
How Conservative Are Russians?

FINDINGS FROM THE 2021 LEGITRUSS SURVEY

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Beginning in 2011-12, the Kremlin and the media it controls embarked on what analysts have widely called “the Conservative Turn.” With support slipping and the largest protests of the Putin era gaining momentum over that winter, the regime’s allies began politicizing certain issues related to sexuality and religion like never before. The aim, it is widely believed, was to drive a wedge between what pro-Kremlin media portrayed as an unrooted libertine minority cultivated by Russia’s Western rivals in Russia’s most elite cities and a moral grassroots majority that upheld “traditional” Russian values. Vladimir Putin, then, could be portrayed as the natural representative of the latter. Despite Russia’s subsequent preoccupation with Crimea in 2014 and ultimately the full-on invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and recognizing that the regime also [supports](#) ideational entrepreneurs propagating alternative ideas, the Conservative Turn has not lost steam.

How broad is the segment of Russia’s vote-eligible population that shares the kinds of opinions that the regime propagates with the Conservative Turn? A 2021 survey devoted to studying just this, the “LegitRuss” survey, helps supply some answers. Confirming a prior [argument](#) by Marlene Laruelle, it reveals that Russians are divided on these questions. Going further, we find that supporters of this brand of conservatism are fewer than Putin’s own supporters, and there is reason to believe that he may actually lose broader support if he ever decides to pursue this particular political agenda more aggressively.

Russia’s Conservative Turn

The fall of 2011 was a traumatic one for the Kremlin. In 2008, Putin had ceded the presidency to his close associate Dmitry Medvedev and shifted to the prime minister’s

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seat, ruling together in what was widely called “the tandem.” The arrangement had become popular, and signs were growing that the population was ready for a change in Russia’s top leadership. So when Putin and Medvedev announced on September 24, 2011, that they would be switching places in 2012, with Putin returning to the presidency and Medvedev becoming prime minister, many were upset. The ruling pair made things even worse by stating openly that this had essentially been planned, an admission that effectively gutted Medvedev’s reputation as a politician in his own right, a blow from which he never truly recovered politically. Ratings dropped. People even booed Putin at a sporting event. Because parliamentary elections were coming up in December, the dominant United Russia Party scrambled to shore up its position, ultimately resorting very sloppily to a much greater level of manipulation and attempted fraud than had been the norm. This was rather easily exposed, including by some disgruntled members of the party itself.

So when the party nevertheless claimed to have won an outright majority of parliamentary seats in the election, protests broke out that quickly escalated. Some even speculated the regime could fall. The Kremlin did not seem that worried, but it was worried enough to offer some concessions, including allowing some formerly blacklisted liberal opposition politicians to again appear on major television channels. Along with these concessions, though, it was also making some institutional changes designed to enhance legitimacy without actually giving up control, such as the introduction of gubernatorial elections that would enable the Kremlin to easily filter out unwanted candidates. As 2012 progressed, the regime also began a greater show of force, increasingly jailing opponents and prosecuting ordinary people who had participated in protest events.

In this context, pro-Kremlin forces also, for the first time, began an emphasis on values. As Maria Lipman has [argued](#), prior to 2011-12, the Kremlin had tended not to interfere with the private lives of citizens so long as they did not become involved in open opposition. Thus while homophobia was known to be widespread, the regime itself did not try to mobilize it as a legitimization strategy (a few political entrepreneurs at local and national levels notwithstanding). With the 2011-12 protests, though, things changed. Russia’s parliament became a “mad printer,” generating seemingly law after law on conservative themes. It became illegal to offend the feelings of religious believers, to “propagandize” what were called “non-traditional” sexual orientations to children, or for foreign homosexuals to adopt Russian children. The punk-art collective Pussy Riot provided the regime with a poster case that seemingly captured all of these elements when they staged a guerilla anti-Putin performance at Moscow’s Christ the Savior Cathedral, an action lambasted by state media as immoral and blasphemous. Effectively, the “for honest elections” protesters were being tarred as representatives of a morally corrupt West.

