I have separated the possible survey responses into three categories, corresponding to these three hypotheses (table 2).⁹

Table 2: Classification of Responses to “Which of the following issues are most important to the country?”

H.1. Economic	H.2. Liberal-Democratic	H.3. State Efficacy
<p>(a) Delays in payment of salaries*</p> <p>(b) Economic Crisis*</p> <p>(c) Inflation, rising prices of goods and services</p> <p>(d) Unemployment</p> <p>(e) The standard of living of the population</p>	<p>(a) Corruption and red tape</p> <p>(b) Democracy and human rights</p> <p>(c) Ecology and environment</p> <p>(d) Influence of oligarchs on economic and political life of the country</p>	<p>(a) Pension benefits</p> <p>(b) Terrorism</p> <p>(c) The situation in the army</p> <p>(d) The situation in the education sector</p> <p>(e) The situation in the health sector</p> <p>(f) The situation in the sphere of housing (ZhKKh) and utility services (ZHKU)</p>

* Response option not available for October 2006 and March 2008 surveys.

Response options classed as economic pertain directly to the economy or to directly address economic issues that impact individuals’ lives.¹⁰ The second category encompasses liberal-democratic concerns that address the protection of citizens’ rights and the independent functioning of

⁹ Surveys also included five additional answers representing social problems: alcoholism and drug abuse; crime; demographic crisis (births and deaths); state of morality and ethics; and youth development. These responses are excluded from the following analysis, because they encompass issues over which the government has no specific control. While the state has attempted to address all of these issues in some respect, from restricting access to alcohol to offering incentives for having larger families, these problems cannot purely be attributed to the state. Some of these problems may also reflect the continuing challenges of the post-Soviet transition; for example, concern over the state of morality and ethics in society has been linked to the end of the state’s authority on moral issues (Gorshkov 2012: 85).

¹⁰ For the purposes of this study, responses were classed in the state efficacy category only if the state has direct control over the problem in question. In the economic category, the greater systemic issue of the global financial crisis underpins the responses. While unemployment and inflation clearly can be helped or hindered by government policies, their increase was the result of the crisis. Likewise the late payment of salaries may be attributed to the management or owners of firms, but in a broader sense is only an issue because of the crisis.

government. The third category addresses the state's ability to effectively deliver services, administer its programs, and guarantee the security of its people.

Hypotheses:

- (H.1) Economic issues since the global financial crisis have become an increasing concern for the urban, private-sector middle class, leading to protest activity.
- (H.2) The urban, private-sector middle class was becoming increasingly concerned about liberal and democratic issues leading up to the electoral cycle protests of 2011-2012.
- (H.3) Problems with the efficacy of the state were of increasing concern for the urban, private-sector middle class, which led to a drop in regime support based on performance-legitimacy.

The Economy and the Global Financial Crisis

The economic issues hypothesis (H.1) is that the financial crisis and related on-going economic issues were becoming increasingly of concern to the urban middle class, leading up to the 2011 Duma election, and led to participation in the protests.

As president from 2000-2008, Putin presided over an economy that underwent considerable growth. As Russia emerged from the repeated devastating crashes and skyrocketing inequality of the 1990s, rising prices for oil and natural gas buoyed the economy. By 2008, incomes had risen by 250 percent. Poverty, unemployment and inflation were falling, and Russia was one of the world's seven largest economies. This growth was accompanied by increased foreign direct investment and increased embeddedness in the global financial system, particularly as oil and natural gas exports accounted for an ever-larger share of GDP. Though it is debatable how directly Putin's policies were responsible for this economic growth, Russians viewed economic development as the greatest achievement of Putin's first two terms in office, followed by higher living standards (Feklyunina and White, 2011: 386). Putin himself emphasized his economic successes, making promises of growth in GDP and salaries.

When the global financial crisis hit Russia in October 2008, many of the economic gains of the previous decade were reversed. As oil prices fell, Russia's GDP plummeted by 13.5 percent, contracting at a rate below even that of 1998 (World Bank Development Indicators). The exchange rate fell, while inflation shot up by 5 percent, leading to a sharp increase in the consumer price index (Rose and Mishler, 2010: 42; World Bank Development Indicators). Workers faced unpaid wages and forced leave, and the unemployment rate nearly doubled between summer 2008 and March 2009 (Teague 2011: 420). By mid-2009, the government had managed to arrest the economy's decline, and, with the stabilization and increase in oil prices that accompanied the recovery worldwide, GDP growth returned to positive territory in 2010.

Given that one of the pillars of Putin's popularity was economic growth and prosperity, there was considerable reason to believe that the economic crisis would have a deleterious effect on his support. Feklyunina and White (2011) have argued that support for the Putin regime stems almost exclusively from positive evaluations of the economy, so any indication of the reversal of economic gains should trigger a deficit in regime legitimacy and a collapse in support (387). McAllister and White (2011) have applied theories of economic voting to Russia to predict that

people most affected by the financial crisis will withdraw support from the regime, particularly if there is clear attribution for the problem (482). Chaisty and Whitefield (2012) note that economic crises can give rise to protest when several preconditions are met, such as high income inequality, an inflexible non-democratic regime, and a resource-driven economy, all of which pertain in Russia (189). Economic issues frequently give rise to protest around the world, and in the past have correlated increased protest sentiment in Russia. The 1998 economic crisis saw a spike in worker strikes, with future events also linked to economic concerns such as wage arrears (Robertson 2007: 784). The Kremlin, too, was concerned about regime support, and carefully spun the crisis from denial, to blaming the West, to representing it as an opportunity for modernization and building a multipolar world (Feklyunina and White, 2011).

Despite expectations, the crisis had a minimal immediate effect on regime support. Street demonstrations did not occur, and the incidence of strikes declined during the crisis, reversing a two-year trend (Teague 2011: 423). Positive evaluations of Putin's performance fell only slightly from 81 percent to 79 percent between June 2007 and June 2009 (Rose and Mishler, 2010: 43). Neither survey respondents' negative feelings about their economic position, recent unemployment nor pessimistic expectations for the economic crisis had a negative affect on regime support, though wage arrears had a marginally significant affect (Rose and Mishler, 2010: 49, 52).

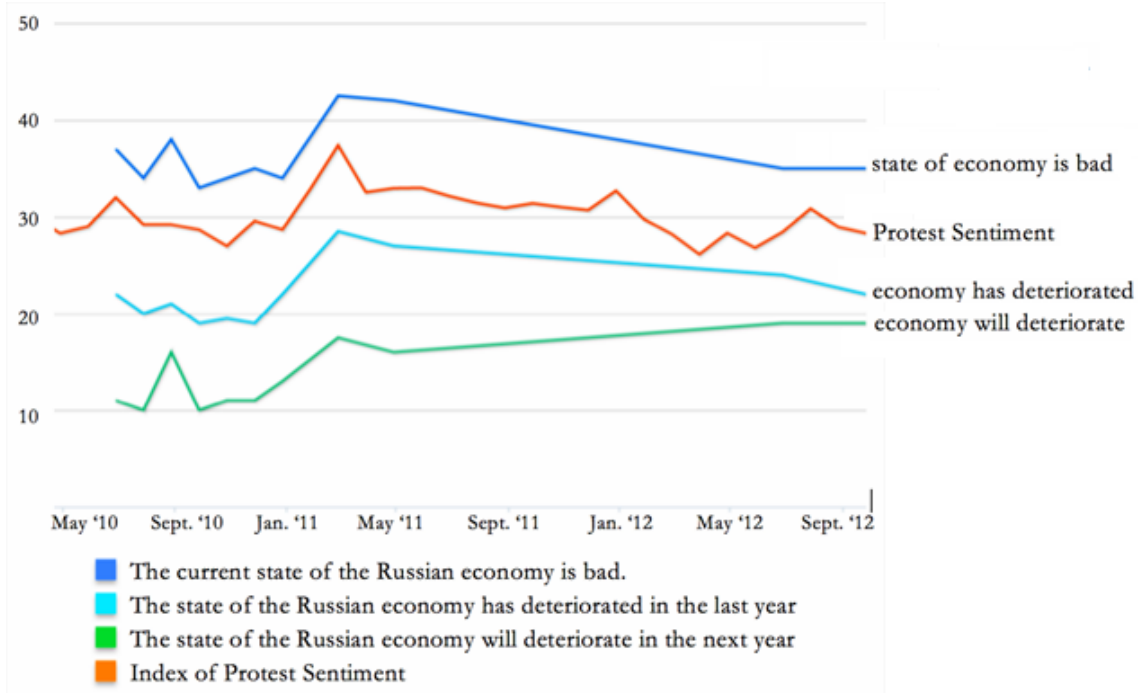
Several explanations for the continued support of Putin have been offered. Russians may not have viewed the economy in a negative light, instead interpreting the crisis as a normal event in the economic development of a capitalist system, which, despite its hardships, was preferable to the deprivations of the communist system (Rose and Mishler 2010: 53). Similarly, Russians may not have blamed the government for the crisis; 40% were unable to identify any domestic or foreign agent responsible for the financial crisis (McAllister and White 2011, 484-6).

