

Understandings of democracy in contemporary Russia

The term “democracy” has a contested history in Russia. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia became a central point for the testing the hypotheses of transtology, a discipline attempting to explain the factors leading to the installment of consolidated democracies after the fall of authoritarian regimes. The 1990s thus saw the intervention of many foreign experts and bureaucrats in the “modernization” and “democratization” of Russia. The hopes that the country had garnered, however, were quickly nuanced. Many studies point to the year of 1993 as a pivotal moment for attitudes towards democracy in 1993. The population, undergoing harsh living conditions due of an unprecedented economic crisis, is said to have been disillusioned with the ideal of democracy - and with politics more broadly - as a result of the constitutional crisis of 1993, which saw to the shelling of the White House by Boris Yeltsin. Since then, the ideal of democracy was appropriated by the Putin regime at the same time as it imposed restrictions on democratic rules such as freedom of press or electoral fairness. The hybrid regime has indeed crafted its own concept, that of “sovereign democracy”, to claim a right for Russia to define for itself what democracy means and to be its own kind of democracy, opposed to the Western idea of liberal democracy.

What effect have these different experiences had on how Russians understand democracy? Most studies on attitudes towards democracy in Russia have focused on support for democracy. The prevalence of these studies is linked to the impact of the literature on transitions to democracy, a part of which considers popular support for democracy as a prerequisite for the consolidation of democracies after the fall of authoritarian regimes (Linz & Stepan, 1996). Some studies have applied broader theories of determinants of popular support for democracy and explained that Russians tend to prefer “order” over “freedom”, or do not have the values necessary to democratic support (McDaniel, 1996; Pavlovic, 2016). Other studies have refuted these ideas, demonstrating that democracy a concept that most people in Russia adhere to as a good form of governing the country (Colton & McFaul, 2002), although they are more likely to adhere to specific elements of democracy than the concept in abstract (Carnaghan, 2011, p. 691). Fewer studies have analyzed this latter point, however, and the meanings that are attached to democracy in Russia.

Agreeing that “how strongly people desire democracy is meaningless unless we also know how people understanding democracy” (Welzel, 2013, p. 310), this paper will focus on analyzing democratic understanding in contemporary Russia. To measure understanding of democracy, I use Shin’s (2017) definition of “informed democratic understanding” as two-dimensional, measuring the ability not only to identify features of democratic regimes but also to differentiate them from those of authoritarian rule. To do so, I will rely on the sixth

wave of the World Values Survey, which was conducted between September and October 2011. I first explore the characteristics that Russians see as essential to democracy, before focusing on some of the determinants of having an informed understanding of democracy. In particular, I argue that having lived under the Soviet Union allows one to better differentiate between characteristics of authoritarianism and democracy, therefore increasing the likelihood of having an informed understanding of democracy. Second, I explore the effects of current regime propaganda surrounding the term “democracy” on democratic understanding.

Theory

Studies on attitudes towards democracy are mostly focused on support for democracy. For instance, Gibson and his colleagues’ study of political culture in the Soviet Union (1992) focuses on the link between personality traits such as tolerance or moderation and support and adherence to democracy. Other studies have applied broader theories of support for democracy to the Eastern European context. For instance, in a study of twenty countries, Pavlovic (2016) applies Inglehart’s (1977) theory of the influence of postmaterialist values on mass support for democracy. Drawing from Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, Inglehart (1977) argues that only individuals who have achieved material satisfaction will support democracy’s political ideals of equality and freedom. Pavlovic (2016) demonstrates that Eastern Europeans who adopt post-materialist values are the most likely to support democracy. However, he also turns Inglehart’s theory on its head by providing evidence that while it is usually posited that cultural values facilitate the establishment of a particular political structure, postmaterialist values can also emerge from the establishment of a functional democracy (Pavlovic, 2016, p. 7).

Other studies have focused on the dynamics of political learning after the fall of the Soviet Union. While some argue that Russian cultural values favor authoritarian regimes and support for authoritarian rule, other researchers have found evidence that Russian citizens’ attitudes and values have adapted to the new contexts that emerged following the fall of the Soviet Union. Mishler and Rose (2007) demonstrate that, although significant generational differences in political attitudes point to the importance of the difference socialization that occurred in different periods of Russian history, trends in the evolution of political attitudes illustrate a process of resocialization and adaptation of attitudes to changing contexts. An earlier study by Colton and McFaul (2002) demonstrates that although mass support for democracy had decreased with the economic and political hardships of the 1990s, in 2000, a vast majority of Russians still considered that democracy was a good way of governing Russia, as well as that democracy was “better than any other forms of government” (Colton & McFaul, 2002, p. 100). Further, their study demonstrates that Russians are more likely to express support for specific elements of democratic rule, such as freedom to elect leaders, freedom of expression or press freedom (Colton & McFaul, 2002, p. 104).

