

# **The Disconnect in How Russians Think about Human Rights and Chechnya: A Consequence of Media Manipulation**

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Despite considerable evidence collected by Russian and Western organizations of human rights abuses in Chechnya and a roll back in civil liberties in other spheres of life in Russia, survey data suggest that there is little demand for the protection of human rights and civil liberties. The Kremlin and other federal and local authorities have considerable latitude to violate personal rights because information about abuses never makes it into the public sphere. In the words of one Kremlin pollster, “If the subject exists in the mass media, it exists in public opinion. If it doesn’t, it doesn’t exist in public opinion.” In other words, the presidential administration can do what it wants as long as it either denies or hides what it has done. This does not bode well for democracy in Russia.

In previous memos [PONARS Policy Memos 221 and 243], we detailed how Russians think about human rights and how they think about Chechnya. Here we show that there is a disjuncture between these two sets of views, which, we argue, stems from the government’s control of the media.

## **Human Rights and Chechnya**

Russian polling firm VTsIOM ran our special battery of questions regarding human rights and Chechnya in their omnibus survey given to a nationally representative sample of 2405 Russians from September 17 through October 9, 2001. The data reveal a complex picture of how Russians think both about human rights and about Chechnya.

In terms of human rights, they strongly support economic rights (the right to work, to own property, and to social welfare) and moderately support rights of the person (freedom from torture and arbitrary arrest). Russians are, however, apathetic when it comes to civil liberties, such as freedom of expression, religion, and assembly. Despite trials of several journalists and academics, the takeover of television stations, and a war in which federal authorities repeatedly violate treaties and conventions Russia has signed, Russians do not fear losing their civil liberties.

Moreover, concerns over rights of the person do not extend to how Russians think about the war in Chechnya. Although a majority expresses strong support for protection from arbitrary arrest and torture, which we know take place routinely in Chechnya, few in Russia link the “mop-up operations” or *zachistki* with violations of these rights. Nearly 20 percent believe that “enemies” of Russia have made up stories about abuses occurring during *zachistki*.

Notwithstanding the low level of concern about human rights abuses, the war in Chechnya is unpopular. Russians are ambivalent about the best policy course. The conflict provokes far more anxiety, fear, and alarm than it does pride. Russians are split on whether there should be an increase in military activity or a ceasefire. One thing they agree on is casualty rates: Russians are very concerned with the loss of their soldiers.