These studies on the financial crisis and regime support were conducted immediately after the crisis. A longer view of the effects of the crisis suggests that the threat might not have been so neatly neutralized. In 2009, several significant demonstrations were held, beginning with those held by car owners and importers in Vladivostok, who objected to protectionist tariff increase on imported cars. This protest culminated in demands that Putin remove himself as Prime Minister. In summer 2009, workers' rallies were increasing, and protests in the single-factory town Pikalevo drew Putin's attention (Teague 2011: 423-4). January 2010 saw the largest demonstration since the fall of the Soviet Union, when 10,000 protestors in Kaliningrad rallied against unemployment, the rising cost of living and corruption and again demanded Putin's resignation (Teague 2011: 424). FOM's protest sentiment indicator from 2010 to 2012 (figure 1) shows that negative assessments of the economic situation¹¹ tend to be correlated with general protest sentiment¹² in the country (FOM).

¹¹ Respondents selecting the most negative option for the questions, "In your opinion, the current state of the Russian economy - good, fair or poor?" "Do you think the state of the Russian economy over the past year has improved, worsened or did not change?" "Do you think that in the next year the Russian economy will better, worse or unchanged?" (<http://fom.ru/indikatory.html#?vt=37,47,128,161,164,185,113&s=125,140,121,117,128>)

¹² FOM protest sentiment index is based on responses to five questions: In the last month did you notice or not notice dissatisfaction, or the willingness of people to participate in protests?; Do you think that in the last month, discontent or people's willingness to participate in protests has been growing or declining?; What percentage of Russians do you think are now discontent, or willing to participate in protests?; Do you

Figure 1: Negative Assessment of Russian Economy, Protest Sentiment Index



Source: FOM Indicators

Economic issues may have played a role in the electoral cycle protests, as members of the middle class may have experienced the crisis differently from working class Russians. Using survey data gathered in 2009, Chaisty and Whitefield (2012) found that although support for the regime decreased among individuals who were personally negatively affected by the crisis, there was no evidence that the crisis politicized the middle class more than the working class (196). This analysis does not take into account significant differences in the longer-term impact of the financial crisis on the middle class as compared to the working class that might affect regime support. The middle class is expected to engage in long-term savings behavior or investment, making them more connected to global financial markets and therefore vulnerable to shocks. Further, as the urban middle class exhibits more sophisticated and differentiated ways of managing their money, they were more likely to have been entangled in the global financial crisis and might be expected to report increased concerns about the economy at a later point in crisis. While a factory worker might have suffered wage arrears and unemployment during the worst of the crisis, as Russia's economy got back on track fairly quickly, these issues would also have been fairly quickly resolved. Comparatively, an entrepreneur with investments in foreign markets would be less likely to suffer from wage arrears or the closing of factories, but would be more likely to experience longer-term effects as the world's financial markets faltering recovery continued to impact investments and international business. For example, foreign direct investment (FDI) in Russia dropped from US\$75 billion in 2008 to US\$36.5

personally feel or not feel resentment, or the willingness to participate in protests?; If next Sunday, where you live, there are rallies, demonstrations and protests, would you take part in them or not?.

billion in 2009, and had only recovered to US\$52.9 billion by 2011 (World Bank Databank).¹³ While recovery in FDI has been steady following the crisis, by 2011, it had only just reached levels obtained in 2007. The slow recovery in FDI would be more likely to impact private sector employees with higher education and businessmen who might work for or do business with international firms, than state sector employees of a similar socio-economic position. Thus, looking at the changing attitudes of the middle class toward the economy in the several years following the crisis might reveal insights not available in studies conducted in the months immediately following.

Finally, the notion that Russians as a whole did not know whom to blame for the crisis does not mean that the educated, urban middle class did not hold the government responsible. Once the crisis had penetrated Russia, the government's rhetoric of blame shifting and denial may have been seen by this group as deceitful, when viewed it in the broader context of the abuses of a paternalistic state (Aron, 2012: 27). The promised modernization program to speed recovery may have particularly appealed to the middle class, who may have been disappointed when no such program was realized.

Liberal Democratic Issues

A second hypothesis (H.2) is that increasing concern about liberal-democratic issues motivated political participation. After all, the protests demanded free and fair elections, one of the fundamental components of democracy. Further, the strong negative reaction to Putin's announcement of his return to the presidency and the outrage at the Duma election fraud indicate a rejection of paternalism and a shift toward a more participatory relationship with the state. It could therefore be possible that these protests were the outcome of rising interest in democracy, human rights, and a government motivated by state-building and concern for the citizens' best interests.

The Russian middle class has generally been described as politically apathetic, but this is hardly a distinction in a society that has negative or ambiguous feelings about democracy. In the twenty years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, free, fair and competitive elections have never truly determined the transition of executive power in Russia. The pluralism of the 1990s led to chaos and economic collapse, tying negative connotations to the concept of democracy. Even in October 2010 poll, only 34 percent of people felt it was possible to describe Russia as a democratic state, while 19 percent were not able to answer the question.¹⁴ The significant portion of survey respondents who were unable to form an opinion about Russian democracy speaks to a lack of clarity about the term and about the actions of the Russian state.

Might these attitudes be shifting in the urban middle class? Many members of this group are in their 20s and 30s, and became politically active when Putin was already in office and when Medvedev's presidency gave the appearance of political debate. They might thus be less likely than the general population to have Yeltsin-era negative associations with democracy. Secondly, in the second half of the 2000s, the urban middle class exhibited increasing concerns over their ability to

¹³ See World Bank Databank <<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.KLT.DINV.CD.WD>>

¹⁴ <http://www.levada.ru/archive/gosudarstvo-i-obshchestvo/rossiya-i-demokratiya/kak-vy-dumaete-mozhno-li-skazat-cto-v-rossi>

impact the political system. Overall, the group surveyed by Gudkov *et al.* (2009), regardless of sector and political involvement, found the most lacking feature of Russian politics was “a controllable mechanism of political goal setting (the lack of transparency in the procedure of decision making), which is to say the suppression of any potential for legitimate innovations in society” (Gudkov *et al.* 2009: 47-48). That a lack of transparency is seen as a critical problem for young, urban, well-off professionals suggests that a major need for political expression is going unaddressed.

Additionally, the financial crisis may have had a secondary impact on attitudes toward the practice of democracy in Russia. Russians who experienced negative impacts of the financial crisis were not less likely to support the regime, but were less likely to positively evaluate democracy in Russia (Chaisty and Whitefield, 2012: 198). This effect was notably stronger among private sector employees with a middle class background, as compared with state sector employees and those with a working class background. Somewhat similarly, McAllister and White (2011) found that blaming Russian leadership for the financial crisis negatively impacted beliefs about democratic progress in Russia and assessments of the individual’s ability to impact government (though they also found that Russians were likely to blame the crisis on democracy itself, rather than on the regime in general and in particular did not find Putin responsible) (490).

These shifts all give reason to believe that middle class Muscovites may have become increasingly concerned with issues of representative and transparent governance in recent years and would thus exhibit a greater concern for liberal-democratic issues leading up to the protests (H.2). The survey response “democracy and human rights” explicitly addresses the issue of Western-style representative government.