This last point illustrates a broader critique addressed to analyses of the support for democracy - that it doesn’t sufficiently address the definition of “democracy” that interviewees adopt. Broad concepts like “democracy” are not necessarily intelligible to survey respondents. Carnaghan (2011), in a qualitative study of the meanings that Russian respondents attach to certain survey questions on broad terms such as “democracy” or “order”, further demonstrates this point. Indeed, she explains that the meanings attached to

the term “democracy” vary greatly depending on individuals, and they far from always mirror the definitions of researchers. Similarly, studies of understanding of democracy have illustrated that few citizens indeed define democracy by the criteria that political scientists do (Canache, 2012; Dalton et al., 2007), shedding doubts on the validity of studies of democratic support that do not control for the definition that respondents have of democracy. Carnaghan (2011) suggests in her study that survey questions that focus on specific elements of democratic rule are more intelligible by respondents, and may therefore lead to more credible findings (p. 691).

This paper will therefore build on this literature, which has demonstrated that “how strongly people desire democracy is meaningless unless we also know how people understand democracy” (Welzel, 2013, p. 310). Several studies have focused on assessments of citizen knowledge and understanding of democracy broadly. A first part of these studies focuses on asking individuals to provide their own definition of democracy, and on using the number of properties of democracy a citizen can name as an assessment of the breadth of their democratic knowledge (Canache, 2012). Other studies focus on the ability of citizens to differentiate between democracies and non-democracies. Shin (2017), in his discussion of popular understanding of democracy, uses the concept of “informed democratic understanding”, which encapsulates two aspects of democratic knowledge: *identification* and *differentiation*. An individual, he argues, can be said to have an “informed democratic understanding” when they are able to successfully identify democracy with its properties *and* not with non-democratic properties (Shin, 2017, p. 4). His cross-national study of understanding of democracy suggests that knowledge is related to experience, as the regions who have the most long-standing democratic traditions are the most informed, demonstrating that “people come to learn about democracy through its practices” (Shin, 2017, p. 17)

A recent study by Gerber and Chapman (2018) of understandings of democracy in Russia has confirmed these dynamics by demonstrating that the concept is intelligible to only a small proportion of the population. The study further analyzes the prevalence of four types of definitions: the “textbook” definition (only 2% of their weighted sample), social definitions (38%), those that use both textbook and social characteristics (42%), and those that don’t consider textbook or social characteristics as essential elements of democracy (17%)¹. They find that those citizens that adopt the “textbook” definition of democracy are more likely to live in global cities, and to support democracy as the best form of government for Russia today (Gerber & Chapman, 2018). This study, however, does not take into account the ability of citizens to differentiate between elements of democratic rule and those of non-democratic rule. This paper will aim to fill that gap, by focusing on an analysis of “informed democratic understanding” (as defined by Shin, 2017) in contemporary Russia. The evidence in the literature leads me to my first hypothesis that informed democratic understanding is limited in contemporary Russia.

H1: Informed democratic understanding is limited in contemporary Russia

¹ This typology of definitions was constructed through the association of elements with the concept of democracy. Textbook definition = free and fair elections, and at least one of the following political criteria: majority rule, protection for minorities, complete freedom for anyone to criticize the government; Social criteria: education for everyone, jobs for everyone, basic necessities for everyone. See Gerber & Chapman, 2018, p. 487.

Further, several studies have explained that understanding of democracy in classical terms may be limited in countries where democracy is not consolidated, or in political transitions, because the meanings associated with key concepts like democracy are likely to shift and be disputed (Schledler & Sarsfield, 2007, p. 639). This is especially the case in Russia, where “democracy” has been subject to many interventions and conflicting meanings since the 1990s. In the years of the Putin and Medvedev presidencies, in particular, the term democracy has been continually used by the regime, serving what Casula (2013) calls a “discursive stabilization of Russian politics” (p. 4). Moreover, political elites in Russia and the presidential party United Russia have used the concept of “sovereign democracy” to claim the right for Russia to define for itself the democracy it aims to create, “exempt from any international comparison or judgment” (Casula, 2013, p. 6). This view of democracy is very linked to nationalist discourse of the national and cultural superiority of the Russian people (Belousov, 2012, p. 66), and has been used in regime propaganda (Belousov, 2012). This leads me to my second hypothesis: that exposure to regime propaganda is negatively linked to having an informed understanding of democracy.

H2: Exposure to current propaganda decreases the likelihood of adopting an informed understanding of democracy.

The impact of authoritarian legacy, however, has not been specifically addressed on studies of understandings of democracy. Some studies, noticing that most of the literature on support for democracy had focused on countries with a long experience of democracy, analyzed on the effect of authoritarian legacy on support for democracy. For instance, in a study of Latin America, Fuks and his colleagues (2018), have tested what they call the “argument of aversion to authoritarian rule” and demonstrated that individuals who have experienced authoritarian rule have a greater tendency to support democracy, because they have experienced first-hand the consequences of authoritarian rule. On the other hand, several studies have demonstrated that, in Russia and elsewhere, there is credible evidence of a positive relationship between understanding of democracy and support for democracy (Cho, 2014; Miller et al., 1997). This paper will build on these two strands of literature and attempt to further explain the relationship between authoritarian legacy and support for democracy, by hypothesizing that individuals who have known authoritarianism - in my case, Soviet rule - are more likely to have an informed understanding of democracy. I argue that if knowledge is related to experience, then citizens who have experienced authoritarian rule in the Soviet Union will have a clear knowledge of the features of authoritarian rule. This knowledge, in turn, should result in a more informed democratic understanding, since the measure of “informed democratic understanding” requires the identification of authoritarian characteristics and their differentiation of democracy.

