

The Houses that Khrushchev and Brezhnev Built

Citadels of Support or Incubators of Political Protest?

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One of the biggest movie hits of the Soviet era, *The Irony of Fate, or Enjoy Your Bath* (1975), still shown around New Year's Day on Russia's major television channels to high ratings, exploited the profound social implications of a 30-year boom in mass housing construction under former Soviet leaders Nikita Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev. In the movie, the protagonist, who had moved into a newly-built high-rise apartment in Moscow, drinks one too many on New Year's Eve with his friends, who put him on a plane to Leningrad (St. Petersburg) by mistake. Still under the influence of vodka and unaware he is in a different city, he gives his Moscow address to the cab driver – "Construction Workers' Street" – and finds himself in an identical high-rise apartment complex. His key fits the door lock and inside he finds the apartment layout and even the furniture exactly the same as that which he had had in Moscow. Millions of Soviet viewers laughed at this setup, which was not as far removed from reality as someone who had not lived in the Soviet Union might think.

This hit scenario captured monumental social transformations that took place from the mid-1950s through the late 1980s as a result of Soviet government investment in thousands of pre-fabricated 5- to 16-floor complexes mostly built of concrete panels that standardized settlement patterns in and around Soviet cities. Fifteen years after the Soviet collapse, few features of contemporary Russia engender the unmistakable back-in-the-USSR sensation than these nondescript, predominantly grey sprawls that continue to stand prominently, and even to dominate, most Russian cities. These estates (*mikroraiony*) may still have enduring political impact. Not only are they likely to

embody socioeconomic conditions, but one may also reasonably expect them to circumscribe distinct lifestyles and socialization patterns that cut across Russia's 10 time zones. At a minimum, one may ask to what extent these quintessentially Soviet residential patterns still have significant implications for political perceptions and behavior of ordinary Russians, midway through Vladimir Putin's second term as president and 15 years after the collapse of the USSR.

This memo looks at residency effects on three politically relevant outcomes in contemporary Russia: (1) support for Vladimir Putin or a political leader like him; (2) a perceived likelihood of public protest – strikes, meetings, demonstrations, and other forms of mass public action – against Russia's president, the executive branch, or provincial governors; and (3) life satisfaction and assessment of individual life prospects. Are the Khrushchev and Brezhnev era mega-estates bastions of support for Putin's system which tap heavily into Soviet nostalgia, or, paradoxical as it may seem, are they incubators of a "revolution of rising expectations" and social protest that could move Russia out of the long shadow of the Soviet Union?

Tapping into Mass Public Opinion Data

To examine these questions, I draw on an opinion survey that I designed and which was carried out throughout the Russian Federation in the fall of 2005 by the Levada Analytical Center and, in Primorsky krai, by the Public Opinion Research Laboratory of the Institute of History, Archaeology, and Ethnography of the Peoples of the Far East (IHAE). The total number of respondents in the Levada Center survey was 4,080. It was drawn from a sample of the adult population of the Russian Federation (680 respondents), the city of Moscow (400), Moscow oblast (400), Krasnodar krai (including the Republic of Adygea) (650), Volgograd oblast (650), Orenburg oblast (650) and the Republic of Tatarstan (650). The IHAE survey queried another 660 respondents, making for a total of 4,740 respondents in all.

Support for Putin (and, by proxy, the form of political leadership and outlook he represents) was measured by asking respondents if they voted for him in the 2004 presidential election. The perceived likelihood of protest in respondents' provinces against Russia's president, the Russian government, or the provincial governor (or republican president) was assessed by respondents on a scale of 1 (improbable) to 5 (highly probable). Life satisfaction at the time of the survey was measured on a scale from - 3 (completely dissatisfied) to + 3 (completely satisfied); future outlook was assessed based on whether respondents believed their lives in the next five years (2005-2010) would improve, stay about the same, or worsen. Age, gender, and income of respondents were also held constant since they correlated nonrandomly with voting for Putin and perceived likelihood of protest.

Since selection of respondents was based on probability sampling across urban and rural areas, the samples are likely to reflect the prevalence of particular types of housing within each survey location (even though they do not necessarily correspond to the actual distribution of housing types across Russia). All in all, I looked at five types of houses that Khrushchev and Brezhnev built. In most regions, the prevalent types are Khrushchev-era apartment complexes, represented for the most part by the ubiquitous

five-storied concrete-panel *khrushchevki*, and Brezhnev-era mass housing projects, represented for the most part by nine-storied concrete-panel apartment complexes. When combined, these two housing types accounted for 28.1 percent of respondents in the Russian Federation, 49.6 percent in the city of Moscow, 54.2 percent in Moscow oblast, 12.8 percent in Krasnodar, 29.7 percent in Volgograd, 16.3 percent in Orenburg, 48.8 percent in Tatarstan, and 33.5 percent in Primorskii krai. Other categories were (a) 5- to 16-floor brick “elite” complexes, usually with larger apartments, better amenities, and more comfortable layouts (known as *doma uluchshennoi planirovki*), accounting for 2 percent of respondents across Russia and between 1.9 percent (Krasnodar) and 15 percent (Primorsky) of respondents in regional samples; (b) small projects (2- to 4-floor houses) built in Brezhnev’s time; and (c) brick or concrete private houses, most of which were built under Khrushchev or Brezhnev.