This hypothesis also uses three issues as proxies for concern about the political system and appropriate exercise of state power: corruption and red tape, the influence of oligarchs on political and economic life of the country, and ecology and environmental problems. All three can all indicate an increasing demand for representation, for the elimination of alternative interests, and for an end to the exploitative use of the state for private gain. The first two proxies, the influence of oligarchs on economic and political life and corruption and red tape, address alternative interests that divert officials from governing in the best interest of their citizens. An increasing concern about the influence of oligarchs suggests concern about the motivations and incentives of those running the country, and whether they are serving themselves and the ultra-elite, or serving the people. Corruption—the abuse of state power for personal gain—has become increasingly recognized as a pervasive problem. Corruption received a great deal of attention under Medvedev, who launched a sweeping yet wholly ineffective anti-corruption campaign in 2008.¹⁵ Corruption is likely to be a particular concern in Moscow, where citizens consume a wider range of media in independent publications and online, and are thus more likely to be aware of corruption.¹⁶ Moreover, entrepreneurs and private-sector employees are more likely to be the losers in corrupt transactions, paying bribes to state employees for building permits, fire inspections and other interactions with

¹⁵ Anti-corruption campaigns themselves can have negative effects on corruption perceptions as well as on attitudes toward the state. Coulloudon (2002) suggests that where regimes are characterized by institutionalized corruption, anti-corruption campaigns can simply raise awareness of the problem, essentially demonstrating the state’s inability to fight address the problem and contributing to impressions of state weakness (188).

¹⁶ See Sharafutdinova (2010: 156) on factors affecting corruption perception in hybrid regimes.

the state that private enterprise necessitates. Finally, as more members of the urban professional middle class increasingly identify with the West and the international urban lifestyle, they view bribery and corruption as increasingly backward.

The third proxy, ecology and environmentalism, is an issue that has become increasingly politicized. Environmental degradation and destruction, particularly in major cities, have become symbols of the abuse of state power and lack of consideration for the law as well as citizens' rights (Aron, 2012: 26). These movements can also be seen as related to the increasing interest in urbanism among the professional middle class of the major cities. Urbanism—or, the improvement in urban living conditions, with Western European cities as a model—has manifested in environmental concerns, such as the interest in parks development in Moscow and bicycling in St. Petersburg.

State Efficacy

The third hypothesis (H.3) posits that the middle class was not satisfied with how the state was accomplishing the work of governing, and as a result, stopped supporting the regime and participated in the protests. If support for the Putin regime is, in fact, based on performance legitimacy, assessments of that performance may not be confined to the economic sphere. Rather, such assessments could also include considerations of service provision, particularly in a post-communist context where the legacy of the Soviet welfare state remains strong. Effective, high-quality and well-administered services would lead to greater satisfaction with the state. Likewise, when services are poorly administered, frustration and dissatisfaction with the state could easily arise. There is reason to believe that the middle class is dissatisfied with social services, as economic growth has raised living standards, but social services remain of poor quality or prohibitively expensive; their expectations are thus not being met by the state (Gorshkov, 2008: 65).

The avenues of service delivery addressed here are pensions, education, healthcare, and housing, all of which are fully or partially administered by the state. Of these, pensions have long been the most controversial, but are less likely to be a concern of the urban professional middle class, who generally skew somewhat younger, are more likely to exhibit long-term savings behavior, and have higher incomes. Education, on the other hand, is likely to be a concern of the middle class, as they value education and have pursued advanced degrees. Corruption is widespread at the university level. In part as a result, 63 percent of the urban professional middle class is interested in sending their children abroad for school (Gudkov *et al.* 2008: 50). State healthcare is rife with shortcomings. Services are free or highly subsidized, but are of low quality, with private treatment prohibitively expensive and a significant market for bribery and opportunity for corruption. The state also continues to be deeply involved in the administration of housing, via Housing Services (*Zhilibshchno-kommunal'niye Uslugi*, or ZhKU) and Housing and Public Utilities (*Zhilibshchno-kommunal'noye Khozyaistvo*, or ZhKKh), which attends to issues such as building maintenance and setting utilities rates. Post-Soviet housing privatization, which continued until March 2013, made 85 percent of the population homeowners, expanding the middle class (Attwood 2012: 904). Yet housing and utilities have become a controversial issue, as the privatization process underscored inequalities and tax issues, the rising cost of state-regulated utilities spawned demonstrations, neglect has led to the degradation of housing stock, and tremendous potential profits have led to monumental corruption (Attwood 2012: 908). For the upwardly-mobile, urban professionals in

question, housing is likely to be a sensitive concern; as their position improves, they will seek better housing, which is in short supply in major cities.

Beyond service delivery, the state must be effective in keeping its people safe, here measured in concerns about the army and terrorism. The military has faced significant deterioration in the last decades, suffering from outdated technology and poorly implemented funding. Major issues with the military, including the mandatory service system, brutal hazing, and other abuses, have been well publicized since 1989 by one of the oldest and best-organized civil society groups, The Union of the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia. Similarly, terrorism poses a serious problem and is not fully contained by the state. Relevant to this study, three major attacks occurred in and around Moscow between 2008 and 2011: the derailment of the Nevsky Express train between Moscow and St. Petersburg in November 2009, the Moscow metro suicide bombings in March 2010, and the Domodedovo airport bombing in January 2011.

Regarding all state efficacy concerns, with the exception of terrorism, one might expect the emergence of civil society groups to advocate for citizens' rights and interests that might encourage the state to reform these sectors. This has occurred in limited ways, as in the case of the military and environmental activism, but broadly speaking, civil society remains weak in Russia. With few avenues to express their dissatisfaction and frustrations increasing, citizens are more likely to resort more extreme ways of communicating their dissatisfaction, which can give rise to protests, like the 2005 pension benefits protests.

While the urban professional middle class can financially insulate itself from mandatory military service and are not yet old enough for pensions, they cannot escape the systemic problems of the education, health and housing sectors. Though they may be able to operate independently of the state in other aspects of life—the culture they consume, or the private-sector jobs they hold—in these three respects, the state and its sub-par, often corrupt services are inescapable. It is thus likely that education, healthcare and housing would be of rising concern among the urban professional middle class.

III. Findings

Methodology

These hypotheses will be assessed using responses to the survey question, “Which of the following problems do you consider most important for the country as a whole?”. This question was asked of a 1600-person representative sample of the Russian population by the Russian Public Opinion Research Center (WCIOM). Due to lack of access to raw data, it was not possible to fully isolate the responses of middle class members in Moscow. Instead, we can look separately at the responses of groups exhibiting single characteristics of the urban middle class. The following analysis is based on analysis of the answers of respondents in the following groups:

- *Education*: respondents with higher education (at least three years of university, or completed university degree);
- *Vocation*: respondents working as businessmen or entrepreneurs; specialist with higher education in manufacturing, science or culture, not including state employees;

- *Income*: respondents with income of 50,000¹⁷ rubles or higher per family member per month;
- *Purchasing Power*: respondents who can easily purchase medium-priced consumer durables (refrigerator, TV); respondents who can easily purchase expensive consumer durables (car, dacha, apartment);
- *Location*: respondents from Moscow and St. Petersburg.

There is a significant caveat to this data, in that we cannot integrate these various middle class criteria to create an ideal urban middle class respondent. These groups must be considered separately. Thus, for example, when we consider the answers of people with higher education, we are looking at people across the country, in all professional sectors, in all income levels, who have higher education. Despite these limitations, this survey data will allow us to look at how these groups' attitudes towards problems have changed over time.¹⁸

This section begins with an overview of salient findings. The following analysis then assesses problems that were of increasing concern between March 2008 and March 2012.¹⁹ It then compares the middle class groups and residents of Moscow and St. Petersburg to the general population. The section concludes with a comparison to another data set collected by Graeme Robertson, in which members of the middle class were asked, "Which of the following are the most important problems facing Russia today?" This survey was conducted online in late February to early March 2012. The possible responses are phrased differently than the options in the WCIOM survey, but are roughly equivalent. I will then compare the responses of groups exhibiting single characteristics of the urban middle class from the WCIOM survey, to those of Robertson's respondents, who were selected specifically for middle class status. Robertson's data set will allow inferences about motivations behind participation in electoral cycle protests, as these participants are isolated in the data.

Findings in Brief

Analysis showed that problems pertaining to all three hypotheses were of increasing concern for middle class groups, as well as for the general population, between March 2008 and March 2012. Rather than any one of these categories motivating an increase in dissatisfaction with the state, the interplay between them might have led to that result. Specifically, dissatisfaction with quality of life or the pervasiveness of corruption may tie these issues together.

Among economic issues, the standard of living of the population saw the greatest increase in concern over this period. The increase was greatest among residents of Moscow and St. Petersburg. Of democratic issues, corruption increased most over the period in question. In this same category, democracy and human rights was among the lowest-rated problems in the whole survey. Evidence from Moscow and St. Petersburg, however, suggests that interest in this issue is dependent on the

¹⁷ Approximately US\$1,575.