H3: Experience of authoritarian rule in the Soviet Union increases the likelihood of having an informed understanding of democracy.

Methodology

The data provided by the World Values Survey contains several variables allowing to address questions of understanding of democracy and support for democracy. Conducted since 1981, the World Values Survey focuses on asking citizens of almost 100 countries their opinions on numerous topics such as politics, religion and family. The sixth round of the survey that I use in this paper was conducted among 2,500 Russian citizens in the end of 2011. This timing of the data is particularly insightful with regards to the Russian context, given the wave of protests against electoral fraud that occurred right afterwards, starting in December 2011. This survey contained several questions of interest with regards to understanding of democracy. Respondents were asked to rate from 1 to 9 if they thought certain criteria were “essential characteristics of democracy”. These criteria were the following:

- (1) Governments tax the rich and subsidise the poor
- (2) Religious Authorities ultimately Interpret the Laws
- (3) People choose their leaders in free elections
- (4) People receive state aid for unemployment
- (5) The army takes over when government is incompetent
- (6) Civil rights protect people from state oppression
- (7) The government makes people’s incomes equal
- (8) People obey their rulers
- (9) Women have the same rights as men

In order to first explore the responses to these questions, I conducted a Principal Component Analysis on these 9 variables. This method allowed me to gain insight as to the main dimensions of variance of these variables, as well as to the ones that were most correlated. With the insight provided by this preliminary analysis and Shin’s (2017) definition of “informed democratic understanding” in mind, I created a dummy variable to account for whether respondents could properly identify characteristics of democracy and differentiate them from authoritarian or autocratic elements. To do so, I decided to focus on five variables (see Appendix). Agreeing with Shin (2017) that economic policies cannot in themselves be considered characteristic of either democratic or non-democratic regimes, I decided to exclude variables 1, 4 and 7 from the construction of my binary variable for “informed democratic understanding”. As for variable 8, “people obey their rulers”, I also chose to exclude it from my definition of democratic understanding because of the strong room for interpretation that this criterion allows. I draw in this choice from Carnaghan’s (2011) analysis of the varying definitions of “order” in contemporary Russia. She explains that for some of her respondents, “strong order [meant] fulfillment of law, the observance of law” (Carnaghan, 2011, p. 693). Given the imprecise phrasing of the question, “people obey[ing] their rulers” could signal both authoritarian rule or observance of the law by ordinary citizens. Therefore, including this criterion would cast uncertainties on my measure of informed democratic understanding.

A binary variable of “informed democratic understanding” was thus constructed using the two dimensions of democratic knowledge (Shin, 2017): first, individuals had to *differentiate* authoritarian criteria from democracy (score of 3 or under on variable 2 and 5); second, respondents had to properly *identify* essential features of democracy (score of 7 or

over on variables 3, 6 and 9). Only those who were able to do both are considered to have an “informed democratic understanding”, and are assigned the level of 1 on the binary variable ‘informed’. The ones who did not are coded 0.

Because I am interested in some of the predictors of informed understanding of democracy, I used this binary variable as a dependent variable in two logistic regression analyses. My first model focuses on the effect of Soviet experience on having an informed understanding of democracy. To explore this relationship, I recoded the age variable, distributed around 18 and 91 years old, into age groups. These age groups serve as proxies for political socialization under different periods of Soviet rule. I constructed four age groups, corresponding to different historical periods, using individuals who have no experience of Soviet rule as a baseline. Following several studies, I consider that individuals become aware of their political environment and experience political learning starting at age 14, and therefore used the age of 15 as a cutoff points from which to construct the age groups (Fuks et al., 2018; Mattes et al., 2016). A summary of the age groups and their corresponding political learning experiences is provided in table B of the Appendix.

To further investigate the effect of experience of Soviet rule on understandings of democracy, it would be interesting to construct on nonlinear generalized model. Indeed, it may be the case that the effect of authoritarian experience increases with the amount of authoritarian experience that one has lived through. Given the difficulties that this method presents in R, however, this paper will not attempt to do that and presume that the relationship between experience of Soviet rule and informed understanding of democracy is linear.

