

# **Russians Support NGOs But Not Parties Implications for Donors**

## **PONARS Policy Memo No. 256**

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In previous PONARS memos (see especially no. 221, also nos. 243 and 244), we presented October 2001 survey results showing weak support among Russians for human rights, particularly for civil liberties and the application of rights norms in concrete situations. Earlier this year we conducted another round of surveys and also ran nine focus groups in Russia in order to replicate earlier results and explore in more detail the potential (or lack thereof) for movements promoting human rights in Russia.\* Earlier results with respect to broad attitudes toward human rights norms were confirmed by our more recent data. Here we focus on new findings that cast a somewhat different light on the potential for human rights organizations to garner support among the Russian public.

Our data show a surprisingly high level of support for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) supporting human rights, and even for those opposing the war in Chechnya. In stark contrast, Russians think very poorly of political parties, as our surveys and focus also indicated, echoing the growing consensus among observers of Russian parties. As Russia heads into the national electoral season in 2003, the human rights community, political parties, and most importantly, international donors would do well to heed the story told by these findings.

### **How Russians View Human Rights: Replicating Earlier Findings**

Our 2002 surveys replicate several findings from our October 2001 survey:

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\* The survey data come from two surveys conducted by the All-Russian Center for Public Opinion and Market Research (VTsIOM). We designed an entire survey that was given to a probability sample of 18- to 64-year-olds residing in six regions of Russia (Perm, Sverdlovsk, Ryazan, Kaluga, Rostov on Don, and Stavropol) in April 2002 (N = 3002). We also included a subset of questions from this survey on the May 2002 edition of VTsIOM's Monitoring survey, administered to a nationally representative sample (total N = 2407). We combined the data from these two surveys, using case weights to adjust for the over-sampling of particular regions, the highly educated, women, and urban dwellers, in order to obtain unbiased estimates of population parameters. For the sake of consistency, we omit those respondents to the Monitoring survey who are outside the age limits of the regional survey, yielding an effective sample size of 4,909. We conducted three focus groups in each of three regions—Perm, Ryazan and Rostov—from July 15 to July 22, 2002.

- Russians perceive human rights along three distinct dimensions: economic rights, rights of the person, and civil liberties.
- They strongly support economic rights, moderately support rights of the person, and only weakly support civil liberties.
- Support for each rights dimension is only weakly predicted by age, education, place of residence, and material well-being.
- Support for the application of rights norms in concrete instances, such as the war in Chechnya and issues involving freedom of the press, is considerably weaker than support for rights norms in the abstract.
- The focus groups provided additional support for each of these statements.

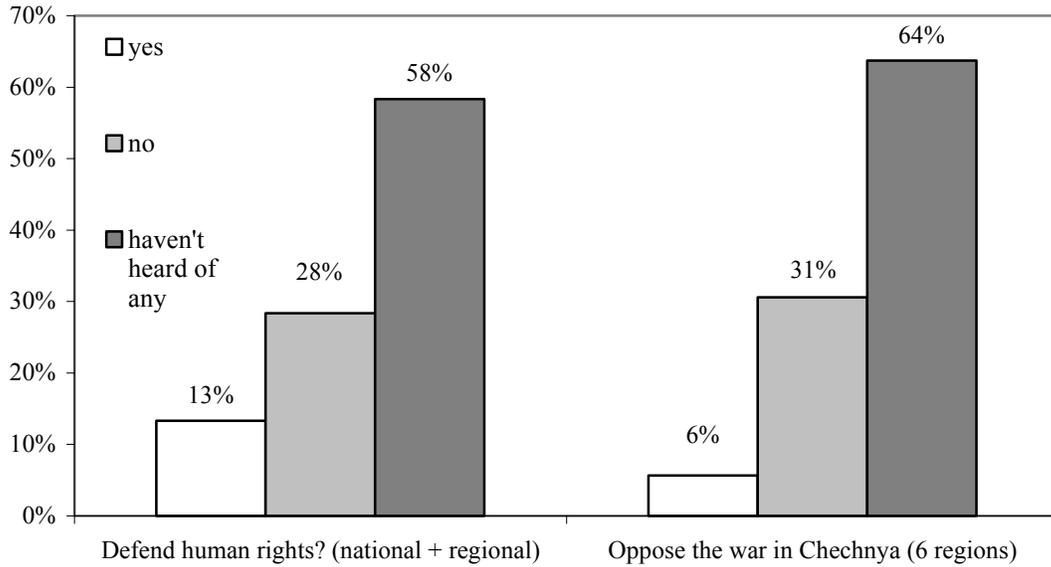
### **A New Dimension: Support for Human Rights and Anti-War NGOs**

Do these findings mean that NGOs who promote human rights in Russia have poor prospects for success? On the surface, they may appear to suggest that few Russians would support these organizations. However, that is not necessarily the case, as weak support for human rights norms may reflect general inattention to and poor understanding of the issues rather than deeper ambivalence to these norms. To get a better idea if Russians' generally weak support for human rights norms translates into negative or indifferent views toward NGOs that promote human rights, we asked several direct questions on our surveys.