¹⁸ This study only uses rounds of the survey conducted between 2008 and 2011 for which sufficient information about the sample was available to isolate middle class groups: March 23, 2008; January 11, 2009; September 11, 2010; January 16, 2011; April 10, 2011; June 26, 2011; November 27, 2011; December 25, 2011; March 25, 2012.

¹⁹ A longer version of this paper reviews findings on problems that were of static or decreasing concern and is available at <<https://academiccommons.columbia.edu/catalog/ac%3A165070>>.

electoral cycle and on current events. Among state efficacy issues, worries about housing, healthcare and education were increasing, implying dissatisfaction with the state’s ability to provide basic social services.

Generally, concerns of the middle class did not deviate significantly from the concerns of the general population. This result might suggest that, despite variation in socio-economic position, members of the middle class do not have priorities that are fundamentally different from those of an average Russian. The difference is more of degree of concern than in kind of concern. This is particularly true of residents of Moscow and St. Petersburg, who were the most critical of the state of any group considered here. This result suggests that residence in the capitals, rather than membership in the middle class, is more likely to make one critical or demanding of the state.

A Constellation of Problems

Issues that were becoming increasingly important in the lead-up to the December 2011 protests included economic, democratic and state efficacy concerns (table 3).²⁰ The problems that had the greatest increase in importance from March 2008 to March 2012 were (1) the standard of living of the population; (2) corruption and red tape; (3) the situation in the housing and utilities sector; (4) the situation in the healthcare sector; (5) the situation in the education sector; and (6) the influence of oligarchs on the economic and political life of the country.

Table 3: Issues of Increasing Overall Importance to Middle Class Groups in Russia

Change March 2008 – March 2012	Issue	Type of Issue
Positive	Standard of living of the population	Economic
	Corruption and red tape	Liberal-Democratic
	Housing and utilities	State Efficacy
	Healthcare	State Efficacy
	Education	State Efficacy
	Influence of Oligarchs	Liberal-Democratic
No net change	Ecology and the environment	Liberal-Democratic
	Situation in the army	State Efficacy
Negative	Terrorism	State Efficacy
	Pensions benefits	State Efficacy
	Inflation, rising prices for goods and services	Economic
	Unemployment	Economic
	Delays in payments of salaries	Economic
	Democracy and human rights	Liberal-Democratic

Firstly, these results indicate that middle class groups are increasingly concerned for their quality of life. Their most important issue in general was the standard of living, an economic concern. Moreover the phrasing of this survey option as “the standard of living of the population”

²⁰ Social problems (alcoholism and drug abuse; crime; youth development; morality and ethics and demographic crisis) were generally of high concern to middle class groups as well as the general population, yet they exhibited little change over the time period in question and were not considered in this study.

indicates that it is a sociotropic issue for society at large, rather than a personal concern. Increasing worry over the state of the housing, health and education sectors refers back to the standard of living.

Given that the standard of living has risen over the last decade in Russia, it might be possible that this frustration is the result of higher expectations. As the urban middle class has accumulated wealth, it has increasingly been exposed to the Western European and American lifestyle via travel abroad and foreign media. Young urban professionals seek membership in the Western, urban elite culture with which they identify, as exemplified by the general post-Soviet predilection for conspicuous consumption. Increasingly in Moscow and St. Petersburg, the young professional middle class has isolated itself from the so-called average Russian, in their own restaurants, coffee shops and bars, many of which are London, Brooklyn or Paris-themed. It is common to hear successful young people in Moscow talk longingly about moving abroad, so that they can finally live in a normal country where everything works as it should. This aspirational obsession with the West and ability to insulate themselves from the dominant culture may have aggravated these concerns about quality of life, in that their expectations and ideals are consistently disappointed.

Additionally, as urban professionals are more successful, they are likely to expect that their greater earnings would increase their quality of life. Certainly a higher income does improve quality of life, but when services are state-administered, as with education and healthcare, having more money does not necessarily mean access to better quality. For example, all institutions of higher education in Russia are public, and thus subject to the myriad problems that any state agency faces—corruption, mismanagement, political manipulation and so on. It is not possible to opt out of this system without the considerable financial wherewithal and aptitude to go abroad for university. For an upper-middle class family, having more money might result in higher expectations, but does not necessarily result in better services. The obvious exception is corruption, but paying bribes for state services might be ethically problematic for this group, which is increasingly frustrated by corruption.

Indeed, another connection between these issues is corruption. The housing, health and education sectors have all been impacted by corruption, and corruption itself the second most important concern for this group. With attention from Medvedev and Putin, corruption became a national issue of high visibility, and it is possible that people then began to see it more frequently and more critically in their daily lives. Greater concern for the role of oligarchs, suggests that this worries about corruption was not limited to the quotidian, but was also leveled at the higher echelons of business and government.

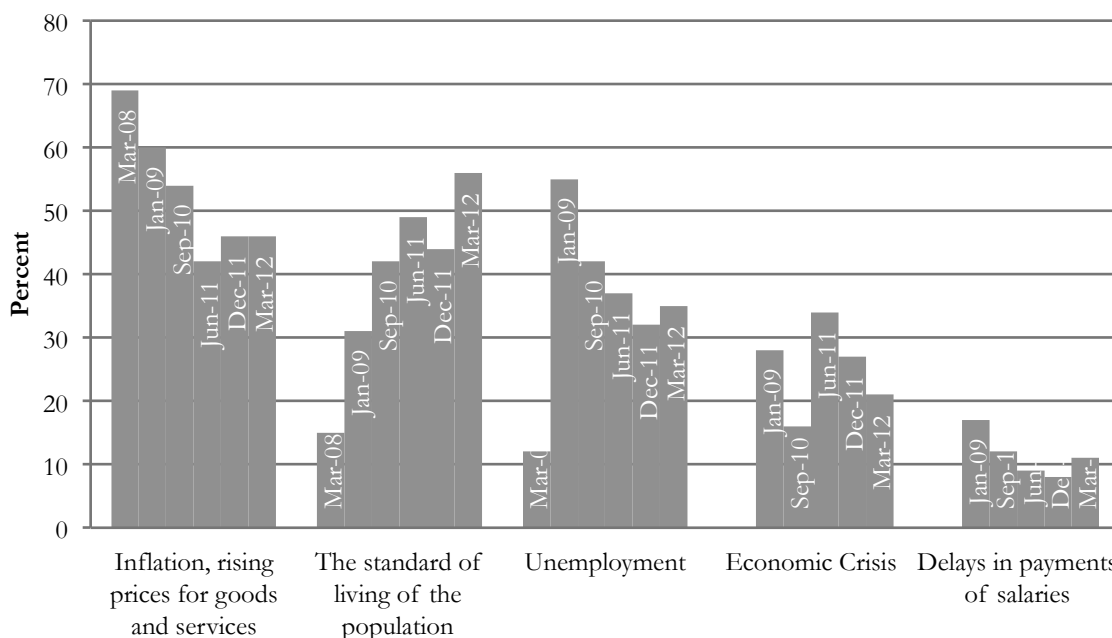
Finally, these results imply that if there was a social contract between Putin and the middle class, there were deep fractures in it before the outbreak of the electoral cycle protests, particularly in Moscow and St. Petersburg. If the social contract guaranteed improved living standards, then these results indicate that those for whom living standards were most improved—the middle class—felt that this issue was not only unresolved, but increasingly problematic. Likewise, the social contract might have guaranteed a certain standard of living, but when major services administered by the government are of poor or decreasing quality, and might no longer allow access to a good education, suitable housing or reliable healthcare, it might be difficult to see how the government is upholding its end of the contract. The social contract might have guaranteed that the state would stay out of your life as long as you stayed out of politics, but if corruption increasingly penetrates public

services, as well as one’s personal and professional life, it might be easy to see that as government intrusion with little benefit.

Economic Issues

For respondents with higher education, those working in the specialized private sector, those earning over 50,000 rubles per month, and those able to purchase moderately priced or expensive durables, the only economic issue of increasing concern was the standard of living of the population. All economic concerns are represented in figure 2, using specialized private sector employees, businessmen and entrepreneurs as a representative example.