In a second model, still using informed democratic understanding as a dependent variable, I explore the influence of current propaganda on definitions of democracy, using three survey questions. Together, they serve as proxies for exposure to government propaganda. First, I use two questions related to the type of media used by respondents in order to obtain information on “what is going on in this country”. The questions asked respondents to rate the frequency of their watching TV News and of using the internet for that purpose, on a scale from 1 to 5. I recoded the variables so that 1 means that they never use a given medium, and 5 means that they watch them daily. The use of TV news suggests that citizens are exposed to regime propaganda on a regular basis, whereas internet use aims to tap more specifically into exposure to propaganda related to “sovereign democracy”, which was mainly circulated through the internet (Belousov, 2012, p. 64). Second, I include a variable accounting for nativity. Indeed, since the regime discourse about “sovereign democracy” is highly linked to nationalistic discourses, we can expect that individuals who are born outside of Russia will be less receptive to propaganda and nationalistic discourse and more likely to have an informed understanding of democracy.

Both of my regression models includes several control variables. In both, I control for gender, using a dummy variable, political interest ranging from 1 to 4, and education and income, both self-described on respectively 9 and 10-level scales. Because working at a government job could have a significant influence on one’s interest in and understanding of politics and democracy, I control for this using a binary variable coded 1 for “working in a government or public institution” and 0 for all other workplaces. I also control for the size of the town of residence, operationalized through a 9-point scale, ranging from smallest to biggest localities. This variable aims at controlling for the effects that urban as opposed to

rural life can have on exposure to political information and political learning. Previous studies have shown that urban residence has a positive effect on the intelligibility of democracy (Gerber & Chapman, 2018, p. 489). However, these studies have also demonstrated that more than residence in an urban area, residence in the global cities that are Moscow and St-Petersburg has a positive influence on understandings of democracy. Unfortunately, the data of the World Values Survey does not allow us to test this relationship, because the scale of residence includes St-Petersburg among cities of more than 500 000 inhabitants and thus does not allow the construction of a binary variable for residence in a global city. In my second regression model, I also control for age, which was not necessary in the first one because the age served as the basis for coding the variable for Soviet experience. Finally, while studies of support for democracy in Russia have demonstrated that the Orthodox faith is more likely to favor a social conception of democracy (McDaniel, 1996), I do not include it as a control variable. Indeed, my dependent variable of “informed democratic understanding” doesn’t exclude individuals who consider social rights as essential to democracy, so long as they are able to identify democratic characteristics and differentiate them from authoritarian ones.

Discussion of results and diagnostics of the models

Characteristics of democracy

The Principal Component Analysis conducted on the 9 variables corresponding to characteristics of democracy informs us that 53% of the variance of these variables is explained by two dimensions (see tables and figures in Appendix). The analysis allows us to distinguish between 3 groups of highly correlated variables: the democratic characteristics, the economic characteristics, and the authoritarian characteristics. An analysis of the two main dimensions informs us that the most influential variables of the first dimension, which explains close to 40% of the variance, are variables corresponding to political characteristics of democracy (gender equality, free and fair elections, civil rights) and economic criteria (state aid for unemployment, income equality, and redistribution through taxation). The variables that contribute the most to the second dimension (explaining 16% of the total variance) are variables V132, V135 and V138. The first two variables correspond to characteristics of authoritarian rule (religious authorities interpreting the laws and the army taking over when the government is incompetent), and the latter to people obeying their rulers. These dimensions yield two important insights as to how Russians understand democracy. First, it suggests that they tend to associate democracy not only to its political characteristics, but also in terms of redistributive economic policies. This finding expands those of other studies, which have shown that definitions of democracy in Russia tend to incorporate social rights at least as frequently as political ones (Gerber & Chapman, 2018). Economic equality and economic rights seem to also be frequently associated with democracy. Second, these results suggest that democratic characteristics are rarely used alongside those of authoritarian rule, pointing to an ability of Russians to differentiate between democracy and authoritarianism. In order to test this preliminary insight, I turn to the analysis of informed democratic understanding.

Informed Democratic Understanding

The first important insight provided by the construction of the binary variable for informed democratic understanding is the percentage of respondents that are able to properly identify essential characteristics of democracy and differentiate them from authoritarian elements. Indeed, only 16% of the sample gave essential characteristics of democracy a score of 7 or more and authoritarian elements a score of 3 or less (see Table 1). More than 60% of respondents didn't do so and 23% did not answer at least one of these questions relating to essential characteristics of democracy.

| | Informed Democratic Understanding | Uninformed Democratic Understanding | N.A (don't know, did not respond, or dropped out of the survey) |
|----------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---|
| N | 408 | 1516 | 576 |
| Percentage of sample | 16.32% | 60.64% | 23% |

Table 1. Informed Understanding of Democracy among Russian respondents

This demonstrates that for many Russians, the definition of democracy either incorporates elements of authoritarian rule, or is uncertain because they do not use the extremities of the scale provided. This finding demonstrates that differentiation between democratic and autocratic elements is not evident for many Russian respondents, and thus confirms my first hypothesis that informed democratic understanding is limited in contemporary Russia.