## Associations

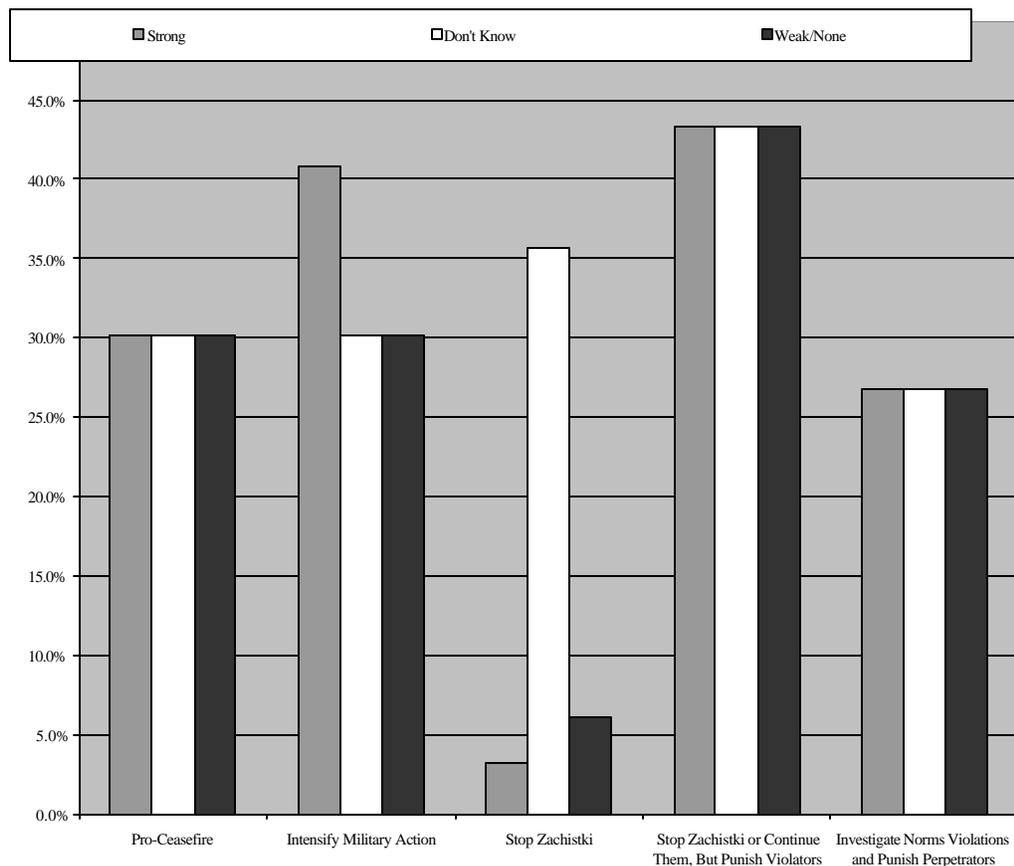
To get a more detailed picture of how Russians think about Chechnya and human rights, we looked at a number of associations. How do Russians who are strong supporters of economic rights think about the war? Are they more or less likely to be in favor of intensification of fighting? How do strong supporters of civil liberties respond to the war? Does an abstract level of concern translate into a specific response to the violations of international norms? What about concern over torture and arbitrary arrest? How do those who are concerned with these issues think about what goes on in Chechnya?

The following figures show the associations between views on Chechnya and support for, respectively, economic, civil, and personal rights, controlling for the effects of other variables that may influence views on Chechnya and support for rights. These control variables include cohort, sex, education, family income, and place of residence. The

associations are presented in terms of the expected probabilities of advocating a particular view on Chechnya corresponding to each level of support for a particular dimension of rights. The “expected” probabilities are calculated based on multivariate logistic regression models, with all variables other than the attitude dimension of interest set at their sample means. This procedure yields a “purer” picture of the association between a particular dimension of rights and views on Chechnya than the bivariate associations; it effectively controls for possibly confounding influences of variables that are correlated with support for rights and views on Chechnya. All statistically significant differences in expected probabilities are shown, and all differences shown are statistically significant.