Figure 2: Simplified Economic Issues for Specialized Private Sector Employees, Businessmen and Entrepreneurs, March 2008-March 2012



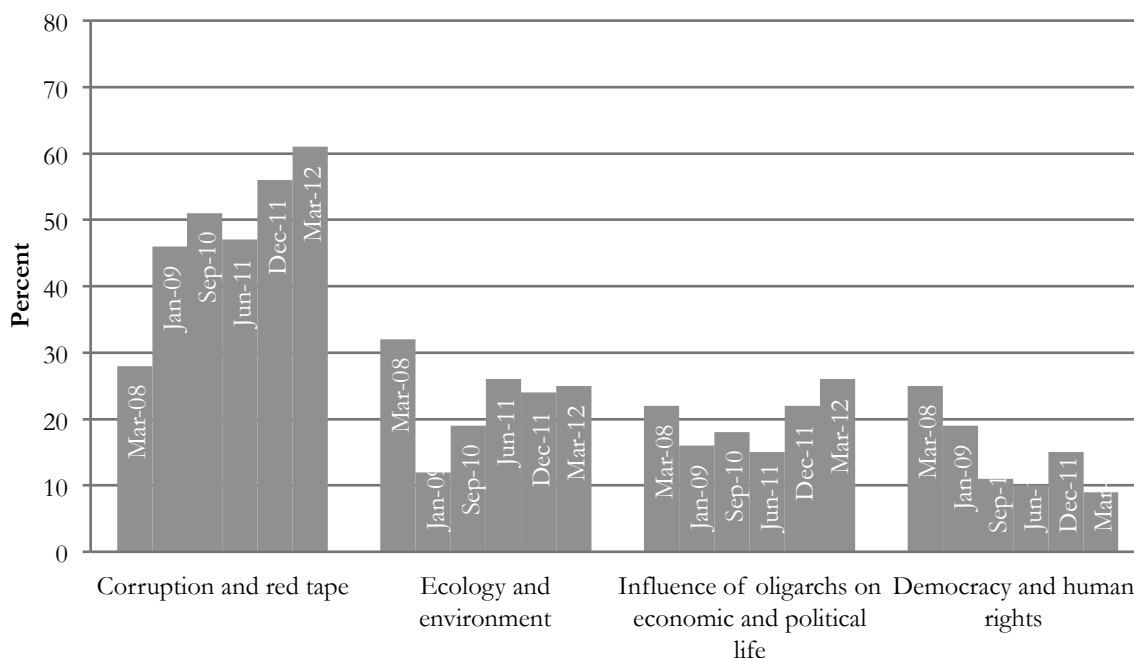
Concern for the standard of living significantly increased between December 2011 and March 2012, roughly corresponding to the period of the electoral cycle. Indeed, this effect was particularly strong in Moscow and St. Petersburg; in December 2011, 51 percent of people selected the standard of living as a problem, and by March 2012, 71 percent felt it was an issue.

Also notable is concern for the economic crisis. This option was first available in the January 2009 round of the survey, at which time it was of significantly higher interest to respondents from middle class groups as compared to the general public. While 23 percent of the general public felt the economic crisis was a problem, 32 percent of residents in Moscow and St. Petersburg and 30 percent of respondents with higher purchasing power selected it in January 2009. While these figures seem low considering the scope of the global financial crisis, they demonstrate that different groups perceived this event differently.

Democratic Issues

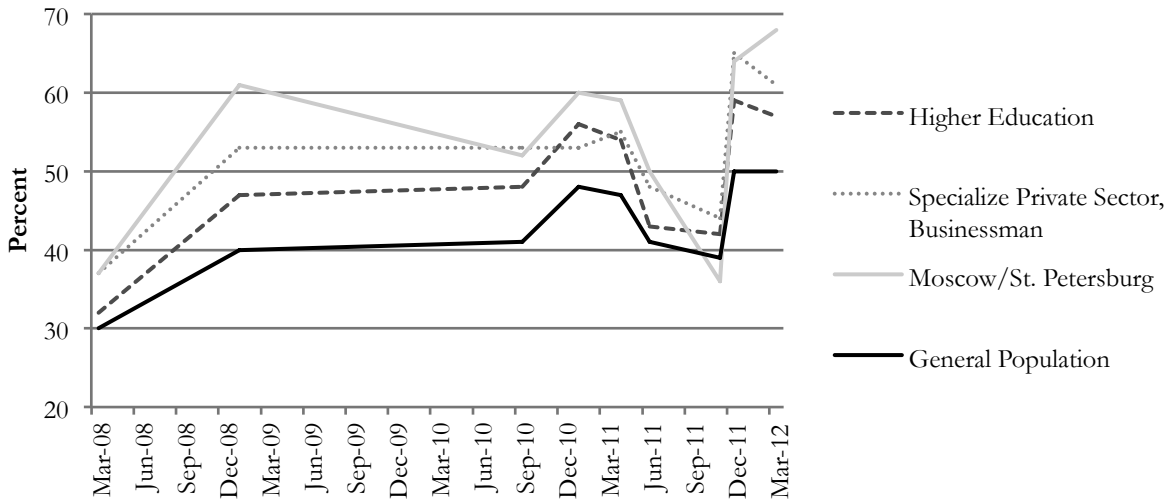
All groups, including the general population, felt corruption and red tape and influence of oligarchs on the economic and political life were of increasing concern (figure 3).

Figure 3: Simplified Democratic Issues for Respondents with Medium and High Purchasing Power, March 2008-March 2012



For all groups, concern for corruption is significant and increasing. Middle class groups were more likely than the general population to select corruption as a problem. It was of greatest concern to residents of Moscow and St. Petersburg and specialized private sector employees. Though corruption is a highly-rated problem on all surveys, it becomes a much greater concern in December 2011. Before December 2011, concern for corruption was high but relatively constant, with around half of all respondents selecting it as a problem (figure 4).

Figure 4: Concerns about corruption

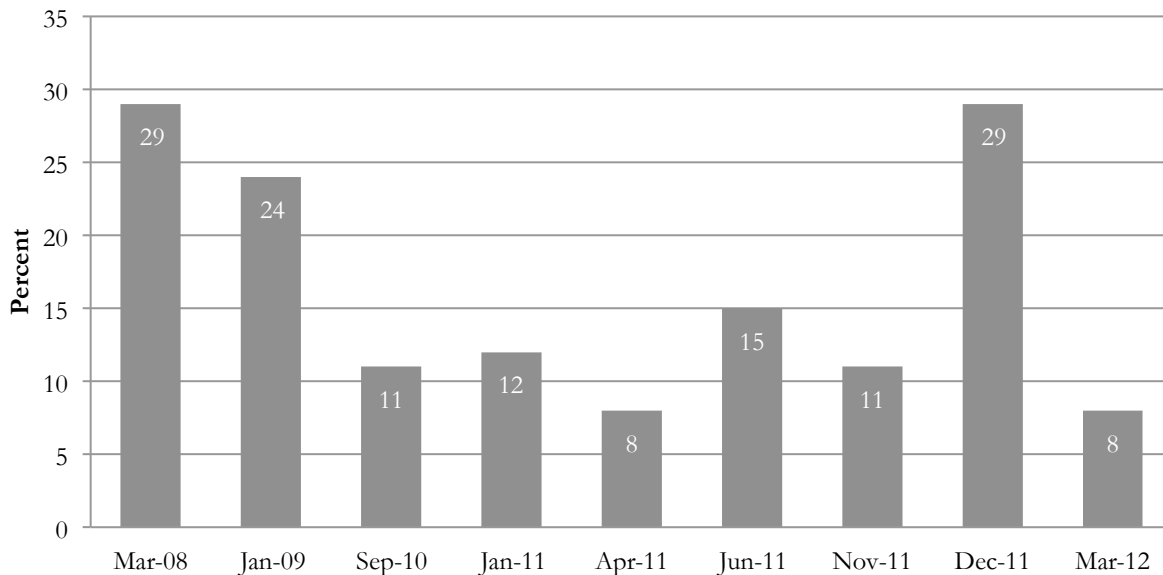


The spike in concern for corruption in December 2011 was not presaged by a rising interest in the issue. Instead, concern for corruption first manifested between the March 2008 and January 2009 rounds of the survey. The May 2008 announcement of Medvedev’s anti-corruption campaign and the programs initiated to mitigate corruption throughout the year are likely responsible for the interest. The announcement of the anti-corruption campaign increased concern in corruption to a similar degree that the Duma elections did; both events led to an increase of approximately 15 percentage points across all groups.