The results of the first regression analysis (see Table 2) reveal that the relationship between experience of Soviet rule is highly statistically significant and positive. As the age group increases, meaning that individuals have had a longer experience of Soviet rule, the likelihood of having an informed understanding of democracy increases by a factor of 1.30. Thus, a person who has experienced Stalinist rule has a likelihood of having an informed understanding of democracy of a little under 0.42, while that of a person who has only known perestroika and the collapse of the Soviet Union is 0.20 (see Figure 1). This confirms my hypothesis that experience of Soviet rule increases the ability to identify authoritarian elements, and thus to differentiate them from democracy. Those individuals that have the longest experience of Soviet rule therefore are the most likely to have an informed understanding of democracy.

| informed | | | |
|-------------------|--------------------|---|----------------------|
| <i>Predictors</i> | <i>Odds Ratios</i> | <i>CI</i> | <i>p</i> |
| (Intercept) | 0.11 | 0.05 – 0.25 | <0.001 *** |
| Woman | 0.95 | 0.74 – 1.23 | 0.710 |
| income | 0.95 | 0.88 – 1.02 | 0.145 |
| polintr | 0.95 | 0.82 – 1.12 | 0.558 |
| educ | 1.16 | 1.08 – 1.24 | <0.001 *** |
| urban | 1.01 | 0.96 – 1.05 | 0.736 |
| gvmtwork | 0.89 | 0.67 – 1.17 | 0.407 |
| Soviet | 1.30 | 1.16 – 1.46 | <0.001 *** |
| Observations | 1468 | Signif. codes: 0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1 | |

Table 2: Model 1 - Odd ratios of binary logit regression for informed understanding of democracy as a function of experience of Soviet rule

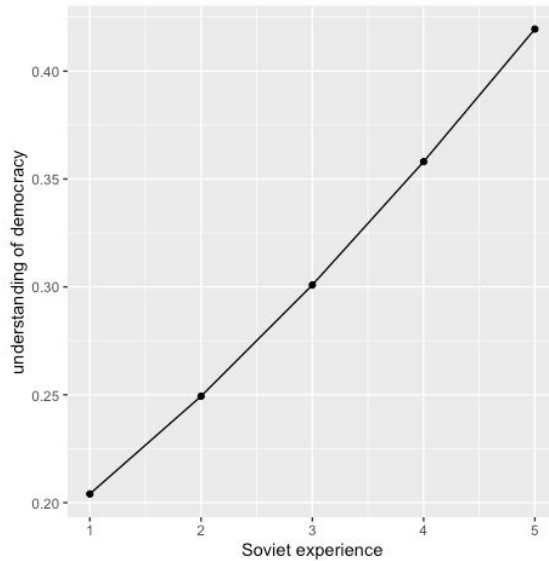


Figure 1: Model 1 - Predicted probabilities of demonstrating an informed understanding of democracy depending on Soviet experience

These findings expand on previous literature related to political learning: just as living in a democracy increases the ability to identify democratic characteristics, living in an autocracy is positively linked to the identification of authoritarian characteristics. They also provide insight as to a possible explanation as to why individuals who lived under authoritarian regimes are more likely to support democracy than the younger generations of new democracies (Moreno & Lagos, 2016). Indeed, studies have revealed a positive link between understanding of democracy and support for it (Cho, 2014; Miller et al., 1997). An interesting hypothesis to consider would be that older generations in countries that have experience strong authoritarian rule are more likely to express support democracy because their political experience under authoritarian rule leads them to a better understanding of democracy, and in turn to a preference for it as a mode of government.

On the question of whether the current hybrid regime in Russia and its appropriation of the term “democracy” has an negative impact on understandings of democracy, however, my second model does not provide convincing answers. Indeed, none of the three variables that were included in the model to account for the effect of the current propaganda of the regime surrounding the term “democracy” reveal a very statistically significant relationship to having an informed understanding of democracy or not (see Table 3 and 4). The regression model reiterates the significant relationship between age and informed understanding of democracy that we explained in the previous model through Soviet experience. Having been

| informed | | | | |
|--------------|----------|---|--------|-----|
| Predictors | Log-Odds | CI | p | |
| (Intercept) | -3.54 | -5.06 – -2.10 | <0.001 | *** |
| Woman | -0.06 | -0.32 – 0.20 | 0.650 | |
| age | 0.02 | 0.01 – 0.03 | 0.001 | *** |
| income | -0.05 | -0.13 – 0.02 | 0.184 | |
| polintr | -0.02 | -0.18 – 0.14 | 0.789 | |
| educ | 0.15 | 0.08 – 0.23 | <0.001 | *** |
| urban | 0.00 | -0.04 – 0.05 | 0.835 | |
| gvmtwork | -0.15 | -0.43 – 0.13 | 0.298 | |
| native | 0.16 | -0.40 – 0.79 | 0.588 | |
| internet | -0.04 | -0.13 – 0.05 | 0.384 | |
| tv | 0.17 | -0.02 – 0.39 | 0.099 | · |
| Observations | 1423 | Signif. codes: 0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 '·' 1 | | |