First, we asked our respondents if they knew of any organizations in their place of residence that "take action in defense of human rights (gather or distribute information about violations of human rights, conduct meetings or demonstrations, collect signatures on petitions to Russian or international bodies defending human rights, and so forth)." We then asked them how they feel about such groups and whether or not they are present in their locality of residence. We later asked (on our regional survey) the same two questions in reference to groups who oppose the war in Chechnya.

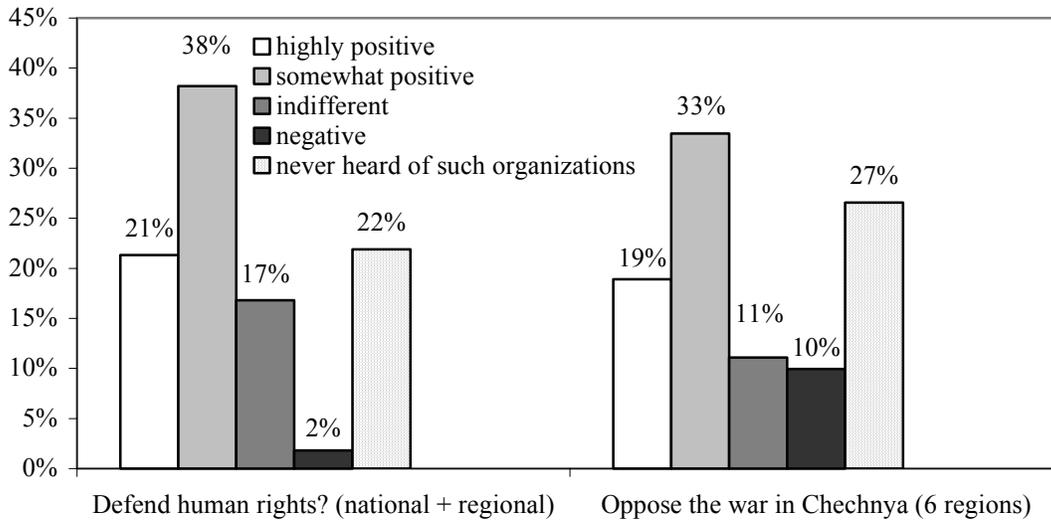
The responses to these questions indicate, first of all, that most Russians are not aware of groups that defend human rights or that oppose the war in their area: only 13 percent and 9 percent, respectively, of our respondents say they are aware of such groups where they live (Figure 1). Thus, although groups such as Memorial, Human Rights Watch, and Committees of Soldiers' Mothers are active in most or all regions of Russia, only a small portion of the population is aware of their activities. This suggests that these groups could do a better job in getting their message out and making their presence felt.

**FIGURE 1: In your locality are there any groups that...**



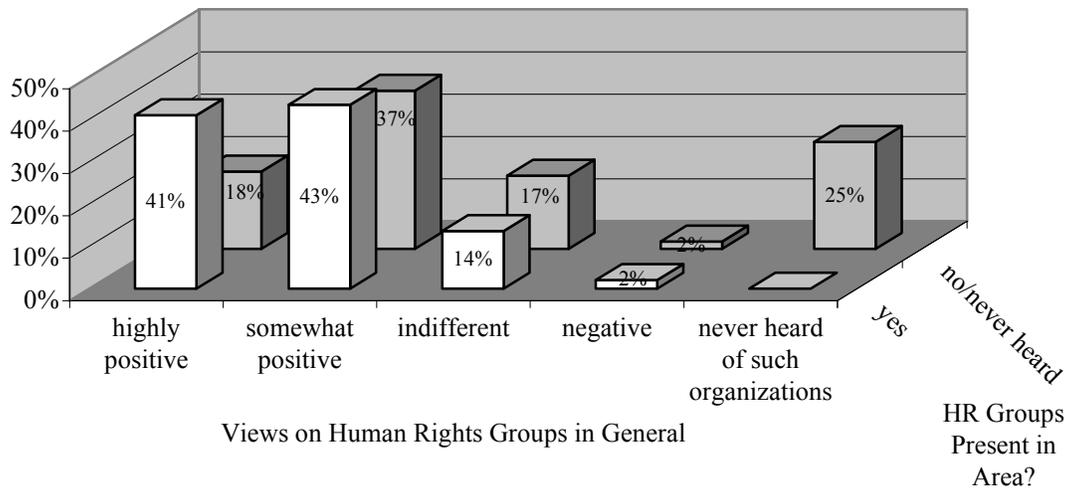
But if the activities of these groups were better known to the public, how would they be received? In fact, even though few think these groups are active in their localities, a large number of Russians have positive views of these organizations (Figure 2). In our sample, 59 percent view human rights NGOs (HRNGOs) positively and 52 percent view groups that oppose the war positively. The negative numbers are extremely small: only 2 percent with respect to HRNGOs and 10 percent with respect to anti-war groups.