This line of legislation continued and eventually became enshrined in Russia's Constitution in 2020. With Putin then in his second of two consecutive terms as president, and thus constitutionally unable to run for reelection, he introduced amendments to the basic law that would reset his count toward the term limit. To avoid a 2011-like popular backlash, the Kremlin's strategy appears to have been to distract attention from the term-limit reset by [including](#) it as only one among some 206 constitutional changes, all of which would be put to a vote over several days in summer 2020. Many of these amendments reflected the Conservative Turn, including everything from defining marriage as between a man and a woman to declaring faith in God a foundation of Russian statehood. Clearly, the Kremlin's belief was that these changes would have broad support. With Putin now clear of formal term limits and able to claim new legitimacy with the constitutional voting, he soon embarked on what would become his February 2022 all-out invasion of Ukraine, which (in a familiar refrain) tars Kyiv authorities as the supposed puppets of a morally corrupt West that threatens basic Russian values and culture.

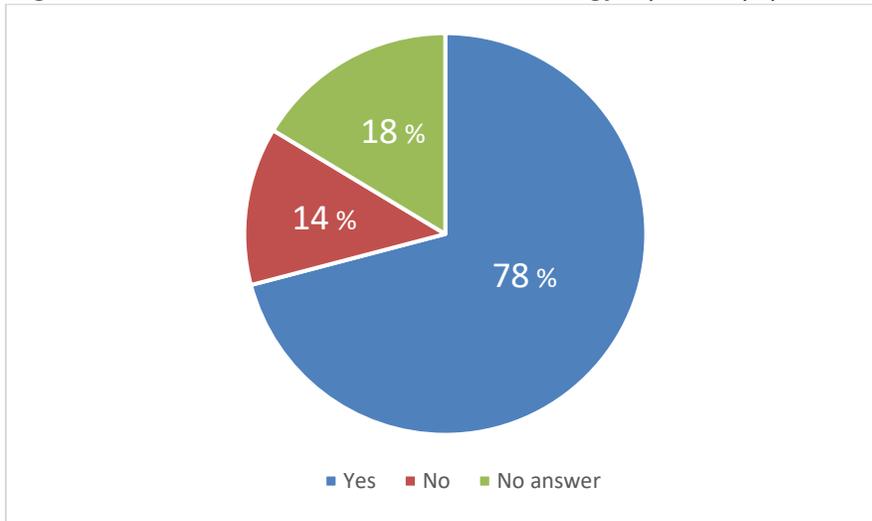
The 2021 LegitRuss Survey

To what extent do people actually share such values? The LegitRuss survey was designed, in part, to find some answers. Funded by the Research Council of Norway as project number 300997, "LegitRuss" refers to a University of Oslo study on "Values-based legitimation in authoritarian states: top-down versus bottom-up strategies, the case of Russia" led by principal investigators Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud. Part of this study was to conduct a survey to probe mass attitudes (the present author had a significant but not exclusive role in designing it). Conducted by the Russian agency VTsIOM, the survey interviewed a total of 5,100 people, which includes a nationally representative sample of 1,500 plus oversamples of 600 respondents each in 6 regions of Russia. Respondents were randomly selected by phone number and then called for the interview. The results presented here, unless explicitly stated otherwise, are generated using weights that adjust the survey samples to population parameters that are known through Russia's state statistics agency.