Democracy and human rights was the lowest-rated concern not only of the democratic issues, but was one of the least important of the survey as a whole. Interest in democracy and human rights consistently decreased over the period of the survey for middle class groups and for the population in general. From a peak in March 2008, when approximately 25 percent of respondents from the middle class groups and 19 percent of the general population were concerned about democracy and human rights, only 7-11 percent of people were typically concerned with this issue by November 2011.

For residents of Moscow and St. Petersburg, however, the story is slightly different. Concern about democracy and human rights appears linked to the electoral cycle protests. For these respondents, concerns about democracy and human rights reached a low point of 8 percent in April 2011, but then increased to 15 percent by June 2011, to a high point of 29 percent in December 2011, following the fraudulent Duma election (figure 5).

Figure 5: Concerns about democracy and human rights; respondents from Moscow and St. Petersburg



This result suggests that, although democracy and human rights were not an issue of great importance for the general population, there was increasing demand in the capital cities for democracy.

It also indicates that attitudes towards democracy and human rights are sensitive to current events. Though residents of the capital might not view their daily lives in the context of these frameworks, they are nonetheless able to use them to understand major events, like elections. It would thus seem that the lack of interest in democracy and human rights is not based on a misunderstanding of or unfamiliarity with the terms, but perhaps by the feeling that these concepts are not applicable to every situation or problem with the state.

Despite the surge in interest in democracy and human rights in late 2011, by March 2012 after Putin's victory in the presidential elections, only 8 percent of respondents in Moscow and St. Petersburg selected this issue. This finding implies that concern for democracy and human rights might be linked to a sense of personal political efficacy. Following the Duma elections, protestors called for the invalidation of the election results, and sought to prevent Putin's reelection in March. Both activities might have led to an increase in concern for democracy, but neither aim was successfully achieved. Putin's reelection was perceived as a failure and deep disappointment for the protest movement. The failure to create democratic change appears to have translated to apathy, rather than on-going concern. If we feel, however, that the importance of democracy and human rights is contingent on a relevant event, this drop-off in interest might be the result of the conclusion of the federal electoral cycle. In other words, if elections lead to an increased interest in democracy, when significant elections are far off, we might expect interest in democracy to decline. We might similarly expect interest to pick up around the next major election.

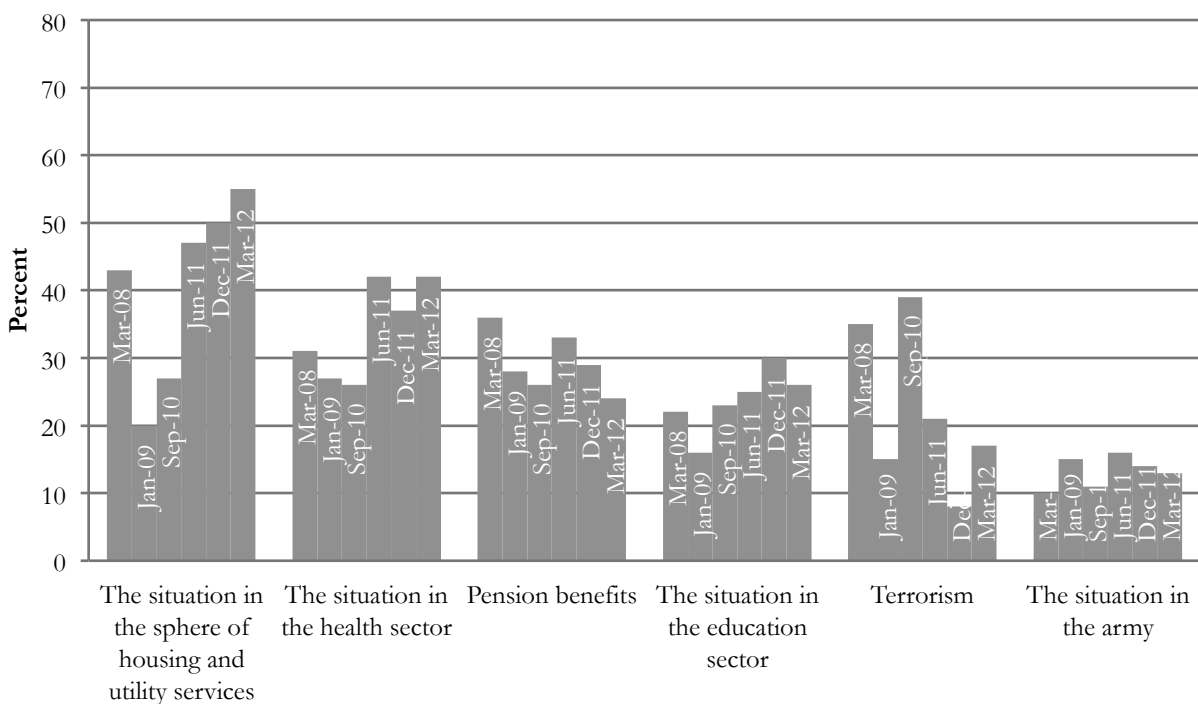
Concern about the influence of oligarchs is slightly higher for the middle class groups than for the general population, and significantly higher for residents of Moscow and St. Petersburg. All groups became more concerned about this issue in the November 2011 survey, exhibiting a 6-14 percentage point increase between June 2011 and November 2011, while concern among the general

population in this period increased only 4 percentage points, from 19 percent to 23 percent. That effect was again strongest in Moscow and St. Petersburg, where concern increased from 24 percent to 38 percent. This increase may have been a response to the announcement that Putin would run for president rather than Medvedev, which implied at least backroom dealing, if not the influence of oligarchs. It also coincided with oligarch Mikhail Prokhorov’s public announcement in September 2011 that he would depart from the Pravoe Delo political party, a satellite party of power in which he had been a prominent figure. These two episodes likely highlighted the role of informal power in Russia’s political system.

State Efficacy

Of issues related to state efficacy, results were again roughly the same across middle class groups, with slight variations in responses from residents of Moscow and St. Petersburg, and the general population. All middle class groups felt the situation in the sphere of housing and utility services, the situation in the health sector and the situation in the education sector were of increasing concern (figure 6).

Figure 6: Simplified State Efficacy Issues for Respondents with Higher Education, March 2008-March 2012



The prominence of the housing, health and education sectors may be linked with a greater concern for the provision or poor quality of state services. Alternately, it could reflect a concern with the costs or the perceived value of these services if the quality is low or decreasing while the cost is high or increasing, particularly regarding housing and utilities. By far the biggest issue in state efficacy—as well as one of the most significant in the survey as a whole—was the situation with

housing and utilities. Beginning in January 2011, all groups and the general population greatly increased their concern about housing and utilities. It went from an issue that about 25 percent of people cared about in September 2010 to an issue for about 50 percent of people in January 2011. It thereafter remained approximately constant.

Concern for the healthcare sector also increased over the period in question, at a similar rate across middle class groups and the general population. Moreover, healthcare was a concern for a nearly identical share of respondents from middle class group by higher education, private sector professionals, and those earning 50,000 rubles per month, and the general population. Respondents from Moscow and St. Petersburg assessed healthcare much more negatively than other groups beginning in April 2011. At that time, all groups increased their negative evaluations of the healthcare sector, but the increase was greatest for residents of the capital cities, for whom concern about healthcare increased by 22 percentage points to 50 percent.

Education exhibited the weakest increase of the three, increasing around ten percentage points for all groups between January 2009 and March 2012. Of all middle class groups and the general population, education was most of concern to respondents with higher education and private sector professionals with higher education, which is in line with expectations. Of all groups, respondents from Moscow and St. Petersburg found it of least concern.

IV. The Middle Class Compared

The Middle Class and the General Population

Across all surveys, responses from the middle class groups as defined by educational level, vocation, purchasing power and income were roughly consistent. Responses from these groups tended to rise and fall in a similar pattern and to a similar degree. This might suggest that a set of coherent attitudes exists within the middle class, but further analysis with more detailed data is needed to confirm this hypothesis.

In fact, the concerns of the middle class groups and the concerns of the general population were not very different. Table 4 ranks issues that were of increasing concern between March 2008 and March 2012. The four issues that have become a bigger concern for the general population—corruption, housing, the standard of living and healthcare—are also the top four issues that are becoming of greater concern for these middle class groups. Essentially, the main problems that concern members of the middle class also concern Russians in general. This result suggests that the division between the middle class and other segments of Russian society may not be so deep, but instead that there are many common causes or criticisms that society in general might make of the state.

