

Do Russians Trust their Police?

REFORM MUST START FROM THE TOP

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 546

October 2018

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Despite some recent, seemingly half-hearted efforts, the police remain one of Russia's most unreformed bureaucracies and Russians' trust in police has been low throughout the post-Soviet period. Survey [data](#) from the NGO Public Verdict and the Levada Center, which asked an annual question from 2010 to 2015 about whether respondents trust the police in their town or region, shows that in 2015 nearly half of respondents (47.2 percent) either strongly or somewhat trusted the police, whereas in 2010 only about a third (32.9 percent) reported this level of trust. Other polls have shown similar results. Though understanding change over time is important, a measurement of general attitudes can only tell us so much. Most people's attitudes are more nuanced than "trust/don't trust." For the police, such a stark dichotomy gives little guidance for concrete measures on how to develop a better relationship with the public.

For deeper insight, we examine data from a 2011 survey of Moscow residents that focuses specifically on attitudes toward the police. We find such attitudes to be more systemic than personal: more positive individual interactions with police are not enough to change people's attitudes. Moreover, perceptions of police effectiveness, fairness, and corruptibility/misconduct each have independent impacts on Russians' overall level of trust in their police. Reforms that address any one of these factors could have important impacts on public trust, but these will likely need to come from above. Survey respondents express a preference for top-down solutions to improve police work. Police can also increase trust by refraining from harsh crackdowns on protests, though frontline officers often have little control over this type of decision-making. Overall, the results are instructive in thinking through potential reform pathways for the Russian police, if indeed they do desire to improve their relationship with the public.

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Russian Police Reform in Brief

The Russian police (*Ministerstvo Vnutrennikh Del* or “MVD”) are the largest of the security services and employ over one million people, with most working on the ground in direct contact with citizens. The MVD is hierarchically organized and divided into specialized sub-units that each fulfills specific functions (traffic policing, public order policing, criminal investigations, etc.). Each of these specialized units are replicated at the national, federal district, regional, and local levels.

In 2011, the police underwent the most comprehensive reform of the post-Soviet period. They were renamed from the *militsiya* to the *politsiya*, salaries were raised 30 percent, and they were given new uniforms and more resources for equipment and training. At the same time, a recertification process reduced police staff by 22 percent and the police budget was re-centralized to the federal level. Despite public debate—the entire draft law was put online for public commentary—and expert input, the reform has accomplished little more than superficial changes. It did not fundamentally change the structure, personnel, approach to the job, or operational capacities of the police. What most ordinary people saw was just a change in name and uniform, which they [reacted](#) to cynically.

More recent reforms have reshuffled powers between the security services, placing the Federal Migration Service and the Drug Control Service under the MVD and removing the internal troops (*Vnutrenniye Voiska Ministerstva Vnutrennikh Del* or “VV”) and riot police (*Otryad Militsii Osobogo Naznacheniya* or “OMON”) from the MVD and placing them into a newly created National Guard, a security force under the direct control of the president. Because most of these are specialized units, ordinary people are unlikely to encounter them in their day-to-day lives. Public order policing is still contained within the MVD as it has always been.

The Russian police have struggled to establish legitimacy and have been described as lazy, corrupt, predatory, biased, and indifferent to the needs of citizens. Yet, they are the arm of the state with which the public has the most interaction and are certainly the most public face of the state’s power. Beyond the more politicized aspects of policing like the violent breakup of peaceful protests, ordinary people remain interested in seeing improvements in the way police do their jobs. Russians want their beat officers to ensure law and order, protect them from violence, and keep an eye on questionable people in the neighborhood. They do indeed call when something is amiss and expect the police to show up to respond to their concerns, not unlike citizens of other countries. Though the harsh police response to the anti-corruption and pension protests of the past year have once again put the police-public relationship in the spotlight, the police have long been concerned with improving their image with the public and have tried a variety of tactics to increase trust.