State Authorities as Moral Authorities

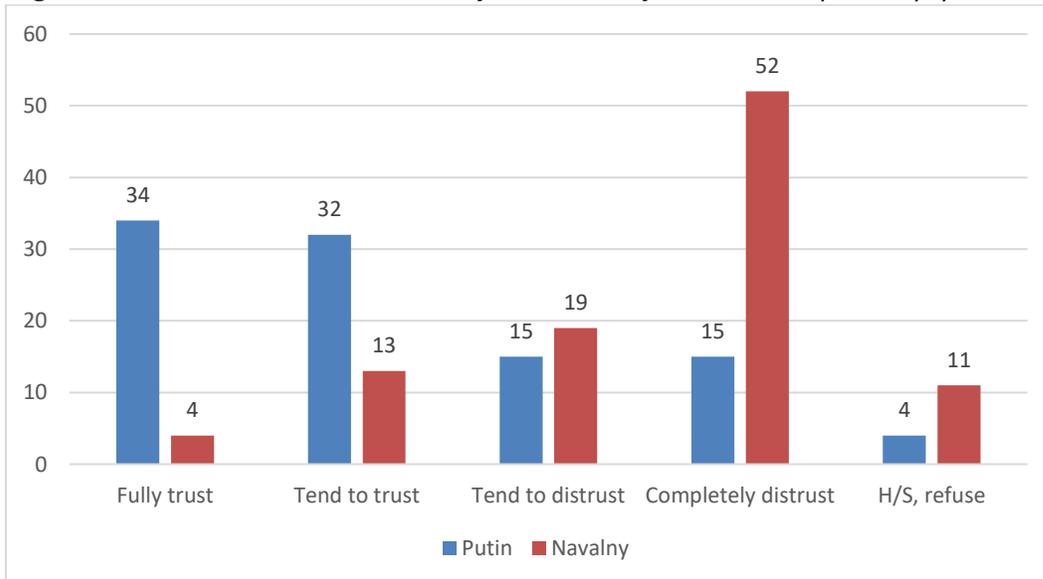
One interesting finding is that Russians do tend strongly to look to state authorities for moral guidance. For one thing, over three-quarters of the population believe that Russia should have a state ideology, as **Figure 1** shows.

Figure 1. Should Russia Have a State Ideology? (percent population)



And if one asks more distinctively about whether people trust Putin specifically as a moral authority, an impressive two-thirds say they do, over three times more than trust his most prominent opposition opponent, Alexei Navalny. This is shown in **Figure 2**.

Figure 2. Trust in Putin and Navalny on Morality and Ethics (percent population)



Note: Precise question wording is: "Some organizations and people deserve more trust in matters of morality and ethics. I will now read out a list of organizations, institutions, and people. For each of them, tell me, do you fully trust, rather trust, rather not trust or absolutely not trust them in matters of morality and ethics? ... President Vladimir Putin ... Alexei Navalny." Figures reflect weighting on key demographics to yield valid estimates of Russia's population as a whole.

We should not, though, leap to the conclusion that people have in mind *conservative* values when saying they trust Putin on moral issues and support the state having an ideology. The LegitRuss survey followed up on the question about state ideology, asking people