Table 4: Issues of Increasing Concern among Russians, March 2008-March 2012

General Population	Higher Education	Specialized Private Sector, Businessmen, Entrepreneurs	Afford moderate and high-priced consumer durables	Monthly income of 50,000 rubles or more	Moscow and St. Petersburg
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Corruption 2. Housing and utilities 3. Standard of Living 4. Healthcare 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Standard of living 2. Housing and utilities 3. Corruption 4. Healthcare 5. Education 6. Oligarchs 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Corruption 2. Standard of living 3. Housing and utilities 4. Healthcare 5. Education 6. Oligarchs 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Corruption 2. Standard of living 3. Housing and utilities 4. Healthcare 5. Education 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Housing and utilities 2. Standard of living 3. Corruption 4. Healthcare 5. Education 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Standard of living 2. Corruption 3. Healthcare 4. Housing and utilities 5. Oligarchs 6. Education

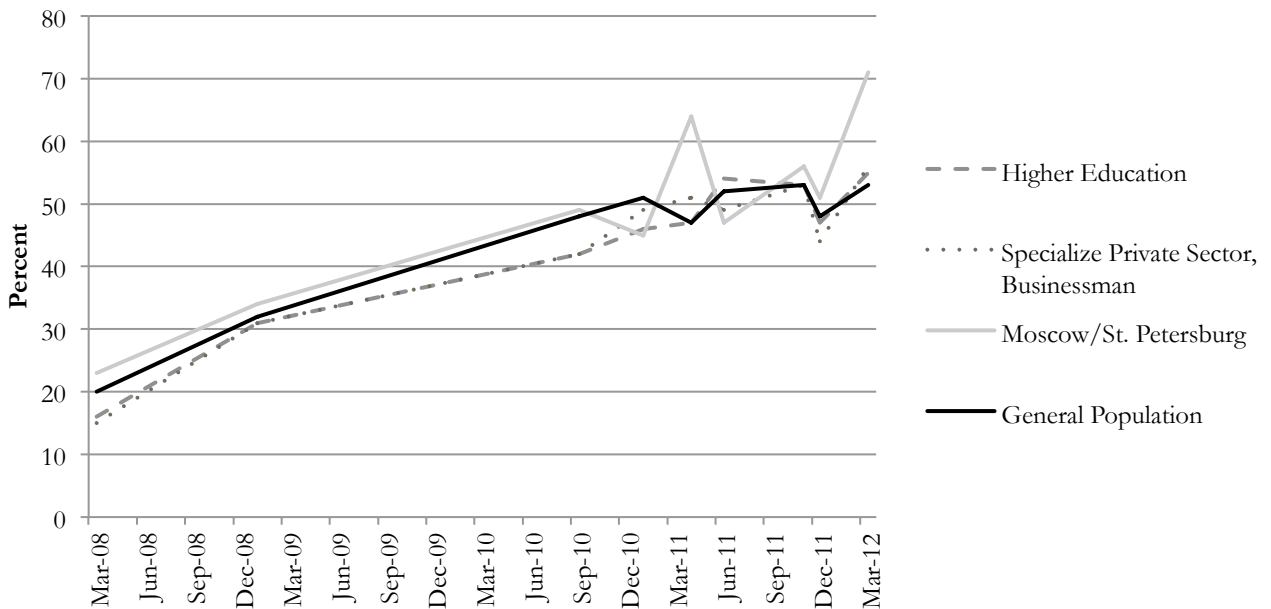
A noteworthy difference here is that members of these middle class groups tend to be more critical than the general population. While the general population only evaluated four problems more negatively over a four-year period, all middle class groups were found five or six issues to be more problematic over the same period. Education and the influence of the oligarchs were increasingly of concern to the middle class groups, but do not register for the general population.

Yet thinking critically about these problems is not only a question of kind, but also of degree. More members of the middle class tended to rate these problems negatively than did the general population. For example, figure 4 above compares evaluations of corruption between middle class groups and the general population. Although corruption saw the biggest increase in negative evaluations for the general population, the middle class groups still consistently viewed it as a much more serious problem than did the general population.

Concerns in the Capitals

Respondents from Moscow and St. Petersburg were generally more critical than members of other middle class groups. A larger percentage of respondents from the capitals tended to identify an issue as a problem for the country, and they were frequently the most negative of the middle class groups. For example, concern for the standard of living of the population significantly increased for all groups including the general population (figure 7). Although this issue was of concern to a large segment of respondents, it was typically of higher concern to residents of Moscow and St. Petersburg.

Figure 7: Concerns about the standard of living of the population



The same is true of responses to the issue of corruption. This suggests that residents of the major cities are more likely to identify problems for the country and to be critical of the state than a member of the middle class might be.

Residents of Moscow and St. Petersburg also showed more precipitous increases in concern for several issues over the course of 2011. An example of this is the 20-percentage point increase in concern for the standard of living in April 2011. This trend suggests that residents of Moscow and St. Petersburg might be more reactive to news or current events and are thus better informed than others. Alternatively, they are more networked and more willing to speak to others about their concerns, which could amplify an increase spurred by a news event.

While the concerns of the middle class were generally in line with those of the general population, here I show support for the theory that residents of Moscow and St. Petersburg hold different attitudes from the general Russian population. This suggests that the experience of living in a major metropolitan capital has a greater impact on one's political views and perception of the state than do indicators of middle class membership, like higher education or higher income. It is therefore possible that residents of major cities might one day play role of constraining government power and advocating for political rights, which is in some theories the purview of a strong middle class. Such a role would make use of the outsize political weight and social capital carried by residents of the capitals, particularly in Moscow.

Middle Class Protesters in Major Cities

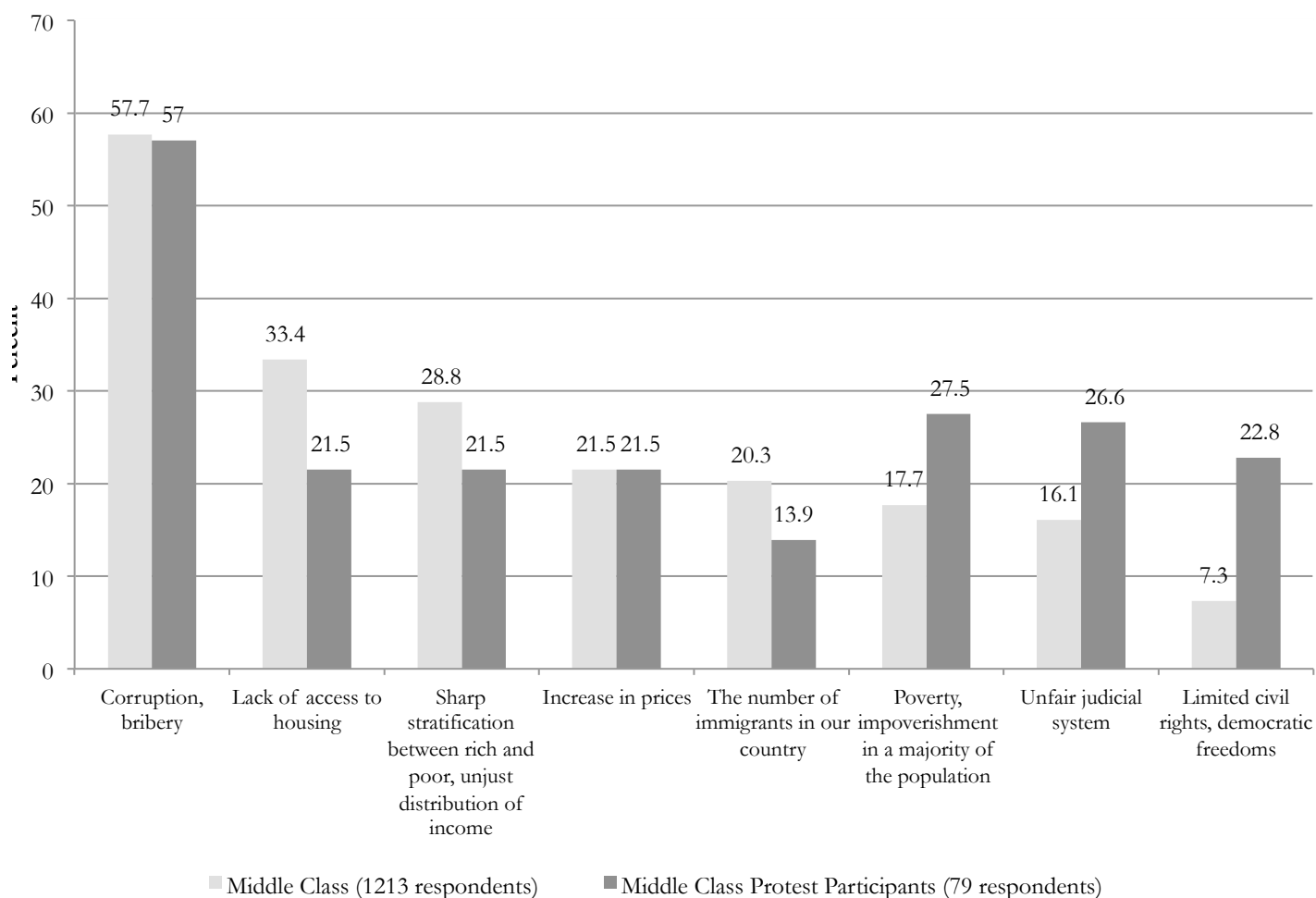
Given the limitations on the data, these surveys can tell us only generally about the concerns of the middle class. They cannot tell us whether these rising concerns resulted in protest activity, or if other factors were involved. Even as certain concerns were becoming more urgent in Moscow,