The Results: Receding but Significant Legacies

To examine how residence in a certain type of housing relates to the vote for Putin, perceived likelihood of protest, and life satisfaction, I ran two types of tests. First, I looked at the impact of residence in each of the five types of Khrushchev and Brezhnev-era housing. Second, given substantial similarities between mass housing projects built under Khrushchev and Brezhnev, as well as the fact that a substantial proportion of houses built in the first five years of Brezhnev’s rule were still designed under Khrushchev, I examined how residence in both of these two types of houses – compared to all other housing types – affected each of the three principal variables of interest.

The results are complex, yet certain distinct and significant findings emerge:

- Moscow has clearly become a post-Soviet city: residence in any of the Khrushchev-Brezhnev houses has no significant effects on the Putin vote, perceived likelihood of protest, or life satisfaction.
- Regarding the vote for Putin, residence in *khrushchevokas* either had no effect, or translated into voting for other candidates or non-voting (as in Volgograd oblast). Conversely, residence in mass housing projects of the Brezhnev era (5- to 16-floor concrete complexes) was associated only with a “yes” vote for Putin (as in Orenburg and Primorskii) and did not relate to voting for other candidates or not voting in any region.
- Paradoxically, in the Russian Federation and Krasnodar samples, failure to vote for Putin was related to residence in elite housing projects of the Brezhnev period – presumably the ones that would most likely evoke nostalgia for the Soviet past among average Russians. It is plausible, however, that residents in these types of housing would be less nostalgic precisely because they had ample opportunity to experience the lifestyle they actually offered (as opposed to imagining it), found the conditions wanting, and developed higher aspirations.
- Regarding protest, mass public action against Putin specifically was not viewed as likely by those residing in the Khrushchev-era houses. Yet, the latter emerged as likely incubators of protest against the Russian government or provincial governors in Moscow oblast, Krasnodar, and Volgograd. As it happens, only in

these three regions was the proportion of respondents in *khrushchevkas* higher than the proportion of residents in mass, elite, or small-scale Brezhnev-era projects. Only in Tatarstan did residence in Khrushchev housing translate into the view that protest was unlikely. Brezhnev-era housing also related more, on the whole, to a stronger perception of the likelihood of protest. In only one type of housing – small Brezhnev-era projects – were residents systematically more likely to assess the likelihood of any type of protest as high, regardless of region.

- Responses on life satisfaction and assessment of life prospects indicate, however, that Khrushchev and Brezhnev projects are unlikely incubators of mass political protest. Invariably, residence in mass housing complexes of this period translates, in most regions, into higher life satisfaction at the time of the survey (Moscow, Krasnodar, Volgograd, Tatarstan) and a more optimistic outlook for the future (Krasnodar, Volgograd, Primorskii). Interestingly, household income patterns do not explain this finding. Respondents in the 5- to 16-floor concrete buildings of the Khrushchev and Brezhnev periods typically reported higher incomes relative to respondents in other types of housing, but so did respondents in post-Soviet high-rise complexes. This means there is something else about residency in the Soviet-era buildings that contributed to a consistently more optimistic outlook on life than residency in post-Soviet buildings. One likely factor is that residents in the former expected less from life. For these reasons, even if a sharp drop in world energy prices, for example, undercuts incomes across Russia, it will not be likely to quickly trigger any major social protest in the Khrushchev and Brezhnev-era residential estates.

In addition, tests that looked at the effects of residence in mass housing projects of both the Khrushchev and the Brezhnev period taken collectively reveal three patterns:

- The perceived probability of social protest is consistently higher in Khrushchev and Brezhnev housing estates in the central, predominantly ethnic Russian regions (Moscow, Moscow oblast, Krasnodar, Volgograd, and Orenburg) and consistently lower in either peripheral (Primorsky) or non-ethnic Russian regions (Tatarstan).
- The above distinction is more likely due to regional context than to ethnicity. In predominantly non-Russian regions such as Tatarstan, ethnic Slavs living in Khrushchev and Brezhnev housing complexes – in contrast to Slavs in other types of housing – said protest against Putin would be less likely.
- The core-periphery distinction worked out in reverse with respect to voting for Putin. Residents of Khrushchev and Brezhnev mass housing projects were more likely to vote for Putin in Primorskii krai, but less likely to do so in Volgograd. In other regions there was no relationship between living in a Khrushchev-Brezhnev project and voting for Putin.