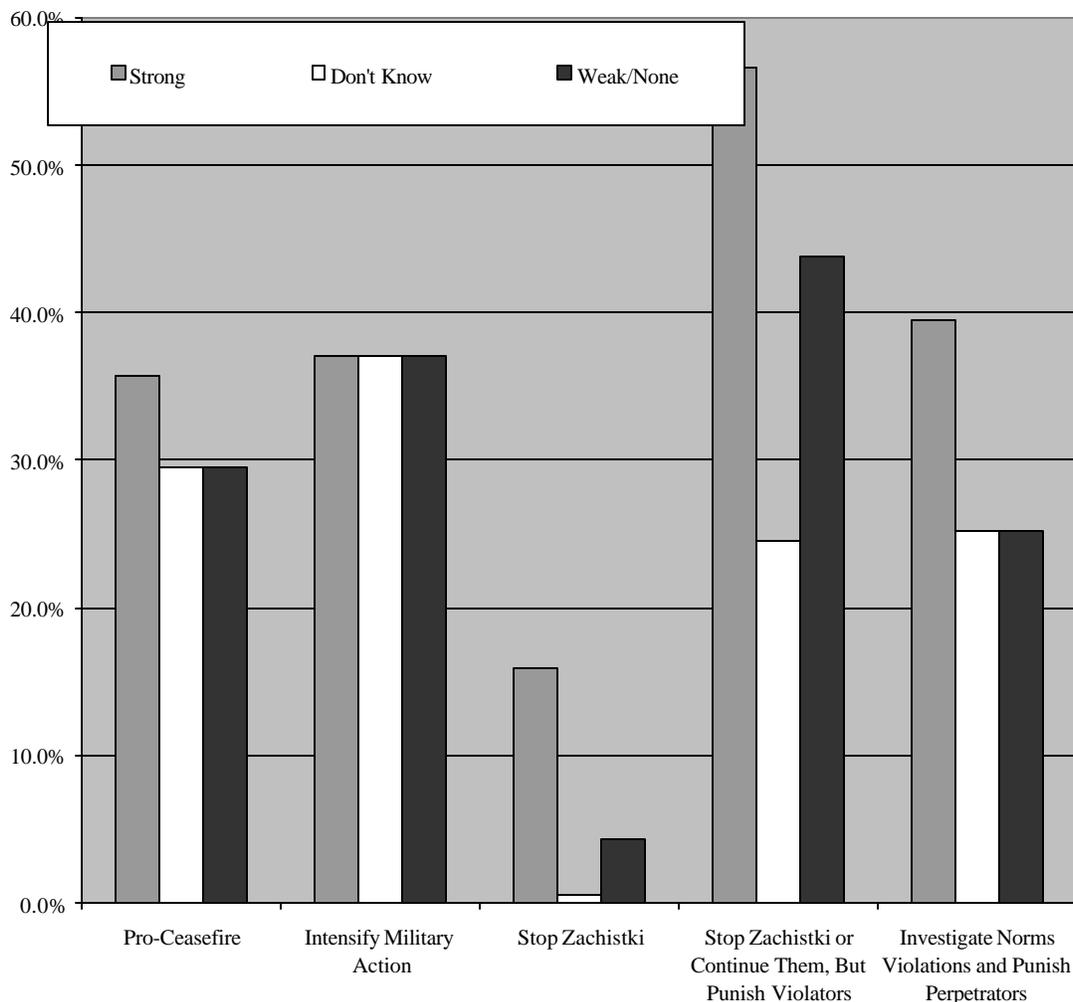
Figure 1 shows that once other variables are controlled, support for economic rights is not associated with support for a ceasefire, opposition to illegalities associated with *zachistki*, or views on how to handle allegations of war crimes by Russian troops. In fact, strong supporters of economic rights are more likely to advocate *intensifying* military action in Chechnya. They are also significantly (though slightly) *less* likely to advocate stopping the *zachistki* altogether, relative to Russians who support economic rights weakly or not at all. Curiously, Russians who have no opinion at all on economic rights—that is, those who found it “hard to say” how strongly they support freedom to work, freedom to a minimal living standard, and freedom to own property—are far more supportive of ending *zachistki* than are Russians who express an opinion on at least one of these specific economic rights. In any event, the overall result suggests there is at most a weak link between support for economic rights and views on Chechnya. If anything, strong supporters of economic rights take a more militant stance.

**FIGURE 1.**  
**Support for Economic Rights and Views on Chechnya**



The relationship between support for civil liberties and views on Chechnya is more evident, and essentially conforms to expectations (Figure 2). Strong supporters of civil rights are somewhat more likely to advocate a ceasefire than are Russians who do not strongly support civil rights (35.7 percent versus 29.5 percent). This is only a moderate association: it implies that if all Russians became strong supporters of civil rights while no other characteristics changed, then 35.7 percent of the population would advocate a ceasefire instead of the observed 30.2 percent. Quadrupling the proportion of Russians who strongly support civil rights from the observed value of roughly 12 percent to 48 percent—which would surely be a remarkable achievement by NGOs and activists—would only increase the overall level of support for a ceasefire to 32.4 percent. Moreover, it would not change the proportion of the population who favors intensifying military action, as attitudes on civil liberties do not significantly affect the probability of holding such a position. Altogether, then, the association between abstract support for civil liberties and policy preferences regarding the level of military engagement is statistically significant but weak.