not everyone who shared those worries participated in the electoral cycle protests of 2011-2012. While those events were larger than earlier protests, they were not particularly large in the when compared to the population of Moscow. Further, these surveys cannot indicate which of these rising concerns might have motivated protest activity at all; for instance, concerns about housing and utilities might not be relevant to participants in demonstrating against election fraud.

Comparing the conclusions drawn from these surveys to an additional data set can shed light on this question. I will do so using a survey conducted online by Graeme Robertson between February 20-March 2, 2012 of 1,213 middle class adults. Urban middle class membership was defined by internet use, at least some higher education, the ability to buy at least some consumer durables, and residence in cities of over 1 million. I will compare results from the WCIOM study to Robertson’s responses to the question "Which of the following are the most important problems facing Russia today?". Respondents were able to select up to three issues.

Figure 8 presents the top five concerns for the middle class in general, as compared with the top five concerns for middle class protest participants.

Figure 8 : Five most significant issues, all middle class respondents and middle class protest participants, February-March 2012



Source: Graeme Robertson

Note: For middle class protest participants, three issues tied for the fifth-most significant issue.

Three of these options are roughly consistent with the responses of middle class groups in the WCIOM data set. Corruption and housing were of significant concern in both surveys. Inflation was also a major issue, but was not increasing in its severity over the course of the WCIOM surveys and so is not considered here. The stratification between rich and poor and the number of immigrants were not options in the WCIOM surveys.

Economic issues are of concern to both groups. Societal stratification—or inequality—was rated highly by the middle class in general, and was also a top issue for those who attended protests. The importance of this issue makes sense, as the middle class is often framed as the victim of rising inequality. This threat, coupled with concern about inflation, suggests that the middle class does not feel economically stable. Corruption, as discussed above, might aggravate this feeling. Unlike the middle class in general, those who attended protests felt that poverty was a more important issue than inequality, though they themselves are not poor. This suggests that, while the middle class in general is concerned with economic issues, those who attended protests view economic issues sociotropically, and are worried about other social groups in addition to their own. While it is unclear if this sentiment predates the protests, the protestors' concern for poverty over their own standard of living underscores again the fragility of the social contract, because it suggests that some people are not satisfied by an increase in their own standard of living and believe prosperity should be shared with everyone. Concerns about corruption and inequality likely resonate with this concern.

The concerns of those who participated in the electoral cycle protests also departed from the middle class as a whole. They were concerned about several of the same issues that the general middle class was, such as corruption, housing and inflation, but protesters also found several democratic issues to be important, specifically the unfair judicial system and limitations on civil rights and democratic freedoms.

It is important to note that concern for the judicial system or for civil and democratic rights was by no means a determinant of protest participation, because these were not the leading issues among participants. We must also ask whether these people held long-standing democratic concerns, or whether attending the protests had impacted their views on democracy. Evidence from the WCIOM data set suggests the latter explanation: concern for democracy and human rights was generally stable and low until the end of 2011, indicating that the protests precipitated a major increase in concern for democracy, particularly in Moscow and St. Petersburg. It is thus likely that attending the protests contributed to how these respondents evaluated liberal-democratic problems in Russia.

A look at other available cross tabs using Robertson's data provides additional insight to concerns about the problems of an unfair judicial system and civil and democratic rights. 26 percent of small business owners rated the unfair judicial system as an important problem, one might assume because they regularly encounter it in the course of doing business. This would be a long-standing democratic concern that they face on a regular basis. 26 percent of respondents familiar with GOLOS (a domestic election monitor) also rated the unfair judicial system as an important problem. In this case, we might assume that these respondents are interested in issues of democracy and objected to the unfair judicial system on principle. After participants in the protests, the second largest group that cared about civil and democratic rights was respondents with higher degrees (15.6 percent), which also suggests concern on principle, rather than in response to recent events. The

third largest group, again, was respondents familiar with GOLOS (15 percent), which similarly suggests that these people might have had a longer standing awareness and concern for democratic issues. We can thus assume that, while some interest in democratic issues among protest participants may have been in response to the protests themselves, for others, concern for those issues had been longer-lived.

V. Conclusions

This study asks if economic, democratic or state efficacy issues were becoming increasingly problematic for members of the professional middle class in Moscow and St. Petersburg, following the global financial crisis in late 2008 and in the lead-up to the electoral cycle protests beginning in December 2011. It finds that problems pertaining to several of these categories concerned the middle class during the period in question: the standard of living, corruption, housing, healthcare, education, and the influence of oligarchs. Two explanations for rising concern for these issues. First, these issues might relate to an overall failure to meet middle class expectations of a higher quality of life. Secondly, they might pertain to rising frustration with the interference of corruption in daily life and the state's inability or unwillingness to mitigate corruption. Both explanations suggest that the theorized social contract between the middle class and the state was sundered before the outbreak of protests.

Rather than demonstrating a divide between the middle class and the Russian population in general, this study has indicated that the views of these groups are relatively in sync on the major issues named above. The middle class groups in several cases felt more strongly about the issues in question, but on no issue did the responses from the middle class members diverge greatly from the responses of the general population. This result provides evidence to counter the idea that Russian society is increasingly polarized, and suggests that many basic concerns and values are held in common across the population.

Respondents from Moscow and St. Petersburg felt more strongly about problems in Russia than the general population and than members of the middle class groups. They were also more reactive than other groups, repeatedly displaying a steep increase in concern for a problem over the previous survey round. Particularly, they were concerned by the standard of living and corruption more than any other group. Further, though most survey respondents did not see democracy and human rights as a problem, respondents from Moscow and St. Petersburg displayed increased interest in these issues around the election protests. This suggests that they use these ideas as a framework to understand events in instances where they might directly impact the state, but not as general mode of relating to the state.

A similar survey of middle class residents of major cities who participated in protests indicated that corruption, poverty, an unfair judicial system and limited civil rights and democratic freedoms were their most salient concerns. On the whole, members of the middle class responding to this survey selected corruption, lack of access to housing and the sharp stratification between the rich and poor as their major issues.

These results comprise a picture of a social stratum that is disturbed by rising inequality. This includes economic inequality (the standard of living, poverty and stratification), inequality of power

or privilege (corruption, the influence of oligarchs and the unfair judicial system), and inequality of service provision (housing and utilities, healthcare, education). Only in certain contexts is the concern for inequality applied to uneven political rights, yet this, it seems, is what spurred the electoral cycle protests of 2011-2012. In interviews conducted by the author, the organizers of these protests repeatedly expressed anger, shame and sense of insult that although Russia is a democracy, those who truly hold the power decided the Duma and Presidential elections behind the scenes. Their votes, the fraud revealed, counted for nothing. The idea that their votes should all be counted equally, and that they as a group should have some political power, was a motivating idea for the protests. The greater landscape of pervasive and ever-more troubling inequality helps to explain why that political concern became relevant when it did, and why it brought so many people out onto the streets to advocate for their democratic rights.

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