| informed | | | | |
|--------------|-------------|---|--------|-----|
| Predictors | Odds Ratios | CI | p | |
| (Intercept) | 0.03 | 0.01 – 0.12 | <0.001 | *** |
| Woman | 0.94 | 0.73 – 1.22 | 0.650 | |
| age | 1.02 | 1.01 – 1.03 | 0.001 | *** |
| income | 0.95 | 0.88 – 1.03 | 0.184 | |
| polintr | 0.98 | 0.83 – 1.15 | 0.789 | |
| educ | 1.17 | 1.08 – 1.26 | <0.001 | *** |
| urban | 1.00 | 0.96 – 1.05 | 0.835 | |
| gvmtwork | 0.86 | 0.65 – 1.14 | 0.298 | |
| native | 1.18 | 0.67 – 2.21 | 0.588 | |
| internet | 0.96 | 0.88 – 1.05 | 0.384 | |
| tv | 1.19 | 0.98 – 1.47 | 0.099 | · |
| Observations | 1423 | Signif. codes: 0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 '·' 1 | | |

Tables 3 and 4: Model 2 - Estimates and Odd Ratios of binary logit for informed understanding of democracy as a function of exposure to current propaganda

born in Russia, however, doesn't have an impact on whether one develops an informed understanding of democracy. Similarly, we cannot establish credible relationship between use of Internet and informed understanding of democracy. This could be due to the fact that the phrasing of this variable doesn't account for the type of content that individuals access on the Internet, and where they gain information, nor does it account for if the internet is their only source of information. The relationship between TV news use and informed understanding of democracy, however, appears to have some statistical significance, but this level of statistical significance doesn't allow us to draw credible findings. Indeed, the confidence interval of the odds ratios is spread around one, meaning that we cannot properly assess if the relationship between TV news use and having an informed understanding of democracy is positive or negative.

Of the control variables used in both models, only education appeared to have a statistically significant impact on understandings of democracy. As was expected, those who benefit from more advanced education are better informed about the meaning of democracy. For each increase in the level of education, the probability of having an informed understanding of democracy increases by a factor of approximately 1.2. The non statistical significance of urban residence echoes other study findings demonstrating that although urban residents are more likely to say that they know what democracy means, urban residence is not correlated with a higher level of adherence to classical definitions of democracy (Gerber & Chapman, 2018, p. 489).

Diagnostics of the Models

Both models provide a good fit to analyze the variance of the dependent variable. Indeed, both have a McFadden's pseudo-r² of respectively 0.24 and 0.25, meaning that they each explain approximately around 24% and 25% of the variance of the dependent, informed democratic understanding. Although this measure appears low at first glance, a McFadden pseudo-r² within the range of 0.2 and 0.4 is considered "excellent fit" (McFadden, 1979, p. 306). Moreover, the models do not suffer from high multicollinearity. Indeed, a test

of the Variance Inflation Factor reveals that in the first model, every independent variable can vary independently of the others at a rate of a minimum of 80%. Most of the independent variables of the second model vary independently of the others at a same rate. However, there is some multicollinearity between the variables of age and internet, which can be explained by the fact that older people do not rely on the Internet as much as young people do. Still, those variables are able to vary independently of the others at a rate of 60%, which suggests that this does not pose undue problems for the validity of this model.

As explained above, using nonlinear logistic regression would be an important way to further investigate the findings provided by model 1. Moreover, both models present some problems related to the imbalance in the values taken by the dependent variable. Indeed, as explained above, the dependent variable, informed democratic understanding, contains many non-attributed values and few values of one. Therefore, the models do not succeed at predicting values of one, meaning that they cannot predict having an informed understanding of democracy but rather only predict not having an informed understanding of democracy. However, these predictions are reasonably accurate. Indeed, both models correctly predict the values of zero (i.e. not having an informed democratic understanding) at a rate of approximately 79%. This imbalance in the data and high rate of missing values could be solved by using multiple imputation, “imputing m values for each missing cell based on existing information” (Cho, 2014, p. 483).

Conclusion

As we have seen, understanding of democracy in contemporary Russia is limited. Echoing studies on the discrepancy between scholarly and popular definitions, many Russian respondents link redistributive economic policies to the concept of democracy. More significantly, however, few individuals have an “informed understanding of democracy”, defined by Shin (2017) as the capacity to identify political characteristics of democratic regimes and differentiate them from features of authoritarian rule. This finding demonstrates that caution should be advised regarding any analysis of support for democracy in Russia that does not take into account the definitions and meanings that respondents attach to the abstract concept of “democracy”. Moreover, the results obtained in the first logistic regression model demonstrate that definitions of democracy are influenced by political experience and political socialization under different regimes. Indeed, an increase in the number of periods of Soviet rule experienced by respondents is correlated to an increased likelihood of having an informed understanding of democracy. However, the models presented in this paper did not provide enough evidence to account for a negative relationship between the current resurgence of authoritarian elements in Vladimir Putin’s regime, including its use of propaganda to claim adherence to a principle of “sovereign democracy”, and understandings of democracy. This issue should be re-assessed using a more fitting dataset, which would account for the specific sources of information (channels, websites...), rather than the type of media consumed.