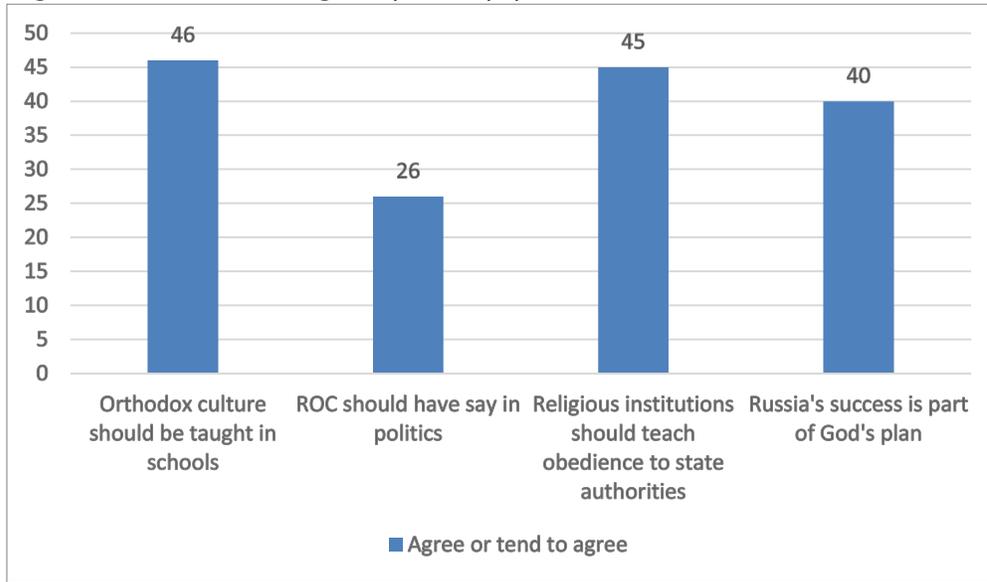
what specific ideology they thought Russia should have. There was little agreement, and only about half favored including some kind of “traditional” elements. Moreover, many people may not actually ascribe to Putin the conservative values that his regime has been observed to propagate. This has been brought home in an important study by Janet Elise Johnson and co-authors [finding](#) that Putin actually sends mixed signals to his citizenry on issues of gender, and that his rhetoric is more ambiguous and Soviet than in line with the Conservative Turn. Moreover, the LegitRuss survey asked people how closely they followed what Putin said on issues of gender and religion, and the overwhelming answer was “not very much.”² Only 28 percent said they followed his views on LGBTQ+ issues at all closely, and only slightly more (31 percent) were attentive to what he was saying on the relationship between church and state.

A Society Divided on Values

To understand the extent to which Russians actually share conservative values, the best initial strategy is to ask them directly, and also to ask multiple questions to make sure our conclusions are not skewed by any particular wording. LegitRuss principal investigators Kolstø and Blakkisrud have already taken us part of the way, [reporting](#) that Russians are not, on the whole, actually very “traditional” when it comes to religiosity. In fact, they find that believers differ very little from non-believers on issues such as abortion, premarital sex, and divorce, with society overall being largely split, if not leaning toward the non-conservative position. In addition, just over half, 56 percent, report belonging to a religious denomination at all, and of these, only 81 percent belong to the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), and 14 percent are Muslim. Only a decided minority of 26 percent think that the ROC should have a say in politics, with 71 percent opposing this. That said, 40 percent do confess to agreeing that it is God’s plan for Russia to be successful—large share of the population but still not a majority. These dispositions are summarized in **Figure 3**.

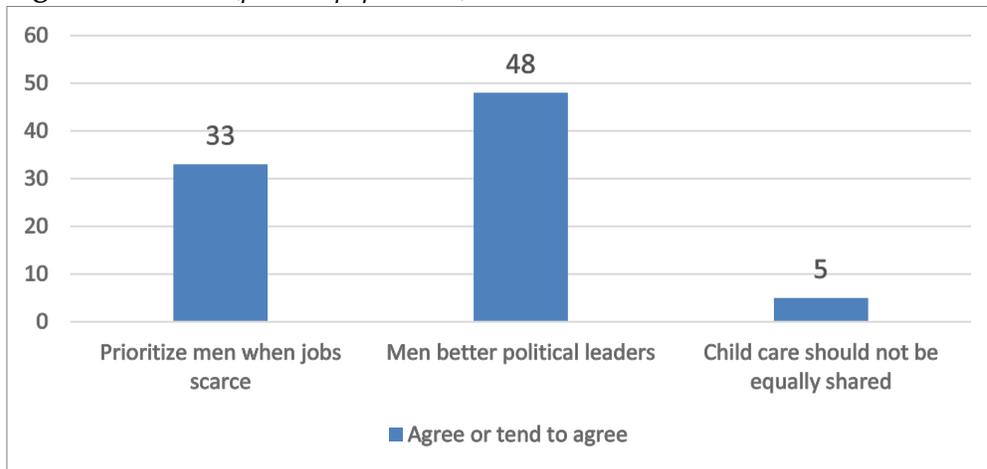
² This question was asked only of a randomly selected third of the respondents, but since the subsample was randomly selected, it is also a nationally representative subsample (just a smaller one).