**FIGURE 2: How do you feel about groups that...**



Finally, we note that Russians who are aware of groups defending human rights in their locality are more likely to view them positively than those who are not aware of any such groups—but even the latter group has generally favorable views toward HRNGOs (Figure 3). The same holds for anti-war groups (although in the interest of space, we do not show the results).

**FIGURE 3: Views on HR Groups by Local Presence of HR Groups, Russia**



The message of these findings is clear: the more Russians know about groups that advocate human rights, the more they like them. Our focus group discussions provided more evidence of this. After a wide-ranging discussion of which human rights are important and what may be jeopardized in contemporary Russia, our moderator asked participants how they feel about groups that protect human rights. Typically, the general response of group participants was positive, though they seldom could point to specific groups that played such a role in their area. However, in two of the groups, several participants were aware of the activities of Memorial in their region, and these groups expressed the greatest level of support for HRNGOs.

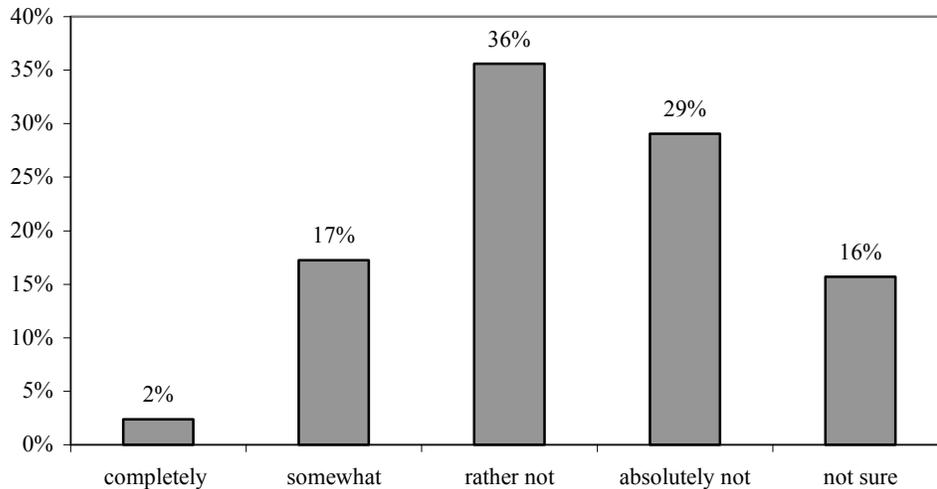
Thus, despite the apparently low level of support for human rights norms among the Russian public, there is a considerable untapped potential base of support for non-governmental organizations that advocate these norms. The implication for donors is plain: money spent on helping HRNGOs (and groups that oppose the war in Chechnya) to increase their visibility and get their message out more effectively would be well spent.

## Parties In Trouble

The strong support evinced by our respondents for organizations that promote human rights is particularly noteworthy because it contrasts sharply with the low esteem in which the overwhelming majority holds political parties (Figure 4). Fewer than 20 percent trust parties “completely” or “somewhat,” while nearly two-thirds do not trust parties. Our focus groups provided some insight into why Russians hold parties in such

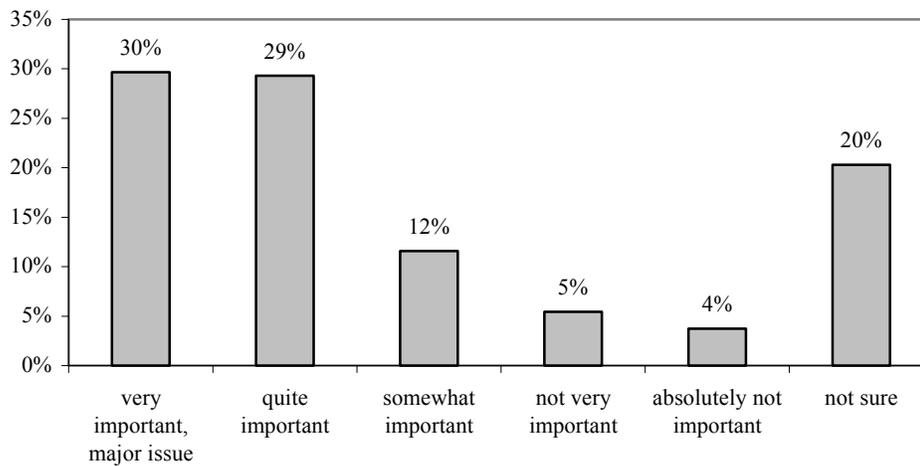
low regard. Participants frequently said they perceive parties as organizations whose sole purpose is to get their candidates elected and serve the personal interests of their leaders. They could not distinguish the platform of one party from another and often opined that the parties seemed to ignore the voters except for when elections were approaching. In sum, despite nearly a decade of Western efforts to build Russian parties through technical support and financing, they have failed to reach the Russian population.