Appendix

Characteristics of Democracy

Variables of interest: V131 to V139 of the WVS 2011, Russia

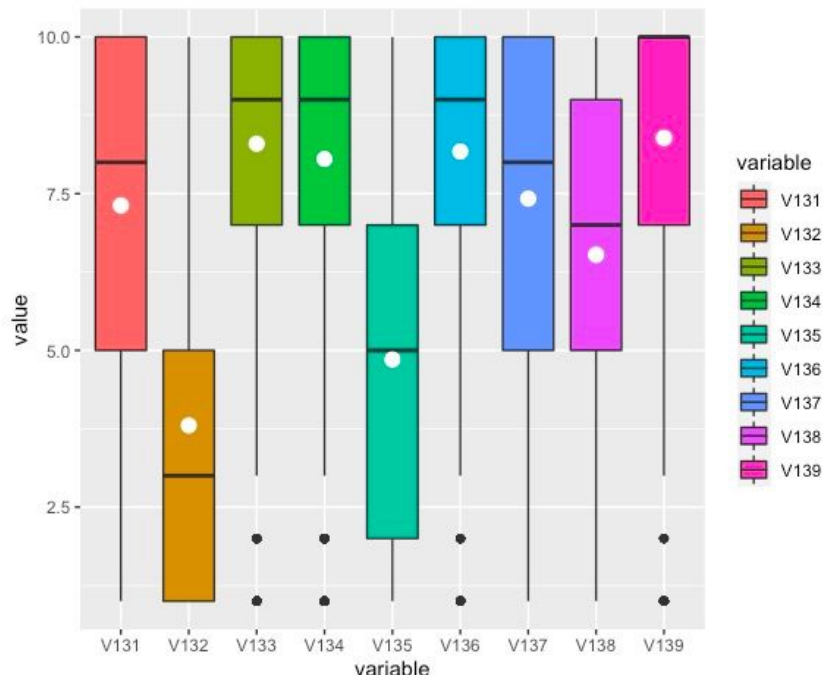
Survey question: “Many things are desirable, but not all of them are essential characteristics of democracy. Please tell me for each of the following things how essential you think it is as a characteristic of democracy. Use this scale where 1 means “not at all an essential characteristic of democracy” and 10 means it definitely is “an essential characteristic of democracy”:

Coding: 1 (not an essential characteristic of democracy) to 10 (an essential characteristic of democracy)

Characteristics:

- V131: Governments tax the rich and subsidise the poor
- V132: Religious Authorities ultimately Interpret the Laws
- V133: People choose their leaders in free elections
- V134: People receive state aid for unemployment
- V135: The army takes over when government is incompetent
- V136: Civil rights protect people from state oppression
- V137: The government makes people’s incomes equal
- V138: People obey their rulers
- V139: Women have the same rights as men

Table A - Boxplot of the distribution of variables V131 to V139 (white dots indicate the mean)



Principal Component Analysis

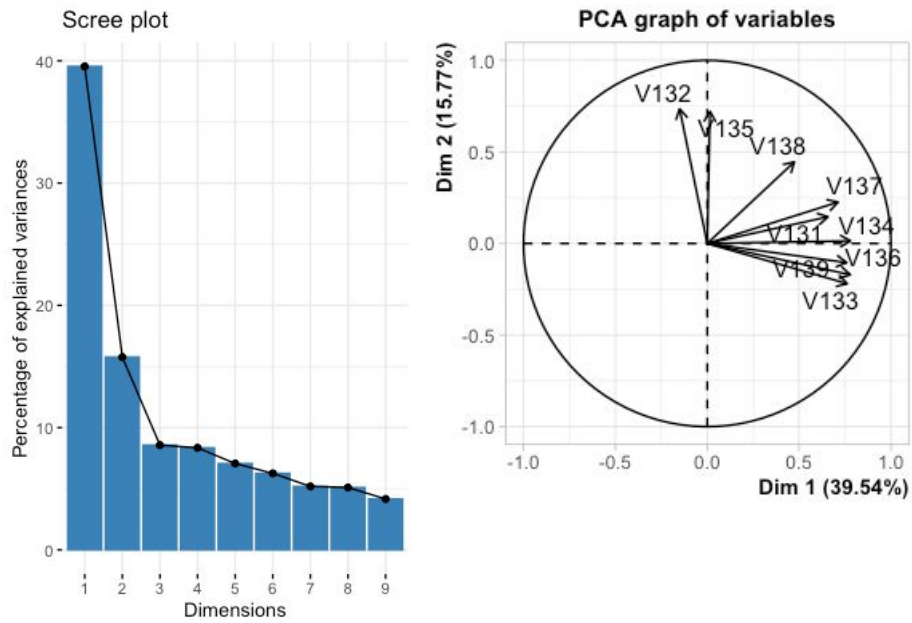
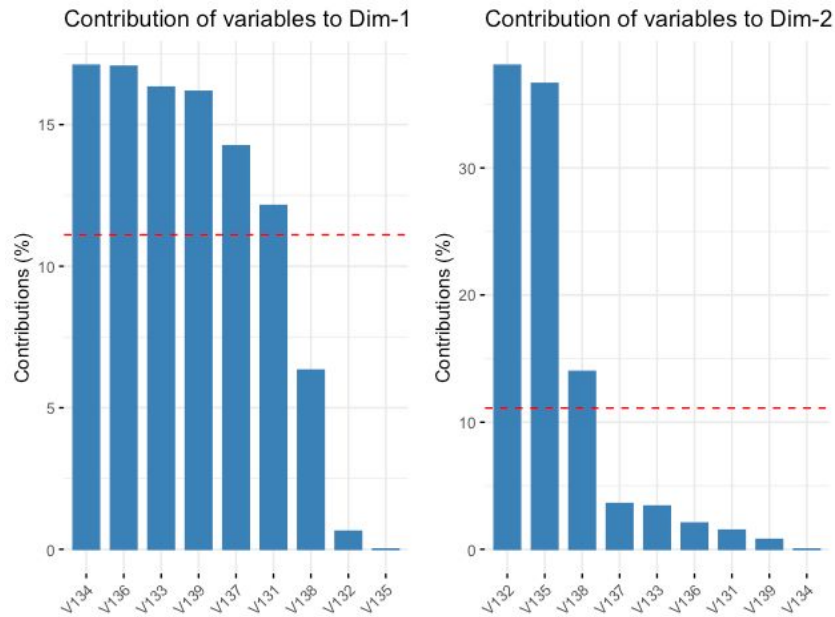