Figure 3. Views on Religion (percent population)



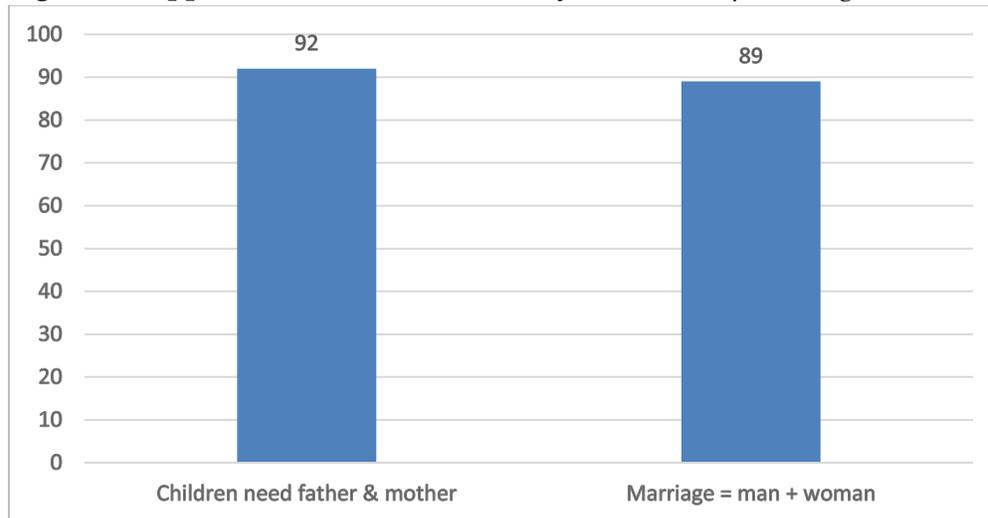
The population turns out to be similarly divided on issues relating to gender, with the exception of LGBTQ+-related questions, which are discussed separately below. As **Figure 4** illustrates, fewer than half the population is willing to publicly endorse overt elements of patriarchy. While sizable minorities think men are better political leaders than women and believe men should get priority when jobs are hard to find, only 5 percent are willing to advocate unequal childcare responsibility and 97 percent say it is never justified to beat a wife or girlfriend. Interestingly, on the sexist values that get more support, the views of men and women do not differ much. Instead, the divide seems to be more generational. For example, if 55 percent of older people find men make better political leaders, only 34 percent among the youngest in the survey would agree. Similarly, just 24 percent of the younger cohort think men deserve job priority, while about twice as many (44 percent) of people over age 60 do.

Figure 4. Sexism (percent population)



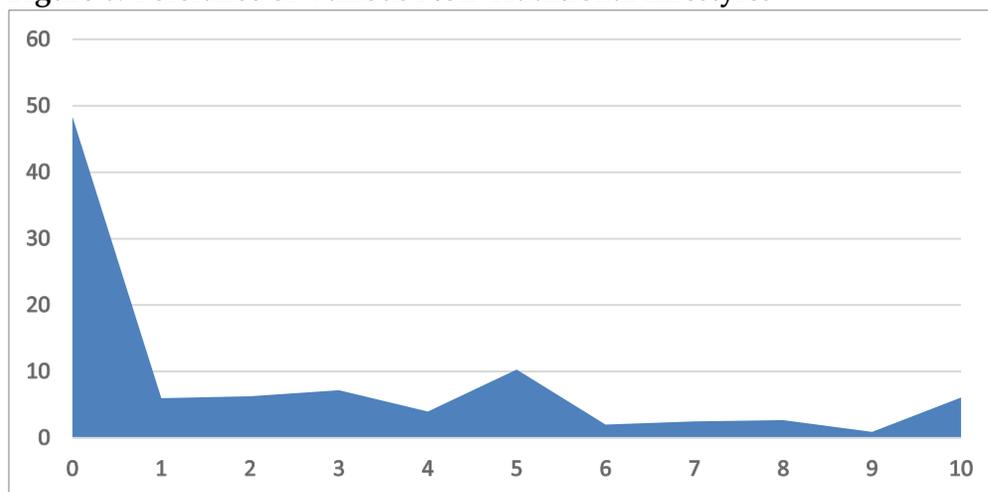
When it comes to what Kremlin discourse refers to as “non-traditional” sexual orientations and family structures, however, we confirm that Russian society is strikingly intolerant. An overwhelming 92 percent believe children need both a father and a mother, and almost the same share (89 percent) agree with the Kremlin that marriage should be defined as a union between one man and one woman, as **Figure 5** reports.