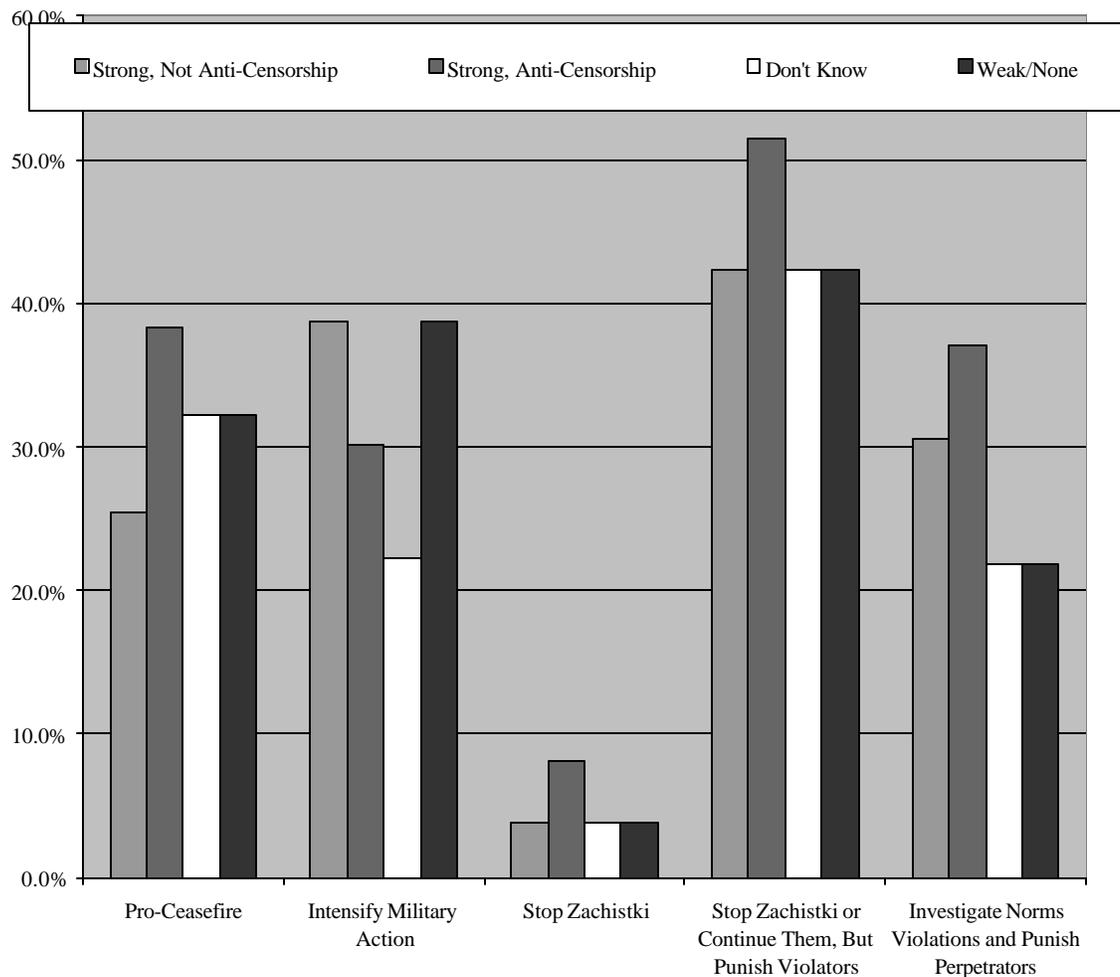
**FIGURE 2.**  
**Support For Civil Rights and Attitudes Toward Chechnya**