**FIGURE 4: To What Extent Do You Trust Political Parties?**



One reason for this failure could be that no party has consistently embraced a platform involving support for human rights. We asked our respondents how much a party's position on human rights influences their decision on whether or not to vote for that party (Figure 5). Again, belying the impression that Russians do not care about these issues, we found that a solid majority (59 percent) finds a party's stance on human rights to be "very important" or "quite important," while fewer than 10 percent say it is not important. Despite the importance of human rights issues to voters, Russian parties evidently have not presented a coherent position on human rights with broad appeal: when respondents were offered a list of parties and asked which, if any, defends human rights, 60 percent said either that they do not know of such a party or that no such party exists. Moreover, only about 6 percent point to Yabloko, the party most Western observers associate with advocacy of human rights norms and identify as a party that defends human rights. Not Yabloko, but the KPRF (the Communist Party in post-Soviet Russia, which received about 12 percent), Women of Russia (about 7 percent), and Edinaia Rossiia (8 percent) are the parties Russians most identify as actively working for human rights.

**FIGURE 5: How important is a political party's position on human rights in influencing whether you vote for that party?**



### **Implications for HRNGOs, Parties, and Donors**

There is a lot of room for HRNGOs to raise their profile with the public, and this applies to the most famous organizations such as Moscow Helsinki and Memorial. Our data show that Russians are generally supportive of groups that advocate rights, even though they have not heard much about them. That 60 percent of respondents are not sure which organizations defend rights is surely an indication that HRNGOs can do more to reach the larger Russian public. A first step would be to let Russians know that other Russians care about a number of rights, that some of these rights are in jeopardy, and that there are organizations located in their town that work to defend these rights, that is, HRNGOs. Through standard public awareness campaigns, HRNGOs ought to be able to raise their profiles and possibly, the demand for the protection of rights.

To do this successfully, HRNGOs should focus on those rights that, according to our data, Russians care about the most: rights of the person (freedom from slavery, torture, and arbitrary arrest.) Efforts directed at raising support for civil liberties (freedom of expression, association, and religion) will have considerably less resonance with the public. But there are ample violations of rights of the person in Russia today, and HRNGOs already have experience working on these issues. One specific campaign in this area that should strike a chord with many Russians is one for police reform. Another promising possibility is work on anti-trafficking: local NGOs that are mounting anti-trafficking campaigns would do well to use data in crafting public service announcements. The year 2003 is a critical one for Russia, which is currently classified as a “Tier Three” country in the U.S. Department of State’s Trafficking in Persons Report. Russia must move to Tier Two in order to not jeopardize further assistance. But a lot of work needs to be done bringing human rights groups together with those working on trafficking. These communities of activists are distinct. Finally, our survey data and focus groups suggest great potential for a movement opposing the war in Chechnya—so long as

such a movement is framed around issues of Russian troop losses and economic costs, not abuses of Chechen civilians.

Our results tell parties they should focus more consistently and coherently on human rights issues. Of course, there is no guarantee that a novel emphasis on this set of issues will translate immediately into mass support for a party—Russian voters remain understandably suspicious of the motives and authenticity of statements by party leaders and politicians. However, our data suggest that human rights issues are potentially important to large numbers of the voting public, and it is certainly the case that no party has paid sufficient attention to these issues to date. One thing is certain: whatever parties have tried in the past has not worked, and despite all the resources spent on party development by Western donors, Russian parties have made virtually no progress at reaching the public. Given their dismal failure to do so until now, they should be willing to try something new, like a strong human rights platform and specific plans to address the growing set of human rights issues facing Russia today.

Given the disappointing results of efforts targeted at building Russian parties, it may be time to channel funding for the development of Russian democracy in a new direction. Our results suggest that direct contributions to Russian NGOs in general—and to those that advocate human rights in particular—should be a key priority for democracy aid dollars. Russian NGOs operate in a challenging environment: they lack open access to the media and feel little connection with the population. They have also been hamstrung by a lack of coordination among themselves. Well-targeted grants to coalitions of HRNGOs can serve a number of productive purposes simultaneously: they can raise public awareness of the work they are doing, provide resources for their work in a closed media environment, establish cooperative ties among the diverse organizations, and give an incentive to leaders within the HRNGO community who appreciate the value of such resources and networks. Together, such efforts can only increase the effectiveness of HRNGOs and help create a self-sustaining NGO sector.