Figure 5. Support for “Traditional” Family Structures (percent agree or tend to agree)



Similarly, **Figure 6** demonstrates that Russians overwhelmingly consider tolerance of non-traditional lifestyles and sexual preferences to be alien to Russian culture and values. Sixty-nine percent would even rule out those not conforming to heteronormative norms as a neighbor, a share of the population not too much smaller than would rule out heavy drinkers and drug addicts (85 and 93 percent, respectively).

Figure 6. Tolerance of Various Non-Traditional Lifestyles



Note: Precise question wording is: “Is the Tolerance of various non-traditional lifestyles, including members of sexual minorities, completely alien to Russian culture and values (0 on the scale) or a fundamental part of them (10 on the scale)?” (Distribution of answers, percent population)

As with misogyny, anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment is also strongly age-related, and it is fading with age. Perhaps most importantly, the survey reveals that people who came of political age under Putin do not stand out for higher levels of such sentiment. For example, “only” 42 percent of those aged 18-24 would rule out sexual minorities as neighbors, as opposed to 81 percent of those 60 or older. Somewhat amazingly, a whole 97 percent of such older people insist on the “traditional” definition of marriage, compared to 63 percent of the younger cohort (this is still an alarmingly high number, though).

Conclusion

While parts of the Russian state and many of its supporters have strongly pushed conservative values since the 2011-12 Conservative Turn, the LegitRuss study shows that such an approach has the potential to appeal only to about half of the population. While a handful of conservative propositions can be described as clear majority positions, in particular hostility toward sexual minorities, most issues appear to have much more capacity to divide than to unite the population, including those involving attitudes to patriarchy and religion. Divisive issues sometimes have the potential to be political wedge issues, and it was just this quality that made them attractive to the Kremlin after Putin had already effectively “lost” support from a large part of the population after the regime’s late 2011 debacle. By stressing conservative positions that had at least close to majority appeal, the Kremlin was carving out a narrow majority for itself that could keep it stable until it regained its political footing.

But things changed when the regime did, in fact, regain its political footing with the 2014 Crimea annexation. This put the Kremlin once again in the position of actively seeking to unify Russia’s population rather than divide-and-rule it. Once that happened, issues related to conservative values became a mixed blessing. While politicizing these issues can reinforce the loyalty of some, they now also threaten to alienate others who had been brought (back) into Putin’s fold with Crimea. The LegitRuss survey found that some 67 percent of the population approved of Putin, a significantly larger share of the population than the share holding most of the conservative values considered in the same poll.³ It is likely partly for this reason that Putin personally has, as the study mentioned above found, avoided the most intolerant, inflammatory rhetoric on conservative issues; this is left to the media, United Russia Party representatives, and others close to the regime. If the Kremlin attempts to further push such values as state ideology, therefore, this is likely to be a sign of regime weakness rather than strength.

³ This figure is estimated from a randomly selected third of the sample. In the entire sample, 53 percent of the entire population said they would vote for Putin, which represents 64 percent of people who would vote and are decided on a candidate.

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