We find more pronounced effects of strong support for civil liberties, however, when we turn to the questions regarding the conformity of Russian forces with legal and international norms. Strong supporters are considerably more likely to advocate ending the *zachistki* altogether (15.9 percent versus 0.5 percent or 4.3 percent), and more likely to call for either stopping them or punishing those who perform illegal acts while conducting them (56.7 percent versus 24.6 percent or 23.8 percent). They also favor an independent investigation of reports of war crimes by troops and punishment of those who are found guilty in substantially greater numbers (39.5 percent versus 25.2 percent). These results are encouraging; they show that Russians who consistently voice strong support for civil liberties translate their abstract support into demands for legality and accountability on the part of Russian forces, even if they are only slightly more likely to support ceasing military hostilities relative to Russians who do not strongly support civil

liberties. Of course, the picture darkens when we recall that only about 12 percent of the weighted adult sample are strong supporters of civil liberties. Quadrupling that figure would increase overall support for ending the *zachistki* to 10.8 percent (versus the observed overall level of 5.3 percent), calls for at least limiting the *zachistki* to 54.9 percent (from 43.5 percent), and calls for independent investigation and punishment of those found guilty of war crimes to 32.0 percent (from 26.9 percent). Thus, the impact would be more dramatic than in the case of support for a ceasefire.

Figure 3 illustrates that strong support for personal rights only translates into opposition to the war and support for accountability when the respondent also expresses concern about government control over the media (“anti-censorship”). Strong supporters of personal rights who are not anti-censorship are no more critical of the war than those who do not strongly support rights of the person, and in some cases, are less critical. But strong supporters of personal rights who do think government controls are excessive—and therefore, we might assume, tend to distrust what they hear and read in the press about events in Chechnya—are more supportive of a ceasefire, less supportive of intensifying military action, more critical of *zachistki*, and more supportive of punishing any proven perpetrators of war crimes. This finding implies that if more Russians who strongly support personal rights—which is about half the population—were to receive reliable information about abuses, then criticism of the war would likely increase. The Russian authorities correctly perceive that public support for the war requires both continued control over the media and consistent public denials and obfuscation of these controls.

**FIGURE 3. Support For Personal Rights and Views on Chechnya**

## Explanations

Aside from some dedicated organizations and activists, and a few war correspondents, 16 percent of Russians, at most, are concerned about human rights violations that go on in Chechnya. In the abstract, Russians are concerned with torture and arbitrary arrest, but this does not translate to Chechnya. Why? Perhaps Russians dislike Chechens and feel they do not deserve the same protections as citizens elsewhere in Russia, in which case the explanation centers on ethnic prejudice. But in our survey, only 15 percent say that they feel “anger at the Chechens” due to the war. Perhaps Russians accept the argument that the struggle against terrorism justifies violations of human rights. Again, our data suggest otherwise: only 22.4 percent cited fear of terrorism as one of their 5-6 greatest concerns. They are far more worried about economic, and even moral issues, than terrorism.

We favor a third explanation for the lack of concern about human rights violations in Chechnya: the Russian government has been largely successful in limiting information about the

war. While readers in the United States and Europe have a lot of information regarding abuse and atrocities committed in Chechnya by Russian federal authorities, Russians do not. This is no accident. The Putin administration has implemented a cohesive strategy explicitly designed to prevent information that might undermine its policies from reaching the Russian public. All states seek to control information about how they use force. But Russian authorities have been able to go further in this regard because there is so little independent media in post-Soviet Russia.

Specifically, the authorities established the PR center, *Rosinformatsentr*, to shape stories about the war. They punished journalists who departed from the sanctioned line, such as Andrei Babitsky and Anna Politkovskaya. The minister of press, Mikhail Lesin, who had ties to *Rosinformatsentr*, worked with Putin allies inside the Duma to amend laws that made it more difficult to report on the war. Federal authorities carried out several dedicated campaigns, harassing and even taking over media outlets that published critical information about the war. Other news outlets, which also had borrowed money from the state but which towed the line on Chechnya, were left alone, allowing editors and publishers to draw their own conclusions.