Table B and Figure A. Graphs of the explanatory dimensions of a data frame containing only the 9 variables pertaining to characteristics of democracy.



Figures C and D. Influence of the different variables on the variance explained by each dimension.

Informed Understanding of Democracy

Coding of the dependent variable (*informed*):

- informed = 1: if V133, V136 and V139 superior or equal to 7 (*identification*) and V132 and V135 inferior or equal to 3 (*differentiation*)
- informed = 0: all other solutions
- informed = NA: at least one question is unanswered

Table C - Construction of the Soviet variable

| | Baseline [18-37] N=923 (37% of sample) | Group 1 [37-43] N= 234 (9%) | Group 2 [43-61] N=828 (33%) | Group 3 [61-73] N=339 (14%) | Group 4 [73-91] N=176 (7%) |
|--|---|--|--|--|---|
| Stalin Era (before 1953) | | | | | |
| Khrushchev Era (1953-1964) | | | | | |
| Brezhnev Era (1964-1981) | | | | | |
| Perestroika and end of the Soviet Union (1981-1991) | | | | | |

Age groups as different experiences of political learning (the shaded boxes represent the eras in which the individual was capable of political learning, depending on their age group)

Table D - Summary of the variables used in the regression models

| Variable | Variable type | Coding | Number of non-missing observations | Descriptive statistics |
|---|---------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|--|
| Dependent variable | | | | |
| Informed Democratic Understanding (<i>informed</i>) | Binary | 0 = no 1 = yes (cf above) | 1,924 | 1 = 16% of total sample 2 = 60% NA = 23% |
| Control variables | | | | |
| Gender (<i>Woman</i>) | Binary | 0 = man 1 = woman | 2,500 | 0 = 45% of total sample 1 = 55% |
| Age (<i>age</i>) | Ordinal | ranging from 18 to 91 years old | 2,500 | Mean = 46 sd = 17.42 |

| | | | | |
|---|---------|--|-------|--|
| Income (<i>income</i>) | Ordinal | 1 (lower step) to 10 (tenth step) | 2,425 | Median (excluding NA) = 4 |
| Political Interest (<i>polintr</i>) | Ordinal | 1 (very interested) to 4 (not at all interested) | 2,448 | Mean (excluding NA) = 2.8 sd = 0.8 |
| Education (<i>educ</i>) | Ordinal | 1 (no formal education) to 9 (university-level education, with degree) | 2,488 | Mean (excluding NA) = 6.5 sd = 1.80 |
| Place of residence (<i>urban</i>) | Ordinal | 1 (less than 2,000 hab.) to 9 (Moscow) | 2,500 | Mean = 4.2 sd = 2.82 |
| Government work (<i>gvmtwork</i>) | Binary | 0 = not a government work 1 = work in government or a public institution | 1,943 | 0 = 41% of total sample 1 = 37% NA = 22% |
| <i>Independent Variables of Interest</i> | | | | |
| Experience of Soviet rule (<i>Soviet</i>) | Ordinal | 0 (no experience) to 4 (experience of Stalin era and all following - cf Table C) | 2,500 | Mean = 1.44 |
| Place of birth (<i>native</i>) | Binary | 0 = immigrant to Russia 1 = native | 2,479 | 0 = 5% of total sample 1 = 94% NA = 0.8% |
| Internet use for information (<i>internet</i>) | Ordinal | 1 (never) to 4 (daily) | 2,423 | Mean (excluding NA) = 2.7 sd = 1.80 |
| TV news use for information (<i>tv</i>) | Ordinal | 1 (never) to 4 (daily) | 2,490 | Mean (excluding NA) = 4.7 sd = 0.76 |

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