Conclusion

A brief response to the principal questions is that houses built by Khrushchev and Brezhnev are neither bastions of support for Putin, nor incubators of mass political

protest in Russia. At the same time, lifestyle and socialization patterns are likely to matter, given that in some of the samples, income and ethnicity had an impact on the Putin vote or perceptions of the likelihood of protest only in the Khrushchev and Brezhnev housing projects, but not elsewhere.

Only when the rest of Russian cities become “de-Sovietized” in their lifestyle, to the extent that Moscow had done by late 2005, may we expect the effects of Soviet-era mass housing patterns on political preferences and behavior to diminish. At the same time, as findings in Krasnodar suggest, a transition toward residency in detached private houses (a “one-storied Russia” scenario) may spell controversial outcomes in the Russian context – both stronger support for Putin-style leadership and a higher likelihood of mass public protest against all key government actors.

Voting for Putin and Likelihood of Mass Public Protest by Housing Type in Russia and Select Provinces (Russia 2005 Survey)						
Type of housing	Population share (%) ^a	Putin Vote (2004) ^b	Protest vs. President ^c	Protest vs. RF Government ^c	Protest vs. Governor ^c	
<u>Russian Federation (sample size: N=680)</u>						
Khrushchev-era apartment complex	14.1	-	-	-	-	
Brezhnev projects (5-16 floors)	14.0	-	-	-	-	
Brezhnev projects (5-16 floors), elite	2.0	No *	-	-	-	
Brezhnev small projects (2-4 floors)	2.3	-	Yes ***	Yes ***	Yes ***	
Pre-Soviet/Soviet private brick/concrete house	13.8	-	No *	No **	-	
<u>Moscow City (N=400)</u>						
Khrushchev-era apartment complex	8.4	-	-	-	-	
Brezhnev projects (5-16 floors)	41.2	-	-	-	-	
Brezhnev projects (5-16 floors), elite	18.2	-	-	-	-	
<u>Moscow Oblast (N=400)</u>						
Khrushchev-era apartment complex	29.7	-	-	Yes *	-	
Brezhnev projects (5-16 floors)	24.9	-	Yes *	Yes ***	-	
Brezhnev projects (5-16 floors), elite	5.1	-	-	-	-	
<u>Krasnodar Krai/Adygea (N=650)</u>						
Khrushchev-era apartment complex	9.5	-	-	-	Yes *	
Brezhnev projects (5-16 floors)	3.3	-	-	-	-	
Brezhnev projects (5-16 floors), elite	1.9	No *	-	-	-	
Pre-Soviet/Soviet private brick/concrete house	50.1	Yes *	Yes *	Yes *	Yes **	

^a = % respondents in the 2005 Russia survey by region; ^b = based on logistic regression; ^c = based on multiple regression (OLS)

"-" = relationship not statistically significant; probability of obtaining the relationships by chance (significance): * = < 5%, ** = < 1%, *** = < .01%

Voting for Putin and Likelihood of Mass Public Protest by Housing Type in Russia and Select Provinces (Russia 2005 Survey)						
Type of housing	Population share (%) ^a	Putin Vote (2004) ^b	Protest vs. President ^c	Protest vs. RF Government ^c	Protest vs. Governor ^c	
<u>Volgograd Oblast (N=650)</u>						
Khrushchev-era apartment complex	17.6	No *	-	Yes *	Yes ***	
Brezhnev projects (5-16 floors)	12.1	-	No *	-	Yes ***	
Brezhnev projects (5-16 floors), elite	11.5	-	-	-	-	
Pre-Soviet/Soviet private brick/concrete house	22.7	-	-	-	-	
<u>Orenburg Oblast (N=650)</u>						
Khrushchev-era apartment complex	6.0	-	-	-	-	
Brezhnev projects (5-16 floors)	10.3	Yes *	-	Yes *	Yes *	
Brezhnev projects (5-16 floors), elite	7.2	-	-	-	Yes *	
Brezhnev small projects (2-4 floors)	2.4	-	-	-	-	
Pre-Soviet/Soviet private brick/concrete house	14.9	-	-	Yes *	-	
<u>Tatarstan (N=650)</u>						
Khrushchev-era apartment complex	21.7	-	No *	No *	No *	
Brezhnev projects (5-16 floors)	26.9	-	-	-	-	
Brezhnev projects (5-16 floors), elite	10.2	-	-	-	-	
Brezhnev small projects (2-4 floors)	5.1	-	-	-	Yes *	
<u>Primorskiy Krai (N=650)</u>						
Khrushchev-era apartment complex	9.0	-	-	-	-	
Brezhnev projects (5-16 floors)	24.5	Yes *	-	No *	No ***	
Brezhnev projects (5-16 floors), elite	15.0	Yes *	-	-	-	
Pre-Soviet/Soviet private brick/concrete house	8.2	-	-	-	-	

^a = % respondents in the 2005 Russia survey by region; ^b = based on logistic regression; ^c = based on multiple regression (OLS)

** = relationship not statistically significant; probability of obtaining the relationships by chance (significance). * = < 5%, ** = < 1%, *** = < 0.01%