How Attitudes Toward the Police Are Constructed

The public’s attitudes toward the police matter for a variety of reasons. Research in many different country contexts suggests that positive attitudes toward the police and beliefs in police legitimacy make people more likely to cooperate with them by obeying the law (in

specific police encounters and more generally), report crimes, and attend or participate in public-police meetings. Conversely, negative attitudes mean that these behaviors are less likely; crime control will be more difficult and fear and hostility to the police may increase (or continue). People may rely on third party enforcement mechanisms (gangs, mafia, private enforcers), be unwilling to delegate even basic powers to police, and at the extreme, there may be a decrease in the legitimacy of the entire political system.

Contemporary police research has tried to isolate and identify the impact of component parts of attitudes, rather than focusing on responses to more general questions like trust/don't trust. These studies have consistently differentiated between two sets of attitudes—perceptions of effectiveness and perceptions of fairness—which they find have distinctly different impacts. These studies also examine whether contact with the police and demographic characteristics increase (or decrease) the likelihood of trusting the police. We look at these same factors, but also investigate how perceptions of police misbehavior and corruptibility impact trust given that much of the writing on Russian police has focused on the issue of corruption. We created indices from multiple survey questions about perceptions of effectiveness, fairness, and corruptibility/misconduct.

So what did we learn? First, and perhaps unsurprisingly, people who believe that the police are more effective, more fair, and engage in little misconduct are more likely to trust them. Each of these attitude components has a strong and independent impact on trust, but the one that stands out the most strongly is whether the police are perceived as fair. Going from a person who answered with poor assessments of police fairness on every question in the index to one who had across-the-board good assessments would be associated with an almost four-category increase in trust in the police, essentially the entire five-category scale. The other two attitude components, perceptions of corruptibility/misconduct and perceptions of effectiveness, are also similar. Going from all poor assessments to all good assessments would result in a 3.5 category increase for each. The fact that each of these indices is independently important suggests that the police have a wide range of opportunities for reform each targeting a different component part of attitudes that make up trust.

Second, it appears that attitudes toward the police are much more systemic than they are personal. When we looked at contact with the police we found that it had no discernible relationship to trust regardless of whether people sought out the police themselves or the contact was initiated by the police. This suggests that when thinking about reform, it is not enough for the police to be nicer, politer and more professional in individual interactions with citizens, though of course that is certainly not something to be discouraged.

Third, demographic characteristics do have some small impact on the level of trust in police. Men are slightly less likely to trust the police, as are those with higher levels of education. Being Slavic as opposed to any other nationality increases trust as does having a close friend or relative in the police. This tracks with other evidence we know from Russia. Males and non-Slavs, especially in Moscow, are more likely to be profiled and/or stopped by the police and are more likely to have negative interactions with them. But, in thinking about reform, there is little the police can do about demographics, other than to be conscious that certain

groups are less likely to trust them and attempt to improve their relationships with those groups.

And finally, though we did not set out to investigate this, another striking finding was that police non-violence in the face of protest may also make a difference in trust. In December 2011, tens of thousands of Muscovites went onto the streets to protest rigged parliamentary elections. For the first several protests, the city government gave permission for people to gather and police monitored them peacefully. The auspicious timing of our data collection, in November and December of 2011, meant that we ended up with about half of our survey sampled before the protests began in Moscow and half afterwards, but all before any crackdowns began. This natural experiment gave us a unique window into understanding how people reacted to police non-response in a situation that many expected to end violently, with the results being that trust actually went up.³ Of course, street-level police are rarely the decisionmakers on whether to let protests proceed, so non-response is not necessarily something they can employ to improve their image as a general strategy. Nevertheless, with recent protests leading to mass detentions and police crackdowns, this finding remains important.

What Does This Mean for Police Reform?

Taking what we have learned from our survey, we can offer some suggestions for how police leadership could more strategically invest time and resources in reforms that would improve the public's trust. Because each of these components has an independent influence, police leadership could pursue some or all of these strategies to improve trust.

To lower perceptions of misconduct and corruptibility, police leadership could work on publicly holding police accountable when they commit misconduct, particularly at the local level and in cases of everyday misconduct. It is clearly important to expose and combat both low-level and high-level corruption (as the Russian saying goes: the fish rots from the head). But too often there is one high-profile dismissal or trial and very little else. As recent rounds of anti-corruption protests suggest, people are increasingly frustrated with the double standards that appear to exist for ordinary people and the elite. Most encounters with police corruption happen in the course of day-to-day life. Examples include bribing police to avoid traffic tickets or other violations (such as noise complaints), paying officials to process paperwork faster, avoid additional hassle, or simply to get them to do their jobs. Police engaging in these forms of corruption and misbehavior are rarely held accountable and those officers who are willing to stand up to the system and call out corrupt behaviors by their colleagues and superiors are often prosecuted in retaliation.