By eliminating critical media, the Putin administration has successfully kept Russians in the dark about abuses and failures in Chechnya. Numerous Russian and foreign journalists have spoken about the difficulty of reporting; how Chechnya is treated by editors as if it were a black hole; how one cannot write about what goes on without fear of punishment. We believe that this absence of reporting is the main factor behind the disconnect between Russians' support for personal rights and their views on Chechnya that we detect in our survey data. In turn, Russians' lack of concern about civil rights enables the Putin regime to crack down on the independent media without suffering a loss of public support: only 18 percent of our sample think there is too much control of the media. Over a third think it should be increased.

## Policy Implications

Because we found a disjuncture between abstract concern over human rights and specific situations, and because we found little support even in the abstract for a variety of civil liberties, we believe support for human rights is extremely weak in Russia. Demand for the protection of civil liberties is very low. Demand for the protection of personal rights is substantial in the abstract, but minimal in the concrete situation of Chechnya. These findings are discouraging for those who want to see Russia move toward democracy. They show that an independent press is indispensable for establishing a society in which the demand for protection of rights is high, the supply of laws protecting rights is high, and the level of abuse is low. Without a critical media and the consistent application of laws, especially within the military justice system, the Russian government has free rein to intimidate its critics—real and perceived—in the media, NGOs, parties, and religious organizations. Apathy toward abuses of power by Russian authority is likely to remain high so long as illegal arrests and torture are kept out of the public eye.

Western leaders and publics are well aware of these abuses. They should avoid the temptation to look the other way in the name of forging an antiterrorist coalition with Russia. Although it may be awkward to do so, they must acknowledge that Russia's approach to fighting terrorism is starkly inconsistent with U.S. and European approaches. As they continue to work with the Russian government on a range of issues, Western governments should dramatically

step up their efforts to increase the demand for protection of rights in Russia. There are several ways to do this.

First, international organizations should insist on full investigations of all allegations regarding behavior by Russian authorities that does not comply with rules regulating membership in European organizations, even if the alleged abuses are committed in the name of “fighting terrorism.” For example, the UN high commissioner for human rights should specifically request investigations with international involvement rather than an investigation by unspecified parties, which Mary Robinson requested in April 2000. Our data show that Russians may support the involvement of international bodies. The Council of Europe should pursue its mission of monitoring compliance with rights more aggressively and publicly than it has to date. Demands by watchdog organizations for the protection of the rights of member states and their citizens can only be positive for Russia. These demands should be explicitly backed in statements by government leaders.

Second, the United States and Europe can help increase the demand for the protection of human rights inside Russia by tripling their budgets for democracy assistance. This assistance should be seen as a part of the counterterrorism strategy; after all, the fight against terrorism is a fight for transparent, open societies.

Third, and more specifically, Russian activists must be provided platforms in the West for discussing what actually goes on in Russia. Donors that support human rights in Russia should regularly host human rights and democratic activists in major European and North American capitals and raise the profile of the issues and increase accuracy in reporting. If competition of views is not allowed inside Russia, there is no reason that it cannot take place outside Russia.

Finally, while the demand for protection of rights must come mainly from inside Russia, Western donors can help organizations develop strategies that circumvent the restricted media market in Russia. Without this assistance, Russian NGOs that Western donors have long worked with have tended to speak only to each other. In the lead-up to national elections in 2003, it is crucially important that Russian NGOs act now to design media strategies that circumvent government control of the media. They need to find ways to get information into the public domain that will increase the demand for protection of rights. They have material to work with: Russians are concerned about casualty rates in Chechnya and about torture and arbitrary arrest. NGOs in Russia must raise awareness on these issues. There are large numbers of Russians who express no opinion on a variety of important issues related to Chechnya and whose opinion perhaps could be shaped with more information. Moreover, political parties favoring military reform might use data to raise the profile of this issue with the public. Public awareness campaigns have been mounted in places with restricted access to the media, such as in Serbia, Ukraine, and even Belarus. Russian activists have much to learn from activists in Eastern Europe. Western donors can help bring these activists together.