To raise perceptions of police effectiveness, the police could take two pathways. First, they could actually become more effective at their jobs, in particular their crime fighting mission. As recently as March 2017, President Vladimir Putin dismissed ten top law enforcement

³ Others on our research team have also taken advantage of the timing of the data collection, see: Frye, Timothy and Borisova, Ekaterina, "Elections, Protest and Trust in Government: A Natural Experiment from Russia," *Journal of Politics*. Forthcoming.

officials around the country stating it was unacceptable that 50 percent of the nation’s crime still goes unsolved. A second pathway is to do a better job publicizing their effectiveness at solving crimes or preventing them. Doing this, especially at the local level, might have some important benefits. Studies in other countries have found that perceptions of crime in people’s own neighborhoods have significant effects on how they think the police are doing. The potential downside to this second approach is that greater publicity surrounding crime, even if it shows that the police are successfully doing their jobs, runs the risk of making it seem that crime is going up when it is really not. Pursuing this tactic would have to be done in a way that highlights police accomplishments rather than frightening the public.

Finally, when thinking about increasing perceptions of fairness, the component most powerfully connected to trust, there are a number of options: increasing transparency, making information more readily available, and increasing access for journalists, even those who might be critical of police practices. Another option is increasing the police forces’ knowledge of and incentives to follow the law. Currently, the police are incentivized more for checking boxes and increasing numbers than they are for doing quality work. This is particularly true of beat police who are so overburdened with paperwork that they spend more of their time completing forms than working with the public. In addition to our own suggestions, the survey asked respondents what they thought would improve police work. This following table shows what they had to say.

Table 1. Responses: How to Improve Police Work

	Yes	Maybe	No	Hard to Say
Stricter control by oversight agencies (prosecutors, Investigative Committee)	81	13	4	3
Stricter control by police leadership	75	16	6	3
Greater openness to media	66	21	10	4
Doubling pay for police	64	22	6	3
Regular publications of results of police work on the internet	54	24	13	9
Evaluating police via public opinion polls	50	29	18	4
Evaluating police via civil society organizations (housing, veterans, NGOs, etc.)	44	30	30	6
Firing all current police and hiring new ones	29	29	35	8

A few important messages emerge from the responses summarized in Table 1. The first is that people are willing to consider just about anything to improve the police. This is evidenced by the high percentage of people who answered “definitely yes or probably yes” to all of the suggested options. Another important takeaway is that respondents believe improving the police is a problem that can and should be solved internally. Eighty-one percent thought more oversight from the Procuracy and Investigative Committee—the institutions charged with investigating and prosecuting police misconduct—was the best solution and 74 percent thought harsher control by superiors would improve police work. These line up with some of our suggestions for improving perceptions of corruptibility, but

also suggest that people feel that they have little voice or control in changing the work of the police from the bottom up.

Conclusion

In sum, our research shows the value in looking at component parts of trust in the police. If they are truly committed to increasing public trust, Russian police leadership would be well advised to think about a multi-pronged strategy which addresses police effectiveness, fairness, and corruptibility/misconduct. Looking forward, an effective strategy could involve a comprehensive reform that addresses all three issue areas or, since each issue area has an independent effect, police could opt to address one at a time. Police should also be aware that simply improving individual-to-individual contact with the public, while a laudable goal, is not the solution to increasing trust. That said, the public's responses about what might improve police work show that this process will likely need to be a top-down one. Citizens appear to be skeptical that bottom-up reform efforts will have any influence on an institution that is so hierarchical in nature.

This research is part of a larger set of survey projects undertaken with Timothy Frye (Columbia University) and Scott Gehlbach (University of Wisconsin-Madison) with the support of the Higher School of Economics' Basic Research Fund granted to the Center for the Study of Institutions and Development at HSE in Moscow.

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